DUAL, OR DOUBLE, cab four-wheel-drive utes are being warmly embraced by the Australian car buyer in ever-increasing numbers. For many, these heavy-duty machines are the ideal one vehicle compromise – a workhorse during the week, and personal or family transport at the weekend.

Late last year, Ford upped the ante, its new PX Ranger earning a five (out of five) star Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) crash test safety rating for all variants except the base model.

With an XLT Dual Cab booked in to road test, we decided to see just how far the new Ranger had also improved in other areas by putting it up against the 2012 model of Mitsubishi’s Triton GLX-R Double Cab. Our Triton test vehicle came equipped with optional five-speed auto, so at $51,490 there was less than $2000 difference in price between it and the six-speed manual Ranger ($53,390).

**RANGER XLT**

Ranger is clearly much bigger and therefore has more interior space than probably anything in its class. It’s also well thought out, Ford designers having ‘cherry picked’ the best features from its competitors.

As well as items listed in the separate stats’ panel, standard features include hill launch assist, trailer sway control, load adaptive control, brake assist, rollover mitigation, side steps, sports bar, fuel tank guard, auto headlights, fog lights, rear park sensors, powered and heated folding mirrors and alarm.

The cabin is much wider than Triton’s and there’s plenty of rear seat leg and shoulder room. The rear seat is more comfortable than most dual cabs, being marginally better than Triton.

It’s a practical beast. Storage solutions include a lockable glove box, chilled console bin, under rear seat storage, four big door pockets and two seat back pockets. Like Triton, there are two child restraint mounting points behind the rear seat and a driver’s foot rest.

Ranger takes the win in the workhorse stakes, able to carry a bigger maximum payload (1148 v 935 kg) and boasts a larger braked towing capacity (3350 v 3000 kg). This makes it acclaimed best in class. Although only marginally larger (no more than 50 mm), Ranger’s tray is much deeper, making for increased volume and there are six tie-downs, a plastic liner and 20 amp power outlet...
fitted. Like Triton, rear visibility is average but this is redressed partly by way of reversing sensors.

The Ford has a truck-like quality. It pulls strongly from around 1000 rpm, but runs out of muscle by about 3500 rpm; the flat torque curve making it ideal for heavy towing duties. Its 3.2-litre, five-cylinder turbo-diesel is fairly quiet and emits a low rumble rather than the higher pitched rattle Triton gets when pushed. For a heavy-duty vehicle of this size, the clutch action is comparatively light, though the manual gearshift lacks the rest of the vehicle’s precision.

The steering impressed as being alert and well weighted, offering plenty of feel, and Ranger is by far the more competent handler. It also has better grip, helped no doubt by broader (by 20 mm) rubber. That said, even with gentle throttle application, it’s still easy to unsettle the rear end when unladen in wet conditions, though Ranger is not nearly as recalcitrant as Triton in this regard.

Off-road, the Ford does everything in one gear higher. It has very low gearing and plenty of low down torque, allowing it to crawl easily with little or no throttle application. There’s good engine braking and, when needed, hill descent control. Four-wheel-drive engagement is as easy as turning a knob.

**TRITON GLX-R**

Value for money slightly favours the Mitsubishi, with Triton being nearly $2000 cheaper (even allowing for the $2500 premium for auto), lower projected running costs over five years (by about $250) and coming with a better warranty. That said, Ranger boasts more standard features and delivers superior fuel economy (both claimed and on test). It’s line ball in terms of likely depreciation.

Though not as extensive as its rival’s, the GLX-R’s standard features inventory (in addition to the items listed in the separate stats’ panel) includes lap/sash seatbelts all around, rear power window with auto up/down function, multi-function info display, CD player with six speakers, auxiliary input, bluetooth, steering wheel audio and cruise controls, sports bar and rear step.

Get behind the wheel and you find Triton has a pretty accommodating ‘work station’. The front seats possess a reasonable range of manual adjustment, however the squab lacks length, and leg
RANGER STATS

MLP: $53,390
WARRANTY: 3 year/100,000 km.
SERVICE INTERVALS: 1 year/15,000 km.
SAFETY: Dual front/side/curtain airbags (DFSCA), anti-lock brakes (ABS), electronic stability control (ESC).
KEY FEATURES: Rear diff lock, dual climate control airconditioning, bluetooth, voice control, CD with four speakers and two tweeters, MP3 compatibility, USB/iPod integration, cooled console, cruise control with steering wheel controls, auto dim interior mirror, rain-sensing wipers, privacy glass, tow bar.
ENGINE: 3.2-litre, turbo-diesel 5-cyl.
MAX. POWER: 147 kW @ 3000 rpm.
MAX. TORQUE: 470 Nm @ 1500-2750 rpm.
FUEL: Diesel.
CRASH RATING: *****
EMISSIONS RATING: ★★★
FOR: Handling, towing, load carrying ability, standard features.
AGAINST: Physical size, price.

TRITON STATS

MLP: $51,490 (5spd auto)
WARRANTY: 5 year/130,000 km.
SERVICE INTERVALS: 1 year/15,000 km.
SAFETY: DFSCA, ABS, electronic brake distribution, ESC, traction control.
KEY FEATURES: Auto airconditioning, map lamps with sunglasses holder, 17” alloys, nudge bar, fog lamps, privacy glass, side steps, left front van mirror, trip computer.
ENGINE: 2.5-litre, turbo-diesel 4-cyl.
MAX. POWER: 191 kW @ 4000 rpm.
MAX. TORQUE: 350 Nm @ 2000 rpm.
FUEL: Diesel.
CRASH RATING: *****
EMISSIONS RATING: ★★★
FOR: Ride quality, long warranty, price.
AGAINST: Lack of torque off boost, engine noise.

support could be better. Lateral support is reasonable, though. There’s a driver’s foot rest, the pedal layout is satisfactory and controls are generally logically laid out. Neither vehicle has steering reach adjustment.

Rear passengers will find their seats comfortable and not as upright as many others, though foot and leg room is not as good as Ranger. There’s a fold-down rear arm rest (an omission on the Ford), two child restraint mounting points behind the seat along with a seat back pocket and four door pockets. Rear vision is only average, particularly with the rear head rests up, emphasising the need for a reversing camera or sensors.

Engine performance is line ball from 0-80 km/h and over the standing 400 m. Elsewhere, our test figures show Triton to hold an advantage, except in roll-on from 50-80 km/h. It gets a second wind about 3000 rpm which comes on with a rush and an increase in engine noise. At 100 km/h, though, it cruises relatively quietly and smoothly.

The five-speed auto transmission with its tip-tronic shifter is a bit clunky at times, particularly on downshifts, otherwise it does the job nicely. Triton’s steering is fairly well weighted and has adequate feel, though it’s a bit dead around centre.

The suspension is softer all round, which makes for a more comfortable ride. However, handling is compromised by this softness to some degree. Rebound damping is lacking and there is more body roll. The Mitsubishi feels not as well planted in slippery going, though this can be negated somewhat by switching to its Super Select 4WD option on bitumen.

Off road, Triton showed itself to be sure footed and capable under most conditions. There’s significantly less engine braking ability than Ranger, though, even with first gear, low range, selected. With no hill descent control, you need to rely more on the brakes to check speed. Wheel articulation is about the same for both.

Although its brake pedal felt soft, Triton pulled up only marginally ‘longer’ than Ranger (28.0 to 27.8 m, from 80 km/h).

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt Ranger would be the better choice if heavy towing is a primary requirement of ownership. The Ford’s 147 kW of power and flat torque curve are ideal for this. Ranger also has a higher maximum towing capacity.

On road, the Ford is a clear winner, with exceptional handling and manners that would do justice to a passenger car. In contrast, the Mitsubishi isn’t disgraced, despite the model being three years old. Off road, Ranger does it so easily and without fuss, while Triton has to work much harder at it.

All up, the Mitsubishi Triton is a competent vehicle in its own right, but as our test showed emphatically, Ford has moved the game on with its new Ranger.