



TRITON TESTED

TONY WATTS COMES TO GRIPS WITH THE NOTION OF DRIVING A TRUCK

Clearly Singapore is not immune to trends in the automobile world. It's just that with the weird and wonderful COE system here, the market has its own quirks and foibles.

Where you come from a car may well be a symbol of freedom, but here, young people are not likely to have a car at all unless mum and dad have stumped up for it, and that's never going to be a symbol of freedom. Affluence and entitlement, perhaps, but freedom? No.

The low volumes in the industry here have, until recently, limited freedom-of-choice too. If the majority of middle-aged middle managers here want to buy a sedan, and nobody else can afford a car, then there's little point bringing in anything else now is there?

The wonders of financing have helped change all that to a degree, and the relaxing of the rules with regards to the private ownership of diesel-powered vehicles is potentially going to see a further swing. More than half the cars sold in Europe these days are diesels, and with advances in technology, these oil-burners are much more refined than they used to be and cleaner too.

They're cleaner because they tend to be more efficient than petrol engines; some high-tech diesels available here – such as the expensive Audi A2 – can get 31/100km efficiency. With the price of fuel these days

that makes diesels look positively attractive, though there are still financial penalties for putting them on the roads.

Still, you do have that choice, and if you're going to drive a truck, a diesel would seem to be that way to go. So while it was unthinkable five years ago to drive a diesel pickup, these days it is an option – enter the Mitsubishi Triton L200.

The L200 is being positioned as a "lifestyle"

quick on the go, if not so much off the line.

The Triton is a truck in the sense that it rides on a separate chassis, which means fairly basic cart springs at the rear; the ride is remarkably smooth at the front end, but a bit bouncy at the back. Potentially this would be fixed with a load in the rear, but you don't really want to be loading it up for a smoother ride. Where it isn't very truck-like is in the styling, which is pretty funky with

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vehicle, hence the accessories fitted to the Road Warrior test vehicle: mouldings along the sides, side steps, chrome barriers around the tray, and a rear view mirror with a built-in LCD and reversing camera. The test car even came with a mountain bike in the tray – just in case I wasn't sure what the focus was.

The 2.5-litre diesel isn't quite as refined as some of the European units I've tested over the years, with a very truck-like rattle at idle, though it is Euro IV emissions compliant. The power delivery is truck like too, but in a good way. The turbo unit pumps out plenty of torque, and in conjunction with the four-speed auto transmission the truck is satisfyingly

its almost egg-shaped cab. Plus you have to like the four-door practicality.

The question is who is going to buy the Triton? The local agent is hoping for American expats used to driving trucks (though without a big V8 engine I'm not sure of the attraction there). It is a proper 4x4 though – with a transfer case for low-range off-road driving – and I suspect that's going to be where the Triton hits the target.

How many people are willing to sacrifice some ride comfort for that is difficult to guess, but as the Triton can carry a family in comfort as well as a big load of lifestyle accessories in the tray, it is a reasonable option. □

CLASS ACT



TONY WATTS RECKONS THE MERCEDES-BENZ CLS 500 IS A MODERN CLASSIC

Several years ago I got into the seat of a car Mercedes-Benz was touting as the world's first four-door coupé. Never mind that four-door coupé is an oxymoron – my Oxford definition of coupé is 'a car with a fixed roof, two doors, and a sloping rear', of which the CLS scores two out of three – what I came away with was a positive impression overall.

I will admit that the styling succeeds in my eyes better from some angles than others – from the rear quarter it almost looks as though it is bent in the middle – but particularly in a dark colour, as on the test car, the profile is stunning. So many classics from Mercedes-Benz are as much about the styling as the engineering under the sheet metal, and I suspect this is going to be one of those yearned-for models in years to come.

That's not to say the engineering behind the CLS isn't impressive, of course. Rather quietly last year Mercedes slipped the 5.5-litre V8 used in the new S-Class into the CLS 500, replacing the three-valve 5.0-litre unit. The move was so quiet that they didn't even change the model designation – so the CLS 500 you get today has the new four-valve 5.5-litre unit and the 7G-TRONIC, seven-speed automatic transmission that is so efficient that Mercedes quotes faster acceleration times than similar manual

transmission cars. It seemed too good an opportunity to miss having a spin in the car, so on a recent jaunt around the back roads of south-east Queensland I managed to nab one for a week.

In Singapore, a test that long is unlikely – the cars just cost too much to put on the road, so a couple of days is the most you can usually hope for. A longer test does have its dangers; when you actually live with a car for a while its foibles can stop being endearing and start being grating. In this instance though, the opposite was true.

After a red-eye flight the last thing you want to do is hop into a car with a confusing array of controls, and frankly that's what I

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was feeling about the CLS, though through necessity I managed to figure out the cruise control within minutes. The silky-smooth V8 is a gem and something to watch out for on over-policed Australian roads – I drove past two radar-equipped highway patrol vehicles within the first 30 kilometres. Ridiculous. You spend so much time looking at the speedometer that it is actually dangerous.

The problem is that the CLS just does speed so effortlessly. At 110km/h it is loping along at under 2,000rpm, and returning some

pretty decent fuel-economy figures too.

When I got off the expressways I started to appreciate the big V8's 388 horsepower much more. Overtaking is a cinch, as the transmission drops a couple of ratios and the car just rockets forward. Lines of traffic are dispatched with ease, as are most corners at traffic lights – it will hit 100km/h in a brisk 5.4 seconds. Top speed is limited by the electronics to 250km/h.

And despite the car's 1,835kg bulk, it is a pretty handy device when the road gets twisty too – no doubt this is aided by the standard (on the V8 models) AIRMATIC DC air-suspension, which offers several firmer sports modes.

Ultimately, though, saying the CLS does all this stuff well should come as no surprise – it's a car that's going to set you back S\$338,888 here after all. Lucky for some...

Where the big CLS really succeeds is in feeling special. Every time I got in the car in the morning it felt good, it made me want to take the long way to my destination which, with the luxury of choice, I did on several occasions. After 1,000km in the CLS I found myself reluctant to hand it back. □