



ISUZU NQR EASYSHIFT

# ONE GOOD TURN

Automatic 7.5-tonner takes stress out of navigating tight spots

By Steev Hayes

PHOTOGRAPHY STEEV HAYES



Steering lock is better than on some of the competition



Daily checks can be carried out in cab



Automated transmission is simple to operate

Isuzu has launched its new NQR light-truck range — and it comes with the option to have automated transmission.

Unlike Mitsubishi, which has opted to install an Allison gearbox for an automatic version of its Canter 7.5-tonner, Isuzu uses its own transmission — a two-pedal setup called Easyshift — and it's substantially cheaper. But Isuzu is taking a gamble by making its Easyshift transmission standard fitment.

Isuzu carried out research ahead of the launch of this model, asking customers, drivers and sales people whether the UK was ready for a 7.5-tonner with automated transmission fitted as standard, and what the market could — or would — stand, price-wise.

The answer to the former question was a resounding 'Yes', while most thought acceptable pricing for the transmission was up to the £2000 mark.

So Isuzu settled on £1000 more than the manual, stressing that it is not making money here, but is basically selling it for what it costs to buy it in.

The Easyshift gearbox has economy and power settings, as well as what is now known in the industry as a 'limp home' facility. However, this only gives either first or reverse gears.

There's also a setting for when the vehicle has to be towed (controls for this are under a flimsy flap at the front of the gearshift console, ahead of the shift lever).

Maintenance of the transmission is very simple, with just a fluid change needed every 100,000 miles.

As for the rest of the truck, there's a facelifted cab, and a new engine with a few extra horses, which will certainly please those who felt earlier models lacked oomph. The new engine is 5.2 litres, which pushes out 150 bhp with the Easyshift gearbox fitted, or 175 bhp with the manual transmission option.

Ahead of full availability of the new trucks in the UK, Isuzu offered a standard-cabbed 7.5-tonner chassis with dropside body and loaded with four tonnes of bagged sand to demonstrate the new model to the press and prospective buyers.

### Driving the Isuzu NQR

Entering the cab is easy as the doors open right up so the driver can virtually step straight in. As with other Japanese trucks of this type, the grab handles have to be used to get in because of the size and shape of the door openings. But once used to this, it becomes second nature. Pulling the door shut once you are in is achieved via long door pull-handles that double-up as armrests.

## Manoeuvrability on the NQR is excellent — one of the attractions of these trucks is that they are designed for use in tight spaces

There is also a small grip on their front end, that the driver can get hold of when the door is wide open, and use to pull it shut (it's actually easier to reach from the driver's seat, even belted in).

Leaving the cab, the tendency is to rest the right hand on the wheelarch, turn to the right and drop out. Isuzu would benefit here by having a rough surface for the driver's hand to rest on, offering more grip should the wheelarch be wet.

Once seated behind the steering wheel, adjustment of steering wheel/column rake and height, and of the seat is easy, while the driver is presented with a simple dash layout. Everything he needs is within easy reach.

The gearbox is a five-speed version and offers the choice of either fully automated gearchanges or a sequential gearshift option, allowing the driver to take over.

Euro 4 will see a new six-speed auto 'box, along with beefed-up engine power from the Isuzu stable to cope with the new emissions regulations.

Isuzu says it still has to refine the ECUs that govern the gearchanges on the demo truck (this one is set up for the Japanese road network which doesn't have roundabouts, so the electronics struggle to cope in the UK). But this will be sorted by the time the new NQRs begin to arrive on these shores.

Generally gearchanges were sluggish, but in economy mode the transmission seemed to upchange very quickly after pulling away, presumably to get the revs back down swiftly for improved fuel economy. Setting off from rest, Isuzu says first gear should be used unless on a

slope with the truck already rolling, when you can go straight to second.

Nevertheless, the transmission really does take some of the stress out of driving in busy urban areas. Forewarned about the apparent anomaly with the gearbox, we never really encountered a problem on a test run around Ferndown, Dorset. On the approach to a roundabout on a slight incline, after slowing to check for traffic, the transmission was sluggish at changing into the appropriate gear, so simply selecting the sequential gearshift option and choosing the gears remedied this. This proved to be the best way to drive the truck, so at any point where it was felt the automation might ponder, just slipping it into manual meant the momentum could be maintained.

If the driver is in manual and stays in a high gear — or forgets to change



Foot rest is useful in lieu of clutch pedal on the automatic



Cab is easy to tilt



Visibility in the NQR is very good

## FIRST DRIVE



## IN SUMMARY

The NQR is fairly basic. But it is also sturdy, functional and built to last.

While the automated transmission is simple it would benefit from a few tweaks to make it more user-friendly.

Image-wise, the Isuzu NQR 7.5-tonner might lack the kudos of other makes, but it isn't necessarily being aimed at the same markets. Isuzu says the truck will be an attractive proposition to payload-critical operators and on local distribution.

This is one of those 'does precisely what it says on the tin' trucks.

- ✓ Looks
- ✓ Handling
- ✓ Brakes
- ✓ Seating
- ✓ Indicator warning beeper
- ✓ Automated transmission
- ✗ Nods on the road
- ✗ Chronic lack of decent storage

down — an audible warning beeps to let him know.

To change from automated gear selection to manual, all the driver has to do is shift the lever forward or rearward and it slips into sequential mode. Moving the lever forward ahead of downshifting seemed the better option, as the truck would often downshift as you moved the lever back, even if the driver was preparing the 'box for a downchange.

It would be better if the gearbox had a setting where the driver could switch out of automated and into sequential mode, and the gearbox maintained the gear it was already in ahead of the driver moving the lever forward or backwards to actually effect a gearshift. Other automated transmissions offer this, for example with Volvo's I-Shift you slip the

lever to the left or right to select or deselect automated gearshifting, but if you go from auto to manual, the gear you are in is the same in either. You have to initiate a gearchange by making a positive move. With the Easyshift transmission, slip the lever out of auto and you find yourself in neutral.

Manoeuvrability of the NQR is excellent — one of the attractions of these trucks is that they are designed for use in tight spaces. Thus, steering lock is better than on some of the competition. Another plus is that the driver can switch quickly from forward to reverse gear without the seemingly massive delays some automated transmissions suffer as the electronics struggle to keep up.

Braking (with the front disc/rear drum braking arrangement), cornering and

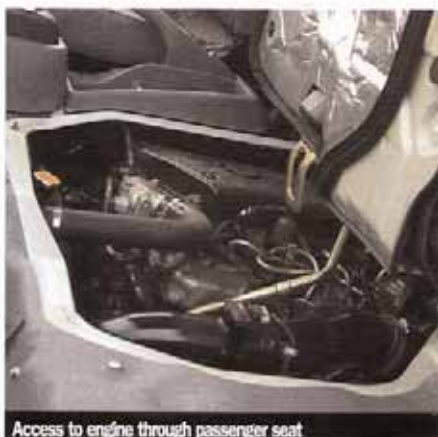
general handling in the little truck are very good, although it does pitch quite a lot on uneven road surfaces.

There is a standard-fitment exhaust brake too, but during this run it didn't seem to have any noticeable effect.

The steering is light, but not overly so, giving good feedback to the driver, keeping him in touch with what's happening on the road.

The facelifted cab has benefited from attention to the insulation, giving reduced road and other noise intrusion into the cab.

The demo truck has a sprung driver's seat fitted (made by an Australian manufacturer), but this is optional. A sprung seat will set the buyer back an extra £250, but the driver will certainly appreciate the extra comfort. ■



Access to engine through passenger seat



Air vents give improved cab airflow



Door opens right up for ease of access