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4WD ROAD TEST

MITSUBISHI DELICA JASPER

- Grey import
- Part 4WD
- Part people mover

BIG IN JAPAN

Mitsubishi's Delica is the only forward control 4WD available today and then it's only as a grey import..

ROAD TEST BY GREGOR STRONACH. PHOTOS BY TIM MUNRO

4WD mini-buses haven't been available new in Australia for some years. Ever since Mitsubishi stopped importing its 4WD L300 and VW its Synchro vans. The only alternatives come from low volume imports from Japan and Mitsubishi's Delica has become the popular choice. We're seeing enough of these odd-ball 4WDs on the roads and tracks these days to wonder where they're all coming from.

The Delica is a funny beast – part 4WD and part people-mover, Mitsubishi has sought to combine the best of both worlds

into one vehicle. It's not the first vehicle of its type we've seen from Mitsubishi – the aforementioned L300 and L400 4WD vans being popular when they were available.

The Delica tested here is a 1996 Jasper low-roof variant. They came from the factory in Japan loaded with little goodies and ready for a moderate offroad workout – although, when you think about it, there's not a whole lot of offroading to be done in Japan.

The quickest way to summarise the vehicle is this: imagine a Mitsubishi Starwagon body plonked on top of an NL Pajero chassis, complete with the 2.8-litre TD and transfer case. Equipped with a four-speed auto gearbox



– with people-mover style column shift – it'll carry seven or more people, depending on the seating arrangement. There were several different models and spec levels produced, based on either the long or short wheelbase chassis with seven or eight seats.

Nuts and bolts

Under the bonnet lurks Mitsubishi's venerable 4M40 2.8-litre turbo diesel. In its day, it was considered a good engine, and the one beneath the very short bonnet of the Delica that we drove was no exception. Even with better than 50,000km on the clock, the engine felt strong and willing, toiling away honestly offroad, through the suburbs and out on the highway.

The gearbox, on the other hand, wasn't feeling as strong, but still provided drive

enough to keep the Delica on the boil. Thankfully, it's very much a 'set and forget' state of affairs with the gearing for the most part – however, finding first in a hurry in offroad situations will take a bit of getting used to on the column-shift.

The Delica's suspension comes in the form of independent front and live axle at the rear all on coil springs, which combine to provide a more than adequate range of travel for mild offroad work.

The 4WD system is Mitsubishi's usual set up offering 2H/4H/4L, operated by a mechanical lever on the floor of the vehicle, in precisely the same place as a standard gearbox floorshift. The transfer lever was a little sticky, and getting the Delica out of 4L took time and patience, but other than that it operated flawlessly.





Mitsubishi's Delica is all about carrying people and cargo in comfort, over all roads. It carries people like no other 4WD wagon can but imagine a mid-'90s Pajero with way too much weight on the roofrack and you'll have an idea of the Delica's offroad ability.

Interior

The interior of the Delica is, as you'd expect, a little dated – what was cutting edge in Japan in the mid '90s is showing its age now, but it's still comfortable and the example we drove was in very good condition.

The highlight of the interior is, of course, the room inside. Set up to provide seating – and comfortable seating at that – for eight people, it's an ideal prospect for large family groups or for 4WD tour operators. The seating arrangement is extremely flexible. The middle row of seats swivels easily, offering forward-facing, sideways or rear-facing options. All of the seats in the rear will fold 'flat' and fit together to form a rudimentary mattress for sleeping, although you'd probably want another mattress on top to even out some of the bumps.

The seating up front is comfortable as well, offering a reasonable driving position.

The Delica is reasonably well appointed, although one thing will require immediate attention if you purchase one is the radio, which is a Japanese unit that offers the full range of AM stations, but the FM band only receives up to 90MHz.

Because of the seating options and passenger carrying ability, the Delica has been

a popular choice for 4WD tour operators in Australia with many of them in service at popular tourist destinations around the country.

Drive

As a daily driver, the Delica's not too bad. Excellent sight lines out the front, and handy oversized wing mirrors give a commanding view of the world around you. Bearing in mind that the vehicle is second hand, we'd have to say that it was pretty impressive. The 2.8-litre mill is still a fairly honest proposition, and the on-road dynamics are as you'd expect from a people mover.

Offroad, and things get a little trickier – while the Pajero underpinnings are still great, the body design has its good points and bad points. Amongst the good points is the visibility – the vehicle offers a superb over-bonnet view, making choosing lines for steep ascents and descents an absolute doddle. Moving through the gears while on the go can be tricky – the dicky column-shift lurks a fair way behind the steering wheel, and the right gear can be a little hard to find for the uninitiated.

The major drawback to driving a Delica offroad is the potential for a rollover as



GREY IMPORTS

It's been going on since the 1980s in one form or another – the importation of low-volume numbers of used vehicles from overseas for sale in Australia. The primary reason behind the initial scheme was to offer vehicles that ordinarily wouldn't be imported into Australia. The initial vehicles arriving were shipped from the US, and were new or near-new examples of vehicles simply not available here.

Shortly, it was Japan's turn, and it's been a process that hasn't waned in popularity since. With Japan's strict laws governing the re-registration of vehicles over five years of age – by all accounts, the laws are openly designed to 'force' car owners to buy a new vehicle every five years – there was suddenly a glut of cheap 4WDs and sports cars pretty much ready-built for the Australian market sitting around in Japan, and going to waste. These are vehicles that, in some cases, would be considered 'near new' in Australia – it's just that they have been forced into obsolescence by the Japanese government, providing a glut of right-hand drive vehicles with reasonably low mileage.

Recently, the original Low Volume Import scheme was changed to the more stringent Specialist and Enthusiast Vehicle Scheme (SEVS), which saw the number of models available for import cut quite dramatically – the big losers being 4WD vehicles.

Before being offered for sale in Australia, the vehicles must initially meet a set of criteria set by the Federal Department of Transport – the key criterion being that the vehicle must not be available for import as a new vehicle by the manufacturer. And this is where the issue gets a little contentious – there are a number of popular vehicles that fall into a grey area in the legislation, and thus are believed by the import industry to be valid, but are denied by the government.

Once the vehicles are deemed by the department to be eligible, a 'test vehicle' can be imported, and the real work begins. The vehicle must be brought up to Australian specification, under the Australian Design Rules (ADRs) for a vehicle of comparable age. These rules govern what can and can't be registered for use on Australian roads, and typical items that must be fitted to vehicles imported under the scheme include new seat belts, new indicator lights and housing, as well as child-restraint tie-down points.



the centre of gravity is, as you'd expect, phenomenally high. Spirited cornering can cause extreme body roll.


Highway cruising is comfy enough, but there's a stack of wind and road noise at anything above 90kph. Fuel usage was respectable enough, with a combined city/highway/offroad reading of 14.1 L/100km – the high frontal surface area would have a lot to do with the higher consumption when on the highway.

Price Guide

Ben Wilmot from North Shore Prestige tells us that you can get Delica's here in Australia for between \$16,000, for 1994 models with up to 100,000km on the clock, to \$60,000 for a 2002 model with low kays. The '96 model tested here had 50,000km on it and sold for \$22K while '98 models go for around \$25 to

\$26,000. Of course the price depends on specification and mileage.

Summing Up

To be honest, the Delica isn't the prettiest 4WD on the market, but for seating flexibility and cargo carrying capacity, nothing comes close. Owners will need to bear in mind that they're buying a second-hand vehicle, and all of the usual caveats that cover the purchase of a pre-owned car need to be adhered to. But the 2.8-litre turbo diesel is a strong performer, and the chassis is as solid as you'd want for bush tracks and beach work. It's an option well worth exploring if you're in the market for a 4WD with a difference. 

The vehicle tested here was supplied by North Shore Prestige, based in Balgowlah, Sydney. You can call them for a test drive of a Delica on 02 9948 5302, or try the Lismore office on 02 6622 7777.

