

WHEELS

Suzuki unveils their "bigger is better" concept truck

By Rob Beintema
Suzuki recently unveiled their "bigger is better" concept truck at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit. The XL6 is a four-door sport utility vehicle with lavish interior appointments and seating for six.

This year's North American International Auto Show in Detroit seemed to be more about trucks than cars and Suzuki joined the parade of new heavy-duty dream vehicles with an all-new concept vehicle, the Suzuki XL6.

Designed specifically for the North American market, this latest, largest and most luxurious Suzuki concept vehicle features leather seating for six inside a lavish cabin, an abundance of versatile storage space, packaged in a sleek exterior and powered by a rugged four-wheel drive powertrain.

While some concept vehicles are merely designer pipe dreams, a very real version of the XL6 will appear before the end of the year.

"This is a key truck for us," said

Mike Kurnik, national advertising manager for Suzuki Canada. "It expands our target for SUV sales and makes us a little bigger, a little more of a player in the sport utility market."

Sure, everybody's jumping on the SUV bandwagon but the XL6 is a natural next step for Suzuki. Suzuki just recently reclaimed a large chunk of the entry level "sport cute" market with its re-styled, re-designed Vitara lineup. Building a production version of the XL6 will give Suzuki customers a bigger model to move up to.

The Suzuki XL6 is a four-door, front engine, rear/four-wheel drive sport utility vehicle. The XL6 - actually Suzuki's biggest vehicle ever - is built on a Grand Vitara platform that's been stretched considerably. The XL6 wheelbase measures 2799 mm (110.2") - about a foot longer than the Grand Vitara. The body has been stretched by about 19" longer than Grand Vitara's - with official XL6 measurements of 4620 mm (181.9") long, 1821 mm (71.7") wide and a 1709 mm (67.3") height. Those dimensions place it smack dab in the middle of traditional competitors. In other words, it's about as tall as a Ford Explorer, a little wider than a

Toyota 4Runner and a little shorter than the Nissan Pathfinder.

But the XL6 will actually be gunning for some of the newer SUV competitors in a lower price range - new models like the Nissan XTerra and models yet to be released, like the Hyundai Santa Fe, Ford Escape and Mazda Tribute.

The XL6 displays classic Suzuki family design cues enhanced with bolder styling and an aggressive stance. An enlarged, louvered grille spans a distinctively styled nose set between bezeled headlights. High-dispersal fog lamps punctuate the beefy front bumper. The roofline features integrated roof rails and a rear airfoil complete with built-in brake light.

Flared fenders and body-side moldings add muscle bulge to the body and the beefy styling is contrasted by a little uptown flavoring of polished chrome accents and large 18" 16 spoke OZ racing wheels.

Inside, the XL6 is quite poshly laid out with beige leather captain's chairs in the first two rows and a two-passenger bench in the back that

folds down to maximize rear cargo area. Sunburst burl woodgrain trims the front dash and side door window controls. All six seating positions fea-



The XL6 is a four-door sport utility vehicle with lavish interior appointments and seating for six.

ture 3-point seat belts and individual air conditioner vents. A side-hinged tailgate swings open to reveal a recessed rear storage bay.

While Vitaras are still built side by side with their Chevrolet Tracker counterparts here in Canada, the XL6 - like the Grand Vitara - will be constructed at Suzuki's plant in Iwata, Japan.

It's a pretty safe bet that the pro-

duction version of the XL6 will stay fairly true to the actual dimensions, styling and spirit of the XL6 concept.

Engine specifications are yet to be determined but the all-new engine will probably build on the success of the Grand Vitara's 155 hp 2.5L V6 - perhaps with a bored-out version of the V6, stroked closer towards a 200 hp level.

And Suzuki's strength has always been in the entry-level market, so even though upscale packages are available in the rest of the Suzuki lineup, expect a little more price-conscious practicality and a little less of the leather-wrapped, luxu-styling of the concept.

A few things are still up in the air. I'm not even sure what the new vehicle will be called.

But, whatever it's named, a production version of the XL6 will probably be appearing at your neighborhood dealership by December at the latest. If you want a peek at what the future could hold for Suzuki, the XL6 concept will be making an appearance at the Canadian International Auto Show in Toronto from Friday, February 18 - Sunday, February 27.

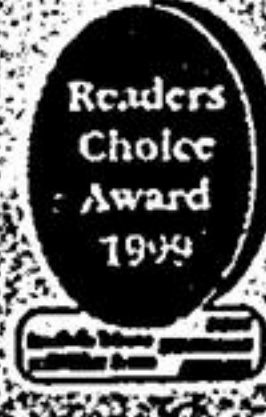
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