

In my research there are two types of people who bought Toyota Fortuners since they were launched during 2006 and all those in between. I will discuss both their adverse experiences of the now famed "Fortuner Gravel Handling problem" to give some perspective on the two extremes of the market.

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES:

Newbie:

Newbie is a professional and lives in Johannesburg. He previously drove various forms German luxury sedan vehicles. He owns a holiday home in the bush and the Fortuner is his first SUV or even vehicle with big wheels. He bought it because he wished for a more comfortable/spacious drive when going places.

Newbie takes his Fortuner onto the gravel road with a measure of caution at first. He is used to slowing down to a very slow speed before hitting the gravel so as not to hit his sump on the first bump.

As he drives along on the smooth gravel, the Fortuner sits comfortably, has very low noise levels and he gains confidence. Slowly he speeds up to 80km/h. A short patch of corrugation comes up and his previous experience with his low profile sedan told him that the faster you go over the corrugation, the less bumpy the ride. Hence he keeps his speed at 80km/h.

All of a sudden the vehicle dances all over the road, the rear overtakes the front and dust flies everywhere. Newbie and his wife nearly wet their pants.

Newbie remember when he read the owner's manual it warned him that due to the high centre of gravity, the vehicle should be driven accordingly.

Newbie ascribes this to the way a SUV should handle and adjusts his driving style accordingly driving 80km/h on smooth gravel and a bumpy 50km/h on corrugations.

One day, after having covered 60,000km in his Fortuner, Newbie speaks to a colleague also driving a Fortuner and the conversation leads to gravel road driving. Newbie confers how impressed he is with his vehicle until his colleague asks him about any handling problems and describes the corrugation “dance”. All of a sudden Newbie recalls his pant wetting experience and asks: “Is that not how a SUV is supposed to handle?”

Ballie:

Ballie a sheep farmer, lives 56 kilometres from a small Northern Cape Town. He is the guy who drove numerous off-road capable vehicles before, both 4x2 and 4x4, SUV and/or pick up type and saw the Fortuner (through the marketing thereof – It’s a Hilux station wagon after all) as a good all round vehicle.

As already said Ballie has driven bakkies when they were fitted with standard 14” tyres and turbos were something that aeroplanes and racecars used. Ballie grew from a 2.2 diesel, to a 2.4 diesel, a 2.8 diesel 4x4 and at last to a 3.0 KZTE. (Man did that KZTE perform!)

During his experience on gravel roads Ballie also sometimes drove his friends’ Land Cruiser 4.2D pick-up, Land Cruiser GX 4500 and even a Mazda 2.5TD.

Ballie drives corrugated gravel roads every day of his life. He travels between 80km/h to 100km/h on normal corrugations. He knows what to expect according to road conditions and what he does with the throttle and wheel.

During late 2006 Ballie retires his Audi A6, buys a Fortuner 4x4 to use for going to town from the farm and to annually explore the world on holiday.

Ballie drives from the dealer onto the gravel, hits the gravel at 80km/h as he did since 1980. He sits with his left hand at 12h00 and the right arm on the windowsill at 03h00. No noise, nice car!

Two kilometers further, where the road to the quarry joins the main gravel road, the corrugations start. All of a sudden Ballie wets his pants, goes through the fence and stops in the veld, 50 metres from the road.

Ballie can't explain what happened. He was just cruising straight on the well trodden road!

Ballie slows down to 60km/h and still the Fortuner dances all over the road. Next thing his neighbour Swannie's wife overtakes Ballie in her 1990 Corolla 1300 "dorpskar" and Ballie feels as though he is in reverse!

A week later Ballie forbids his wife to drive the Fortuner on any gravel road, parks it in town and uses the KZTE farm bakkie to commute to town as the dealer already sold the Audi.

Ballie and Newbie comparative experience:

The first question everyone asked during this research and whenever I complained or commented on the problem was: "But do you know how to drive on gravel?"

My answer was affirmative, but I never like to use myself as an example and luckily these two extremes in the form of Newbie and Ballie crossed my path.

Both of them are real and I can present their names and contact details should anyone wish. I think however that the existence of both has now been well established.

Admissions by TSA:

Bump Steer – Toyota SA admits that the Fortuner has a “rear axle steering effect” when driving on uneven surface. The question however remains, how could a person retain control of any vehicle when you steer the front wheels but the vehicle steers itself through its rear wheels? Why does the Prado (whose suspension is the same description and layout that the Fortuner and Land Cruiser 200) not have the problem?

General Grabber tyres – The mere fact that TSA has offered replacement of this is also a further admission that the problem exists.

Verbal comments of TSA not contained in TSA technical report:

The Toyota SA Spokesperson explained that the Fortuner was developed through the global “IMV” project with the goal to produce a standard, global affordable SUV. The emphasis was on affordability which disallowed for features that is included in the more expensive SUV’s. (This made sense pertaining to cosmetics such as lack of interior colour choice – but should not compromise on safety or drivability)

The NVH aspect also weighed strongly – To quote the Toyota SA technical spokesperson verbatim on the day: “If a Fortuner overtakes me at 160km/h on the highway, it tells me that the vehicle’s suspension works.”

Misrepresentation?

When Toyota brought the Fortuner onto the market in South Africa, it was clearly marketed as the SUV version of the Hilux. The ladder frame chassis was part of this aspect. This already created great expectation and is in the South African context a bold statement.

The Fortuner was marketed through the “elevate yourself” campaign. Nothing was said about it being affordable. (Remember the advertising campaign involving the island chief where the Fortuner is carried on stilts. It is not the servant sitting in the driver’s seat)

When they placed a 4x4 badge on the boot lid they would have known that these vehicles would be used similar to the Prado and Land Cruiser SUV’s. Why is the load limit (615kg for the Diesel 4x4) not indicated in the brochure?

The salespersons did not tell the buying public that this vehicle has a limited usability compared to the Prado or Land Cruiser and that it is not a “baby Prado” as typically indicated in the motoring magazines.

Fatal Admission:

Toyota SA further admitted to me personally that an upgrade of suspension and tyres would reduce and/or eliminate my problem. Toyota SA further said that this aspect could be advised to clients at dealer level as Toyota SA may not jeopardize it’s specifications as determined from Toyota Japan.

Toyota SA then made the fatal admission that this aspect was never communicated to dealers, hence dealers could never communicate this to the public.

Knowing well of the limitations and so-called design specifications, but neglecting to inform the buyer of the vehicle thereof results in a negligent misrepresentation by Toyota SA to all Fortuner owners who bought the vehicles for purposes of off-road driving and whose expectations are not met.

Inconsistency of problem:

My current Fortuner 3.0D4-D 4x4 (delivered on 19 December 2007) is my second one. My previous Fortuner with the same specification (delivered end Sept 2006) had none of the handling issues that the current one had.

Some members and Fortuner drivers on 4x4-community.co.za lashed out at the alleged “unfounded allegations” by us who do experience the handling problems. I can say for sure that my previous Fortuner was good for 110km/h on the same road where my current Fortuner could not exceed 70km/h.

Toyota could still not give an answer to why some Fortuner’s has the problem and some not. They call it isolated problems and will address each on it’s own merits.

Shock Absorbers:

I persist to say that the standard shock absorbers (Monroe) fitted to the Fortuner is not capable to handle the admitted “live axle” of the Fortuner. Toyota however refuses to get involved in a discussion about shock absorbers and left me to test the shock absorbers on my own devices as same was said to be within specification.

I have contacted Monroe Technical department who informed that similar to the General Grabbers on the tyres, Monroe supply the shock absorbers according to specifications supplied by Toyota SA. Similarly Monroe could then not be bitten for the quality or specification of such product as they merely supply what Toyota SA instructs them to supply.

Upon enquiry however, Monroe confirmed that the original equipment shock supplied to Toyota SA is, to quite an extent, inferior to the replacement shocks.

The original equipment is for instance a mono-tube design whilst the part replacement is a twin-tube. The replacement part is also approximately 15% stiffer than the OE. This is due to the “soft roader” aspect that Toyota SA requires from the shocks (NVH?).

Monroe also said that they would send the shock absorbers I removed from my Fortuner to their factory for testing at different speeds and will give me a technical feedback report on them. This will be arranged shortly with Monroe.

Toyota SA report:

With all due respect, save for the admissions contained therein, I regard Toyota SA’s report as worthless.

In closing the unidentified writer thereof writes: *“After testing together with all the customers on the specific chosen road we can now conclude that the Fortuner suspension performed well within the design specifications/limitations.”*

However, upon arrival on the morning of 30 August 2008, the Toyota Technical persons commented that nothing scientific would come from the testing on the day. The report now has a conclusion where I am uncertain who the “we” referred to are. I distance myself from the conclusion.

Another troubling aspect is the absence of the exact design specifications/limitations. Apart from the sketch plan and load capacity table (which could hardly be described as a design specification) I find no measurable design specification.

Perhaps Toyota SA could provide us with a design specification for the “bump steer” or “rear axle steering effect” in millimeters. The movement could surely be measured to determine whether each vehicle falls within the specification.

Who is the “Biggest Loser”?

I must however say and commend that I have always received prompt service and responses from my dealership Monument Toyota Constantia and Toyota SA.

What I would like to know from Toyota SA is their responsibility to their clients as a whole in the public interest.

The issues that were raised pertaining to the safety and the handling of the vehicles put families at risk. If the owner doesn't complain, then it is accepted that the problem doesn't exist.

Perhaps that may be so but I would have felt better if Toyota, with regard to them knowing that a problem seems to exist, rather than attempting to prove the public wrong (refer “drop-plate” test on towing), to do what Nissan recently done with their Navara airbag problem: inform the public. This buys respect for a brand.

At least there seems to be a tyre replacement campaign going on. Whether the problem would be solved the future will tell.

The fact that Toyota SA went through the trouble to attend the informal test and having expertise in the like of Gerhard Groenewald attending buys respect for their interest in what their clients have to say.

At the end it will be families whose lives are endangered and the insurance industry who should meet the claims for vehicles and lives lost due to accidents that will lose. If it could be proved scientifically in any given instance is another question.

What will TSA do?

Will Toyota do a recall on the Fortuner after admitting that it is dangerous?

How far does Toyota's social responsibility go?

Will they do a monetary compensation for persons who had to "upgrade" their Fortuners' suspensions, shocks or tyres themselves?

What are the specifications and parameters mentioned in the report? Are they determined and measurable?

The main issue was that most Fortuner owners were not informed by the salesperson, who in turn was not informed by Toyota SA of the limitations of the vehicles.

A proper recourse would be for a client who complains of the limitations and not having been informed thereof prior to the purchase of the vehicle, to return his vehicle against a refund of the purchase price.

What have I done?

I have fitted Old Man Emu suspension and BF Goodrich tyres at a cost in excess of R21,000.00. My problem seems to be somewhat eliminated. A very small measure of "rear axle steering effect" remains, but at least it is minimized by the stiffer rear suspension.

To quote Toyota SA – I have lost a bit of comfort to gain some handling.

Conclusion:

Both Newbie and Ballie will not live happily ever after.

To those "Fortunate" ones between us who don't experience problems, enjoy your vehicles!

Damn I'm sorry I sold my previous Fortuner!

That's my 2c's worth. I'll let you know what Monroe's report says!

DeVilliers Botha.