



Big truck surprisingly sensible

A large, chrome-clad, petrol eight-cylinder ute may seem more of an indulgence than a work tool. Or at least we thought when we first drove the Ram 1500.

That drive was a quick blast out in the Australian countryside, with some off-road fun thrown into the mix. The RAM proved more nimble on the road than we thought, quick (for its size), brash and fun.

There was the risk that when I got home, it would be too big to park, the wife would hate it, and it overall is better at yelling "look at me" than actually doing any work.

How wrong I was. Yes, Americans do look at me, but they also build a proper "truck". I say truck as while you could excuse it being a ute, it weighs well over 2500kg, has a GVM just short of 3500kg. It will pull up to 4500kg. Those are some serious numbers.

Our review vehicle was the 1500 Laramie, the more luxurious spec of the two model 1500 range. The Laramie gets a more extended cab and shorter tray, the cheaper Express a shorter cab and longer tray. The Express also gets a front bench seat, so both Steve and Gary can join you in the front row on the way to the site.

The Express starts at \$94,990 and the Laramie at \$114,990. Sales seem to be ticking along well, with 40 already with buyers, and Ateco NZ confident they will hit their target of 200 cars for the year already.

The Laramie offers a lot of luxury; you climb up - the side steps are an absolute must - into the big, comfy leather seats. They are electrically controlled, and the

front's headed and cooled.

The leather steering wheel is heated, and the pedals can be electrically adjusted in and out. There are two zones of climate control; the carpet is plush and a massive central storage unit that acts as a comfortable armrest.

Infotainment is well taken care of with an eight inch touchscreen system with navigation, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto in the Laramie.

The system is a little complex initially, though once you are used to it, it is very functional and responsive. The rubber mobile phone mounts are handy - and a relatively simple idea.

I am surprised others have not picked up.

Interior build quality felt great, aside from an errant air-conditioning pipe. I would argue few factory-built commercial vehicles in New Zealand have an interior of this quality. The Melbourne factory "remanufacturing" these vehicles does a good job.

That includes the local steering tune. There is no getting away from the fact the RAM is heavy and 5.8 metres long and large, but it drives surprisingly well.

There is some roll and a slight floaty feeling, however, it doesn't bounce sharply, and the steering offers a reasonable level of response. My normally ute-hating wife loved the RAM for the comfort provided by the excellent seats and comfortable ride.

With the usual contingent of airbags, electronic stability control, and the intelligent "Ready Alert" braking system which prepares brakes in emergencies or dries them in the rain, safety is



reasonably well covered, though there is no autonomous emergency braking, lane-keeping systems or adaptive cruise control.

Additional tow assistants include trailer sway control, ready alert braking and, on the Laramie, trailer brake control.

Under the bonnet is the all-important eight-cylinder HEMI engine. It produces 291kW of power and 556Nm of torque. It is paired with an eight-speed transmission and four-wheel drive in both models.

Hit the gas pedal, and you get a firm push back in your seat, this big girl likes to dance. With the factory optional sports exhaust system it also sounds fantastic, even at relatively low speeds. Tick this option box.

At launch, Ateco indicated a 3-litre six-cylinder turbocharged diesel was going to be offered in the future. Now we are told that is no longer the case.

The Hemi's thirst can't be ignored. Claimed consumption is an average of 12.2 litres per 100km, and in our test, we saw this number rise to around 15 litres. The engine will cut to four cylinders when cruising - so on the plus side if you do a lot of open road work your usage should drop.

Overall though, the RAM is a very cool, comfortable beast of a truck. We loved it, and if we had a lot of heavy work to do would like it even more. ■