



Does the Force One need Big B to promote it? I am sure that's one of the reasons you actually became aware of its existence but at the price it's pegged at, you would have come to know about this new SUV anyway. The attribute of value-for-money makes itself known without any manufacturer trying too hard to convey it. Retailing at showrooms in Delhi at ₹10.65 lakh, you get a large SUV with a burly diesel engine, seven seats with enough leg room for all, adequate space for luggage, large 16-inch wheels with alloys and several other useful features. But that price tag also puts it into direct competition with some established players — the Mahindra Scorpio, the Tata Safari, and to a certain extent, the invincible Toyota Innova. The Force One is from Force Motors — yes, a strong player in the commercial vehicle business but it's a babe in the woods as far as selling passenger vehicles is concerned. Sure, that's the reason why it needs Big B to introduce its first serious passenger vehicle in the market, but I think the Force One will be able to find its feet eventually.

So what is the Force One all about? It owes its origin remotely to a Chinese SUV, but that's where the connection ends. You see, Force Motors manufactures complete powertrains for Mercedes-Benz, so it had access to the German firm's engines and gearboxes. Then it got a Chinese manufacturer to provide stamped panels for the body, based on its own specifications. All the other major components are either manufactured in-house or sourced from major suppliers. For instance, Rane supplies the steering systems, Lumax got it the lights, Subros the airconditioning, Gabriel the shock absorbers, Wabco the brakes etc. Then Force Motors got Mercedes-Benz Technology to help validate the electronics on the SUV, while some prototypes were shipped to Lotus in the UK for tuning of the dynamics. Engineers from Lotus also drove the car extensively in India to further tune the suspension. An assembly line was put together at Force Motors' facility at Pithampur in Madhya Pradesh to produce the SUV.

And that's where I had a chance to briefly sample the Force One. When I drove it, only a few details were yet to be finalised and several technical specifications were yet to be shared, but the

The Force One — it's big and burly, aggressively priced and has a Daimler-sourced diesel engine. We think it's promising!

Force feedback

Srinivas Krishnan drives the new SUV from Force Motors and tells you all about it

product was as good as the final one. The first impression is that of size. It is a fairly long SUV; though it does not look contemporary, it has presence. I have an issue with the way the front end looks — though it has got a set of fancy LEDs in the headlamps, the grille design makes it look somewhat gawky. It does not have the gratuitous curves that most SUVs and crossovers sport nowadays, but straightforward body panels translate to cost savings in stampings. And it helps that they also give it the profile of a German Panzer tank — always a good thing on our roads. The prominent wheel arches redeem its looks by giving it an aggressive stance, while the alloys help highlighting them further.

Inside, the layout again is not exactly adventurous, sticking to a traditional look. The usage of the wood-finish plastic is excessive in the version I drove and there could be more attention to the fit and finish and quality of the plastics used. The chunky steering wheel has a set of buttons that are placed in such a way that they don't intrude while you are steering. The two dials in the instrument panel are sober and classy and you are also greeted by a galaxy of idiot lights in the panel when you start up. If the Force One is about size outside, thankfully, it's the same inside as well. The middle row and the last row have more than adequate leg room and there is decent space even after the last row for luggage. The seats of course fold down so you can use them

the way you want. One of the Force One's main selling points will be its generous space for seven adults.

And the other, for sure, will be its powertrain licensed from Daimler. The 2,200 cc 16-valve inline-four common-rail turbodiesel is rated at 140 bhp at 3,800 rpm and 32 kgm of turning force between 1,600 and 2,400 rpm. Sounds familiar? It is the same one that powered the last-generation Mercedes-Benz C and E 220 CDI. Power from the engine is transferred to the rear wheels via a five-speed manual transmission. Driving the car in and around the Pithampur plant, the Force One feels surprisingly light and nimble — not what I expected from an SUV of this size (and also from a commercial vehicle manufacturer!). I

was told by Force Motors engineers that their SUV has the best power-to-weight ratio in its category. If that's indeed the case, it is a good thing, because a better power-to-weight ratio allows for better performance even when the vehicle is loaded and, most impor-

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tantly to us Indians, it translates to good fuel economy. A figure of 11 to 13 kmpl is what Force Motors claims, which if true, is pretty decent for a machine in this category.

The SUV pulls cleanly and the engine doesn't seem strained at all, though there is a boom in the cabin at higher revs. The gears fall smoothly enough, but engaging the dog-leg reverse with the collar is a bit of a pain. With the kind of power on tap, the Force One should be a quick SUV. The steering setup was too over-servoed and could do with some more feedback, especially at higher speeds. As far as the suspension is concerned, it did not buck around on the smooth sections of tarmac even without any load. I also took it off-road around the plant, through some slushy sections and gravel. Though it was only a rear-wheel drive version (the 4x4 follows in March 2012), the body-on-chassis construction plus the Force Motors DNA should handle that, right? The Force One, aided by Apollo Hawkz rubber, easily managed the no-road situations and it does not throw you around inside the cabin either. Disc brakes in front and drums at the rear provide adequate stopping power — though I wish Force Motors would introduce ABS (which is being developed by Bosch) earlier than the scheduled December 2012. Oh, and airbags will feature in the Force One sometime in 2013.

All in all, the Force One is a promising SUV — it has quite a few things going for it vis-a-vis the competition — even a rather prominent brand ambassador. I only hope he doesn't overshadow the product!

The writer was invited by Force Motors to sample the Force One in Pithampur