

# Three of the best

CAN A MODERN TURBO-DIESEL, DOUBLE-CAB UTE BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE? WE RUSTLED UP THREE OF THE BEST FROM MITSUBISHI, NISSAN AND TOYOTA AND HEADED TO THE COROMANDEL TO FIND OUT.

Story by Ross MacKay, Mark Baker and Sean Willmott. Photos by Mark Baker.



Ever since I have been holidaying in the Coromandel (and that is now 20+ years and counting...) I've heard stories about people living 'off-the-grid' up in the hills.

One passed on more recently – but which tallied with a fleeting glimpse I had while out on a bush run last Christmas – was of a long-time visitor to the area finally moving in full-time to the eco-house he had been building up a long and torturous driveway high in the hills behind Whitianga.

The driveway, so the story went, was a 4WD-only affair tackled with verve by said mysterious owner, in an old, rust-streaked Jeep Cherokee on his weekly trips to civilisation for supplies.

Coincidentally, a good mate has just sold up his family home of 30+ years and moved to the Peninsula himself, and – being the sort of fellow who delights in knowing everybody's business – I phoned him and after the usual small talk involving our still Auckland-based friends, asked if he knew anything about 'an eco-house built up a long driveway?'

Well, talk about the floodgates to the local rumour mill (if you don't mind me mixing my metaphors) opening... for the next 20 minutes I got chapter and verse.

First up was a rumour doing the rounds of the local 'Reeza' (RSA) about some mysterious but obviously monied Americans throwing two (and in one spectacular case over Kuaotunu way, apparently) three times the GV at slack-jawed local property owners so they could build their, 'architecturally-designed' millennium bunkers.

Then came the slightly more believable story of a recent 'Lotto winner' turning up in 'a brand new Merc' wanted to know what sort of discount he could get off the \$2.3 million asking price of an ostentatious 'gin palace' high on the hills between Whitianga and Simpsons Beach for sale as part of a divorce settlement... if he paid cash which, apparently, he had brought with him!

Of eco-houses and long torturous 4WD-only driveways, however, old mate had heard not a peep. So – very long

story short – when I needed a decent day's drive with on and off-road sections to test our latest batch of turbo-diesel, double-cab utes I decided on a trip to Whitianga to see if we could get to the bottom of the story – and hopefully the top – of the driveway!

## Three's company

The old saying, three's company, four's a crowd is certainly true of group tests. So we again stuck to a three-ute sample this year.

The big news in terms of the trio was Mitsubishi's bold new Triton VRX which also proved to be the price leader at \$49,990 + ORC. It was joined by a Toyota Hilux (in our case a demo SR5 Cruiser with a no-more-to-pay price of \$56,990 kindly supplied by – cheers Haydn and team – Albany Toyota) and a Nissan Navara ST 4x4, again supplied by a dealer.

This time it was from Jason Du Toit, the ever obliging New

Car Manager at Manukau Nissan, and was a \$57,290 RRP six-speed –manual ST model.

Initially, I was after autos but when I asked around at a grassroots drift day I was at what sort of trannie the ute owners there preferred, more (five of the eight I asked) said 'a manual any day!'

So when I asked Jason what sort of demo units he had 'on the lot' and he said 'a nice black ST manual' I was like 'I'll take it!'

## Getting to and from

Rather than constantly moaning about the state of Auckland's traffic choked motorways, I prefer to work round them. So the plan was a nice early (5.30am) start then trickle out to Clevedon and on to Kawakawa Bay, Kaiaua, and eventually the Hauraki Plains, Thames, Coromandel and Kuaotunu for a late breakfast.

Once there my plan was a little more free form; stop, chat,



and subtly raise the question with whatever chatty local/s we could find about a long, tortuous driveway to a luxury eyrie high in the hills, somewhere in the general area.

Sketchy? Sure but if nothing else we were going to give the three utes a good workout on everything from smooth city motorway to dusty Coromandel back road and – hopefully – a steep, narrow bush track of a driveway requiring Lo-Range 4WD!

If we stumbled upon it, and it didn't have a big fat, padlock on a gate at its base, I figured the best thing to do was head up it until we found a house, knock on the door and introduce ourselves.

If the 'mysterious owner' was at home my plan was simple; introduce myself and my 'mission' and hope he enjoyed the notoriety his build and driveway had generated...

And if he didn't and invited us (as has happened on the odd occasion before my time on the magazine) to 'piss off back where we came from' the only down was... back down the 4WD-only driveway... completing a decent sort of test.

### Usual suspects

Driver-wise I only had to find two willing co-conspirators, which helps no end with the logistics of a multi-vehicle test, and when *Company Vehicle* Editor Sean Willmott and colleague and off-road racing media man Mark Baker both said 'hell yeah' at pretty much the same time, I had one less thing to worry about.

And so, very early one gorgeous autumn day three TD DC utes were seen running in convoy from Clevedon to Kawakawa Bay the up over the Touge-like 'pass' to Orere Pt and our first serious stop for photos.

I led the way initially, anyway, in the (Toyota) SR5 Cruiser with Sean tucked in behind in the Mitsubishi and Mark riding shotgun in the (Nissan) Navara.

With three different driver swaps heading East and another three on our return we each got plenty of seat time across the three utes; enough anyway to come up with the following conclusions



### Mitsubishi Triton VRX – Mark Baker

Is it wrong that the colour of a vehicle is my most enduring impression? That glowing gold on the Mitsubishi is truly sensational, lustrous and multi-dimensional in how it plays with the sun.

I can temper that by also saying the Mitsi is, as always, loaded with great tech and

spec and the transmission is superb. It is in fact the most improved in our test group.

The new Super-Select 4WD options simplify the off-road experience, backed by a huge range of on and off-road technologies including Hill-Descent Control, Forward Collision Mitigation, Blind Spot Monitoring, Rear Cross Traffic Alert, etc.

Triton gets my award for

best (clearest, most logical) dash design – especially the in-dash touchscreen which has big clear icons like everybody's favourite computer operating system.

The engine is a 2.4-litre turbo diesel unit making 137 kW and 437 Nm of torque, coupled to a six-speed auto transmission. Numbers bely performance – the Triton gives nothing away to the

Hilux or Navara. Shift-wise, the transmission can be left to its own devices or there is the option of paddle shifting – the only one in this group.

Even on 80/20 road-orientated tyres, the Triton feels unfussed on gravel roads and almost unstoppable in the rough. Obviously, you'd change tyres for winter or for farm work.

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mode' update, Mitsubishi has taken its already-capable Triton and made it nearly impossible to fault – on-road or off.

**Mitsubishi Triton VRX – Sean Willmott**

Not my first rodeo with the Triton VRX, but it is the first time I've had an orange one to play with and given the choice, I'd stay with the orange, it brings out the best in Mitsubishi's latest incarnation of the Triton.

The exterior now looks a lot more purposeful. Good. Any hint of 'beak' has gone and while it's busy at the front, it looks like a proper ute. The increased weight under the chunky angles gives a more positive and solid feel to the handling.

I like the ingress and egress points on board the Triton – at the back end anyway. The front, not so much. Couldn't get in without contorting head and neck to odd angles.

Interior is good, even with that bulging rear air circulatory whatsit. Plenty of room, didn't feel cramped in any respect. Well placed instrumentation and controls enhanced roomy cockpit

effect. Very impressed with refined, in-dash touch-screen which is easily operated, well-lit and very user-friendly. Just needs permanent satellite navigation despite Apple Carplay and Android Auto – I'd rather not use my data thanks, even if AC and AA WOULD actually talk to my cheap ass phone. Excellent sound system notwithstanding, in-cabin noise levels are reduced to car-like levels.

Drive-wise, it was impossible to fault the Triton. That 2.4-litre engine delivers an excellent level of power (for speed) and torque (for everything else to do with motion that isn't speed).

The Triton felt like it had the most to give in terms of performance on road, off road and in flight. Suspension was also impressive as it didn't mush into corners and provided excellent levels of pliancy in the off road section. Good levels of steering precision too.

Seats are very good, supportive and electrically heated with good adjustability. Flappy paddle shifters unnecessary, shifting in manual mode on the shifter perfectly good.



**Toyota Hilux SR5 Cruiser – Mark Baker**

"No wonder it's their best seller" was a random comment during the test, and it's true. A six speed auto coupled to the biggest engine in the test make the Hilux more 'car-like' than the other two.

Off road, it's a Hilux. Nothing more to say – the Hilux has always been the standard others are measured by. It is assisted now by a suite of grip, traction and braking aids that will take it safely into the backblocks and back again with minimal fuss.

The capability of the other two on test simply show how close the contest is these days. Mere fractions now separate the contenders.

On road, this is one of the most 'car-like' of the class. Still endowed with superb braking, still subjectively the fattest torque curve down low. The 2.8-litre four cylinder turbodiesel has 450 Nm of torque between 1600-2400 rpm and 130 kW of power at 3400 rpm. Equal on torque with the Navara, the Hilux somehow feels to have more.

Though the Hilux has impeccable performance on or off road and though it is sold in large part to corporates and farmers who recognise its legendary

toughness, this was the mildest Hilux I've seen on test in terms of colour, spec and 'bling'. Yes, it's the SR5 spec. No, vanilla white doesn't do it justice. Having driven white Hiluxes for a few years in a previous life working for DoC, it's not a colour I cherish.

Hilux has traditionally led the pack –in fact it pretty much created the category – but the others are nipping at its heels and in some places edging ahead. The next model range refresh will be intriguing.

**Toyota SR5 Cruiser– Sean Willmott**

The SR5 Cruiser name suggests this has all the off road ability of a Ferrari – none at all. In fact, the SR5 does live up to the Hilux rep for off road indestructability, it's only the name that suggests otherwise.

I expected the Cruiser to be at its happiest on tarmac, but not so much. Engine felt like it was all power, no torque on the open highway and long travel between gears in auto did nothing to improve that. Manual shifting much more rewarding and effective.

Despite the appointment level being right up there, I didn't get any sense of this is better than a regular dual cab Hilux. Maybe not so coarse as a working ute, but certainly not the "wow, this

is better than most cars" the SR5 Cruiser nomenclature might suggest.

As utes go, this is definitely 'vanilla' rather than 'hokey pokey' (putting it in Toyota advertising terms) well, OK, maybe French Vanilla.

Nothing jumped out as being overly remarkable until we got to the off road bits where the Hilux heritage really came to the fore.

At this point the engine felt like it had everything it needed to do the job – and it does – although I was mindful of being a bit more circumspect than Crumple might have been, it is a "pretty" ute after all.

In terms of connectivity though, both the Mitsi were better. It took forever to pair a cellphone and I gave up after a while. On-board navigation was good, but the screen is not integrated and as is the norm for all Toyota product in this regard, looks after-thoughtish.

Overly pliant suspension meant the Lux tended to nosedive quite a bit on front end cornering – an odd contrast to the positive steering input and feel. Sound system excellent, road noise levels not especially memorable. Very dark cockpit interior though, despite refined mica dash trim.



**SPECIFICATIONS Toyota Hilux SR5 Cruiser**

ENGINE:	2.8 litre (2755cc) common rail injection 4-cylinder turbo-diesel
TRANSMISSION:	6-speed automatic w/ Eco & Pwr modes and rear diff lock
POWER:	130kW@3400rpm
TORQUE:	450Nm@1600-2400rpm
ECONOMY:	8.4l/100km
SUSP. FRONT:	Coil
SUSP. REAR:	Leaf
BRAKES:	Disc front, drum rear
WHEELS/TYRES:	Alloy 18 in. dia. w/ A/T 265/60 R18
TURNING CIRCLE:	12.6m
LxWxH:	5350x1855x1815mm
WHEELBASE:	3090mm
APP/DEP ANGLES:	31/26 degrees
GROUND CLEARANCE:	286mm
WADING DEPTH:	700mm
KERB WEIGHT:	2105kg
LOAD BED:	1525 (l) x 480 (d)
PAYLOAD:	(auto) 910kg
TOWING:	(auto) 750kg (ub), 3500kg (b)
TRACTION:	A-TRC incorporating ABS, EBD, BA, ESS, VSC & TSC, HAC & DAC
SAFETY RATING:	ANCAP 5 stars
WARRANTY:	3 year/100,000km
TDAP:	\$56,990

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**SPECIFICATIONS Mitsubishi Triton VRX**

ENGINE:	2.4 litre (2442cc) common rail injection 4-cylinder turbo-diesel
TRANSMISSION:	6-speed automatic w/ Sports Mode & Super Select II 4WD & off-road mode
POWER:	135kW@3500rpm
TORQUE:	437Nm@2500rpm
ECONOMY:	8.6l/100km
SUSP. FRONT:	Coil
SUSP. REAR:	Leaf
BRAKES:	Disc front, drum rear
WHEELS/TYRES:	Alloy 18 in. dia. w/ HT265/60 R18
TURNING CIRCLE:	11.8m
LxWxH:	5305x1815x1795mm
WHEELBASE:	3000mm
APP/DEP ANGLES:	31/23 degrees
GROUND CLEARANCE:	220mm
WADING DEPTH:	800mm
KERB WEIGHT:	1995kg
LOAD BED:	1520mm (l) x 1470mm (w) x 475mm (d)
PAYLOAD:	905kg
TOWING:	(auto) 750kg (ub), 3500kg (b)
TRACTION:	ATC incorporating ABS, EBD & ASC + HAS, HDC, FCM, LDW, UMS, BSW, LCA,
SAFETY RATING:	ANCAP 5 stars
WARRANTY:	10 year/160,000km (Powertrain) 5 year/130,000km
RRP:	\$49,990



Nissan Navara ST – Mark Baker

Nissan’s Navara has well and truly outgrown its construction industry origins. This is a well-mannered, comfortable utility with maybe the best

evolution of one of the finest four-wheel-drive systems on the market. The Navara’s driving position is high and commanding, with forward

visibility enhanced by the ‘polyhedral’ bonnet, which sits low in its central area and rises up each wide over the wheel-arches. The 140 kW twin-turbo

2.3-litre diesel propels the Navara very capably on road. It produces all its 450 Nm of torque between 1500-2500 rpm, right where it’s most useful. This is the smallest diesel of the three, and in our test truck it was coupled to a beefy six-speed manual transmission.

Every generation of Navara has taken a step forward and upward in ride quality, assisted in the case of our tester by the optional Nitto tyres and massive Grid alloys. On the winding road from Coromandel to Kuaotunu the manual transmission got a workout but the road-holding was never in question uphill or down. Nor did the massive tyres intrude on the cabin sound levels.

Our travel on narrow gravel roads into the hinterland also revealed surprising grip for such a wide footprint.

Single-track climb sections were also tackled with aplomb. In fact though it’s clay-based the ‘tough, torturous 4WD-only driveway’ our esteemed mission managed to trip over posed absolutely no issues at all, the Navara’s ‘wing’ bonnet allowing accurate placing of the front wheels to walk over rain ruts without dropping into them or damaging the road surface.

To conclude, the Navara as driven gave very little away to its higher-spec test rivals. It is a solid workday companion when it needs to be, a perfectly practical family four seater for the weekend, and – on ‘dubs’ and big boots and kitted out with nudge bar and more – a cool company vehicle with an imposing road presence.

Nissan Navara ST – Sean Willmott

Lots of good points despite spec difference meaning we weren’t really comparing apples with apples.

The transmission proved something of a novelty at first but on the Coromandel twisties, great fun. Why would you have a manual? So you can use the gears in brake mode which means your discs don’t smell like they’re melting.

Black interior a little foreboding, and integrated info touchscreen clear and functional but not ‘woo woo’ cool. Engine felt a little asthmatic compared to the other two, especially when cruising. Seemed to hold its own off road and in not open road environs however.

Connectivity by far and away the best of the bunch. Once again, excellent sound system and road noise well damped. Interestingly, lowest specification level compared to the other two but the interior was plusher, with softer materials making for a much more comfortable interior.

Steering was – OMG when is this PlayStation-sized steering wheel going to have an effect? Oh, there it is. More turns lock to lock than I prefer, though this didn’t seem to be an issue

off road. The Navara was quite at home on “I think there’s something solid down there” surfaces.

This was the only ute where I was aware of the back end. Not in a bad way, just aware that it was

attached and that you definitely notice the fact that it is coil rather than leaf sprung.

Certainly a good pick for an honest workhorse ute, rather than a show pony.



SPECIFICATIONS	
Nissan Navara ST 4x4	
ENGINE:	2.3 litre (2298cc) common rail injection 4-cylinder turbo-diesel
TRANSMISSION:	6-speed manual and rear diff lock
POWER:	140kW@3750rpm
TORQUE:	450Nm@1500-2500rpm
ECONOMY:	6.5l/100km
SUSP FRONT:	Coil
SUSP REAR:	Coil
BRAKES:	Disc front, drum rear
WHEELS/TYRES:	Alloy 16 in. dia. H/T 255/70 R16
TURNING CIRCLE:	12.4m
LxWxH:	5255x1850x1825mm
WHEELBASE:	3150mm
APP/DEP ANGLES:	33/28 degrees
GROUND CLEARANCE:	226mm
WADING DEPTH:	700mm
KERB WEIGHT:	1936kg
LOAD BED:	1503 (l) x 1560 (w) x 474 (d)
PAYLOAD:	(man) 974kg
TOWING:	(auto) 750kg (ub), 3500kg (b)
TRACTION:	A-TRC incorporating ABS, EBD, BA, ESS, VSC & TSC, HAC & DAC
SAFETY RATING:	ANCAP 5 stars
WARRANTY:	3 year/100,000km + 3 year 24-hr Roadside Assist.
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## Drive by shooting – Ross MacKay

Incredible as it may seem we did find both the driveway and the owner of the ‘house way up on the hill’ (via the simple expedient of asking a local who stopped to ask me if I was lost as I waited for Baker and Wilmott to return to where I parked up after the buggers overshot my carefully marked out rendezvous point).

The only problem, as far as this little yarn goes is that Bob (not his real name) asked us if we wouldn’t mind not disclosing its specific location because he is ‘sick and tired of rip, shit and bust guys in 4WDs’ making a mess of the various paper roads and tracks in the area and leaving local people to clean up and often pay for the mess they have created.



To which all I could do was acknowledge he had a point but ask in turn that he not ‘tar all 4WD owners with the same brush.’

By pure coincidence we met ‘Bob’ only a km or so

from the bottom of his drive, at which point he could well have invited us to reverse out the way we came. Instead he listened as I explained who we were and what we were up to, then offered us the opportunity to complete our journey to his house site then turn around there.

As you should be able to define from the accompanying photos the driveway was everything you could hope for – and more – in terms of a Lo-Range 4WD testing ground for a 4WD utility; steep, narrow and bumpy with a couple of rock step-ups/step-downs to test traction control systems and raised diagonal rain sluice-aways to see what sort of ramp over and articulation angles we could achieve.

Needless to say all three utes breezed up and back down the 3.5km driveway. What really impressed me, however, was more how they brushed up on our return – late that evening – to Auckland.

A quick hose down underneath, then automatic wash and (manual) vacuum inside and the trio were ready not just for work, but

for the showroom.

Their secret – like that of the specific location of the 4WD-only driveway – safe with Bob, Mark, Sean and myself.

## Conclusion – Mark Baker

Each of these double-cab turbo-diesel utes has its attractions. Each has points where it outdoes the others. They don’t make the job easy for reviewers.

If I wanted a vehicle that could carry and tow a decent payload of sand or a small excavator to spread it around – and then zoom away for a weekend exploring the Coromandel – I might go for the Navara, especially with those massive boots on.

The Hilux wins on driveability, the SR5 pack is appealing but there is a distinct sense that it’s now deploying all of its armoury to fend off the assault of these pretenders to the throne.

The Triton is most improved among these three. It now has serious off-road ability, coupled with on-road manners. It has always been loaded with spec and tech, but now presents a much tougher stance on the road as well.



## The winner – by a nose!

So who wins? This time – on behalf of Ross, Sean

and myself – I hand the crown to the big improver, Mitsubishi’s Triton VRX.

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