

Ram trucks launch under new RHD distributor

Priced from \$139,500

By Mike Costello, Senior Editor

Ram 2500 and **Ram 3500** heavy duty American trucks are now available in Australia as right-hand-drive vehicles, re-engineered to factory standards in Melbourne at a new assembly line belonging to the Walkinshaw Automotive Group.

The chromed-up 4x4 behemoths launched to the media today as part of their national rollout across an initial network of 20 dealers, planned to expand to more than 30 sites as demand increases.

The operation is run by a new distributor called American Special Vehicles (ASV), a joint-venture between Ateco Automotive — the local importer of Maserati, Lotus and

Chinese brands LDV and Foton — and Walkinshaw Automotive, known for its performance Commodores and racing team.

This is an interesting arrangement. The distributor says it stands apart from existing businesses that already offer converted (not “re-engineered”, in ASV parlance) right-hand-drive full-size pick-ups such as the Ford F-150 and Chevrolet Silverado.

Pricing kicks off at \$139,500 plus on-road costs for the ‘entry’ and greater-volume Ram 2500 and climbs to \$146,500 for the Ram 3500 — more than double a Ford Ranger Wildtrak but more than competitive with rival conversion companies such as Performax.

We understand that Australia’s weakened dollar hit ASV, and that it had to adjust prices above where it envisioned when the project commenced last year. It buys the vehicles from FCA’s Saltillo plant in Mexico.

To the deal itself, which ASV says is attracting very strong customer and dealer demand from heavy-duty buyers.

ASV has full-volume import approval, so it can import as many Ram trucks as it wants and has the exclusive license on these vehicles. They’re fully ADR compliant, and have been designed to exactly match the ex-factory LHD versions in every aspect.

They will even be crash tested at APV next week in Melbourne to make sure



all the safety equipment works, though ADRs don't demand them. It's unlikely they'll go through the ANCAP system, however, given their mass.

A new assembly line in Melbourne removes the cab from the ladder frame and swaps over the steering wheel to the right. The process involves the fitment of a newly developed steering box, sway bar and new injection moulding (made in Australia by the company that makes the moulding for the Altona-made Toyota Camry) among other items.

Walkinshaw has employed 15 new workers for the full-time assembly line and done 30,000 hours of validation testing, and spent millions of dollars. It aims to produce 500 cars (90 per cent will be the 2500) in the next year and will ramp things up in time. A full re-engineering job takes only 20 hours.

The overall mission was to make RHD Rams that work at a level equivalent to Fiat Chrysler factory standards in every detail, with total symmetry of the pedals to the wheel and in the turning circle, etc.

"Our engineers and manufacturing teams have risen to the challenge of implementing a completely unique build process for the right-hand-drive Ram, while simultaneously designing, sourcing and cataloguing hundreds of original equipment quality parts," said ASV joint chief operating officer and Walkinshaw engineer John DiBerardino.

"Our goal was to produce a right-hand-drive Ram truck that meets the engineering standards, quality and refinement of the left-hand-drive product. We have spent tens of thousands of man hours and millions of

dollars to make sure we get this right."

RAM TRUCKS IN DETAIL

Both the Ram 2500 and 3500 are powered by a 6.7-litre Cummins turbo-diesel engine producing 276kW and a staggering 1084Nm of torque through a heavy-duty six-speed automatic transmission with three multiple clutch packs.

With the right setup, a Ram 2500 can tow a massive 6989kg (double a Ranger or HiLux) while the Ram 3500 that needs a truck license can tow 6170kg. The equation is flipped for payload, where the coil-sprung 2500 can lug 913kg and the leaf-sprung 3500 a massive 1713kg in the tray.

The 50-KSI steel frame has eight separate cross members, hydro-formed frame rails and fully boxed rear rails.

The Borg Warner transfer case features electronic shift on the fly engineering with three operating ranges plus neutral. There's a low-range reduction ratio of 2.64:1, and both are highly capable off the beaten path.

Inside the six-seat cabin you get a range of luxuries such as leather seats, heated and ventilated in the front with 10-way power adjustment for the driver and six-way adjustment for the front passenger.

You also get a heated and leather-bound steering wheel with integrated audio controls; dual-zone climate control; tinted power windows; an 8.0-inch touchscreen display; nine-speaker sound system with subwoofer and USB/Bluetooth connectivity. There's also an Australian powerpoint in the fascia.

There's also six airbags including full-length curtains; electronic stability

control; rear park assist and a reverse-view camera, plus an eye-level brake light with cargo camera; a tyre-pressure monitoring system and remote keyless entry.

"There is a significant opportunity to fill the pent up demand for an OEM quality vehicle of this type," said ASV's other joint chief operating officer, with overall responsibility for import, distribution, network, sales and marketing, Peter McGeown.

"Not just the quality of the vehicle either, though that is significant, we will offer a nation-wide dealer network with sales, parts and service support commensurate with a brand of this standing.

"We want people to be confident when buying a Ram truck, assured they are getting value for their money and certain that we will be there to support their vehicle when necessary. The quality of dealer we have been able to recruit to form our Ram Truck network has convinced me that we will meet that challenge."

Right-hand drive Ram trucks engineered by American Special Vehicles are covered by a three-year/100,000km warranty along with full parts and service support.

We're going to get behind the wheel of a Ram 2500 in January, and will bring you a review then.

