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Foton Tunland 2015 Review

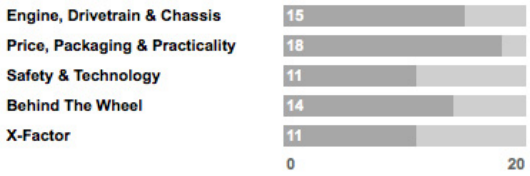
FOTON

China's Tunland ute rates favourably against its big-name rivals

Expert Rating

★★★½☆

69 / 100



What we liked:

>> Attitude when loaded
>> Quality of fit and finish
>> Torque and economy figures

Not so much:

>> Budget audio system
>> Narrow torque band
>> ANCAP safety rating

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Foton Tunland 4WD single-cab Road Test

The budget ute market is burgeoning Down Under as newcomers like the Chinese-built Foton Tunland arrive to take on segment stalwarts. Powered by a Cummins turbo-diesel and with a mix of domestic and imported driveline components, the Tunland offers a range of models priced from $21,990 driveaway. With proper one-tonne payload capacity, expected equipment levels and a surprisingly high construction standard, the Tunland appears to have what it takes to tackle its big-name rivals ... provided you ignore its three-star ANCAP safety rating.

Fifty years ago we all looked down our noses at new vehicles sourced from Japan. The disparaging term "Jap crap" was a common catch cry of those raised on a strict diet of American and British flavoured mainstays, locally-built or otherwise.

In the 1980s it was the turn of the Koreans – and to lesser degree minor European manufacturers – who arrived into our established market with "cheap and cheerful" options for budget-conscious buyers. Look at them now.

Since then models from these brands have grown to become established players Down Under, but for modern-day newcomers, from India and China particularly, there's a familiar and vocal unacceptance that's strangely reminiscent of the criticisms once held for Toyota in the market.

Like the automotive equivalent of a college hazing, these new arrivals must earn their place – especially in the rough and tumble commercial sector. Justified or not, the censure of brands like China's Foton takes time to dissipate. After all, a good reputation must be earned, especially when it comes to tradies.

Which brings us to this week's test car: the Foton Tunland.

Look past the obtuse nameplate and you'll find a vehicle that competes favourably with its big-name competition, not least of all on price. And considering the brand is less than 20 years old (Foton was founded in Beijing in 1996), the Daimler/Cummins held company has achieved much in a relatively short time.

The Tunland's build quality stacks up well against Thai-built rivals from Ford, Holden, Isuzu, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Toyota and others. The welds of the ladder-frame are neat – far better than those on recently sampled Indian-sourced rivals, while cabin quality matches that of the top-selling Toyota HiLux and Nissan Navara.

Driver ergonomics are likewise well thought-out, with primary and secondary controls falling to reach easily. There are grab-handles on the A pillars, which is a plus in my view, though the lack of a 'dead pedal' is frustrating on longer trips.

The weighting of the steering and pedals is appropriate, while the gearshift is mechanical, yet accurate. The hydraulically-assisted steering is a little long in the rack, feeling similar to the Mitsubishi Triton's, and delivers a lefty turning circle of 13.4m.

The seats are adjustable through the usual ranges and the steering column offers tilt-only adjustment for a clear view of the concise dual-dial analogue instrument panel. Unfortunately, speedo accuracy is beyond the pale with an actual speed of 92km/h recorded at an indicated 100km/h.

The blend of materials used within the two-seat cabin comprises a considered blend of comfort and robustness. The leather-bound steering wheel is a nice touch, the cloth seats are cosseting and the surfaces likely to endure the most wear (i.e.: floors, door cards, console and dash top) are durable polyurethane. It's well screwed together too, with none of the rough edges or loose ends usually found in vehicles at this price.

Foton's HVAC system was just as admirable, with super-cold air-conditioning making short work of a hot cabin. Air distribution is reasonably effective, too, though we found the recirculation function still let in a few fumes from smoky vehicles ahead. We also found the wiper/washer operation to be quiet and very effective, and the low-beam headlight range acceptable, though perhaps not as good as vehicles developed with Australian country roads in mind.

The only other real quibble comes from the weak reception of the radio's FM band. The sound quality isn't what you'd call crash-hot, either, and the Bluetooth phone system's audio is feeble in spite of being a cinch to set up. The trip computer is likewise basic, and unfortunately inaccurate. The display read 9.2L/100km upon emptying the 76-litre tank – we calculated actual use at 10.5 (over a week of mixed city and highway driving).

We should point out that the 2.8-litre Cummins ISF engine was less than 700km old at the time of test. Turbo-diesel units typically take quite a few thousand kilometres to replicate the manufacturer's fuel consumption claims (8.3L/100km ADR Combined), and we predict the Foton's will be no different.

The four-cylinder engine is managed by a Bosch fuel management system and like most modern rivals features a high-pressure common-rail and direct-injected delivery system. Outputs are rated at 120kW at 3600rpm and 360Nm from 1800-3000rpm. They're reasonable figures and nearly match those of the HiLux's 3.0-litre turbo-diesel (126kW at 3600rpm and 343Nm from 1400-3400rpm).

In reality, however, we found the torque band narrower than was claimed. The Tunland really needs to be on boost to develop its torque, which we found most accessible from 2100-3000rpm. The slim span means the five-speed Getrag gearbox is worked more frequently than 'lazier' high-torque offerings like the Holden Colorado and Ford Ranger, though the middle and high ratios are well matched to mixed duties, with low range gearing perhaps too tall for load-lugging duties.

Carrying 600kg of payload (the Tunland has a 1015kg maximum rating) required a few revs and a little slip of the hydraulic-assisted clutch to get away cleanly. On the go, however, the spread of gears and the access to torque they allow saw performance unaffected, the Tunland suffering only from poor throttle calibration that requires more input at higher road speeds than feels appropriate. If Foton could find a six-speed tranny with a taller first gear, and an additional over-driven ratio up top (sixth), the Tunland would likely feel more relaxed at each end of its operation.

The Foton is equipped with a Borg-Warner transfer case and Dana diffs at both ends (limited-slip up back). The push-button four-wheel drive system operates fuss-free from the lower centre stack, and in conjunction with 200mm of ground clearance offers enough traction for off-road use, provided there's enough weight over the rear-end to maintain traction.

Like many in the segment, the Tunland rides on 16-inch steel wheels (with 245/70-series rubber), is stopped by disc front and drum rear brakes and is suspended by a double-wishbone coil-sprung arrangement up front and a leaf-sprung live-axle array under the tray. The aluminium tray measures 2400mm (long) by 1790mm (wide). The removable sides provide 250mm of tray depth when in place.

With a three-year/100,000km warranty and three years' roadside assistance, the Foton Tunland enjoys a similar level of after-sales support to its mainstream competitors. It offers six-month/10,000km service intervals, though at the time of publication no capped-price servicing plan was available.

It is also not offered with traction or stability control (commercial vehicles are currently not required by legislation to come with stability control) and received a three-star ANCAP safety rating when last tested in 2012.

It does, however, feature dual front airbags, anti-lock brakes with electronic brake-force distribution and three-point adjustable seat belts. There is no top-tether or ISOFIX child-seat fixture available, meaning the Tunland is unsuitable for transporting children under the age of four years.

As an example of the new breed of vehicles we're likely to see a lot more of in years to come, it's pleasing to see the Tunland's rapid upward development trajectory. Should safety levels match the current model's construction quality with the next generation, we see no reason why Foton won't one day be regarded as highly as the once-ostracised brands before it.

2015 Foton Tunland 4WD single-cab pricing and specifications:

Price: $24,990 (as tested, drive-away)
Engine: 2.8-litre four-cylinder turbo-diesel
Output: 120kW/360Nm
Transmission: Five-speed manual
Fuel: 8.3L/100km (ADR Combined)
CO2: N/A
Safety Rating: Three-star ANCAP