

NEWS

Over-reaching to the converted

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HOW big is too big? We're about to find out.

Full-size American pick-ups as wide as a Kenworth truck and more than six metres long are set to return to Australian roads, via a new factory-backed distributor for Ram vehicles.

Such pick-ups were last sold here in significant numbers in 2007, when Ford Australia imported the F-250 and F-350 that were converted to right-hand-drive in Brazil.

Unlike the other half a dozen or so independent operators who convert US vehicles for local roads, the new Australian deal has the backing of Ram Trucks USA.

The right-hand-drive conversions are done locally on vehicles that come straight off the production line with, among other preparations, Australian radios and navigation already fitted.

The joint venture between Walkinshaw Automotive Group (owner of Holden

AT A GLANCE

ASV RAM 2500 LARAMIE

PRICE From \$139,500 plus on-road costs

WARRANTY

3 years/100,000km

SERVICE INTERVAL

12 months/12,000km

CAPPED PRICE

SERVICING No

SAFETY 6 airbags

ENGINE

6.7-litre 6-cyl turbo diesel, 276kW/1084Nm

TRANSMISSION

6-speed auto; 4WD

THIRST 13.5L/100km (test)

DIMENSIONS

6027mm (L), 2009mm (W), 1974mm (H), 3797mm (WB)

TURNING CIRCLE 13.4m

WEIGHT 3577kg

SPARE Full-size

PAYLOAD 913kg-1713kg

TOWING 3500-6989kg

Special Vehicles) and veteran vehicle distributor Neville Crichton is called American Special Vehicles.

The biggest differences

between ASV Ram vehicles and other locally converted US pick-ups are under the skin.

The ASV Rams are fitted with a moulded dashboard made by the same company that makes the Toyota Camry dash in Australia (rather than fibreglass favoured by other converters), and the right-hand drive steering assembly is made by the same US company that builds the left-hand drive versions.

The wiper area covers at the base of the windscreen are made by the same company that makes HSV bumper bars. The list goes on.

The investment in engineering these changes stretches into the millions.

To find out what it's like to drive, first you must climb aboard. The Ram 2500 sits high off the ground. The side rails are not solely for show — they're necessary for climbing up to the "captain's chair" driving seat.

The biggest surprise is how quiet the Ram 2500 is. ASV's replacement insulation (the factory insulation is removed during the conversion process)



suppresses much of the noise from the massive 6.7-litre Cummins turbo diesel.

The other surprise is the grunt. Despite weighing 3.5 tonnes, the Ram 2500 accelerates quicker than the top-spec Ford Ranger, the Wildtrak. Then again, 1084Nm of torque will have that effect.

The third surprise is fuel economy. After more than 600km of a mix of freeway and city driving, we saw 10.0L/100km on the open road and averaged 13.5L.

However, we were unladen and didn't exploit even 1kg of the Ram's 6989kg towing capacity (when fitted with a gooseneck), 4500kg (with 70mm tow ball), or 3500kg (with 50mm tow ball).

Downsides? The column shift gear lever is on the right of the steering wheel, close to the door, and the foot-operated park brake is on the right. Neither is a deal-breaker.

Overall, this is the closest a local conversion has ever been to a factory finish, both in

interior presentation and the way the vehicle drives. A factory warranty adds peace of mind.

It's not cheap, at roughly twice the US price before currency and steering conversions. Then again, it's not much dearer than a top-line Toyota LandCruiser, which can tow "only" 3500kg.

If everyone towing a large horse float or a big boat who stopped me for a chat over the weekend was a guide, there's a sizeable niche in the new-car market for these sizeable trucks.