

# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

***Two weeks in the new RAM 1500 confirms this American is one for serious consideration – words by Warren caves, images by Torque it Up Photography***



***"The Laramie is the flagship top-of-the-line RAM 1500 model, and it comes equipped with all the fruit you'd expect"***



**D**elivery recently reported on its first test drive of the RAM 1500 dual-cab ute held over a single day in Bathurst, NSW.

A few hours of driving is a great introduction to a new vehicle, but a longer real-world test is even better to get a broader feel and insight into a vehicle's ability and performance. So, when an opportunity to grab the keys to a RAM 1500 Laramie for a couple of weeks came up, I jumped at the chance.

Picking up the 1500 Laramie from just outside the centre of Sydney, in Alexandria, the pouring rain resulting with local flooding was not the leisurely experience I had envisaged. However, the combination of a large vehicle with its accompanying weight and full-time four-wheel-drive option provided a secure environment to tackle such a meteorological event.

My previous drive had already given a sense of familiarity with the vehicle, but the first impression of the vast interior space in this vehicle remained. There are buckets of room inside the cabin space, large comfortable heated and ventilated leather seating, and, with a large centre console/armrest, the driver is provided with a really relaxed driving position, perfect for highway touring.

The Laramie is the flagship top-of-the-line RAM 1500 model, and it comes equipped with all the fruit you'd expect from a vehicle targeted at the higher equipment level sector of the Australian ute market.

In addition to the leather seats, there is a leather steering wheel, which is also heated. The steering column is tilt adjustable but not telescopic, although the brake and accelerator pedals have electronic height adjustment, which may compensate for that omission. I had no trouble finding a comfortable seating position, with ample electronic adjustments available, although the lumbar support seemed a little too minimal for this old worn-out back, I prefer a deeper arch position.

Within the steering wheel are the controls for the main instrument dash panel, offering menus to view trip meters, digital speedo, cruise control settings, ambient temperatures, engine and oil temps and pressures, and more, all conveniently located on the left steering-wheel spoke, along with Bluetooth phone function buttons.

The opposing spoke contains the buttons for cruise control functions along with plus and minus buttons for manual gear selection. On the underside of the steering wheel are buttons for audio volume and station seek operation. Initially I thought this was bad positioning, as they are operated by feel alone; however, the minimal functions allocated to the buttons made it really easy to use once orientated with the functions.

The 8.4-inch UCONNECT system located in the centre panel is responsible for controlling audio functions for the premium Alpine sound system and its accompanying 10 speakers (I only found eight, but I'm sure they are there somewhere). The UCONNECT system can also be used for controlling the climate control system and satellite navigation.

The generous centre console provided ample space for personal items, while cup holders and small storage vestibules can be found within the interior and in the doors.

As the rain continued for my journey home, the rain-sensing wipers did their bit to keep vision unobstructed, and the automatic projector headlights kept me visible to others.

On the motorway the RAM 1500 cruised leisurely at 110 km/h, registering an engine speed of about 1600 rpm, thanks to the 3.21:1 diff ratio. This is clearly aimed to provide the best possible fuel economy over the higher numerical 3.92:1 ratio available, but this comes at a cost of rated towing capacity, dropping from 4.5 tonnes to 3.5 tonnes for the 3.21:1 ratio vehicle.



## FEATURE

At cruising speed, the ride is smooth and firm, and noise levels are well subdued. V8 fans will, however, enjoy the experience of there being just enough engine noise available to demonstrate the 5.7-litre Hemi V8 engine rumble when pressed into service, although for the most part the RAM just loped along unstrained.

During the test period, I subjected the 1500 RAM to Hume Highway running, driving on local rural roads of dubious quality, shopping duties with the wife, and a tow evaluation. This provided a broad cross-section of driving conditions.

At 5.8 metres long and just over 2.0 metres wide, this is no small ute and is clearly designed for the big jobs. While not overly daunting to drive, some environments don't lend themselves well to the RAM. Shopping centre car parks for example don't cater well for a vehicle of such generous proportions, but, in saying that, it's not that you can't take it there, it's just the parking spots are a bit tight and some preplanning should be employed when parking, like reversing into spots that allow a straight line drive out. If I had a choice of a different car at home for this task, I'd certainly take that one instead. However, I did manage to pack a weekly shop of groceries into the two optional 240-litre RamBoxes, and locked them securely away, so it's not all bad at the shops.

Being designed for heavy-duty towing, with a full boxed chassis the RAM 1500 handled quite well empty, although on several occasions the rear end seemed a little too firm in the dampeners to absorb some off-set bumps and corrugations on dirt road corners, resulting in a bit of axle tramp under power and tail whip, some weight in the back and revised or adjustable dampeners may improve this.

With fuel efficiency so high on vehicle manufacturers' check lists, and rising world petrol prices, some may think it bold to introduce a V8 petrol-powered large ute into current markets, and I was one of those people.

I wondered if consumers would accept such an option when the competition was generally downsizing diesel engines while increasing output to achieve good fuel economy returns.

This was obviously on the minds of RAM Trucks Australia as well. With such a large engine capacity of 5.7 litres producing 291 kW of power and 556 Nm of torque at 3950 rpm, the engineers at RAM Trucks have put a great deal of development into clever ways to reduce fuel consumption without sacrificing performance when it's needed.

Perhaps the most significant contributor to increased fuel economy is the use of RAM's multi-displacement system (MDS), by which the engine management system shuts off two cylinders on each bank when conditions of low load are sensed. This system does not shut off the same cylinders all the time, rather alternating the off cylinders to equalise engine block temperatures. The only way to know when this is happening is by the green ECO indicator light in the dash, and the transition between all eight cylinders firing and shutting off four is practically unnoticeable from the driver's seat.







Also aiding fuel economy is the use of grille shutters, which maintain optimal thermal temperatures within the engine for more complete combustion and fuel efficiency. When the grille shutters are closed, the airflow is directed up over the bonnet, further enhancing aerodynamics and aiding better economy.

The 1500 is equipped with electronic steering, and, by removing the need for the engine to drive a power steering pump, the official word from RAM Trucks is that this move alone has reduced fuel usage by 1.8 percent and returns five horsepower to the engine.

Transmission drive is via an eight-speed automatic transmission and transfer case. There are four drive mode options selectable: change to 2WD; 4WD auto, which is basically all-wheel-drive mode without the centre diff lock; 4WD high with centre diff lock; and 4WD low. Park, reverse, neutral and drive are selectable via the dash-mounted rotary knob.

The eight-speed TorqueFlite transmission is a double overdrive transmission with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> gear ratios being 0.84 and 0.67 respectively.

For towing purposes there is a tow/haul button on the dash, which modifies the throttle and transmission behaviour when towing to sharpen up the throttle response, more readily initiate downshifts, and hold gears a bit longer before upshifting. When activated this feature seemed to restrict the transmission from selecting 8<sup>th</sup> gear.

Over my two weeks with the RAM 1500 Laramie I covered a total of 1056 kilometres, recording a total combined fuel consumption figure of 12.3 l/100 km. This included city traffic, the mandatory “let’s give it a stomp and see how she goes” (more often than I should have), 110 km/h freeway driving (empty), and a 155 km tow test towing a 2.6-tonne gross mass trailer from Picton, NSW, to Marulan, and return, which is quite a hilly test route. Fuel consumption rose to 16.3 l/100 km for the tow test section.

The fuel-saving features really seem to work, and there are some diesel-powered utes in the market that would not be too far behind these figures.

For those that may still rate these figures a bit too high, there’s always the upcoming 3.0-litre V6 diesel option for the 1500, which is scheduled for release before the end of the first quarter of 2019.

There were some minor aspects of the RAM 1500 I didn’t like, such as the park brake activation. It’s foot activated, and, with the pedal set down alongside the front RH kick panel, I found that on application I was continually kicking the door speaker with my muddy boots. I also felt the lumbar support seemed a little insignificant and the rear dampeners seemed too firm.

In conclusion, the RAM 1500 proved quite the performer, as expected power supply was ample and plentiful, with the real surprise being the commendable fuel economy. **D**