

FIRST
DRIVE

Mazda Tribute

Featured model: 2.0GSi 4WD



BADGE ENGINEERING NEVER really went away – car makers just got smarter in the way they disguised it. But not so Ford and Mazda, whose chunky 4x4 sports utility vehicles, the Maverick and Tribute, are not only near-identical twins, they also roll off the same Japanese production line.

Neither of them is a serious off-roader – they're more at home on grass and gravel. Indeed the entry-level model Tribute is available (sensibly) with front-wheel drive only. This comes with a 2.0 litre/124bhp petrol engine (no diesels yet) that's loud and pretty coarse on hard acceleration. It cruises quietly enough, though, and is matched to an excellent five-speed gearbox.

The dearer GXi and GSi models are front driven, too, but only until the Select 4WD system senses that the front wheels are beginning to slip; it then seamlessly transfers up to 50 per cent of engine torque to the rear wheels. It's fully automatic in operation, but can also be switched in and out manually.

The range is topped by a lively and well-equipped three-litre model. This isn't the sweetest of V6s, but its refinement level is raised by the standard, smooth-shifting automatic transmission.

The Tribute's ride feels well-composed, if rather too firm and abrupt on broken tarmac to match the more supple Freelander (a relative by marriage, incidentally). Nevertheless, it has a good solid feel and copes competently with bumps and bends, thanks to well-checked body roll and responsive rack and pinion

steering. It's noticeable, however, that the two-litre's steering and handling feel more alert than the V6's, which, in turn, has a more compliant ride. The suspension copes well off road, as well.

The plainly Japanese fascia provides clear dials and convenient switches. From the large and comfortable seats, all-round vision (with rear head restraints removed) is very good within the air-conditioned cabin. Centre consoles differ between the 2.0 and V6, with the handbrake better placed in the former.

Passengers in the back tend to slide about on the V6's leather seats which provide little side support, headroom isn't over-generous, either. There's plenty of legroom, however, and you sit comfortably high.

There's a flip-up window in the top-hinged tailgate, beyond which lies a spacious and adaptable load area.

VERDICT

It hardly matters whether you choose Tribute or Maverick; they're both near car-like to drive, composed on the road and capable over tricky terrain. They're also roomy and practical. It's really down to your preference for the badge and the styling, except that the Tribute is available cheaper (with less kit or with only two-wheel drive); it also has a two-year longer warranty, but the V6 costs £500 more than Ford's. Eeny-meeny-miny-mo...

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★★★★○○
Handling/steering	★★★★○○
Comfort	★★★★○○
Space/practicality	★★★★○○

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

engine 1989cc, 4 cylinder petrol, 16 valves; 122bhp/128 lb ft with transverse location; 61-litre fuel tank

drive 5-speed manual, dual-mode four-wheel drive

suspension front: MacPherson coil spring/damper struts, anti-roll bar

Rear: multi-link with coil springs and dampers

tyres 215/70R16T on 6½ in alloy wheels

brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear, with ABS and brake force distribution controls

0-62mph* 13.7 sec

max speed* 103mph **maker's figures*

official (combined) mpg 29.1

THE TRIBUTE RANGE

size and type upper medium (mid-priced) sports utility vehicle

trim levels GXi, GSi, V6 auto (= GSi +)

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/2.0 litre/122bhp, V6/3.0/194, diesel: due 2003

drive 2-wheel drive or dual-mode 4WD.

2.0: 5-speed manual, V6: 4-speed stepped automatic with torque converter

notable features two-wheel-drive-only version available, unibody construction, electronic 4x4 lock, 1700kg towing capability on 12% gradient (V6)

LIKES ...

extra large electric sunroof and blind sunglasses holder above mirror
plenty of cup holders/storage spaces
easy-to-adjust roof rack rails
big knobs and controls for audio

and GRIPES

raising the seat reduces thigh support
inadequate lower sill paint protection
lap belt only for rear centre occupant
no centre rear head restraint
"space-saver" temporary spare wheel

