

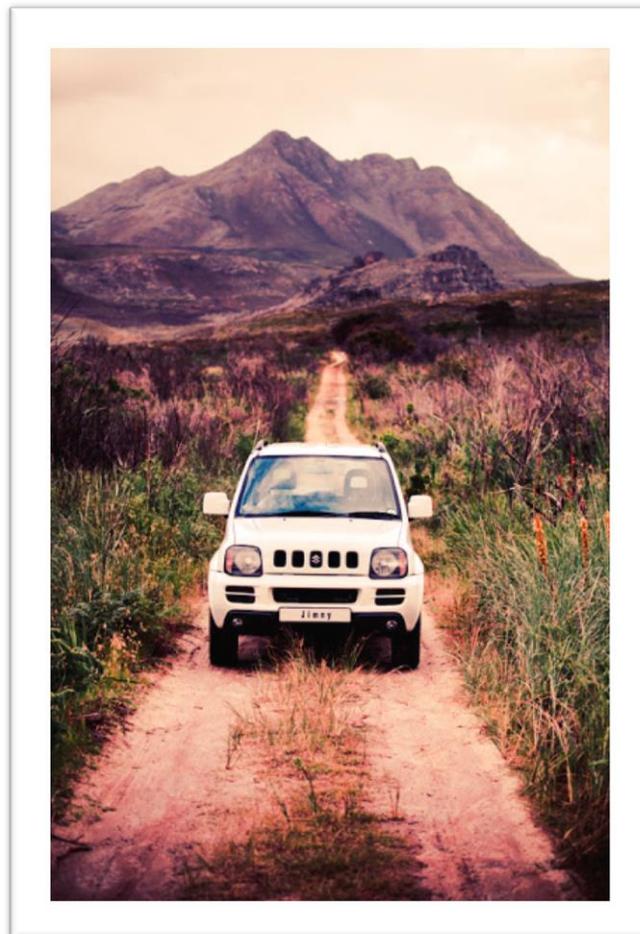
green lima beans and other stories

Jimny, a little love affair

This site is NOT about reviews of stuff. But until my more work-oriented ecological.co.za site goes live, this post can live here. Because the Suzuki Jimny is so damn cool it deserves serious consideration, and when I was researching to buy I struggled to find any reviews from people who'd actually lived with these cars and really used them as working vehicles.

My work involves a substantial amount of fieldwork and site visits in **Provincial Nature Reserves**. It's a hard life I know, but someone's got to do it. In the 14 months since I bought this car in Feb 2011 I've racked up 28,000 kilometres throughout the Western Cape: a mix of city driving and commuting, lots of tarred highways, gravel roads in various states of repair, and nature reserve tracks ranging from gentle to 20 degree inclines liberally strewn with large rocks and dongas.

Yes, the Jimny looks like a dinky toy. It's downright girly in appearance. Rugged reserve managers and other Land Cruiser types may not take you seriously. The name does not help. Fortunately I'm manly and hirsute enough to pull it off. But can this tiny, cute caricature of a Jeep actually be a serious work vehicle?



All the detailed specifications are available from the [Suzuki website here](#). Of these, four things together really distinguish this car from any other:

- It's tiny and featherweight- 3.645m long, 1.6m wide and only 1,070kg
- It's light on fuel with a claimed 7.2L/100km - comparable to a light sedan or hatchback (in South Africa it's only available with a 1,328 cm³ petrol engine)
- It has a real 4x4 drivetrain, with proper selectable low range
- It's by far the most affordable 4x4 at R192,900 (*update Oct 2013: R209 900*), even including vehicles without low range like the Toyota RAV and Daihatsu Terios.

Yes, it's small

The Jimny is a really unique set of design choices. Let's get the obvious stuff out the way first. This is a two-front door, one rear door car, shorter than most city cars. It's for singles, couples and families with no more than 2 small kids. Like any two-door, getting into the back seat involves sliding the front seat forward, and is a pain. While it is possible to fit two, or even three very short-legged persons in the back seat, for 6 foot tall adults, seat depth and legroom together are not adequate to allow knees to be pointed forward in a normal sitting position even when the front seats are pushed way forward, which would then push the front occupants' knees into the plastic dash. At 6ft1" I need the driver's seat adjusted as far back as possible, and very tall drivers would probably not fit. With only two standard sized adults however, it is perfectly comfortable, and with the rear seats folded forward, provides plenty of packing space.

And it really is frugal.

Manufacturer's claims for fuel consumption tend to range from optimistic to downright fraudulent. In this case however, they aren't too far off the mark for a sensibly driven Jimny. Over 28,000km, I've managed an average of 7.5 litres per 100km, ranging from a delightful 6.9l/100km when doing lots of 80-90k/h driving on dirt, up to 9.1l/100km when tearing along at 140km/h. That means 400km to a maximum of 500km before the fuel light comes on, requiring a 36l refill, and leaving around 4l or 50km of reserve in the 40l tank. I drive like a granny and have to do very little city and rush hour commuting, so these figures are around the best you could expect, with average users of cars in standard trim reporting 8-8.5l/100km, and some even getting typical consumption as high as 10l/100km.

I haven't noticed any large difference in consumption when engaging 4WD high range on loose gravel or muddy dirt roads, nor if the air conditioning is on. Even 30km of low range on up to 20deg incline didn't dramatically reduce range on a full tank.

It's clear that the Jimny's fuel use responds strongly to driving style, with lowest consumption requiring good practise of gentle acceleration, avoiding heavy braking by anticipating traffic, and staying below 110-120km/h. Likewise, oversize tyres and heavy modifications take their toll. However, even the worst Jimny fuel consumption figures reported are 30% or more lower than virtually any other 4x4, and half of what many big 4x4s use.

But has it got the off-road credentials?

In short; yes, and then some. Remember me bitching about rear seat space three paragraphs ago? That's because this isn't anything like most serious off-road vehicles. It's not a truck turned into a car. It's more like a super quad-bike with a light body. After living with this car for a while, it's clear that every design decision aims to keep overall mass way down so that lighter engine, suspension and running gear can be used. That shortness translates into the ability to turn on a dime, and incredible entry and exit angles. And hot damn, it works. You can climb into and out of holes that would leave bigger cars with their rears buried in the ground. This little thing runs rings around any other 4x4 I've driven. It's small, narrow and light enough to pick lines that other cars couldn't and zips merrily over soft sand that bogs down heavier vehicles. On steep inclines and really rough tracks, with low range engaged from the button on the dash, the little 1300 engine and excellent power to weight ratio is entirely adequate to keep it crawling over rocks and up impossible inclines all day. It might be bested by bigger cars with larger wheels and a bit more clearance on huge boulders, but I've yet to meet a reserve track where I couldn't get through without even breaking a sweat.

Despite its cutesy looks, this is no soft-roader without low-range or adequate clearance. I recently accompanied an all-wheel drive Volvo XC70 down a rocky track, and breezed through sections where the Volvo was spinning tyres, scraping its chassis, and having to make several attempts at steep, loose sections despite its powerful diesel engine. If you're more interested in getting into the wild than engaging in constructed 4x4 challenges, the Jimny will get you anywhere you need to go.

Oh, so that means it's not so hot on the tar?

Well... that depends on your expectation. I've pointed out that the Jimny is very short and narrow. It is of course tallish too. Having moved straight from owning a similarly sized and shaped 1986 1600 Daihatsu Feroza, and having driven the older SJ incarnations of the Suzuki, I found the handling phenomenally brilliant in comparison, with decent cornering, fantastic braking even in emergency situations, and far better high-speed road holding. But physics is a bitch. Compared to a lower sedan, or even a wider off-road vehicle, cornering does involve some leaning and is best approached with sensible caution. The ridiculously short 2.25m wheelbase means over steer is a potential hazard, and something you have to be very aware of, especially on loose gravel roads. Engaging four wheel drive helps in these circumstances, but it's not magic. The Jimny is not as stable as a longer vehicle, and if you don't adjust your driving style accordingly you will come to grief. That said, I've never felt unsafe, and the few times drunken men and horses have appeared out of the dark, I haven't felt even close to losing control, even while swerving and simultaneously emergency braking from over 100km/h. The ABS brakes do their job just as they should.

While the rev-happy Jimny can maintain 140km/h comfortably on the open road, it does wreak havoc with the fuel consumption. I'm not interested in driving much over the speed limit anyway. I've seen enough freshly dead and maimed idiots and their victims in my travels to understand the dangers. Ironically, driving fast actually makes almost no substantial difference to travel time anyway. How many times have you rushed past a slow truck, and had it pass you an hour later when you stop for a 10 minute pee break? My rather belaboured point is that the Jimny is plenty fast enough. Yes, the little engine does sound strained at over 120km/h. Yes, once in a while you might need to change down a gear when going up a steep hill. Yes, a sixth gear would be lovely on the open road, and would probably dramatically drop consumption on long trips. Yes, it would be nice to have a little more power when overtaking long trucks. But honestly it really is fine like it is. I regularly drive 8 hours or more in a day, and the performance isn't something I think about.

In the city however, the Jimny is in its other element. It keeps up with traffic effortlessly and it's got none of the disadvantages of a normal four-wheel drive. Any reservations you might have about the open-road handling will disappear when you have to park in crowded Long Street, or do a quick u-turn across a single lane. The turning circle actually beats nearly all small sedans and hatchbacks, and it's a doddle to park in the smallest space.

It's all about compromise.

When I bought this car, I was utterly baffled as to why the designers didn't add 15cm to the length of the car and allocate that space to back seat legroom, and maybe add small rear doors. Oh, and roll-down rear windows. Did I mention that the back isn't just cramped, it's probably downright claustrophobic? But why should I care, I never go in the back. I now realise that adding any space would have required a cascade of design changes that would make it impossible to have such a small, nimble and fuel efficient package that is also tough, capable off-road and on, and at half the price of any other 4x4.

In short, if you want the fuel consumption and manoeuvrability of a small two-wheel drive, with real usable off-road ability, something has to give. That something is space, and to a lesser extent, power. And while a short, narrow and tall 4x4 will never corner as safely as a sedan, the Jimny actually handles surprisingly well, and ABS braking and passenger and driver side airbags provide additional peace of mind. If like me, you really don't care about 0-100km/h acceleration times as long as you can easily keep up with other traffic, and like travelling light, the Jimny will take you anywhere. It handles ridiculously easily in the rough compared to heavier and larger vehicles where you can hardly see your line over the long bonnet. Although I typically do two to three day trips, I wouldn't hesitate to take mine on serious overland expeditions. I don't really understand why anyone would want to struggle with a 100kg canvas house when a 2kg two-man tent goes up in minutes. Out of Africa is a hassle kids, let it go. But if you can't, and you struggle to fit all your expedition gear inside and on top of your long-wheel base Landy, the Jimny is not for you.

Like any car, the Jimny is a design compromise. Professional motoring journalists unvaryingly value power, acceleration, speed and luxurious comfort. Apparently fuel economy, affordability and flexibility are only for wimps. Reviewers that actually test the Jimny thoroughly in the rough note with surprise that it's as capable an off-road vehicle as the best. But even those that get that far are usually put off by the small interior, practical finishes, and the fact that the mountain goat handling is less of an asset on the open road. In their never ending macho quests, they miss the point that even the most ardent town dwelling over-lander typically spends 90% of their time in town where a conventional 4x4 is a heavy, thirsty, hard to park and turn nightmare, and engine power is frankly irrelevant. For me, the Jimny has all the right compromises for my lifestyle. It's a pleasure in and around the city, adequate on the open road, and can also get into the back of beyond. Every time the fuel price goes up I have reason to be thankful. But most importantly, as a package, it's more fun than a barrel full of monkeys. **Real Jimny drivers** passionately love their cars. Over a year on, and I still smile every time I get into mine.



Update Jan 2013 - My thoughts on the new Jimny.

The new 2013 Jimny model only has cosmetic and minor safety feature changes. Most notably, a ridiculous, blanked-off, utterly non-functional bonnet air scoop that serves no purpose except to possibly slightly reduce aerodynamic efficiency and make the car seem like a bit of a poser, instead of the wolf in hamster's clothing that it really is. Amazingly, the non-MP3-playing CD-frontloader sound system remains unchanged, meaning you still cannot play MP3s or plug in an external player and the tiny, tinny speakers mean that a sound system upgrade is the first thing most people will want to spend money on.

The good news is that all the important good stuff remains exactly the same, and it's still the most competent and efficient real 4x4 you can buy for anywhere near the price.

<http://www.greenlimabeans.com/2012/04/suzuki-jimny-4x4-owner-review.html>