Ford has made some significant changes to its Falcon and Territory models for 2006. With the new BF Falcon and SY Territory models come styling changes, improved safety, better performance and economy, and upgraded drive trains.

Ford claims a first with the introduction of DSC (Dynamic Stability Control) on both a manual transmission and locally built V8 sedan. And the Territory Ghia is the first Australian-manufactured vehicle to feature a reversing camera. It provides the driver with a wide-angle view of up to 15 metres to the rear of the vehicle – a bonus for pedestrian safety.

The standard 4.0-litre DOHC Barra straight-six engine has been tweaked to provide 190kW of power at 5,250rpm and 383Nm of torque at 2,500rpm. Ford claims better fuel economy across all models, with improvements of between 5.2 per cent on the standard Falcon and 11.3 per cent on Fairmont Ghia.

Drive train improvements include an upgraded four-speed automatic transmission, a new six-speed automatic on some models and the addition of traction control on all petrol sedan and wagon variants.

Ford’s new ZF 6HP26 six-speed auto is a compact, lightweight, high-torque-capacity transmission with smaller, more graduated steps between each gear. Of two versions of the six-speed auto, the higher – with 600Nm torque capacity – is fitted to V8 models.

The new transmission features, as does Ford’s standard four-speed automatic, a Sequential Sports Shift mode to offer drivers manual control over its six speeds. Both four- and six-speed automatic transmissions also feature Grade Logic Control, which causes the transmission to downshift when driving downhill to provide increased engine braking.

While the new six-speed auto is standard on Fairmont Ghia, Fairlane, LTD and Territory AWD models, it is an option on XR models and mandatory as the standard transmission on Falcons fitted with the optional V8.

The Police Journal test-drove a luxurious Fairmont Ghia 5.4-litre V8 with the new transmission around Tasmania. Despite the Island State’s mountainous topography and a full payload, the Fairmont returned good fuel economy (12.6 litres per 100km) for a V8.

Also test-driven was a six-speed automatic TS Territory AWD around Adelaide and down to Yorke Peninsula. It returned very good fuel economy (11.6 litres per 100km).
per 100km) for such a big, hefty vehicle.

Clearly, the new six-speed auto offers substantial driving pleasure as well as more-than-acceptable levels of economy. It is no wonder the Fairmont’s 230kW V8 engine ticks over at a lazy 1,250rpm to reach 80km/h, and just 1,750rpm to reach 110km/h.

Both test drives showed Ford’s new transmission to be a winner. As it is highly efficient, it makes the very best use of available engine power and goes about its business without any fuss. It offers enormous flexibility and exceptional shift quality in both manual and automatic modes.

Around Tasmania, the Fairmont V8 proved to be the perfect car, with its combination of excellent passenger comfort and superb driveability. Its DSC (Dynamic Stability Control) was put to the test – while swerving for a kangaroo – and passed with flying colours.

This system, standard on many Territory and high-end Falcon models, uses ABS and Traction Control technology to maintain stability when the vehicle approaches its physical limits. DSC helps, as do other such systems, to maintain control through programmed intervention. Many see it as one of the best safety features a car can have.

Territory is a modern, impressive vehicle that offers enormous space, comfort and versatility. It also has good road manners, excellent drivability and reasonable economy. Ford has not, but should, take the next step to make a serious off-road version.

BF Falcon pricing ranges from $34,880 through to $57,860 (Fairmont Ghia V8). The SY Territory RWD price ranges from $39,490 through to $56,320 (Territory Ghia AWD).

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To those in the know, the letters WRX – synonymous with the Subaru Impreza nameplate since 1994 – have always meant a neck-snapping, turbo-charged rocket that sticks like glue. But things have changed with the introduction of the ’06 Subaru WRX. Still turbo-charged, it continues to stick like glue and remains one very quick car but, with a new motor, delivers more refined power.

Out with the 2.0-litre motor and in with a larger 2.5-litre powerplant. The 2.5-litre turbo-charged Boxer engine produces a very credible 169kW of power at 5,600rpm and 320Nm of torque at 3,600rpm. From inside the car, the motor – even when pushed – is much quieter; and, owing to its additional torque and larger displacement, there is not the same degree of turbo lag at low revs.

This means the new model offers faster acceleration earlier, and that results in smoother power delivery across the entire rev range. Still obvious is the rush when the turbo comes on boost, but it no longer breaks your neck. These attributes make the WRX a much more refined car to drive, particularly around town.

Beyond its stunning power and performance, the WRX is a very flexible car. It looks good, will accommodate four adults in comfort, and offers a roomy cabin with good visibility. The sedan has a sizeable boot while the hatch, owing to its design, has a much larger cargo area. Either would make an excellent multi-use, every-day vehicle at home, around town or on tour.

In the bang-for-bucks stakes, they are pretty good value for money: $40,990 (WRX sedan) and $41,440 (hatch).

The jury is still out – and likely will be for some time – on Impreza’s new front end. Most think it is okay, but others dislike it. The previous model evoked a similar response for some time after its release. In reality, Subaru is unlikely to have any trouble selling the car: the new turbo charged 2.5-litre engine makes up for any perceived failings in appearance.
RAV4

stacks bigger

In a grab for an even larger slice of the bulging AWD market, Toyota has introduced an all-new RAV4 model line up. The short-wheel-base three-door variant has gone to make way for six new models based on the same five-door wagon format.

While the RAV is totally new and very modern, it sports a familiar face and takes some styling cues from its predecessor. There even exists a hint of Kluger familiar face and takes some very modern, it sports a wagon format.

Stacks bigger than the old model – 4,600mm long and 80mm wider – it now has a cavernous interior; and its wheelbase is 170mm longer. Passenger space is up by 20 per cent, and cargo space by a massive 35 per cent.

The longer wheelbase and wider track provide new models with superior ride and increased stability when cornering. But the bigger body means increased weight, which Toyota has countered with a modest 5kW increase in power.

All models feature a pleasant 2.4-litre VVT-i engine, which produces 125kW at 6,000rpm and 224Nm of torque at 4,000rpm. The engine, which features an electronic throttle, is smooth, refined and willing. A Police Journal test car provided adequate rather than stunning performance.

Drive is predominantly to the front wheels, as Toyota’s Active All Wheel Drive system transfers torque to the rear wheels when loss of front wheel traction is expected. This system is more compact than a full-time AWD system and therefore saves weight.

To the consumers’ pleasure, Toyota has included an AWD Lock button on the dashboard to allow the driver to lock the system manually up to 40km/h. This feature is highly desirable, particularly in sand, mud or snow. RAV also benefits from increased ground clearance, but the exhaust could be difficult terrain, as are many in this class.

In the new RAV4 line up are the CV, Cruiser and Cruiser L. Each is available with five-speed manual or a smooth four-speed automatic with gated shift control. The Police Journal test drove the entry-level automatic, which proved both comfortable and capable.

Its comfort, versatility and excellent interior space were immediately apparent. Visibility is good from the comfortable, supportive seats. The dash is neat and tidy with easy-to-use controls and a smart gauge layout.

Toyota has given new RAV stacks of useful storage compartments, including drink-holders all over the place, door bins, map pockets, two glove boxes and dual console bins.

Second-row seats are a 60/40 split-fold design and have features to ensure maximum flexibility. Each seat has a number of tilt positions for maximum comfort and can be individually slid forward to allow more cargo space. They also fold flat to the deck level of the cargo bay by pulling a lever attached to the seat or another lever adjacent to the tailgate.

The cargo bay is enormous for a vehicle in this class, and capable of carrying large items, particularly with the rear seats dropped. As well, a 90-litre storage bin under the cargo floor is used to house the cargo net and blind when not in use.

On-road performance is very good, particularly in light of RAV4’s size. The engine is willing and had no problem coping with the notorious Willunga Hill at the speed limit. The automatic transmission goes about its job with a minimum of fuss – its gated shift pattern is easy and effective to use.

RAV4 prices start at $31,990 (CV manual), which represents an increase of $550 over the previous equivalent model. But Toyota says RAV4 has around $2,000 worth of additional specification.

Standard items across all models include:

- ABS with Electronic Brake Distribution and Brake Assist.
- Electric power steering.
- Seventeen-inch wheels.
- Air conditioning with dust filter and rear heater ducts.
- Cruise control.
- Power windows and mirrors.
- Remote locking.
- Six-speaker MP3/CD audio with steering wheel mounted controls.
- Tilt and telescoping steering adjustment.
- Driver’s seat height adjuster.
- Driver and passenger airbags.

Prices top out at $43,990 for the Cruiser L auto, which also gets:

- Full leather trim.
- Front side and full-length curtain airbags.
- Heated seats.
- Sunroof.
- Numerous electronic driving aids.

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Spiralling oil prices have naturally sparked greater-than-usual interest in the small-car market. Accordingly, market heavyweight Toyota has replaced its previous small-car range, Echo, with new models called Yaris.

Yaris comes in three body configurations that bridge the gap from compact three-door and five-door hatch to a roomier four-door sedan. Clear from the outset is that Yaris is a better-looking proposition than was the Echo. It has similar exterior lines but looks sportier and less radical.

The Police Journal test-drove the newest of the 14-model Yaris bunch, a four-door YRS sedan. It was fitted with automatic transmission with a gated shift-pattern floor-mounted lever, now common across much of the Toyota range.

Yaris sedan is powered by an economical and lively 1.5-litre VVT-i engine, which produces 80kW of power at 6,000rpm and 141Nm of torque at 4,200rpm. It shares design features with the petrol engine used in Toyota’s Prius hybrid petrol/electric car. So fuel economy is claimed to be good 6.1 litres/100km, and 6.7 litres/100km (automatic version).

The sedan is fairly tall and features a very short bonnet, long sloping windscreen and short boot. It looks cheeky, modern and practical.

Given its small external dimensions, it is very spacious inside. The cab forward design means passenger space is maximized. Front legroom is ample for even the tallest of drivers; and the rear can easily seat two adults in comfort.

No standout, but appealing

Just as pleasing is the size of the boot, which measures 900mm long, and up to 1,400mm wide. It includes a full-size spare wheel under the floor. By dropping one or both of the 60/40-split rear seats, one can easily enhance the cargo space.

Yaris has a central gauge layout, as did the Echo before it. Analogue gauges feature in the sedan, while the hatch comes with a digital readout. It will not suit some but, in reality, does not take long to get used to. It certainly leaves the area in front of the driver totally uncluttered and provides excellent forward visibility.

Below the gauges are large rotary dials for the ventilation system and a smart-looking audio system. Overall, the interior has a plain and simple layout which is ergonomically sound.

On its test drive, the Yaris sedan proved to be a very comfortable and willing little car. Its 1.5-litre motor was well matched to its four-speed auto and had no trouble powering away from a standstill or maintaining highway speeds, even on steep hills. The motor is relatively quiet – unless pushed hard – and miserly with fuel.

While Yaris sedan is not a car to stand out in a crowd, it certainly has plenty of appeal; and that Toyota quality is evident in everything the car does.

It is scarcely about to threaten the huge crop of cheaper cars, particularly the Korean bunch, but should sell well because of its credentials. It comes well equipped, with most wanted items included as standard:

- Dual airbags.
- ABS brakes with Brake Assist and EBD.
- Air conditioning.
- Remote locking.
- Power windows and mirrors.
- Four-speaker CD/MP3 audio system.

Yaris manual sedan costs $17,690, while the auto sells for $19,190. A worthy inclusion is front side and curtain airbags for only $750.

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