

Fullback faces tough challenges

By  Henrie Geysers

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There is something incongruous about a Fiat bakkie but then the same applies to Mercedes-Benz bakkie, Renault bakkie and even more so, Maserati bakkie and it is going to become even more interesting as more and more manufacturers scramble to join the growing world-wide swing to the pick-up market.

Remember how the eye-brows lifted when Volkswagen introduced its Amarok bakkie and how quickly it established a firm foot in a segment crowded by Toyota Hilux, Nissan Navara, Isuzu KB, Foton Funland, Mitsubishi Triton, Mazda BT-50 and the popular Ford Ranger?



Here's a surprise for you

Well here's a surprise for you – Fiat's new three-model Fullback range of bakkies have got what it takes to become a strong player, thanks mainly to its power factory which is precisely the same engine you will find under the bonnet of the Mitsubishi Triton.

The Fullback range is made up of a single cab powered by a 2.4-litre petrol engine which produces 97kW and 202Nm and two double cabs armed with a 2.5-litre turbo diesel engine which kicks out 100kW and 324Nm (131kW and 400Nm in the flagship 4x4 model).



The three bakkies have the same five-speed manual transmissions which, in the case of the 4x4 model I drove, also has a smaller stick for the low-range transfer case (which we did not have the opportunity to test off-road).

The eye candy

They also share the same kerbside appeal with eye candy such as matte-silver trim, 17-inch alloys, shapely xenon headlights, flared wheel arches, large chrome wing mirrors, (as well as a tonneau cover and a prominent matte-black bull bar which I suspect were add-ons).

The nicest surprise of this bakkie is the way it kicks into action with a mighty power surge and although the five-speed gearbox is not designed for rapid quick cog changes it is of the smoothest we have come across. The steering feel is typically bakkie solid.



Critics might say the living quarters are a bit lacking in style but I liked it because it is reminiscent of bakkies of a few years back; strong, unfussy and workman-like. The cabin is spacious, particularly at the rear, and the seats are not only handsomely trimmed with leather but also really comfortable. Finding a comfortable driving position is also easy because the driver seat is push-button adjustable and steering column is manually fully adjustable.

The Fiat comes with an infotainment system with Bluetooth and USB as well as a reverse camera, cruise control and fully adjustable climate control. With the exception of the bright red and silver Fiat badge on the steering wheel, the rest of the cabin is a tad bland.

Two minor irritations

Two minor irritations we experienced during our week with the Italian were the loud flapping noises made by the tonneau cover (probably because it was not fitted properly) and the excessively loud beeps when it the vehicle is locked and unlocked, to say nothing of a screaming alarm when you unlock the door manually without disarming the alarm – a guarantee to incur the chagrin of the neighbours, particularly if it happens late at night or before sunrise.

Overall the Fullback ticks many right boxes, but it faces a few tough obstacles such as its newness in this tough and highly competitive segment, the low sprinkling of Fiat dealerships in this country, the newcomer's as yet unproven durability, plus its lack of a EuroNCAP crash rating.

In its favour is pricing and a price-inclusive five-year/100 000 Service Plan. The models and prices are:

- Fullback 2.4 – R232,900
- Fullback 2.5Di-D Double Cab – R402,900
- Fullback 2.5D-D Double Cab 4x4 LX – R468,900

ABOUT HENRIE GEYSER

Henrie Geysers joined the online publishing industry through iafrica.com where he worked for five years as news editor and editor. He now freelances for a variety of print and online publications, on the subjects of cars, food, and travel, among others; and is a member of the South African Guild of Motoring Journalists. henrieg@africa.com

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