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NEW ISUZU KB

EXCLUSIVE



Our 4500km test of the new sixth-generation Isuzu on SA's toughest roads

50
YEARS OF
LAMBORGHINI



+NEW AVENTADOR ROADSTER DRIVEN

PORSCHE CAYMAN
THE FIRST DRIVE




THE COMPASS CHALLENGE



Ahead of its local debut, we drive the new Isuzu KB on an epic journey to the most extreme geographical points in South Africa. Five days and over 4500 kilometres of hard driving provided SA's first real-world test of the new, sixth-generation KB

WORDS PATRICK CRUYWAGEN // IMAGES ALISON COLE



ON PAPER, THE challenge seemed rather straightforward: drive one of the first 2013 Isuzu KB units off the production floor in a clockwise direction over kilometres of tar, gravel and thick sand, visiting the most southern, western, northern and eastern parts of the country to test Isuzu's new KB over the most diverse conditions, climates and temperatures this country had to offer. To our knowledge, no one had ever undertaken such a feat – specifically in such a short time frame – but the roads and terrain we expected to encounter *en route* would also be representative of what the average SA bakkie owner (from farmers to executives) would encounter on a daily basis, allowing us to form a definitive opinion on the newcomer's performance against its rivals.

As the vehicle was one of the first KBs to leave the production line (well ahead of the model's local debut in March) and was 'run in' on the way from Port Elizabeth

to Cape Town, logic dictated that we should start the challenge at Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa. From here, we looked to venture across the winelands to the North West, plotting a route to the other three points before finishing just north of the Kosi River mouth on the KZN coast.

From the outset I must confess that I have had absolute respect for the previous, fifth-generation Isuzu KB as I once drove from Johannesburg to the Congo River along some of Africa's hardest roads without any problem (this despite the dodgy fuel north of the border). On another occasion I got submerged in a remote part of the Save River in Mozambique on a blazingly hot Sunday afternoon, yet the KB still got me home. Such is the reputation of the workhorse in many people's eyes, which means the latest iteration has some huge tyre tracks to fill.

Problem is, lately even the petrol pump attendants have started to question if the iconic Isuzu still has ▶



what it takes to compete with the new big boys in the bakkie segment. Many felt that it was no more than an ageing farm bakkie by comparison with Ford's new Ranger and only good for carrying big loads and doing utilitarian work. The time for refinement and refreshment was well overdue and our modest 'little' adventure in a new double-cab version was going to tell us exactly if the latest KB had changed for the better ... or worse.

South to West: Cape Agulhas to Orange River mouth

'Sir, this restaurant are closed,' explains the burly owner of an Agulhas eatery soon after we arrive at the tip of Africa. Even though the inside looked to be locked and loaded with locals, we moved on as he was not to be messed with. Sure it may have been a private party, but this was Hilux country after all and the custodians of a new KB were not likely to be that welcome. Thankfully, this outlook was not shared by all in Agulhas: we had spent that afternoon with Derick Burger, the unofficial mayor and resident 4x4 fundi in the coastal town. He kindly guided us to some of the area's rockier viewpoints that overlooked the exact geographical spot where the cold Atlantic and warm Indian oceans meet.

One of the criticisms of the previous Isuzu was its poor 206mm ground clearance by comparison with its rivals – Toyota Hilux 227mm, Volkswagen Amarok 192mm, Nissan Navara 230mm and Ford Ranger 237mm.

▲ Agulhas is home to the most southern point in Africa, the starting point of the Compass Challenge

Although we still heard that all too familiar expensive sound of rock on undercarriage when trying to manoeuvre the newcomer into position for our cover shot, its 235mm ground clearance is a big improvement. Although the 30deg approach angle is more acute than its predecessor's 36deg, the departure angle has improved slightly to 22deg thanks to a new, integrated rear bumper, while the breach angle of 23deg remains virtually unchanged from the previous generation.

The KB's low-down torque makes it a pleasure to crawl over rocks and boulders in a controlled manner and its added grunt was evident when trying to crest one of the final sand dunes. Although Isuzu's proven 3.0-litre turbodiesel is not the most powerful amongst its peers, it coped well with most of the rocky obstacles we threw at it.

If you study the dimensions of the KB's all-new i-GRIP ladder-frame chassis that underpins the Isuzu V-Cross (Thailand), Isuzu D Max (UK) and Holden Colorado (Australia) – launched in their respective markets mid-way through last year – the new pick-up measures around 265mm longer, 60mm wider and 35mm higher than before, which allows for a roomier interior. Derick has driven almost every type of off-road vehicle that had ever traversed these parts including the previous KB and soon commented on how the interior of the new model's cab felt bigger, and that rear knee- and legroom (914mm) had also improved. To achieve this, ▶



▲ Derick Burger knows every 4x4 track in Agulhas



▲ And they're off, heading from the most southern point to the most western point

◀ The low down torque makes rock crawling a controlled affair

▼ One of these is a wreck. No prizes for guessing which is built for running on ground



the rear seat has been moved right back so no reclining is possible. Unofficial figures suggest that the load bay is still shorter, narrower and shallower than most of its rivals, but GMSA engineers say the newcomer will now accommodate a full Euro (wooden) palette measuring 800mm x 1200mm. With a lengthened wheelbase and wider front and rear tracks, the new chassis is claimed to be 42% more rigid.

GMSA's engineers completed over one million test kilometres in its development, which is why the local model launch takes place so long after the rest of the world. The development time was spent tailoring the newcomer's ride, handling, cooling and durability for South African conditions and meeting with existing owners from key markets to find out exactly what they wanted. So not only does the South African version have a diff-lock, it boasts a seriously strengthened load box and a third hinge to reinforce the tailgate. Park sensors have also been added to assist the KB's manoeuvrability in tight confines.

After sunrise on the first day we set off on our journey heading through the winelands and the rain to the N7 before turning north adjacent to the West coast on our 1 000km leg towards Alexander Bay. Piekenierskloof Pass revealed the first signs of the 3.0-litre D-TEQ turbodiesel's added power and torque. I left the gearbox in fifth gear and floored the accelerator and not once during the long climb did the speedo dip below 110kph. While GMSA was reluctant to divulge any official specifications or performance outputs ahead of the local launch, the similarly-powered Isuzu V-Cross offers claimed peak outputs of 130kW and 380Nm of torque. Given that GMSA has just launched the Trailblazer with a new 2.8-litre Duramax turbodiesel producing 132kW and 470Nm when mated with a six-speed automatic transmission, it's slightly baffling that GMSA opted to merely revise the old-generation 3.0-litre. That said, the KB offers a wide torque band



too and throttle response is adequate. We presume the decision to go with the 3.0-litre is due to fuel quality concerns north of our border, but one would expect that the new 2.8 would have undergone those same fuel quality controls before it debuted in the Trailblazer. Ironically, the 2.8 is offered in the Holden Colorado variant in Australia. Both KB and Colorado have an identical one-tonne payload across their ranges, but the KB's three-tonne towing capacity falls short of the Colorado's 3.5-tonne limit.

GMSA has also stuck with the five-speed manual transmissions of old and the new KB will be offered in double-, extended- and single-cab guises from launch, together with a choice of a 2.5-litre turbodiesel and a new 2.4-litre petrol engine. In overseas markets, Isuzu has introduced a new five-speed automatic 'box, but we feel Volkswagen's new eight-speed automatic Amarok will take some beating in the two-pedal market.

Due to the vast distances and quiet roads in the Northern Cape, locals drive bakkies flat out in these remote areas along the straight, asphalt stretches of the Karoo. We too had to put foot in the KB to reach the Orange River mouth before sunset as our travel time had been cut short by the many roadwork delays that littered the route.

To get to the mouth of the Orange River, you have to sign into the mining area and muscle through some thick sand tracks that venture past an old lifeguard tower, which many mistake for the most westerly point. From here the KB skirted the wetland effortlessly to ▶



▲ To get to the most eastern point you have to follow the fishermen's tracks for the last few kms



▼ Believe it or not Alexander Bay has never ever had a fogless day



where the Orange River flows into the ocean. With tyres partially deflated, the thick sand proved no hurdle for the Isuzu, which was left in high range. The one time it did grind to a halt was at the thickest section, so we engaged low range, reversed out of the hole and then powered forward through it. Once in its power band, the motor will definitely be able to get you through most situations. This important wetland is home to over fifty bird species and is one of the West coast's hidden gems.

West to North: Alexander Bay to Beit Bridge

To get from the most western to the most northern point is almost 2000 kilometres, so we had scheduled a halfway stop in the farming town of Vryburg. After the previous evening at the river mouth we back-tracked about 100km and so it was not long before we were heading east for the first time. To the north of us lay the Orange River, protected by an escarpment of jagged mountains. You know when you are close to the river when the stark brown landscape is contrasted by lush green vineyards. Kanoneiland (the biggest inland island in SA), Pofadder and Kakamas flew by but we had to stop for a refuel in Kathu as the size of the KB's tank has not changed – it still holds 76 litres. By this point, we had averaged around 11.4ℓ/100km and so our range was just under the 700km mark. The refinement of the engine and cabin NVH are much improved both at idle and on the open road, so much so that I sometimes had to remind myself that we were in a bakkie as it's definitely more car-like to drive than the outgoing KB.

The country's northernmost point was the only compass point I had not visited before I embarked on this trip. I was amazed how the route had changed since I last visited the small towns along the way. For ▶



▲ According to a farmer and Isuzu owner 'it sits as nicely as an old Merc on the gravel roads.' We concur

▼ The pass just outside Steinkopf offers dramatic views over the barren Northern Cape landscape



ONCE IN ITS POWER BAND, THE MOTOR WILL DEFINITELY
BE ABLE TO GET YOU THROUGH MOST SITUATIONS

SO WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Outside

The new Isuzu stands higher and wider, giving it a much bolder appearance. Some might say they don't see the difference but place the old and new together and the new jumps out at you. Despite looking similar to Mazda's BT-50 and Mitsubishi's Triton from certain angles, one can still get a sense of that familiar Isuzu DNA. The modern fresh design sees two elevated lines coming down from the edges of the bonnet to the now totally chrome grille. The issue of undercarriage airflow normally associated with increases in ride height is countered by two little flaps at the bottom of the flared wheel arches. With the additional height and mass, GMSA claims much aerodynamics work was done to ensure fuel consumption improved. The new KB will boast the lowest drag coefficient (0.47 Cd) in its class.

Engine

Unlike the Trailblazer (and Australia's Holden Colorado,) which gets an all-new 2.8-litre engine, the KB uses a revised version of Isuzu's existing 3.0-litre D-TEQ turbodiesel, the same as the Isuzu V Cross in Thailand. While the 2.8-litre would have increased the KB's 3-tonne towing capacity to a class-leading 3.5-tonne, we suspect GMSA may have concerns about the 2.8-litre's performance on low quality fuel north of the border, although this should be clarified at its local launch. Despite lacking the low-rev surge of the new Ford Ranger, overall refinement and performance has improved.

Suspension

The suspension changes are coil springs replacing the old torsion bar set-up in the front, while the rear leaf springs remain unchanged. When we visited a friend on a Vryburg farm the 30km gravel section was negotiated at some pretty high speeds and the Isuzu sat nicely on the gravel in spite of the size increase and suspension changes. The engineers responsible for the chassis set-up have definitely succeeded in creating an extremely comfortable drive, no matter what the surface.

Chassis

While the unofficial figures suggest that the load bay is still shorter, narrower and shallower than most of its rivals like Volkswagen's Amarok, GMSA engineers say the newcomer will now accommodate a full Euro palette and that its all-new i-GRIP ladder frame chassis is claimed to be 42% more rigid than its predecessor, extending the wheelbase while widening the front and rear track. The redesigned rear bumper does not stick out anymore and is now nicely integrated into the body. The optional extra tow ball is neatly packaged and out of the way.

instance, Delareyville has become so derelict, it's a struggle to find any tar among all the potholes and the pavements are in a total state of disrepair. We were now passing through what I refer to as the stomach of South Africa, as it is populated by loads of grain silos that, in turn, help feed the nation. The kilometres and hours rolled on as we travelled through dusty farmlands: harvesting season was by then over and tractors ploughed lands in anticipation of the first summer rains.

We swapped the N14 for the N1 north – Beit Bridge and Zimbabwe was only 300 kilometres away. For a while we made good time on the N1, but this was the start of the December holidays so the border post was its usual chaotic self. Just before its entrance we turned off onto a deserted tar road that runs along the Limpopo

River and the Zimbabwe border. Even though the government spent millions putting up a layered security fence, it was littered with holes and the clothing of successful border jumpers. After about 30km my Garmin sat-nav beeped and signalled that we had arrived at the most northern point. We stopped and noticed a settlement of sorts behind us – a local farmer and Isuzu fan, Lukas Lange, spotted the new KB and came over to chat. He told us that these informal settlers were all Zimbabweans and most worked for him. The irony here was that while cars and trucks backed up at the heavily fortified and patrolled border post not even 20 minutes away, right here Zimbabweans travelled freely between the two countries via the holes in the fence. International travel – Africa style...

▲ The only thing that will stop an Isuzu on a gravel road is a dust storm



▲ While it might still look like a bakkie from the outside the interior appears SUV-like

◀ No more little black buttons on the dash. You can now, with the flick of a dial, change from 2WD to 4WD to Low Range. We would still prefer a traditional lever though for peace of mind



No time to cast a line into the Jozini Dam and pull a Tiger fish

North to East: Louis Trichardt to Kosi Bay

The last day would see us cross three provinces and cover the last 1 000 kilometres from the heat and dust to the muddy tracks of Limpopo, and finally to the beaches of KZN. As we headed south-east we moved through some of the most fertile land in all of Africa, on roads where you can buy a wealth of fruit and vegetables, not to mention a chunky chicken or two from the street vendors. After traversing a never-ending muddy track through the Limpopo timber plantations, the beautiful Drakensberg Escarpment came into view signalling the coast was drawing closer.

After lunch and having negotiated hundreds of massive speed bumps on the road into Kosi Bay, we arrived at our final destination after dark. It is not possible to drive to the most eastern point so the next day I was up at 4am and ran along the beach in search of it. There was no fanfare or sign, just a lone fisherman, me and my GPS. As the sun rose the KB was driven south, stopping to look at the fishermen tending their traps along the lagoon. We could have stayed here for a week to recover just snorkelling and fishing, but once in sight of the river mouth the GPS signalled that this was the end of our adventure.

We had successfully completed the inaugural Compass Challenge and had found the latest KB hard to fault. From our first impressions the newcomer proved reliable, comfortable, powerful and immensely capable and if priced right, should be a very competitive product. GMSA asked loyal customers what they wanted, looked at what the competition was doing and then improved on what they already had. The car-like interior, increased power and new looks are sure to make potential new double-cab buyers sit up and take notice. While an improvement, the sixth-generation Isuzu KB is neither a game-changer nor the best player in the class, it simply remains an alternative to the evergreen Toyota Hilux and Ford's impressive new Ranger. **tc**



▲ You won't get to the most eastern point without 4x4



▲ We had to hoof it along the beach from the Kosi River mouth to get to the most eastern point



SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL	VW Amarok 2.0 BiTDi 132kW D/C 4x4	Toyota Hilux 3.0 D-4D 4x4 Raider D/Cab	2013 Isuzu 3.0 KB 4x4 D/Cab	Nissan Navara 2.5 dCi Le 4x4 D/Cab	Ford Ranger 3.2 TDCi D/C 4x4 XLT
DIMENSIONS/WEIGHT/CAPACITIES					
Price	R 435 500	R 432 100	N/A	R 437 800	R 446 710
Engine	1968cc 4cyl Bi-turbo diesel	2982cc 4cyl turbo diesel	2999cc 4cyl turbo diesel	2488cc 4cyl turbo diesel	3198cc 5cyl turbo diesel
Power (kW @ rpm)	132 @ 4000	120 @ 3400	130 @ 3600*	140 @ 4000	147 @ 3000
Torque (Nm @ rpm)	400 @ 1500-2250	343 @ 1400-3200	380 @ 1800-2800*	450 @ 2000	470 @ 1500
Transmission	Six-speed manual, 4Motion 4WD	Five-speed manual, Selectable 4WD	Five-speed manual, Selectable 4WD	Six-speed manual, Selectable 4WD	Six-speed manual, Selectable 4WD
Suspension (front)	Double wishbone, coil springs	Double wishbone, coil springs	Double wishbone, coil springs	Double wishbone, coil springs	Double wishbone, coil springs
Suspension (rear)	Solid axle, leaf spring	Solid axle, leaf spring	Solid axle, leaf spring	Solid axle, leaf spring	Solid axle, leaf spring
Length/Width/Height	5254/1954/1834mm	5255/1835/1850mm	5295/1860/1785mm	5296/1850/1907mm	5274/2163/1821
Fuel Tank (litres)	80	80	76	80	80
Fuel cons. (claimed)	7.9ℓ/100km	10.6ℓ/100km	8.1*(claimed) 11.4 (actual)	10.6ℓ/100km	9.8ℓ/100km
Towing capacity (kg)	2800	1840	3000*	3000	3350
Payload (kg)	922	870	1010*	845	1049
Loadbox Length/Width/Height (mm)	1555/1620/508	1520/1515/450	1485/1530/465*	1511/1560/457	1520/1700/520
Approach / Departure / Breach (deg)	28/23/23.6	30/23/25	30/22/23	29/22/18	26/22/19
Ground clearance (mm)	192	227	235*	230	237

*Official GMSA specs may vary from those quoted