



ANOTHER CONTENDER APPEARS

Chinese truck manufacturers continue to appear on the Australian truck market. **POD** takes the latest, the JMC, out for a spin to see if it passes muster.

We already have close to 20 different truck brands competing in the Australian market, so why not add one more? *Diesel* reported on the launch of the new brand from China, JMC, in our November issue last year. Now, the company has trucks on the streets and is ready to start selling product.

The company behind the brand is the

Jiangling Motors Corporation (JMC), an operation which built its first vehicles back in 1968 and in the years since has branched out from cars into commercial vehicles. A joint venture with Ford saw the company building Transit vans in China, and a deal with Isuzu led to the production of N Series cabs and some truck assembly work. Now, the company is building its own brand truck and eyeing markets around the world.

The JMC Conquer is a familiar-enough looking truck. It appears to be based on the Isuzu N Series, not surprising given JMC's previous cooperation with the Japanese truck maker. The cab is clearly closely related to the current-generation Isuzu cab.

The three-litre Topanther TDCi engine is also either an Isuzu or very closely related to the one fitted to the lightest end of the N Series range, the 4HK1-TCN.



The engines look very similar, while the power and torque ratings and rpm levels are exactly the same. There is one major difference, however – the Topanther TDCi uses SCR to clean up the exhaust emissions and meet ADR 80/03.

The truck tested by *Diesel* is the JMC Conquer 3360. The numbers refer to the wheelbase length, 3,360mm. Dimensions and specifications are comparable to a truck like the Isuzu NLR medium wheelbase.

Walking over to the truck, it looks like just another Japanese truck off the production line. Most passersby would think it was an Isuzu or just a generic small white truck. For those with a bit

more knowledge of the sector, the mirrors are the giveaway – apart from the badge on the front, of course. These mirrors are fitted on the front corner of the truck and not on the door. The driver has to look through the windscreen to see down the nearside of the truck, a typical domestic configuration in much of Asia.

Climbing into the truck, the other signs that this is a Chinese truck are the fit and finish inside the cab. Here, the JMC does pretty well. The floor covering seems to fit about right, door handles and step are in the right position and stable, and the dash seems to be fitted securely.

In fact, the first impressions are good. The truck is well finished and surprisingly sound, the door closes with the right noise, the key goes into the ignition and the engine starts with a familiar sound and runs evenly. Setting off is as one would expect in any small truck, and the feel is quite positive.

Chinese trucks of the past have suffered with badly set up steering, braking and clutches – there is none of that here. The steering is direct and easy, just as it should be when running around town, and the turning circle is excellent. Braking is effective and well adjusted to feel safe for the driver and not snatch when activated. Similarly, the clutch

“MOST TRUCKS THIS SIZE USE SOME FORM OF HYDRAULIC/VACUUM ARRANGEMENT TO CONTROL BRAKING. THIS PARTICULAR JMC MODEL USES AIR BRAKES AND, WHEN DRIVING WITH THE WINDOW DOWN, THE DRIVER CAN HEAR A NOSTALGIC SIGHING SOUND FROM THE BRAKE BOOSTER, REMINISCENT OF THE EIGHTIES.”

has the right feel and bites at the right moment. All good so far.

In fact, this truck does not take any getting used to. If the driver has had a go with a small Isuzu, Hino or Fuso, driving this truck will feel familiar. Controls are in the right place and pulling on the exhaust brake is as ineffective as on other trucks.

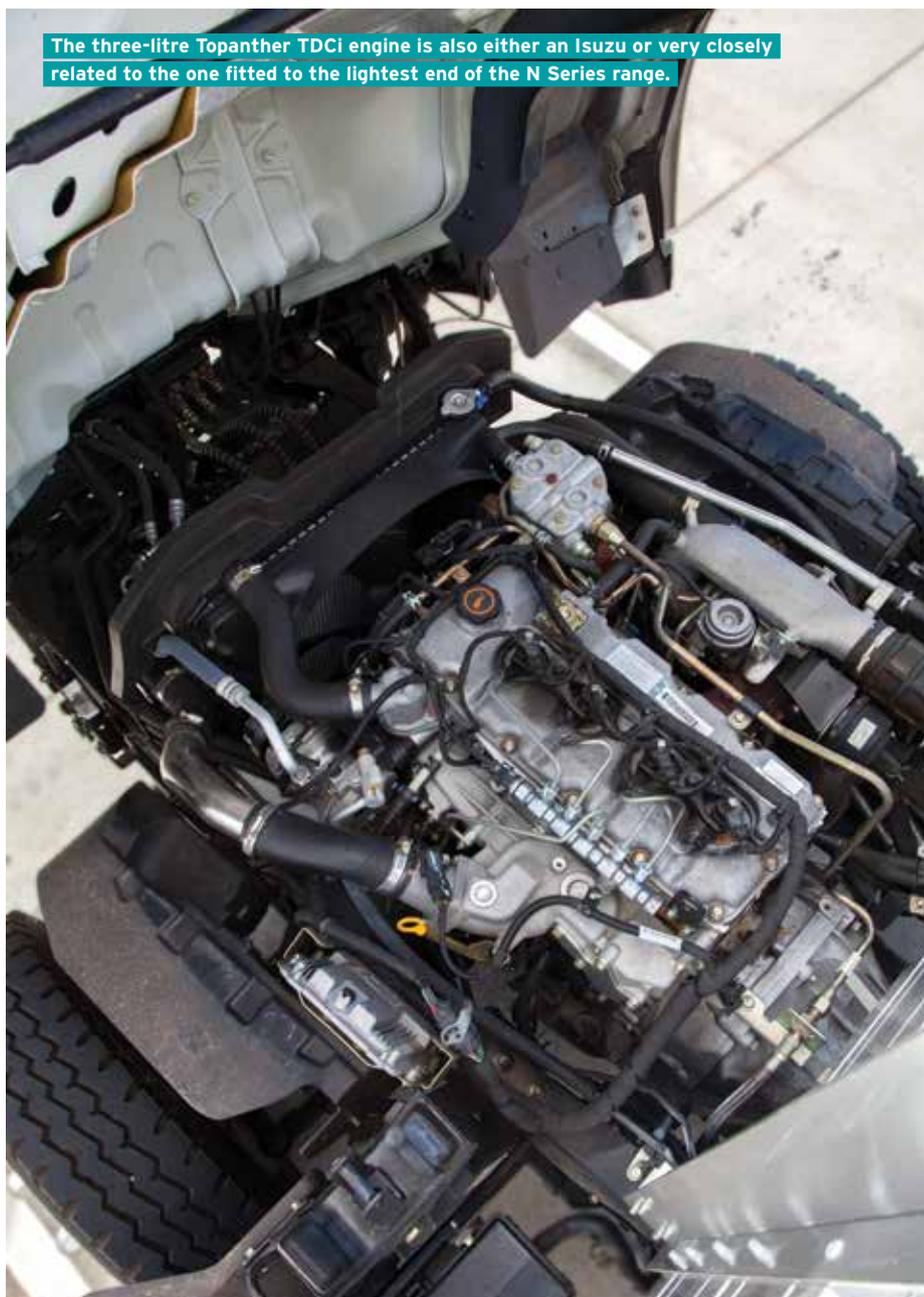
If there is one difference, it is in the sound of the braking system. Most trucks this size use some form of hydraulic/vacuum arrangement to control braking. This particular JMC model uses air brakes and, when driving with the window down, the driver can hear a nostalgic sighing sound from the brake booster, reminiscent of the 1980s.

Changing gear is simple enough. The six-speed box has a low first ratio, so setting off in second is the norm. The default position for the gear stick is quite central, so to engage second, when starting off, the driver has to push the stick to the left and forward. The driver gets used to this in no time. If anything, the action on the gear stick is just a little notchy, but this truck has only done a few hundred kilometres and can be expected to improve after a while.

All-round visibility is good, the windows are large enough, well positioned and the mirrors are also effective. The instruments are also clear and concise – speed in the middle, tachometer and fuel levels on the left, and air pressure and engine temperature to the right. There is no Adblue level gauge, though – perhaps you have to wait until a warning buzzer comes on and you can then top it up?

The controls on the dash work well and the entertainment system is only one generation behind that seen in most Australian trucks. It fills a double DIN slot, has good sound and all the driver needs, unless they are looking for Bluetooth connectivity. Maybe next time.

One issue new models often get



The three-litre Topanther TDCI engine is also either an Isuzu or very closely related to the one fitted to the lightest end of the N Series range.

wrong is the drinks holders in the cabin. JMC has scored ten out of ten on this truck. The drinks holders are large enough and robust enough to hold a full 600ml bottle or a takeaway coffee comfortably without spilling, and close to the driver's hand, located below the air

vent next to the door.

When the JMC gets up to a bit of speed, one of the issues with this truck becomes more obvious. The truck uses multi-leaf springs front and back, and they appear harsh from the driver's seat. Driving through road works can



be uncomfortable as the vibrations come right through the cabin, making for a stiff and uncomfortable ride for the driver.

The situation would be a little better if the JMC driver's seat was suspended, but it is not, it's firmly bolted to the floor of the cabin. We have become used to, at least, taper-leaf front springs or, more recently, independent front suspension. At the rear, we are used to a taper-leaf helper to take the sting out of the multi leaf.

Going to taper-leaf springs on the front would make a great improvement, as would a suspended seat. Even a re-evaluation of the suspension tuning by the importers might give the driver some relief. The fact that the suspension feels smoother on some different road surfaces suggests tuning may be an issue.

All in all, this JMC Conquer shows us just how the Chinese knowledge about dealing with more sophisticated truck markets is developing.

This is the third incursion into the Australian truck market by a Chinese brand and we have seen each one improve on its predecessor. First there was the Foton, then the JAC, and then the Foton again, under a different importer. Now, the JMC product has ticked more boxes than those who came before.

Early models didn't have the finish we expect, even at the bottom of the market, and were short-lived. The second wave of the Foton did quite well in terms of fit and finish, but has not set the world on fire. This JMC is unlikely to do so, either, but it does have the potential to be in the game, to be a realistic alternative to a second-hand Japanese truck.

It's the next stage of development that may turn out to be a bit tricky. It's an okay product, but to succeed it needs a good network, to get the trucks and the name out there in front of the truck-buying public.

This is something even the well-established brands struggle with at times. However, if JMC can develop some presence and is seen to support the product the way customers have come to expect, then there is a chance this will be a brand that does establish itself.

If JMC doesn't make the grade, we can be sure the next Chinese entrant to the Australian truck market will make an even better fist of it. The fact is a substantial presence in our truck market for Chinese brands is inevitable. It is not a matter of if, but when. **IID**

