



4WD BUYERS GUIDE

FOTON TUNLAND

Chinese made, but with global-brand mechanicals - April 2016

The Foton Tunland may be the ute market's best-kept secret, Allan Whiting reckons, after a taste of what's to come in 2017.



Like other Chinese vehicle introductions to the competitive Australian market the Foton Tunland's was rocky.

In 2011 WMC Group walked away from a distribution agreement and the deal passed to Queensland company FAA Automotive.

Foton sales in 2012 and 2013 were poor and in April 2014 Foton distribution was picked up by Foton truck distributor, Ateco, thus putting Foton light truck and ute business in the same hands.

The Foton range is managed by Alex Stewart, who joined Ateco after holding the position of Divisional Manager of Product Strategy, Marketing and Customer Care with truck maker Hino.

Alex is a canny Scot, so the move to virtually unknown Foton, after selling a well-known and respected brand, surprised industry observers.

"I am under no illusions about the challenges ahead in a market as tough and competitive as Australia's, but I am also confident that the outstanding value offered by Foton will drive a steady increase in sales and expansion of our dealer network over time," Stewart said after the ute distribution deal was done in April 2014.

"This is an exciting 'ground floor' opportunity and I am greatly encouraged by Foton's commitment to adapt its products to the requirements of our market."

Foton is no lightweight corporation. It was founded in 1996 to manufacture light and heavy-duty trucks, agricultural tractors and other machinery for domestic and global markets. It has assets exceeding \$A10 billion and 290,000 employees.

Automotive products include trucks from two to 55 tonnes, dump trucks, tractors, mobile cranes, buses,



MPVs and utes, and new-energy batteries.

Foton has R&D centres in Beijing, Germany, Japan and Taiwan, and technical supply agreements with Getrag, ZF, Aisin, Borg Warner, Bosch and Dana. In March 2006 Foton and Cummins created a 50:50 joint venture company to produce light-duty diesel engines. Capacity is 400,000 engines per annum. In January 2009 Foton and Daimler AG formed a 50:50 joint venture for the production of medium and heavy trucks in China, with an initial investment of \$A1.3 billion.

The Tunland



The Chinese-made Foton Tunland is aimed at markets outside China and has some notable advantages over its competitors in the Australian one-tonne ute class.

Unlike previous Chinese-made vehicles the Tunland isn't a 'knock-off' of older-generation Japanese vehicles.

It incorporates world's best engineering inputs: a new, light-commercial-specific Cummins diesel engine, Getrag gearbox, Borg Warner transfer case, Bosch electronics and Dana rear axle.

The Tunland's Cummins 2.8-litre turbo-diesel engine has a cast iron cylinder head and thermostat-controlled electric radiator fans rather than an aluminium deck and viscous-coupled fan, and a steel plate sump guard is standard on the Tunland 4x4.

Tunland's Cummins engine does duty in Foton's bigger trucks up to 4.5 tonnes GVM, so is under-stressed in a ute.

At launch in 2012 Tunland had the longest cab-to-rear-axle measurement in this class, minimising tray rear overhang and optimising tow ball positioning, plus it had the widest front track and second-widest rear track of any non-European ute in the class. It also featured the largest diameter front disc brakes, with twin-piston AP6 callipers, big rear drums and four-channel ABS with EBD.

Initial Tunland deliveries Down Under were crew-cab utes, but a short-cab model was released in late 2013. The lineup now consists of 4x2 and 4x4 crew cab utes; 4x2 and 4x4 cab/chassis and a single cab 4x2 ute.



Pricing for the Tunland ranges from \$22,490 for a 4x2 single cab/chassis, up to \$30,990 for a 4x4 crew cab ute.

Equipment levels are high: air-conditioning; cruise control, with steering wheel buttons; power windows; remote key two-stage door unlocking; leather steering wheel rim; CD/MP3/FM/AM audio, Bluetooth; USB ports ; tilt-adjusting steering wheel with audio buttons; power-adjustable and manual fold-back door

mirrors with turn indicator lights; dashboard mode-select buttons for 4WD and low range; clutch foot rest; twin map lights for front occupants; 12volt/120W illuminated power outlet and 'puddle' lights under the doors. On the crew-cab there are Isofix child seat anchorages on the two outside rear seat positions and the centre-seat occupant has a lap-sash belt.

The powertrain is workmanlike, headed by the Cummins 2.8-litre turbo-diesel engine, with Bosch electronics and figures of 120kW at 3600rpm and 360Nm in the 1800-3000rpm band. These aren't class-leading by any means, but provide more than adequate loaded-ute performance.

The main transmission is a Getrag five-speed manual, coupled to a Borg Warner transfer case on 4x4 variants, with a low-range ratio of 2.48:1. The Dana rear axle has an LSD centre on 4x4 models.

On and off road

We've tested a short cab tray-back and two crew cab Tunlands. Driving ergonomics were very good, with tilt steering adjustment, driver's seat height, slope and lumbar adjustment.

The steering wheel buttons worked well on two of the test vehicles, but the cruise control buttons were 'sticky' on one vehicle.

The unladen short-cab Tunland's handling and ride quality were quite good on smooth surfaces and over mild bumps, but potholes and major bumps sent the back end out of line. We reckon the rear leaf springs need a redesign, with a stronger main pack and helpers that come into play only when the load increases to near-GVM.

The crew cab models were quite different, with spring rates that gave very good ride quality (for empty utes). The Tunland kept its feet on bumpy bitumen and corrugated gravel. We loaded one with half a tonne of payload and it sagged only marginally at the rear, and ride quality was good.

We coupled a two-tonne boat and trailer to the other crew cab and it coped with 150kg ball weight quite happily.

Off-road ability of the three Tunland test vehicles was very good, considering there were no traction aids, other than a rear-axle LSD.

Build quality was fine and fit and finish seemed no different from Thai-built machinery.



Noise levels inside the cab were low, unless the Cummins was working hard.

The engine bay was very well laid out, with a large air-cleaner box and easily-reached fuel filter. The serpentine drive belt was very easy to check and replace (unlike nearly all others) and the radiator had twin electric fans, so there was no fan drive to get in the way.

A taste of things to come

For the present, there's no automatic transmission option and no traction aid offering, such as electronic stability control and traction control, but this package is on the way. Another initiative is all-wheel disc brakes that only the LandCruiser 70 Series can boast.

Foton has been trialling the disc-brake and ESC/TC package in its 4x2 single-cab 'Wellside' ute model for some months. The next step is to incorporate this kit in all Foton ute models.

We conducted a partial test of this gear and checked out the new interior features in a crew-cab 4x4 evaluation vehicle. This ute had four-wheel discs, but no ESC/TC electronics. It also had a new infotainment system that was a tad quirky to operate.

The four disc brakes produced great stopping power and handbrake operation wasn't an issue. Other ute makers claim that they've retained drum rear brakes to ensure good handbrake performance, but we don't buy that: we think it's a requirement of registration as a pick-up in Thailand, where most of these vehicles are built, along with the Thai-mandated requirement for leaf rear springs.

In 2017 the Foton Tunland range should have class leading chassis dynamics and an automatic box option. Even if pricing goes up by a few thousand bucks Tunlands will still be the best value for money buys in the market.