



SURFIN' SAFARI

In the first part of a new series on buying second-hand four-wheel drives, John Rooth clears the confusion surrounding one of Australia's most popular 'grey' imports - the Toyota Surf

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ROOTH

THE SURF SITUATION

Phew. If you want to get really confused about a second-hand four-wheel drive, then ask someone about Toyota Surfs. Then ask someone else, call a mate for a third opinion and mention it at the pub just to start a fight. Now you'll have at least four opinions and they'll probably be radically different just like these:

"Surfs? Just spec'd-up 4Runners. No worries with parts. Gotta be the best buy on the market considering what you get for the money ..."

"Yeah, this bloke spent \$20,000 but when the transfer-case chain stretched it cost him another four or five grand to swap it all over to HiLux stuff. Couldn't get a chain anywhere in the world. Wouldn't touch 'em with yours pal."

"No mate, no parts for Surfs. They're totally different to our Toyotas. Can't even suggest anyone who might have them. Pity,

there'd be plenty of demand. Those Japs treat their machinery like it's disposable, revving them from cold to redline, never bothering with servicing. Bastards of things to buy second hand."

"Heaps more power than the bottom-line stuff Toyota Australia brings in and they'll go anywhere! The best thing is the Japanese are meticulous and love their cars. So you know they've been run in properly, serviced to the book and still spent most of their time garaged."

Got that? Good. The truth, as always, is somewhere in between. However, most of the Surfs imported and complianced in Australia do represent terrific value for money. So much so, the growing demand for them - note those massive car yards that often stock nothing but imported vehicles springing up all over the place - means that slowly the bullshit is being replaced by real knowledge.

The Japanese like new things and they like gadgets. Four-wheel drives are status symbols in Japan; they're popular

because of the 'outdoor' image they convey even if many never see dirt. Most Japanese use public transport during the week and many own motorcycles and cars as well. Combine that with registration requirements penalising older cars (great way to stimulate their home market!) and we've got a situation where 5-10-year-old Toyota Surfs – top-of-the-line models and loaded with extras – aren't worth much in Japan.

Clever Australian businessmen with an eye for an opportunity can buy them cheaply, and with plenty to choose from, need only pick the best. Importing vehicles isn't easy but it's possible once you've climbed the 'paper mountain'.

Enter the Australian Government. They have vested interests to protect and have seen what happened in New Zealand when private entrepreneurs deluged the market with 'grey' (second-hand) imports. New Zealand's local new-car market – which employs many people and generates plenty of revenue – almost collapsed. So our mob came up with some stiff compliancing laws and put a limit on the number of vehicles a compliancer can accommodate. As a result, the consumer pay an extra \$3000 or more to cover these rules, but the 'fast buck' merchants – most of them – get the chop, leaving the reputable blokes to cope with the flak.

The stiffest opposition to grey imports comes from the distributors and dealers who find there are competitors, with a good product and sharp prices, chopping into their market. They react by spreading horror stories about lack of parts availability and briefing their parts guys to offer no help at all. The local spare parts situation is already a nightmare thanks to different countries supplying the Australian market (new HiLuxes on sale in Australia might have been built in Japan or Malaysia for instance – even chassis dimensions can vary). So the hard-pressed 'counter' man is only too happy to tell the Surf punter to sod off.

Meanwhile, other intrepid entrepreneurs hear rumours of parts problems and realise there's a market for 'wrecked' grey parts. If you can buy a good low-mileage, late-model truck cheaply in Japan, a wreck is almost worthless. They then bring in parts and build a thriving market in second-hand, low-mileage components!

To add more confusion, some big insurance companies refused – initially at least – to insure grey imports, scaring the market even more. They use the parts-availability argument as a reason, but many industry insiders feel pressure may have been applied at a higher level. After all, some of the distributor's fleet contracts and such represent very big business for these same insurance companies. In addition, the two have a history of operating closely, while the grey importers are the new kids in town.

However, the law of supply and demand eventually wins through. It's still confusing because of the tall stories and unjustifiable claims made in retaliation. Although, as more grey imports arrive every day, the parts and back-up requirements create



Opposite: Already modified for off-road work, this Surf has yet to actually see dirt by the look of the underbody



Left From Top to Bottom:

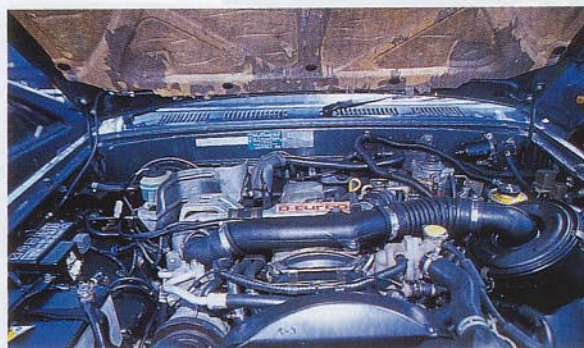
- The so-called 'narrow body' models are distinguished by their square headlights. This one had an ECB bull and towbar; Aussie-made products exported to Japan!

- The compliance plate means that Australian Design Rules on seatbelts, child-restraint anchorage points, side-impact intrusion bars, fluids and tyres amongst others have been met and complied with. That's about \$3000 worth of tin!



- EFI means electronic fuel injection. These are the ones that make the most power but worry some motor tuners too. Note the dual batteries – necessary to power the 10-stacker CD

- This plain, turbo model has the typical import under-bonnet look – clean and stock down to the radiator hose clips



- This ECB towbar was already wired for an Aussie plug, but you need to check the details for translation problems!



demand that has to be supplied. At this stage, South-East Queensland is probably the best-developed market for Surfs because of the terrific demand for cheaper off-road vehicles, air conditioning, and as much as anything, that's where the boats stop first!

WHAT IS A SURF?

The Surf is the Japanese market equivalent to our 4Runner. They're almost identical in terms of body and running gear componentry, except they run different motors. Surfs that arrive here are all turbocharged diesels, usually the 2.4- or 3-litre models, some with EFI, some without.

Surfs can be divided into three categories: 1988 and earlier models that (easily identified by only having two doors and a fibreglass rear canopy); the four-door 1989 and 1990 models (called the narrow body but best recognised by their square headlight surrounds); and 1991 models or later (called the 'wide body' models). The narrow and wide body is another Surf myth because there's no discernible difference in actual overall width.

As a rule, imported Surfs are top-of-the-line models with such features as electric windows, power steering, air conditioning and power mirrors standard across the range. Coming from a country that loves aftermarket accessories, many of them are loaded with extras like Recaro seats, 'monster' stereos, cruise control, bullbars and towbars. Side-steps are virtually compulsory – every vehicle I saw had them.

Both the automatic and manual transmissions have the same basic construction features as the equivalent 4Runners (although a Japanese 1992

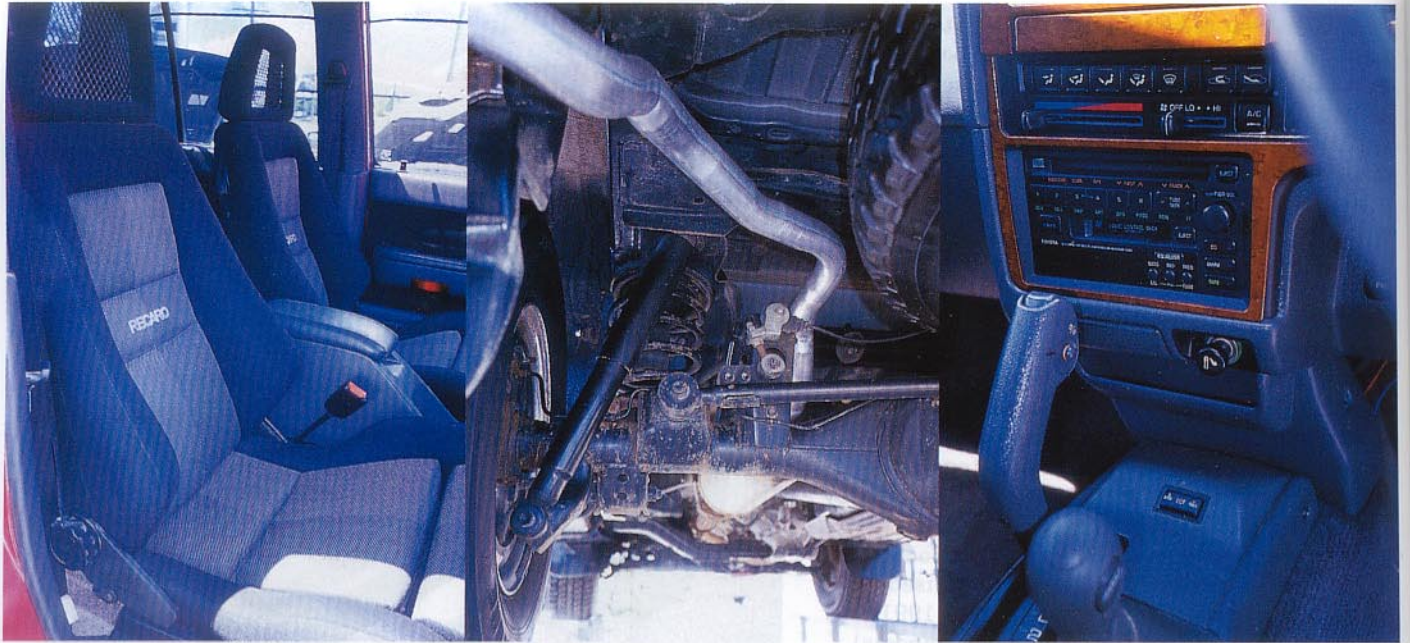


Left: This older, two-door Surf had 82,000km on the clock and a price of around \$10,000. Note the side-steps, which are compulsory Japanese equipment

Left Centre: Grey import Surfs are usually fully equipped – to the extent that if you want manual window winders, you might have to make a special request!

Below: A 1992 model, loaded with extras, dead clean with only 60,000km and no signs of ever having been off-road. All that, a potential \$15,000 saving on anything similar sold new in Australia, and it had 4Runner stickers applied in Japan!





Above Left: Lookee here! Recaro seats and a wood-grain dash! This Surf's interior was 'top dollar'

Above Centre: New shocks, new tailpipe and no sign of ever having been off-road. Note how the paint is tired though, nothing a bit of underbody spray wouldn't fix

Above Right: The Japanese take their stereos very seriously, so even the most basic Surf will usually come with top-of-the-line equipment. Hopefully they kept their 'Boy George' tapes for the next car ...

model Toyota is equivalent to about a 1996 model here), including independent, coil front suspension and a solid rear axle.

SURF SUITABILITY?

Surfs come close to being the ultimate small family all-rounder. Their turbo-diesel four-cylinder motors are cheap on fuel (averaging around 10km/L or 27mpg), the automatics suit city work, and they're easily driven and parked by smallish drivers, and us bigger folk too. They're comfortable and have more space in the back seat than most modern cars. They also have all the benefits of a small station wagon with a rear seat that folds down, and full rear access for loading. Off-road, their ground clearance and lack of potential capacity for serious modifications limit them – although anything's possible with enough cash, gas and welding rods.

One advantage Aussie-spec 4Runners have over Surfs is that their suspension (shocks and springs) have been tuned to Australian conditions. So chances are they handle sharper than their Japanese brethren.

INHERENT PROBLEMS

There aren't too many concerns with the Surf but expect problems with the mirrors. I don't know why, but many people mentioned that. Presumably, even though they are replaced as part of the compliance procedure, it's because they're different to anything available here. You'd have to be a prat to get too hung up over a mir-

Toyota did have to recall a number of their earlier Surf diesel motors because of potential cylinder-head cracking. This was supposedly because of thermostat problems causing severe overheating, something that – if it hasn't been done by the compliancer already – should be replaced. Thermostats are common parts that are available anywhere.

The EFI (electronic fuel injection)-equipped engines have a facility for computer fault diagnosis/tuning but apparently only one repairer in Sydney and another in Melbourne have the necessary adaptor. My local turbo expert reckons computer readouts are a crock for the most part anyway, saying that any turbo/engine related problem can be traced manually and repaired by someone who knows what they are doing. In fact, differences in computer readouts and interpretations often make them nothing more than a starting point.

Similarly, I was told several times that Surf injector pumps, because the LN130 (2.4-litre) and KZN130 (3-litre) motors are different to anything locally, can't be rebuilt. Then I found two diesel-pump specialists who were adamant that any pump was repairable, and one mentioned they were starting to get a regular trade in Surf pump rebuilds! Both of these businesses advertised themselves as 'diesel truck specialists' rather than car repairers. Once again, you may have to ring around, so don't believe the first thing you hear.

On the entertainment side, you might find you can't get any FM radio station higher up the band length than the ABC because Japanese FM stations operate at lower bandwidths. A trip to a car sound specialist to fit a simple band-expanding device will fix that for less than \$75. John Laws fans will be happy to know AM bands are just the same ... if you're that way inclined.

Once again, ask around and you will find the right person to solve any translation problem because with so many Surfs around now, somebody

STOP PRESS

As we went to print, we uncovered a company in Queensland who can convert Surf IFS to beam axle! They use the Bundera front axle and do a gearing change to suit. Contact BOAB 4x4, 717 Gympie Rd, Lawnton. Ph. (07) 3205 5766

PARTS AVAILABILITY

Ha! The \$20 question! Twenty bucks in phone calls that is. The trick is to find someone who knows their stuff or where to go for bits. Essentially, all the body parts are available from Toyota Australia (or the local wreckers), as are the majority of driveline components and filters and such. Unfortunately, you have to know what you're asking for, so use words like 'HiLux' and '4Runner' to avoid getting dipped in old sump oil.

There are a number of Toyota dealers who are very helpful when it comes to Surf parts (I know of two in the Brisbane area who have parts substitution lists). No doubt more will join the bandwagon once they realise ignorance doesn't pay the bills.

Meanwhile, many importers have developed parts backup, guaranteeing delivery times as good or better than local dealers, who are stuck having to deal through the official outlet. As you read this, there are stocks of second hand 'grey suitable' parts growing all over the country, especially complete components like engines and gearboxes. Several wrecking yards specialise in nothing else. Buy a copy of the 'Parts Trader' or one of the 4X4 Trader magazines and you'll find many contacts.

As a matter of interest, and as an example of how confusing the Surf situation can be, that chap who spent thousands replacing his gearbox and transfer with HiLux stuff (see The Surf Situation) might have been having a bad day. A little bird (who happens to work behind a Toyota counter) told me they had a chain in stock that would have fitted, he just hadn't asked for it. A 'grey' wrecker told me he'd have sold him a complete replacement, low-mileage transfer case for \$300 with a guarantee, or a gearbox for the same price. Another Surf expert backed that up when he told me they never bothered fixing gearboxes because it was cheaper to buy a complete one and slot it in complete.

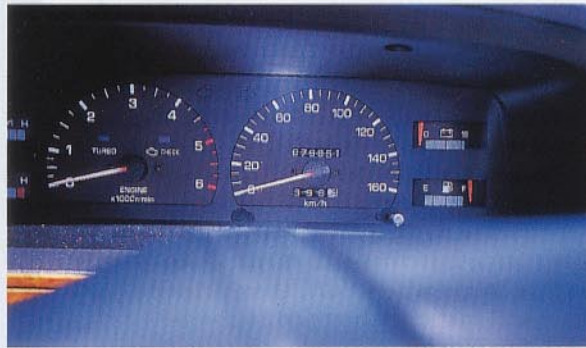
However, you have to know who to ask. Do some homework and you'll find anything is possible!

COMMON OFF-ROAD IMPROVEMENTS

When it comes to bullbars, towbars, lights, winches and such, anything that will fit a 4Runner will fit a Surf. A lot of HiLux stuff is also suitable. Just remember your tape measure and check all mounting dimensions first, because you can't expect any correlation between local-model listings and what you actually have!

Older, two-door Surf buyers might note that there's already a roll bar installed in the rear compartment. That's an Australian compliancing requirement – one of the more sensible ones – so if it's not there, demand it!

Ground clearance is the biggest stumbling block (ha, ha ...) and while a body lift is possible, jacking up the independent suspension more than about 50mm is not an easy task. Surfs respond best to a good set of aftermarket shock absorbers and longer



Left: Almost 88,000km on the clock and nearly nine years old. About 10,000km per year is the absolute maximum, many have far less



Left Centre: This older two-door has an overkill of the 'square' look. However, that incredible stereo system should twist your brain enough to overlook any styling concerns



Below: This Surf had already been lifted 50mm and fitted with good quality shockies. Now all it needs is someone to take it off-road

PRICE RANGE

Pre-1988: \$9000 – \$14,000

Narrow Body (1989–1990): \$12,000 – \$20,000

Wide Body (1991-plus): \$16,000 – \$30,000

TOYOTA SURF

Best points: Great value for money, loaded with extras, good fuel economy, low mileage with little off-road use, a great all round 'soft' 4WD that is quite at home in the city.

Worst points: Finding the right advice on parts and servicing, potential to improve off-road ability and all the information panels are in Japanese!

THANKS TO:

John Whittaker, Brisbane Tuning and Turbo

Centre (07) 3393 1588

Duncan Scott, Macquarie 4X4

Centre (02) 4587 7114

John Lawrence, Japanese Import Vehicles

Compliance (07) 3245 7844

Mike at Pitstop Performance (07) 3396 2006

rear springs. A locking diff isn't a good idea at the front unless you like snapping CV joints (which are a common Toyota part, by the way).

The EFI turbo-diesels pull really well in stock form but no matter what size motor you've got, it will benefit from such usual mods as a mandrel-bent, free-flow exhaust system and reusable Finer Filters. A good turbo specialist can squeeze out another 20 per cent just by rejigging the pump, injectors and turbo. John Whittaker did just that to his wife's Surf, then turned up the boost to 14psi and instantly bumped rear-wheel horsepower from 42hp to 60+hp.

Serious off-roaders have many options available for bulk power, because kits are available to adapt V6 and V8 EFI motors to the five-speed manuals. Nobody makes an adaptor for the auto 'box as far as I'm aware, probably because they'd have to make shrapnel-proof housing to go with it ...

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

As a trail bike tour guide, I saw how the Japanese deal with machinery first hand. They tend to treat motor-bikes much more like appliances than Australian riders, often abusing starter motors and clutches, and are notorious for jamming gears. That's partly because they don't ever think in terms of squeezing heaps of miles from their machinery the way we poor old Third World Aussies have to.

The Japanese can be very pedantic about routine, so if a vehicle has been serviced, it's probably been done properly and regularly. Apart from having a good listen and a long test drive - driving some tight corners in 4WD both forward and reverse to check the CVs - there's not much else you can do. Expect all oils, filters and fluids to look fresh because they should have been changed to meet the compliancing regulations.

The average grey import has probably clocked up a maximum of 10,000km per year. With Japan being a very urban country, most of that will have been under stop-start conditions. Therefore it's worth checking a manual's clutch and gear-change operation very closely and listening for slip in the automatic under change down. A good importer or his agent will have already done that when he bought the car but it won't hurt to do it again.

Rustproofing is a rarity in tropical Japan because they usually 'flick' a vehicle before it has a chance to rust anyway! No importer would bother bringing in a rust bucket but, once you've bought a Surf, consider getting it thoroughly rustproofed immediately. Most of the examples I saw had the beginnings of rust in places like the rear inner guards, probably from exposure to salt air on the docks as much as anything.

Other than that, you should employ exactly the same techniques as you'd use to buy any second-hand four-wheel drive. Look for signs of rock bashing underneath (very rare), smoke, abnormal wear on the brake and accelerator pedal, and listen to the turbo. Most importantly, keep looking until you know exactly what you're getting. 