duelling
dual cabs

Starters: Toyota Hilux SR5, Volkswagen Amarok Trendline.

STORY ERNEST LITERA (AN AUSTRALIA'S BEST CARS AWARDS JUDGE)

VOLKSWAGEN'S AMAROK IS a seriously tough newcomer to the increasingly popular twin-cab utility market, where top-of-the-range models that cross between work and recreation lead the surge. But to really capture the hearts and minds of buyers, Amarok needs to square off against the universally respected Toyota HiLux.

Mindful of the demand for privately owned twin-cab utes, as opposed to a purely commercial workhorse, Amarok has been launched with the choice of four equipment lines that favour the top end of the market. A two-door single cab will follow. All have the same 2.0-litre diesel engine and six-speed manual transmission with a selection of driveline options.

Amarok Trendline (our test ute) is one grade higher than the base model in standard features. As well as 4MOTION and a rear differential lock, it has carpets, drawers under the front seat, a multi-function display, cruise control, fog lights, 16-inch alloy wheels and body-coloured peripherals, all for $47,990.

Like all chassis-mounted utes, Amarok can be adapted to take the usual variety of load-carrying trays, but as yet there is no factory bull-bar.

In contrast to VW's modest start-up list, the well-entrenched Hilux is oriented to the working end of the market with a staggering number of model variations in every imaginable configuration.

It's at the top of the line-up, the SR5 dual-cab diesel manual pickup, that we find a Hilux that most closely lines up with our Amarok Trendline, yet Toyota has a diesel auto or petrol V6 model in manual and auto.

SR5 is the best equipped HiLux;
In physical dimensions and structure, you get the feeling VW simply copied the Toyota, and why not? It’s been the best seller for years and its durability is legendary.

it’s cloth trimmed like the Amarok Trendline and comes with 15-inch alloys, full chrome finish, side steps, sports bar, cruise control, trip computer and a six-disc CD player.

Amarok’s DOHC 16-valve 2.0-litre diesel engine may be seen as slightly underdone against the grunt of a Hilux twin-cam, turbo 2.0-litre, but this is one of VW’s modern diesels with twin-turbo induction. It delivers 400 Nm of torque from just 1500 rpm, eclipsing Hilux by almost 60 Nm, and maximum power output of 120 kW is topped by the Toyota’s 126 kW.

Hilux has strong physical pulling power but it is not as flexible as Amarok and needs more gear changes to keep it within a narrower working rev range. As a result, Hilux always feels more truck-like.

By contrast Amarok has a sweeter pickup from low revs and feels much more linear in its power and torque delivery across a wider rev range. It is more relaxing and easier to drive, particularly in tricky situations – Amarok’s six-speed manual gearbox has a smooth, short throw action against the long, slow-shifts of the five-speed Hilux – although neither would be described as spritely.

It does, however, trump Hilux in payload (998 kg as opposed to 885 kg), and in maximum towing capacity.

The durability of Toyota’s 4WD system has been proven over countless years; its simple ruggedness and separate 2/4/4-low manual selector lever is familiar and easy to use.

Amarok uses an electronic switch to effect the same 2/4/4-low and centre differential lock. While this is more convenient, there is no difference in 4WD ability, with both utes impossibly capable and arguably inseparable on our off-road tracks. That said, there would be situations where Amarok must gain some advantage from its additional standard rear diff-lock.

Overall, Amarok’s driveline technology gives a consistent advantage in fuel economy, maintaining a 0.5-1.0 litre/100 km lead under all operating conditions despite being 147 kg heavier.

Chassis refinement and everyday ride and handling characteristics are where the newer Amarok displays a clear advantage over Hilux. It has a more progressive spring and damper rate and is decidedly more forgiving on occupants over sharp bumps and corrugations or when lightly laden.

Amarok’s smart technology also translates into things such as optimising ABS braking for either bitumen or dirt roads. Hilux just feels solid everywhere, which traditional buyers may translate into durability, but the handling does not inspire confidence and it feels old-school rugged with insensitive steering and a truck-like turning circle.

Underneath, both vehicles are built on a massive chassis with an uncanny similarity in dimensions as well as in their simple and rugged suspension components. All underpinnings and driveline are above chassis height and are well shielded.

Amarok’s load tub is a little shorter and wider than Hilux but it is substantially deeper and importantly has an extra 110 mm between the wheel arches. Each has a full-size alloy spare wheel.

There is little difference in cabin dimensions. Amarok is a little wider, but Hilux has slightly more headroom in the front and more seat travel and knee-room in the rear. Drivers will find
the seat shaping, comfort and support to be equally good, both have seat height control, and Amarok has both reach and height steering adjustment whereas HiLux has height only.

Rear seat comfort is marginally better in HiLux. Although firmer, Amarok’s rear seat is still better than most and is clearly better suited to children with three child seat anchorages on the seat back, three lap-sash belts and head restraints, plus front and rear seat lighting. HiLux has a lap-only rear-centre belt and two outer child seat anchorages on the rear floor which proved difficult to use.

All Amoraks have a five-star ANCAP safety ranking thanks to ABS, stability control and six airbags for the front seat occupants. Clearly missing are curtain airbags for head protection in the rear seat. HiLux SR5 gets ABS and stability control, and in addition to front and side airbags there’s a full-length curtain airbag. But due to inferior crash test performance, HiLux only has a four-star ANCAP ranking.

CONCLUSION
In physical dimensions and structure, you get the feeling VW simply copied the Toyota, and why not? It’s been the best seller for years and its durability is legendary. So while we could find nothing in Amarok to suggest it’s any less rugged, it is much nicer to live with, uses smarter technology in a more advanced driveline and it costs less.

HiLux Upgrade
At the time of going to press, Toyota released a revamped and expanded HiLux range (from 32 to 35 variants).

The focus has been on a styling facelift and improved value for money (as much as $8340 or 15.8 percent) by way of equipment and safety upgrades.

As well, prices have dropped, with an SR5 4x4 turbo-diesel auto double-cab, for example, going from $55,690 to $53,490.

Colleagues invited to the vehicle launch reported that the ride quality had improved thanks to softer springing and shock absorber settings.

However, the drive train and major underpinnings remain as before. So, too, tray dimensions and load carrying capability (although towing capacity has been increased to 2500 kg).

A completely new HiLux is said to be still two years away.

HILUX STATS
MLP: $53,490^*
WARRANTY: 3 years/100,000 km.
SERVICE INTERVALS: 6 months/10,000 km.
SAFETY: Anti-lock brakes, front/side/ head airbags, electronic stability control.
KEY FEATURES: Climate control airconditioning, remote central locking, cruise control, power windows and mirrors, six-stack CD/MP3, bluetooth, front fog lamps.
ENGINE: 3.0-litre, inline, DOHC 16V, turbo-diesel 4-cyl.
MAX. POWER: 126 kW @ 3600 rpm.
MAX. TORQUE: 343 Nm @ 1400 rpm.
FUEL: 8.3 litres/100 km (claimed), 10.0 (average, as tested).
CRASH RATING: ****
EMISSIONS RATING: ***
FOR: Durability, proven track record.
AGAINST: No steering reach adjustment or hill descent control.

AMAROK STATS
MLP: $47,990^*
WARRANTY: 3 years/unlimited km.
SERVICE INTERVALS: 1 year/15,000 km.
SAFETY: Anti-lock brakes, front/side/ head airbags, electronic stability control.
KEY FEATURES: Climate control airconditioning, remote central locking, cruise control, power windows and mirrors, single CD/MP3, steering reach and tilt adjust, front fog lamps.
ENGINE: 2.0-litre, in-line, DOHC, 16V, turbo-diesel 4-cyl.
MAX. POWER: 120 kW @ 4000 rpm.
MAX. TORQUE: 400 Nm @ 1500 rpm.
FUEL: 7.9-litres/100 km (claimed), 9.2 (average, as tested).
CRASH RATING: ****
EMISSIONS RATING: ***
FOR: Torquey engine, bigger payload and towing capacity.
AGAINST: No auto option, bluetooth costs extra.