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Totally convincing display of firepower

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Volkswagen is entering new territory with its workhorse Amarok by taking on the legendary Toyota Hilux at its own game. How good is it? Broadcaster and journalist Allan Dick goes to Patagonia to find out

If Volkswagen, pick-up truck and Argentina all sound like odd bedfellows, you're not alone. We had to explain our mission three times to sceptical airport customs officers.

OUR driver, "Willie", was threading his way through the traffic of Buenos Aires with the skill and speed of race great Juan Manuel Fangio, but he found time to bemoan the increase in the cost of steak.

"Two months ago, it was 10 pesos a kilogram. Today it is 20 pesos. The people cannot afford to buy it," he said.

That's about \$7 in New Zealand currency, cheap by our standards. But the average wage of a worker in Argentina is about 36,000 pesos a year, or \$12,000. Which gives it some relevancy.

Later, at a small Buenos Aires restaurant, the size of the sirloin steak that arrived on our plates gave rise to questioning the size of the beast that had donated it.

We were dining at 7pm on a hot and sultry night - about three hours before most of the locals. The steak was at least 2.5cm thick and took up the entire surface of the large dinner plate. The cost was about \$12.

Today, Argentina is one of the poorer countries in South America, but at the start of last century it was the wealthiest, with the fifth highest standard of living in the world. And it was all on the back of Argentine livestock. The country was a major beef exporter.

"Today," said Willie, "our President doesn't want us to export beef. She doesn't want our beef producers to start charging export beef prices to the citizens of this country."

We were in Argentina for the international launch of the new Amarok, Volkswagen's entry into the highly competitive world of the mid-sized, pick-up market - a market dominated by Japanese-designed makes like the Toyota Hilux, the Nissan Navara and the Mazda BT50.

And if Volkswagen, pick-up truck and Argentina all sound like odd bedfellows, you're not alone. We had to explain our mission three times to sceptical airport customs officers on return to Auckland.

VW's decision to enter the market was doubtless promoted by its desire to explore every possible



VW says it took the best of the existing pick-ups, tore them apart and improved on everything it could. Photo / Supplied

market sector in its quest to become the biggest automotive group in the world.

Traditional pick-ups were a gap in the VW portfolio. But there was the question of where to build the workhorse. The only plant in the world that had spare capacity was in Argentina, where two local-market-only cars, the Fox and the Suran, are built. So the decision was made to build the Amarok here, for the world.

How successful has VW been? Very - and the Amarok has a special party trick that sums up its excellence.

The actual vehicle launch took place near Bariloche in the foothills of the Andes in northern Patagonia in countryside that was variously Queenstown, Westland beech forest and the Mackenzie Country.

VW had created a demanding, highly specialised off-road track to show how capable the Amarok was in four-wheel-drive mode.

We tackled a steep 43-degree "cliff-face" gradient in low range, first gear with the 2-litre bi-turbo diesel engine on idle. The way it crawled up the face was impressive enough, but what followed was amazing.

At the steepest part of the climb our German navigator asked us to stop, switch off and take feet off "clutch, brake and gas". The Amarok rocked back with the engine compression in low range-first gear holding us.

"Now," he said, "keeping feet off the clutch, brake and gas, turn the key."

We knew what he wanted us to do, but, surely it was impossible?

We twisted the key, the starter motor engaged and wound the Amarok up this impossibly steep face for about half a metre before the motor caught and off we inched - all without touching any of the pedals.

It was an impressive and totally convincing display of the firepower of the Amarok.

German VW bosses on hand for the launch made no secret of the fact they got their hands on the best of the existing pick-ups, tore them apart and improved on everything they could. Of course, it was the legendary Toyota Hilux that became their benchmark.

Off-road, we had previously done pretty much everything before that we did in the Amarok - except that special party trick - but never before had we achieved so much with as much ease.

The drivetrain and chassis of the Amarok is packed with so much electronic power that it literally moves the goalposts.

On the open road it is a capable performer, feeling more car-like in the way it drives than any other pick-up we have ever driven. There are two suspension options - luxury and heavy-duty.

It's bigger all-round than a Hilux, with bigger payload, greater towing capacity and a bigger cabin.

The tray of the Amarok is 1555mm long, 1620mm wide and 508mm deep. It has a towing capacity of

2.8 tonnes.

But it has a smaller engine than the Toyota. The 2-litre, bi-turbo diesel engine develops 120kW and 400Nm of torque from just 1500rpm. The 3-litre, single-turbo diesel in the Hilux provides 126kW of power and 343Nm from 1400rpm.

VW claims the Amarok uses 7.8 litres of diesel/100km; the equivalent Toyota figure is 8.3.

The Amarok is the first passenger vehicle in VW history to use a separate ladder chassis - necessary to give the vehicle the required strength to tackle demanding terrain.

There is a beam back axle using semi-elliptic springs, with independent using double wishbones at the front.

On top of this VW has built a body style that is unmistakably VW but also a true pick-up.

There is just one engine choice - the 2 litre bi-turbo diesel with, initially, a six speed manual gearbox, although an automatic will follow.

There are three drive trains - the full works, high- and low-ratio transfer box, a permanent four-wheel drive that doesn't have a low-ratio transfer box and a rear-wheel drive only.

Next year, a two-seater cab version will be introduced with a much longer deck.

Even though the Amarok uses available capacity at the Buenos Aires plant, production will be limited to about 100,000 vehicles a year, working three shifts a day.

After a 150km drive on mixed roads in Argentina and the amazing off-road performance, it's impossible not to believe that the Amarok lives up to the claims its manufacturer makes.

However, VW concedes it has two obstacles to overcome - convincing the traditional pick-up buyer that the same maker that brings you the Beetle can also deliver a truly tough truck, and that a 2-litre engine using modern technology is more than a match for a 3-litre using older technology.

The Amarok arrives in New Zealand in the second half of the year. No prices yet, but it will be competitive.