



**Bold moves:** The Mahindra Pik-Up ute is a cheaper 4WD alternative to Japanese imports

## FIRST DRIVE

with Robert Wilson

India is a land of fascinating historical relics and, until recently, many of them came from its car factories. On dusty, potholed roads, three-wheelers like enormous prehistoric insects would joust with British family car designs from the 1950s and '70s while 1930s-pattern motorcycles buzzed through the gaps.

But in the early 21st century, India's car industry is being spoken of in the same breath as China's. Both are vying to become the next big thing in affordable motoring.

The best known of the subcontinent's living automotive fossils is the Hindustan Ambassador, an Indian version of the 1954 Morris Oxford, which is still made, although increasingly snubbed by the country's 1.2 million annual new car buyers.

India's other rolling relic is a version of the World War II Willys Jeep that has been made by Mahindra since 1969.

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Mahindra tried its luck in Australia 20 years ago with a so-called lifestyle four-wheel drive based on its licensed Jeep copy — and fell on its face.

This time its offering is similar to the generic Japanese four-wheel drive ute already flooding the market.

Importer TMI Pacific sees an opportunity for them as work utes for regional Australia.

The Mahindra Pik-Up starts at \$23,990 for a single cab two-wheel drive version. A two-wheel drive double cab can be yours for \$25,990.

The four-wheel drive versions costs \$26,990 in single cab or \$29,990 for the double cab. That's \$6700 less than the cheapest Japanese double cab ute, Mitsubishi's petrol-engined Triton.

The price advantage for 2WD models is less pronounced, with sparsely equipped versions of some

designs undercutting the Indian.

All versions of the Pik-Up come with a 2.5-litre common rail diesel engine that meets the stringent Euro 4 emission standard.

Its idle is a constant reminder that Mahindra also builds tractors, but it's not disgraced by the none-too-high standards of ute performance and refinement.

It's strong but not athletic with a narrow torque band between 1800 and 2200rpm. Get caught out of that range and you'll be reaching for the occasionally awkward five-speed manual transmission.

But stay within the band and it feels a bit stronger than its stated 247Nm.

Lightly loaded, it never needed to shift down on highway hill climbs.

Power is 79kW, which for a weight of 2150 kg for the top 4WD dual cab



version means acceleration is adequate, but no more, despite the considerable noise. A Ford Ranger, by comparison, makes 105kW and 330Nm from its 2.5-litre diesel while a Holden Rodeo, generates 120kW and 333Nm from 3.0-litres.

The steering is pleasingly accurate at the straight-ahead but, like all 4WD utes, the Pik-Up is nothing special dynamically.

The front independent torsion bar suspension is relatively soft and quite comfortable, but the rear leaf springs are unyielding, cruel devices that make for a harsh ride.

The payoff is in payload, which even in the dual cab 4WD is 1000kg (including passengers and tray load) or 1160kg for the 2WD single cab, about the same as its Japanese competition.

But looking at the stout construction of the Mahindra and bearing in mind that India has a tradition of overloading wheeled devices that dates back to the Juggernaut of Vishnu, there seems little doubt it could handle a full load.

The cab is a roomy place with

enough headroom for a turban or an Akubra. Finish is to about the same as a Japanese ute of five years ago.

It's no Taj Mahal and has some tacky textures like faux carbon fibre on the centre console, but nothing fell off in the test and it did not squeak or rattle. Or at least not that could be heard over the racket of the Pik-Up at its maximum comfortable speed of 110km/h.

Off road, the same low gearing that made it noisy bestowed traction and authority. The square (in every sense, baby) styling made it easy to place on tight bush tracks, and intangibly, it felt more like a Land Rover Defender than a generic Nistoymitszda ute.

But the Mahindra's 9.9 litres per 100km overall fuel consumption is not as good as the figures achieved by the latest Japanese-designed utes.

By ute standards the Mahindra is well-equipped with air conditioning, carpet, internal mirror adjustment, fog lamps, remote central locking and the luxury car feature of follow-me-home headlights.

There are no airbags or ABS but TMI Pacific says both are in the pipeline. There's also a complex but well-specified stereo with four speakers and the ability to import music from an USB drive or SD memory card.

It's tempting, right here, to make a cheap shot about rural Australians but they are invariably more sophisticated than their stereotypes (as are Indians) and many may already have country music-laden SD cards tucked in the pockets of their moleskins.

A 4WD diesel ute for \$30,000 might be music to their ears.



Ute beaut: The Mahindra Pik-Up Ute would suit conditions in rural Australia



**Daily Telegraph**  
**Saturday 18/8/2007**  
**Page: 49**  
**Section: CARS Guide**  
**Region: Sydney Circulation: 346,000**  
**Type: Capital City Daily**  
**Size: 41.28 sq.cms.**  
**Published: MTWTFS-**

**Brief: MAHINDRA**

# SHORTHAUL

## PICKING UP INTEREST

After establishing a beachhead in NSW, TMI Pacific, importers of the India-made Mahindra Pickup, is moving north and south with new dealers in Queensland and Victoria to win sales.

"We have successfully laid the foundation in NSW and we are now in the process of recruiting dealers in Queensland," says Claire Tynan, chief operating officer of TMI Pacific. "There has also been strong interest in Victoria and we are bringing forward our Melbourne Dealer Open Day to August."

Meanwhile, the NSW dealer network continues to grow with a number of new dealers joining since the launch of the Pickup.