

Xenon moves Tata into new lifestyle market

BY HIMESH BHARGAVA

Now I hear you sniggering in the background as I say this, but believe it or not I do think that Tata have a bit of a competitor in the "lifestyle" bakkie market with their new Xenon 4x4 and 4x2 double cabs - and I'm not just saying that because four generations ago my ancestors were on a ship from the Tata motherland.

Seriously, for starters you gotta actually look at the Xenon. It's as un-Tatcoline in design as comparing Eskom to a first world service provider. The Xenon shape is current and certainly reminiscent of more mainstream competitors. Have a squiz at the picture alongside. You will notice some interesting outer contours that curve upwards along the rear doors, and colour coding from door handles to rear-view mirrors and wheel arches. Some launch units had shiny bull- and roll-bars; nice. The 16-inch rims, though, are still a bit of a wonder. The size is fine, it's just what I call the nipple cap design

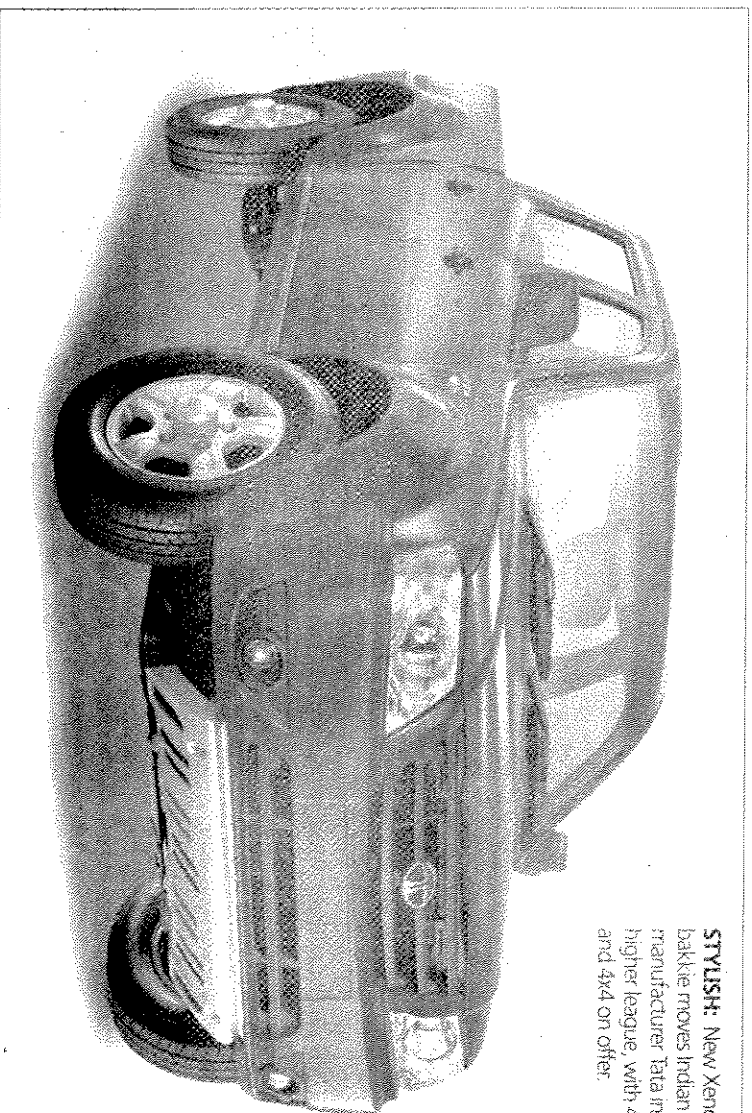
that doesn't work. You know the one, the centre cap protrudes quite noticeably - many of the vehicles (including ours) in fact lost the caps while thrashing about in the bush.

But that's easy to overlook in terms of the bigger picture. The inside is decent enough, with good legroom all round and a really fair finish. Yes, a bit plasticky, but nowhere near as bad as some of the Chinese crap we've seen invade the market. There's actually a very nice chunky aluminium looking gear-lever, and a pimp-my-ride front loader with MP3 capability that comes as standard.

The steering was a little oversized, but had a nice feel to it. My only issue with it was that it was height adjustable only, and not for reach.

Other features include electric windows, power steering, central locking, aircon and comfy seats.

Tata SA was determined to prove how capable an offroader the Xenon is, and flew the lot of us out to a holding in the Volksrust area. I



STYLISH: New Xenon bakkie moves Indian manufacturer Tata into a higher league, with 4x2 and 4x4 on offer.

doubt the rain was factored in, making for a rather interesting and muddy day. In any event, I was surprised by the capability of the 4x4 we piloted (must have done some development near the Himalayas me reckons).

There's this little, and I do mean little, dial that you move up or down (think of the light beam height adjuster in your car) between high and low range that gets the rock crawling going. Normal to high range can be done "on the fly", while low range needs the vehicle to be stationary. There's a limited-slip diff instead of a diff-lock system, but it worked in the mountainous execution.

We did most of the slipping, sliding, cruising, crawling and climbing in low range, but there were certainly parts that could have been tackled in 4-high, especially considering that under the bonnet lies a 85kW/360Nm 3litre direct common-rail diesel engine - the only engine currently on offer in the Xenon 4x4 and 4x2 (double cab only) range (there's runovers of a 2.2litre later in the year).

Ground clearance was ample (yours truly though did manage to anchor the Xenon on a huge boulder while playing Rambo). Tata quote 26 degree approach and 22 degree departure angles, torsion bars for further body raising, and a rear

wheels that are closer to the end of the load box for easier towing and manoeuvrability. Safety tethers include crumple zones, collapsible steering column, brake load sensing proportioning valve, and side intrusion beams. Obvious show falls are the lack of airbags and ABS, which is partly the reason why the Xenon costs so much less than rivals like the Hilux and Isuzu KB which do have these items.

The Xenon 4x2 double-cab comes in at R169 995, the 4x4 double cab will set you back around R25k more at R194 995 - both include a year/100 000km warranty and year/60 000km service plan. It's worth a second look.