

Ode to the UTE: a Kiwi love story

Like all good love stories, this one comes with a warning – a curse that has been the nemesis of ute owners since the beginning of time and tray. Glenn Dwight explains.

Let's talk about LOVE. Not just any love; the love New Zealand has for utes. The Ford Ranger, the Holden Kingswood, Crumpy's Toyota Hilux, they all hold a special place in our hearts – with the stats to back it up.

The top-selling vehicles in 2018? Ranger, then Hilux, with Triton coming in at number 5. While I can't speak for the whole country, I can tell you my own story and how I think there is a fondness for these flat-deck automotive artworks in all of us.

For me, it started with my dad; he had a yellow (mostly paint, but some rust) Morris Minor ute. As a kid, it really was that often-overused cliché, 'business up front and party in the back'.

We would sit for hours in the cab pretending to drive, but when it came to the tray, well that was our stage... We would perform punishing shows to any family or neighbour who we could convince to be part of an audience.

And when my dad got a Kingswood work ute in traditional 'Holden Golden'; that was like moving from the community theatre to Carnegie Hall. The performances got bigger in the back and the driving turned from recreating mundane family trips to pretending we were Peter Brock winding our way through Mount Panorama in style.

Kiwi/Aussie bond

But there is far more to the humble ute than just the excitement it brings to a child's imagination and the practicality it brings to moving large objects no boot could ever handle. It is also a bond between New Zealand and Australia. For just like the pavlova, the ute belongs to both sides of the Tasman (but let's be honest, was probably invented by a New Zealander).

According to that fount of knowledge Google, 'A ute (/ju:t/ YOOT), originally an abbreviation for 'utility' or 'coupé utility', is a term used in Australia and New Zealand to describe vehicles with a tray behind the passenger compartment, that can be driven with a regular driver's license.'

A small part of me wishes, however, that there was such a thing as a 'ute licence'. Obtaining it would involve the ability to stack an entire household's furniture Jenga-style on the tray with only a single tie-down and some bailing twine (and maybe a white hanky attached to the inevitable overhanging object).

A cautionary tale

This brings me to the cautionary part of this tale. Like all good love stories, this one comes with a

warning. While being the owner of a ute brings great joy, it also brings a curse, a curse that has been the nemesis of ute owners since the beginning of time and tray. That curse is the 'mate' who is moving and needs a hand, which basically translates to your ute and your lifting ability.

Nonetheless, in the grand scheme of things, this is a small price to pay, I say. For as that great New Zealander Fred Dagg would say when it comes to vehicular transport and the ute: "We don't know how lucky we are".

Just for a second, imagine living in other parts of the world and having to drive a 'pickup truck'. Here in Aotearoa we use a ute to actually pick up, and that's the way it should be.

The Year of the Ute?

So come on New Zealand, let's celebrate the ute and make 2020 'The Year of the Ute': the year when those follically blessed grow mullets to celebrate the ute's simple attitude of 'business up front and party in the back'.

Then let those mullets blow in the wind, for you are ute drivers and your forearms are brown, because you always drive with the window wound down. ■

Car enthusiast Glenn Dwight is a creative director at NZME in Wellington.

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