

Retro sophisticate

INDIA'S MAHINDRA PIK-UP DOESN'T LOOK TERRIBLY STYLISH BUT WHAT IT LACKS IN LOOKS IT MAKES UP FOR IN TOUGHNESS AND TECHNOLOGY. BY IAN GLOVER

WAY BACK in the Swing era of music, a singer named Ella Fitzgerald reigned supreme. She wouldn't make it today, lacking a photographic model's looks and body. Though she had a voice like honey and an incredible range, Ella was anything but model-like – a paradigm example of how video killed the radio star. There's a story that an equally well-known musician of the time woke up in bed next to Ella one morning. "Oh no," he groaned. "Ella, for Heaven's sake, *sing* something!"

The Mahindra Pik-Up is a bit like that. With styling cues reminiscent of a square tub of margarine, it almost demands a test drive by someone with the visual acuity of Stevie Wonder, but after that, criticisms are few and far between.

Now imported by Tynan Motors Group, the Pik-Up is not Mahindra's first venture into Australia. In the 1980s Perth Mitsubishi dealer John Hughes brought in a Mahindra Jeep copy, made under licence with a Peugeot diesel motor. Despite being told repeatedly that the vehicle was a farm implement – not an RV – with more PTOs than you could poke a driveshaft at, it was marketed to take on the likes of LandCruiser head-on, and failed dismally. This time, the sales pitch is far more realistic, targeting tradesmen, industrial site users and, judging by the presence of Tynans at rural field days, predominantly farmers.

For the rural user, the Mahindra has much to recommend it. Both front and rear headroom is excellent, even for those who choose to wear a Stetson. Thanks to an extremely short cutaway out the front (the fact that the 2.5-litre common rail turbo-diesel power plant is a four-cylinder helps here), over-bonnet visibility is superb – just the thing for sighting stumps when paddock bashing. Unable to source gear, transfer case and final-drive ratios from the importers, we can't tell you what the low-range first gear ratio is, but can report that it slows the vehicle down well enough to crawl around paddocks when hand feedings are necessary. On our test double-cab vehicle, the tray is about the same as other similar offerings, but extremely deep – 1485 x 1520 x 550 millimetres – capable of taking a good load without having to resort to massive tie-down efforts. Watch the tailgate though – it's extremely heavy – though the load height is fine. The Mahindra has a full one-tonne payload.

The tie-down points appear to be very sturdy, and there are plenty of them. By way of reference, the single cab tray is 2294mm long – by far the best way to go if you need the extra space – making the single cab probably the best choice for the man on the land, as the seating and ergonomics are still not up to Japanese standards. The space between the steering wheel and the driver's door, for example, is cramped, and the cabin in toto is narrower than what we've come to expect.

Make no mistake, this is a retro vehicle. That's both good and bad. It seems incredibly tough – bulletproof – but despite the independent front end (the rear is leaf sprung), ride on the highway is somewhat harsh, naturally more so unladen, like all utes. Steering, despite being power-assisted rack and pinion, is deader than a full morgue, with more play than a preschool. Ground clearance is a creditable 210mm, but you'd want to change the highway pattern tyres for serious country work – they'd clog with mud as soon as they looked at it. Likewise, the five-speed manual gearbox is long-throw but precise, and the clutch is similarly agricultural.

However, compared with the original Mahindra import, the Pik-Up is extremely sophisticated. The sound system is a CD/MP3 player complete with a USB port and SD card port. Where the Indian 'Jeep' had plastic windows and completely vulnerable lightweight doors, the Pik-Up features keyless entry, an alarm and an engine immobiliser. Welcome to 21st century India.



MAHINDRA PIK-UP

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