

KIT REVIEW
Reviewed by Mike Caine



Once in a while I get the chance to review a vehicle that really appeals to me as a fan of real off road vehicles. Buggies, touring cars, saloons and formula one models are all variations on a theme and appear regularly on these pages.

Tamiya's kit of the Isuzu Mu will be more recognisable to UK readers as the Vauxhall Frontera, RCMC build the latest 'King off the Road' from the world's leading model company

Over the years there has been a tremendous selection of radio controlled models that perform well off road or on road. They sometimes use a common donor chassis, but in many cases they are purpose-designed to a racing specification which can restrict its use for the average man in the street. Similarly there are beautiful

scale models that are not ideal for radio control and those you would never wish to contemplate racing lest you damage them.

I think I've found a solution which is more than a compromise. You may recall that last year another reviewer was raving about Tamiya's latest release: the Mitsubishi Pajero or Shogun as it

is known in England. The concept was to build a newly designed off-road vehicle that would appeal to the masses, but there it ended. It was never really considered as a competitive racing machine - but why? Off-road events using real 4x4 or RV's (recreational vehicles) are extremely popular not just in the UK, but all over the world and

if their owners are prepared to tackle this type of event with a vehicle that costs a lot of money then why not consider doing the same with a radio controlled model? Tamiya subsequently released a second version, the famous Jeep Wrangler and again this model also had good appeal due to its strong stateside image and fame.

At the Nuremberg Toy Fair, Tamiya featured a prototype of Isuzu Mu ('Mysterious Utility'). It was finished in a dull gold/orange colour that did nothing to enhance it's looks at all.

It's basically the same vehicle known throughout Europe as the Frontera Sport in either Opel or Vauxhall versions. It's another of those shared design concepts such as the Rover/Honda tie-up or the Ford Maverick/Nissan Terrano offering.

Isuzu in Japan produces it as the Mu; General Motors in the USA call it an AMIGO, and Europeans think Frontera Sport is better.

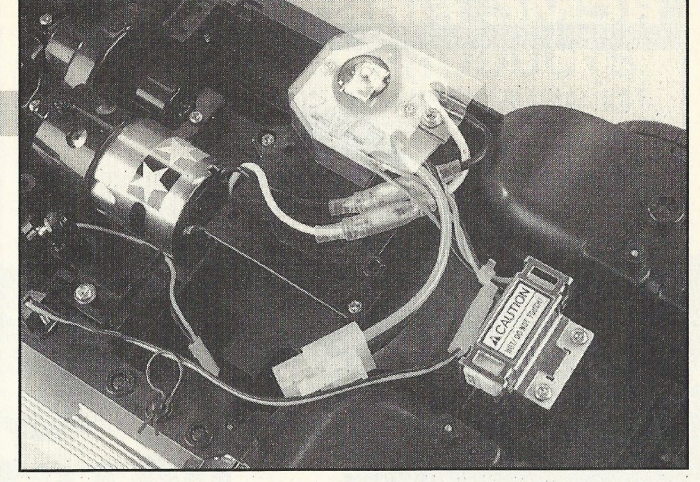
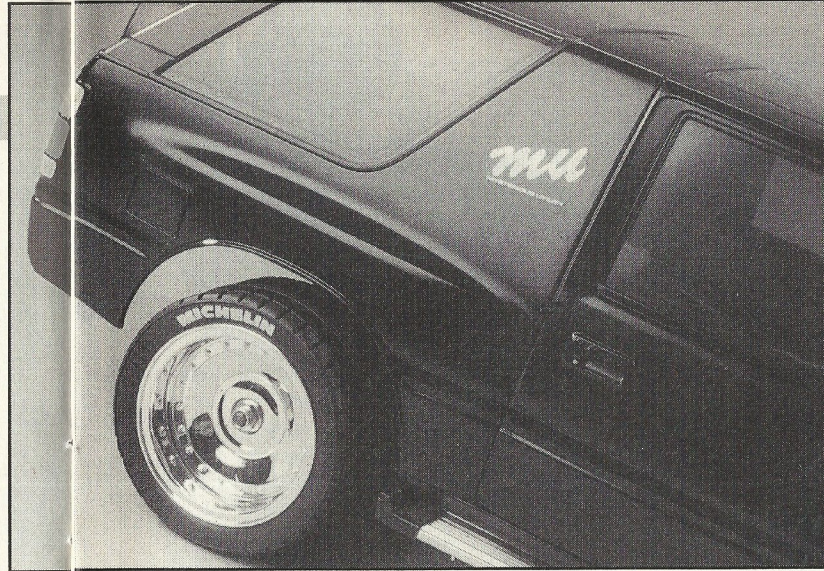
New Frontiers



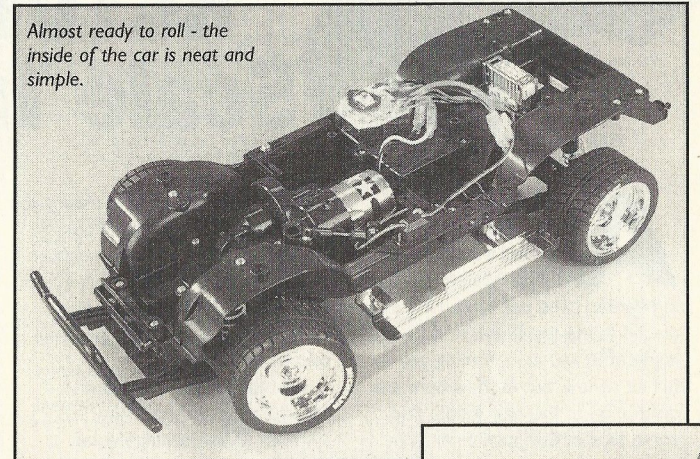
Above; With a hard moulded plastic body the detail is excellent.

Right; 'Mu' in the kit but could be transformed easily to Vauxhall.

Below; Underside of the car has amazing detail although cleaning after a muddy run wouldn't be much fun!



Almost ready to roll - the inside of the car is neat and simple.



but I skipped over this stage of construction as I was intending to blow the savings and opt for a mid to upper range electronic speed controller that would give me infinite control over the terrain I envisaged encountering.

Bodyshell

The bodyshell was prepared for painting by thoroughly washing off the release agent used in manufacture before painting. I chose an authentic Vauxhall shade of green in an aerosol can from the local Vauxhall dealer as this manufacturer was one of the first to offer acrylic sprays ideally suited for plastic parts found in model cars.

Take care if you use a cellulose based paint as too heavy a spray could result in you destroying a hefty bit of the kit. Remember that Tamiya offer a superb range of TS sprays too, which are ideal if you don't want an authentic colour finish. A Frontera sales brochure proved useful in providing the relevant information to replicate the European look as there are subtle differences to the three manufacturer's versions.

Most of the chrome parts were finished semi-gloss black and I'm afraid you have no option with the supplied pre-tinted windows. Foam inserts are supplied to support the low-profile tyres, but these will be discarded for serious off-road use together with the wheels as I prefer to fit a set of five spoke, or BBS-style alloys.

Just for effect, I fitted the optional light bulb set available from Tamiya leaving the final wiring to be sorted when the model was completed and running. Various ball connectors were fitted in place of the kit-supplied screws, to assist fast changes of suspension units, steering arms etc.

each one fitting to its partner perfectly. No need for files and sharp knives here. A 540 size motor is normally fitted in a centre chassis position, but this time lengthways rather than transverse as found on the touring car range of models.

This motor powers drive to both the front and rear wheels. Ahead of the motor, an enclosed gearbox directs power through a large steel, universally jointed propshaft to a floating rear axle casing containing a bevel drive differential, or if you so desire a permanent differential lock.

The rear axle assembly is connected to two trailing arms damped by coil over oil-filled shocks.

Incidentally, the rear differential lock comes into its own on slippery surfaces and is utilised to good effect by the 'full size' versions too.

Plastic and bronze bushings come as standard, but it's well worth considering fitting ball-races from the beginning if your budget allows, to prevent premature wear. You also benefit from longer run times and better performance. A mechanical wiper arm-style speed controller is supplied as standard,

interesting bits, chrome wheels and a lot more hidden away in the inner box packaging complete with comprehensive instructions but a disappointing sticker sheet. Still not to worry I'm building a Frontera despite what the stickers say!

Kit features

Although the MU (sorry, Frontera) isn't a pro racing machine it's well designed and worth owning. The chassis is the same as its predecessors Pajero and Jeep Wrangler, but it comes as standard with the low ride, set up previously available as an option to lower your normal 4x4 ride height to improve handling - exactly the opposite to the set-up I want for off road competition use!

Anyone who has constructed a Tamiya kit will know that it's simplicity itself and that the quality of plastic parts is second to none,

So the task in hand is to build a Frontera and adapt it with various parts available as a competitive off-road competition model - no not a buggy, but a high performance, four-wheel drive model car capable of going off-roading without fear of damage or inability to perform.

The Tamiya box, in my view, is very bland and not up to its usual standard of putting across exciting contents without removing the lid. Like this year's F1 grid, there seems to be an abundance of blue and Tamiya have followed the trend with another blue artist's impression. Green or red would have been better which is why the former is the colour of our review model!

Inside the box, however it's the usual story of Tamiya excellence; nicely bagged up parts, lots of

Performance

I was curious too see what difference could be made to the ample output of the standard Actopower touring car motor. I've also driven a real 4x4 for some considerable time and it was interesting to note the similarity between the model's handling and the real thing.

Current technology allows 4x4 vehicles to drive like saloon cars on the road and be like luxurious tractors on the rough stuff! The short wheelbase allows for good tight turns and obviously too quick in this area can result in a rollover. Spring settings can be changed, which together with damper oils and piston changes, will give differing set-ups for virtually every on- and off-road requirement. Plenty of low down power was on hand. The M-Troniks speed controller coped extremely well without wheelspin and enabled a decent amount of acceleration and an impressive top speed on-road before turning off into the 'rough stuff'.

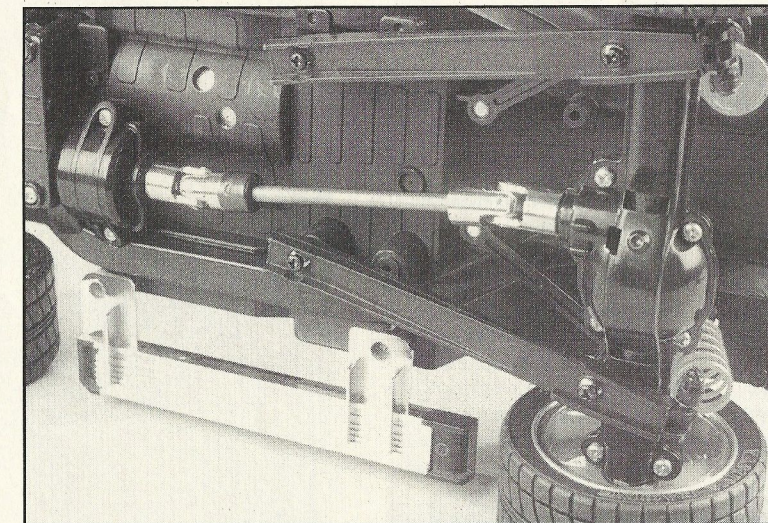
After all this is supposed to be a model of an RV so let's see what it can do. Loose dirt proved no problem and handled as well as most purpose-built racing buggies. The high centre of gravity meant you had to think in advance of some directional changes, but the thing was surprisingly stable.

The car's ability to tackle different obstacles and types of terrain was truly impressive. The diff lock came into its own on slippery surfaces; the floating rear axle enabled the car to maintain an even ride on severe slopes and in situations where the tyre/wheel was at different heights at each corner ie over big rocks. Through longish grass, rutted mud tracks, gravel and sand, the modified

motor gave all the necessary 'grunt' to keep the car moving.

I even tried a shallow stream to test its off road capabilities (the ESC needs to be mounted quite high if water features regularly on your route and remember to waterproof the steering servo and receiver).

Knowing that real off-roaders don't get too enthusiastic about jumping their treasured possessions over ramps, I felt the



same about the model and resisted the test of trying to get it airborne like the Red Arrows!

Factory option parts

A range of spare and tune-up parts in Tamiya's Hop Up series is available and were mentioned or used in the review kit.

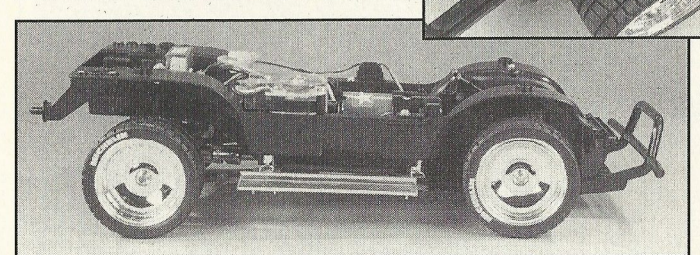
A full set of sealed bearings to replace the kit-supplied bushes.

Torque Splitter for front gearbox.

Aluminium damper set.

Various wheels and tyres from the extensive Tamiya range.

Lightbulb set and flashing unit set.



Lightweight titanium screws Aluminium anodised wheelnuts - very pretty!

Remember, at the start of this review I said this kit was not a compromise and could be made to perform. Further options are going to be fitted to enhance this

model's performance and I hope to be able to report on developments in the future. In the meantime look out for this Mysterious Utility in your local model shop and don't be put off by the box!

