

In the utility segment several newcomers are challenging the established order

They're relatively unfamiliar names here but China's Foton and India's Mahindra and Tata represent massive and well-established brands in their home markets. All three are targeting Australia's LCV segment with a range of keenly priced budget offerings and they each boast a reasonable list of features. So, what's the catch?

Foton Tunland v Mahindra Genio v Tata Xenon Comparison Review

While newcomers to the Australian automotive scene like Foton, Mahindra and Tata may still be greeted with some scepticism, each of these brands is having a red-hot go at carving out a slice of the pie.

In particular they're targeting the lucrative light commercial vehicle segment, with a mix of utes in

various formats to tempt budget-conscious buyers. It's another option for buyers looking to save big on the established – and significantly dearer – alternatives, and one predicted to continue its growth.

Look beyond the unfamiliar names and these companies boast some impressive credentials. Mahindra

and Tata, both Indian concerns, have each been producing commercial vehicles for over 60 years and are each a part of major (and separate) multi-billion-dollar conglomerates.

China's Foton has been around since 1996, but this state-backed entity has reportedly produced over five million vehicles in the years since.



All three have major tie-ups with various western automotive empires and all three are experienced exporters, their products sold in an increasing number of markets around the world.

Here in Australia, those products are handled by Ateco Automotive (Foton), Mahindra Automotive Australia (Mahindra) and Fusion Automotive (Tata). Ateco Automotive is an experienced hand when it comes launching new brands to the Australian market [Ed: think Kia in its infancy] while Fusion Automotive is a part of the Walkinshaw Performance Group. Mahindra Automotive Australia, meanwhile, is a 100 per cent subsidiary of India's Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd.

Our curiosity piqued by the pricing and foreign pedigree, we grabbed an example from each brand's local line-up to get a clearer picture of just what you get for your money.

Providing more of a flavour of each brand's offerings rather than a direct comparison, we assembled three models that each take a different slant on the LCV theme: a 4x4 single-cab cab/chassis (Foton Tunland); a 4x2 single-cab cab/chassis (Mahindra Genio); and a 4x2 dual-cab pick-up (Tata Xenon).

To assess their strengths and weaknesses we subjected each to trucksales.com.au's commercial vehicle test loop – a run that takes in a sprawling industrial estate, motorway, and bumpy and undulating back roads. The route is completed both with and without a load – 600kg in the case of the latter.

Acceleration and brake testing was conducted for each model using VBOX GPS equipment, while an in-cab sound test recorded ambient noise at 80km/h.

After all that we headed bush, taking the trio north of Melbourne along a twisting and hilly country circuit of sealed and unsealed roads – all the sorts of conditions that tradies and especially farmers would typically encounter.

BARGAIN BUYS SO, WHAT EXACTLY HAVE WE GOT HERE?

All three utes fall into the sub-\$30,000 bracket (sub-\$20,000 for the Mahindra) and as such they shouldn't be compared to the likes of the dual-cab utes we examined mid last year. These are workhorses, plain and simple, for those looking to cart a load to and from worksites and those who work on the land. However, these new players also manage to pack in plenty of features for a price the majority of entrenched rivals simply can't match.

All are powered by four-cylinder turbo-diesels mated to five-speed manual transmissions, and all boast a traditional ladder-frame chassis with a fairly basic suspension set-up: double wishbone up front and leaf-springs/shocks at the rear. They all have front disc brakes and rear drums; they all have anti-lock systems too. But only the Xenon comes with stability and traction control.

While the brands themselves are relatively unknown here, some of the names attached to these utes' major components aren't. The Foton boasts a Cummins 2.8-litre ISF engine – made in China through a joint venture – while it also get a Getrag gearbox, Borg-Warner transfer case and Dana limited-slip differential.

The Xenon is powered by Tata's own DICOR 2.2-litre engine, while the Genio's mHAWK 2.2-litre engine has been developed in conjunction with Austrian diesel specialist, AVL.

On paper all three boast similar power outputs (120kW for the Tunland and Genio, 110kW for the Xenon) but the corresponding torque varies significantly. Mahindra claims 280Nm for its Genio while that figure jumps to 320Nm for the Xenon and 360Nm for the Tunland.

The Genio is also the lightest of the trio, with a kerb weight of 1720kg versus 1860 for both the Tunland and the Xenon.

While our acceleration testing saw the Tunland trump the competition ahead of the Xenon and then the Genio, our time behind the wheel revealed significantly different

characters in terms of engine performance. The Tunland might have the numbers but it also has the narrowest torque band, with its pulling power most effective between 2000 and 3300rpm. The Xenon delivers its punch further up the rev range, hauling hard from 2500rpm to its indicated redline (4250rpm), while the slowest of the three, the Genio, actually offers the broadest spread of useable urge, from 1500 to 4000rpm.

There's also appreciable difference between each vehicle's five-speed transmission. Each works well enough but the Foton's is a pleasure to use, while the Xenon's gearstick knob feels overly bulky and delivers a marginally less refined shift. The Genio's five-speeder feels notchy and is generally a bit rough around the edges, but with familiarity it still does a perfectly adequate job.

The Tunland's first gear could be a little taller and the Genio feels like it could do with a sixth ratio for the highway. At 100km/h in fifth the Mahindra is spinning at 2500rpm, compared to just over 2000rpm for its rivals. Otherwise the ratios across all three are logically spaced.

SHOULDER THE LOAD

We approached our 'loaded' runs with interest. The test route covers several extended gradients and on each occasion our budget utes impressed, dragging 600kg – around half their quoted payload capacity – up the hills with ease. Each ute held fourth gear on these climbs and even maintained a slight degree of acceleration, although the Tunland's turbo really requires some boost to find its stride.

We should mention that the Tunland only had 600 kilometres under its wheels while the two Indian utes both had several thousand; the Cummins engine was freeing up noticeably over the course of the week it was in our care.

The suspension set-ups on these utes are basic for good reason: they're proven, they're sturdy, and they work. They're all fairly typical of the breed: firmer at the rear to handle the payload and thus a little choppy when

unladen, with a tendency to transmit all the smaller road imperfections any decent passenger car would iron out. However, we've sampled harsher rides from unladen LCVs in the past and with the weight in the back the ride smooths out noticeably across all three contenders.

The Xenon feels just a bit softer than the Genio or Tunland, displaying a marginal degree of extra body roll through the bends and a slightly 'floaty' sensation at highway speeds, but again – it's entirely within normal LCV parameters.

The dirt roads we traversed posed absolutely no problem for these utes; at one point they all successfully scabbled their way up a 4WD-only climb. Here the Tunland remained in 4x2 mode to level the playing field. The Tunland has two front recovery points while the Genio and Xenon each have one at the rear.

All three vehicles all fare surprisingly well in terms of NVH (noise/vibration/harshness) too. None of them suffer from undue vibration and in LCV terms they're all reasonable quiet. The Tunland manages just 74dBA at 80km/h – that's the same as the Toyota HiLux we tested in our mega dual-cab shootout last year.

The Genio and Xenon weren't far worse, each recording 77dBA. The Mahindra and Tata's engines both make a racket under acceleration but on a steady throttle there's little to complain about.

As for workhorse credentials, the Tunland has the lowest payload at 1015kg but – along with the Xenon – the equal-highest towing capacity, at 2500kg. The Genio boasts a 1260kg payload and an 1800kg towing capacity, while Tata says the Xenon is good for a load of up to 1040kg.

Both single-cab cab/chassis models come with factory drop-side alloy trays. The Genio's measures 2706mm (long) by 1776mm (wide) while the Tunland's measures 2400mm (long) by 1790mm (wide); both with a 250mm tray depth. The Genio's tray is lower (930mm height versus 1050mm for the Tunland) but we prefer the all-metal hinges on the Tunland's tray. One of the plastic

shrouded hinges on the Genio was already broken. Both come with side rails to aid the securing of cargo.

The Xenon's tub, meanwhile, is fairly modest at 1400mm (long) by 1300mm (wide), with 1025mm between the wheel arches. The cube water tank weight was too neat a squeeze so we opted for 600kg of rubber discs instead. The tub comes with a liner as standard and four tie-down anchor points.

Quality street

While all three are reasonably close in ability, the quality and appointment of each ute's cab sees the emergence of a clear pecking order. Here the Tunland has an appreciable lead on its Indian challengers, its cabin possessing a level of comfort and refinement closest to that of the big-name brands.

The Tunland has no sidesteps but it does benefit from two A-pillar grab handles, while the driver's seat offers the greatest adjustability – fore/aft, height, recline and lumbar. The only chink in its ergonomics armour is its lack of a dead pedal. The Genio has one and while the Xenon doesn't. The Tata does at least allow more space for your left foot than the Tunland's set-up.

The Tunland's mix of darker plastics is broken up by some faux wood-grain panelling; it might be a bit cheesy but we certainly can't complain about the panel tolerances and general quality. The Tunland has the best cabin storage too, with a generous centre console bin, two cup holders, door-pocket bottle holders and a reasonable glove box, while the leather-appointed steering wheel and seating adds a real touch of class.

The Indian utes both lag behind the Tunland for cab quality and attention to detail. The Genio offers a bit more in the way of storage but its beige trim and upholstery will wear and soil quickly compared to the Xenon's darker scheme. The ergonomics of both Indian models leave a bit to be desired, too. Both come with fold-down armrests, but the Xenon's seat is too low in relation to both the

pedals and the steering wheel, while the seating is too high in the Genio. Neither driver's seat offers height adjustment.

One big surprise across all these utes is their level of standard equipment. With the exception of cruise control and a trip computer, the Xenon comes with hill-hold assist, switchable traction / stability control, load-adaptive headlights, foglights, a reversing camera and a comprehensive infotainment system (with sat-nav).

The Tunland has cruise control, Bluetooth connectivity and a trip computer with a quality digital display. It also gets a sturdier alloy bulkhead than the Genio's equivalent. The Genio also gets cruise control but a trip computer is optional; it has the lowest level of equipment but then it is appreciably cheaper than the other two.

All three benefits from 12-volt auxiliary power sockets, audio systems (with AM/FM/CD/MP3/USB input), power windows and mirrors, remote locking and manual air-conditioning. The Tunland's and Genio's air-con works incredibly well, while the Xenon's system is adequate but has to contend with the dual-cab's larger internal volume. The Genio and the Xenon even come with puddle lamps.

Construction quality is perhaps the biggest issue hanging in prospective buyers' minds and while we can't gauge how any of these models will stand up to years of abuse, we can say the Tunland is again out in front here – there's an obvious level of care that's gone into its construction.

No, it's still not up to the standard upheld by the veteran campaigners of the field, but it's not as far off as many might think. External panel tolerances are fine and uniform, the chassis welding is fairly neat and the under-tray cabling has been routed neatly and thoughtfully. The Genio's welding and cable routing are a little more haphazard, while the Xenon's standard of construction falls somewhere between the two.

As for fuel economy, the Genio comes to the fore with 8.8L/100km recorded over the course of this test, ahead of the Xenon (9.5) and decidedly thirstier Tunland (12.2). That's covering road and offroad use, largely empty. Taking each vehicle's fuel tank capacity into account, the figures equate with working ranges of 790, 690 and 570km respectively. Again, the Tunland's fuel economy should improve with additional mileage.

There is no compulsion for manufacturers to obtain an ANCAP safety rating for commercial vehicles but here Tata's Xenon leads the way, its recent addition of stability control pushing it to a four-star rating. Its operation is fairly abrupt but its inclusion is a big bonus in present company. The Tunland, meanwhile, has a three-star ANCAP safety rating (no stability control or traction control) while the Genio hasn't been assessed. At least all three have anti-lock brakes and dual front air bags.

Foton offers a three-year / 100,000 km warranty on its Tunland with three years of roadside assistance. Mahindra offers the same warranty coverage but no roadside assistance, while Tata trounces both with its 'Tough Cover' program, which sees a four-year / 100,000 km warranty coupled with four years of roadside assistance and capped-price servicing.

The bottom line

Bearing in mind that this review isn't a head-to-head shootout, we were mightily surprised by the general ability and features to be found in these 'budget' utes.

Remembering a time not too long ago when Aussie buyers scoffed at Korean cars (and Japanese cars before them), the established players should be keeping a watchful eye on these new rivals.

Yes, their long-term durability is yet to be proven, their dealer networks are small compared to those of the market veterans and their resale value will likely suffer, but all three of these utes do the job for a modest price – while significantly undercutting their big-name rivals.

However, after weighing up all their pros and cons, we have to award the win here to the Foton Tunland.

While the Tata Xenon wins just acclaim for its four-star ANCAP rating and its comprehensive 'Tough Cover' program, the Tunland won us over with its higher level of all-round refinement.

Meanwhile what the Genio lacks in aesthetics it makes up for in sheer ability, and we can't discount the fact it's the cheapest vehicle here by nearly \$5000.

The Tunland, however, offers the most well-rounded package, offering practicality and performance with a decided splash of panache.

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

Price: \$24,990 (as tested, plus on-road costs)

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

What we liked:

- >> Quality seating
- >> Overall fit and finish
- >> Payload and towing limits

Not so much:

- >> Fairly narrow torque band
- >> Bigger turning circle
- >> No stability control

2015 Mahindra Genio 4x2 single-cab cab/chassis pricing and specifications:

Price: \$19,990 (as tested, plus on-roads)

Engine: 2.2-litre four-cylinder turbo-diesel

Output: 120kW/280Nm

Transmission: Five-speed manual

Fuel: 8.6L/100km (ADR Combined)

CO2: 228g/km

Safety Rating: N/A

What we liked:

- >> Attractive pricing
- >> Broad torque band
- >> Large tray and payload

Not so much:

- >> Quirky seating position
- >> Lower quality cab interior
- >> Average chassis welding

2015 Tata Xenon 4x2 dual-cab pickup pricing and specifications:

Price: \$25,990 (as tested, drive away)

Engine: 2.2-litre four-cylinder turbo-diesel

Output: 110kW/320Nm

Transmission: Five-speed manual

Fuel: 7.4L/100km (ADR Combined)

CO2: 196g/km (ADR Combined)

Safety Rating: Four-star ANCAP

What we liked:

- >> Four-star ANCAP rating
- >> Capped-price servicing
- >> Well equipped

Not so much:

- >> Quirky seating position
- >> Minimal cabin storage
- >> Poor low-down torque

