

Tribute solves SUV problem

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WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

Everyone you know has an SUV and now you've got your heart set on one, too.

Or, at least you did, that is, until that pesky sticker price got in way. And then there's the insurance premiums. And what about the latest enemy: the ever-increasing price of gas. Whoever said there's a price to be paid for looking cool wasn't joking — at least when it comes to SUVs.

However, Mazda, it seems, is one manufacturer that has figured this out and offers a very real solution. It's called the Tribute. So, Bunky, pick yourself up and brush yourself off, 'cause we've got some good news for you.

The Tribute gives you the chunky, macho, good looks you seek, the shallow sticker price your line of credit can handle, and sips fuel like a mid-sized car. In fact, the only other sport utes that can touch the Tribute's fuel figures are Toyota's RAV4, Suzuki's Vitara, Chevrolet's Tracker and, of course, the Tributes domestic-based twin, the Ford Escape.

How is this possible, you might ask? Simple.

Mazda keeps the base price (just shy of \$22,000) and fuel consumption in check by offering a 130-horsepower four-cylinder engine under the hood, front-wheel drive and a five-speed manual transmission as standard. And, with exterior dimensions approaching those of a Jeep Grand Cherokee, you get the unmistakable aura of sturdiness and affordability.

I told you it was simple. Adding 4x4 to the base model adds just \$2,650.

The Tribute becomes very enticing when you realize that you can get a 200-horsepower V6 and four-wheel drive for not a lot more loot. With these attributes, in fact, the Tribute comes in at about the same price as the more utilitarian Nissan Xterra and the smaller, less powerful Honda CR-V. A bit of a surprise is the availability of the V6 with front-wheel drive, sure to be a hit with warm-city dwellers.

The Tribute carries the D-shaped grille that adorns most of Mazda's products (and looks strangely similar to most Acura products, too)

with a large corporate logo affixed to a center crosspiece.

Snake-eyes style combination headlamps offer a distinctly upmarket look and rival those found in more expensive machinery.

Of course, the sides and bumpers are slathered with more plastic than you'll find at a resin chair convention, but at least it saves the sheet metal from dings and scratches that are commonplace in the urban jungle.

The Tribute's cost (and weight, to a certain extent) is also kept low because of the two-speed transfer case. Rather, there isn't one. Instead, you'll find a nifty torque-splitting differential that maintains power to the front wheels, unless they begin to slip, at which point torque begins to flow to the back wheels.

In really crummy conditions, just press the dash button that locks the differential in 4x4 mode and each of the wheels gets an equal amount of power.

The Tribute is no pretender and can tow up to a 1,600 kilograms.

The most number riders you'll fit into the Tribute are five, with two front buckets and a rear bench seat that folds to increase hauling space.

Perhaps the thing that sticks out the most — literally — is the large, column-mounted gear selector stalk. Conspicuous is a polite understatement, but its location does allow you to get up and move to the back of the vehicle without tripping over a console-mounted shifter.

The Tribute is available in four trim levels — DX, DX-V6, LX-V6 and ES-V6 — with all models having air conditioning, power windows and locks, 100-watt CD stereo and anti-theft engine immobilizer.

Unfortunately, none of the V6 models is available with a manual transmission. But as far as value goes, the DX-V6 4x4 at around \$26,500 has to be viewed as a relative bargain, while an ES-V6 4x4 equipped with leather seats at just over \$32,000 is well within the budget of the typical sport ute shopper.

Mazda's Tribute might not be the most powerful or luxurious sport utility that money can buy, but it just might be the most sensible way to look cool, be cool and save some cool cash at the same time.

The Liberty can be opted as far as the buyer likes

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door handle - or pushing a button on the optional remote - and the glass swings smoothly up, offering hands-free loading and making rear opening a one-step process. The rear seat back also sprouts six grocery bag hooks.

A move up to a Limited Edition adds most of the modern amenities. The Limited includes the 3.7L V6, roof rails, upgraded audio system, alloy wheels, air conditioning, cruise and tilt steering and a convenience package. And you can opt the Liberty up as far as you like with extra features and doo-dads like leather seating, tinted glass, side air curtain, 6-disc CD, trailer-towing and off-road add-ons, even submersible halogen fog lamps. Yadda, yadda, the list goes on.

"Listen," I told the Jeep guys at the launch, "we can talk about 'new features' and 'increased content' till the cows come home but what any future customers and those loyal Cherokee owners really want to know is, bottom line, will it cost more than a Cherokee?"

"No," they told me.

The 2002 4-wheel drive Jeep Liberty Sport will have an MSRP starting from \$22,600. The Jeep Liberty Limited Edition will start from \$28,400. That's pretty competitive compared to last year's Cherokee prices. For a lot more vehicle.

And, speaking of being competitive, while I test drove several versions of Liberty, Jeep also showed enough confidence in their new product to provide test vehicles in the same class from other manufacturers - the Ford Escape, Nissan Xterra, and Toyota RAV4 and Honda CR-V.

I don't usually base my judgments on vehicles that are not provided by the manufacturers themselves but I will say this.

The Jeep Liberty compares favorably against any competitor in the marketplace. Very favorably.

If you're in the market for a compact-to-mid-size sport utility with off-road pedigree and excellent on-road manners, you owe it to yourself to test drive the new 2002 Jeep Liberty.

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