



# Four-wheel-drive of the Year

## Suzuki Grand Vitara XL-7: A truly useful off-road business tool

Suzuki has engineered a remarkable vehicle in the XL-7 – one that should have strong appeal to companies needing, or liking the idea of having, four-wheel-drive wagons in the fleet.

There was some quite stiff competition in the segment this year, what with the Ford Escape and Mazda Tribute, the V6 and BMW-diesel-engined versions of Land Rover's Freelander, Renault Scenic RX4, the BMW X5, Ford Explorer, Jeep Cherokee and Hyundai Santa Fe (the last two, timing-wise, just slip into contention this year, one at the start, the other at the end).

But whichever way the pack was shuffled, the judges kept on turning up the XL-7.

The XL-7 has been designed in such a way as to be very appealing to the business market, although perhaps not quite in the way Suzuki had in mind.

What they did was take a V6 Grand Vitara – a tried and true product that is already a fleet 4WD favourite – gave it a little more power and a big stretch to turn it into what may be fairly regarded as a true seven-seater.

But although the vehicle has had a significant lengthening, the other vital dimensions are the same, or almost the same, as the Grand Vitara, so the overall package is still quite compact – an advantage both around

town and on New Zealand's typical tight off-road tracks.

While Suzuki places its marketing emphasis on its people-carrying capacity, both COMPANY VEHICLE and its companion publication, *NZ 4WD*, regard the extra seats almost as an incidental.

Where we believe the vehicle shines – and this is where it is going to score in the fleet market big-time – is its ability to carry four or five people *and* a decent load. Most 4WDs of this size don't have a huge amount of luggage or equipment space unless the rear seat is folded, or partly folded. There often has to be a compromise – one we've often seen ourselves. Either take four or five people and limit them to very little luggage, or take a decent amount of luggage and/or gear, and cut back on the personnel – which usually means taking a second vehicle.

The XL-7 eliminates the compromise and when only one or two people are on board, the cargo space verges on enormous.

The XL-7 offers another important advantage, too. Its longer wheelbase endows it with a superior ride to the Grand Vitara or other vehicles of its general size, and, for the most part, has better handling. Its V6 motor, an updated version of the one in the Grand Vitara,

is well able to handle the performance demands of a laden vehicle.

Today's light-medium 4WDs are appearing without low-range gearing and, often, with electronic aids to assist with traction in slippery conditions. The lack of low-range is an acknowledgement by the manufacturers that few of the vehicles go off-road, or very far off-road.

Rightly or wrongly, Suzuki clings to its separate-chassis construction, with a proper low-range gearbox, no traction aids and a solid rear axle, coil sprung, where most of its rivals have now gone all-independent.

A recent group test of the light-medium V6s (see later in this issue) confirmed that the Suzuki pays a small penalty in ride quality for its less-sophisticated setup. But off-road, the Suzuki shone, bettering all of its rivals and proving that the "old fashioned" 4WD attributes of good wheel travel and articulation and good low-speed control are still the way to go.

When the new forest has been surveyed, the remote microwave tower repaired or the guests delivered to the hunting lodge, the XL-7 is still plenty smart enough for the boss to drive home and for cred-conscious kids to be seen in by their friends outside the school gates.

The XL-7 has opened up a new category of fleet vehicle and that alone makes it a winner.