

FIRST AMONG EQUALS

With the very latest Vitara now arriving in the UK, it seemed a good time to review the impact of a vehicle that can be justifiably thought of as the very first European SUV. If you think there are too many mid-range SUVs on the road, well, it's all Suzuki's fault!

Words: Nigel Fryatt

“S”tyled to new adventures for new lifestyles” was how Suzuki proudly described the Vitara when introduced in 1988. Now the fact that sharp suited marketing managers and ‘global brand’ directors still drag up similar fatuous slogans when launching new SUVs in 2015, only underlines just how far ahead of the game Suzuki was back in 1988. Even the name is clever, artificially constructed to imply ‘lifestyle, youth and vitality’; it was actually produced by a British trademark company for the European market. Back home in Japan, Suzuki’s new four-wheel drive was christened Escudo and this was, apparently, to represent “The Evolution of Design Excellence”. OK, so many of us may find this marketing tosh somewhat grating, but

remember, Suzuki got there first. Before the Vitara there were simply no ‘lifestyle’ SUVs.

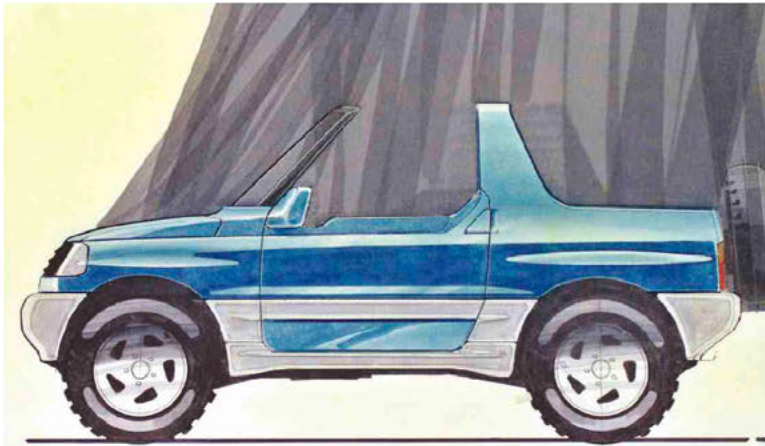
The Suzuki Vitara JLX short wheelbase (three door) was listed in this magazine back in 1989 as available for £9000. At the same time you could get a Dacia Duster GLX three door for £6500, and a Lada Niva Cossack for £7345, but build quality – or rather lack of it – poor reliability and reputation meant these were not competitors. Suzuki was still selling SJ410s and Santanas at the time, don’t forget. If you wanted a Land Rover Ninety, the base vehicle started at £14,467, while a Range Rover Vogue was £27,350. There was quite simply nothing in the market like this, at this price, from a respected four-wheel drive manufacturer.



Below: One of the very first promotional shots of the European Suzuki Vitara. Still looking pretty good to us...

The UK was chosen by Suzuki Japan to be the launch country for the new Vitara, and some 200 journalists turned up in Edinburgh, Scotland to drive the first 70 Vitaras in Europe. Suzuki GB Cars was actually a division of the





1988 AND ALL THAT

To put things into perspective, in 1988: A pint of beer cost 87p; Liverpool won the First Division and Chelsea were relegated; Ayrton Senna won his first F1 World Championship; Ben Johnson won the 100m in the Olympics (with a little help from certain substances); and the Peugeot 405 (above) was European Car of the Year. Looking back, it wasn't a great time for mainstream cars. The top ten best sellers included four Fords and three Vauxhalls, with the Metro the fourth best selling vehicle in the UK! Kylie Minogue was bouncing around chanting '*I should be so lucky*' and to keep everyone being positive we were all listening to '*Don't worry, be happy*' by Bobby McFerrin. Sadly, the great Enzo Ferrari passed away, and can you guess what was the best selling car accessory of the year? Garfield the cat.

Above left: These design studies of Vitara developments were drawn back in the early 1990s. One is clearly a forerunner to Suzuki's X/90... not a vehicle as successful as the Vitara!

Right: Apologies for the quality of this picture as the original couldn't be found, but looking carefully you will see that the original design prototype of the Vitara is actually built from layering wood! Computer? Phah!

Left: The design of the Vitara was labour intensive, no high tech computers and virtual reality caves here. This is a pre-production wooden mule being tweaked 'by eye' in Japan



Heron Corporation and so this launch was a big deal. Suzuki's President, Mr Osamu Suzuki, was in attendance, keen to hear what the journalists thought. The test route included on-road miles, motorways, Scottish greenlanes and a special off-road course in a 'bing' – a former open cast mine. This in itself was new for international car launches, in that Suzuki wanted to show that this was a vehicle that could be driven seriously both on, and off, the road. For some hardened newspaper hacks, this was the first time they had ever driven off-road and they were doing it in a fancy looking vehicle, with big wheel arches, sitting high and bouncing about universally being impressed, if somewhat confused. What was this vehicle? ➤

NOSTALGIA

Suzuki Vitara

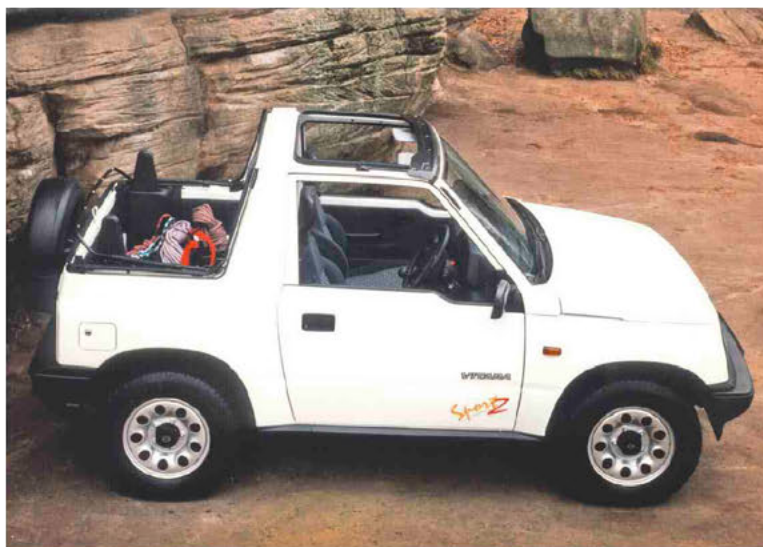


◀ While the new design of the Vitara was a significant change from everything else on the road, it wasn't just an interesting shape. Underneath there was a tough, three section, ladder frame chassis. To select four-wheel drive you had to physically move a lever on the two speed transfer 'box - no electronic wizardry here - remembering first that if you had manual free-wheeling hubs, you needed to get out and twist to the 'Lock' position otherwise the 4WD system would simply turn the driveshafts, not the wheels!

Besides the chassis, and selectable low range transmission, Suzuki also surprised with the Vitara's suspension set-up. Fully independent at the front, with MacPherson struts and coil springs, the rear axle was located by coil springs and trailing lower links. This allowed for good wheel articulation, useful as there was only eight inches of ground clearance, but this was linked with approach and departure angles of 40 and 41degs, front and rear - which we described in this magazine at the time, as 'respectable'. Damning with faint praise, with hindsight, perhaps.

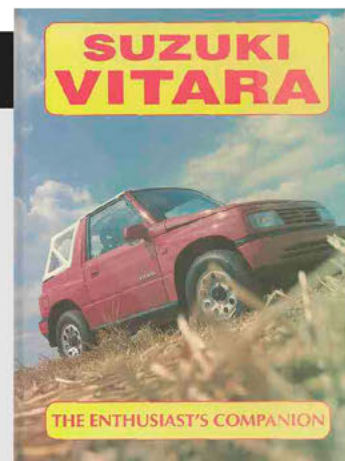
Power for the Vitara was a then new 1.6-litre engine, which arrived in both carburettor and injected formats. It initially produced a modest 74bhp at a rather buzzy 5250rpm and only 90lb ft of torque. The result was a towing figure of 1100kg. To put that in perspective, the Fiat Panda 4x4 of that era claimed a towing figure of 900kg. A quick engine upgrade within a year of launch did

When launched, the Suzuki Vitara was available as a three door 'metal top' or as a soft top. In many ways, it was the open version that firmly cemented the Vitara's 'fun, lifestyle' character



ANCIENT AND MODERN

When researching for this feature, a colleague mentioned that the book I wrote in 1995, *Suzuki Vitara: The Enthusiasts Companion*, was actually still available on Amazon. Intrigued I checked and was pleased to see that it had two five star reviews. Pride then got the better of me and I couldn't resist checking to see what was thought of my literary talents. Someone called Crystal wrote: "This book is of the good old vintage type. The pages contained the sort of information you would expect a book of this type to have." Vintage!? Whether the reviewer was referring to the vehicle or the author was not clear, but it does, perhaps, show the original Suzuki Vitara is now entering 'classic' status.



improve matters, but it was perhaps a modest start and we commented that it would benefit from some additional sound deadening for the engine compartment, especially when travelling at motorway speeds.

The Vitara was also sent to the US, where it again proved to be somewhat ahead of the game. General Motors had a shareholding in the Japanese company, which led to the first Vitara in America to be initially marketed as the Geo Tracker. Intriguingly, for America there was actually a two-wheel drive version of the Tracker. Given that having two-wheel drive versions of modern day SUVs is a fairly recent phenomenon (Land Rover introducing this with the Evoque, and continuing with the new Discovery Sport) for the Vitara to have such a version in the very early 1990s can be seen as another first.

Yet when we concluded our report on that first test drive in Scotland (December 1988), like many test reports at the time, we were obviously a little underwhelmed, reporting: "Visually the Vitara might not be everyone's bottle of brown ale and it seems the poseur who might have been quite happy with an SJ in standard trim is going to look long and hard at the bolt-on yuppie accessories designed to macho-ise the Vitara and think Hm... The Japanese told us that they expected families to go for the car as their main vehicle, stressing good value for money, with added recreational scope and safety from four-wheel drive." How right they were. A total of 2.87 million Vitaras were built, and some 40 per cent of those were sold in Europe.

While Land Rover and Jeep can justifiably claim some major developments in the world of four-wheel drive, it is perhaps too easy to forget the influence of the Vitara. OK, so Suzuki is not making the glamorous technological 4x4 marvels that seem to roll from the Jaguar Land Rover production line every other month. It doesn't produce a tough working pick-up to match the ubiquity of Toyota's Hilux, and it doesn't have the kudos, enduring character and four-wheel drive heritage of Jeep's Wrangler. However, it can claim to have been the first manufacturer to produce a European family SUV, that spends most of its time firmly on the tarmac, but has off-road credentials. SUV sales and marketing departments of many motoring manufacturers will still persuade you that their latest vehicle matches your 'adventurous, outdoor, sporting lifestyle'. To help you understand better, the vehicles will be given tough, go-anywhere names and special paint jobs. It's worth remembering that the Vitara's been there, and done that for nearly three decades. We salute the first modern SUV every produced. Viva Vitara! **4x4**

Right: These period promotional photographs were shot to emphasise the 'lifestyle' aspects of the Suzuki Vitara. In a way, it's the actual subject matter in the photographs and their context that dates the picture and not the vehicle itself...



NOSTALGIA
1992 Suzuki Vitara



IN THE BEGINNING...

Suzuki produced the Vitara, the first 'lifestyle' SUV, a model that was to start a global trend. We went to Germany to drive a totally original 1992 Vitara JLX. And it was something of a surprise

Words and photography: Nigel Fryatt

There was the tiniest little shriek of protest from the fan belt as we switched on the ignition. But that 'old engine' signature was but a brief distraction. Surely, even a fully restored 23-year old vehicle shouldn't feel this good. But that was the point; it hadn't been restored, it was 100 per cent original, both mechanically and, as we drove further, also in its character and soul.

It is important to backtrack a little, to explain just why we were driving a 1992 Suzuki Vitara JLX three-door around the picturesque German countryside outside Bensheim, near Frankfurt. Bensheim is actually the headquarters of Suzuki Europe and that is where we

had tracked down the Vitara. It had come to our attention some months ago, and the launch of the very latest Vitara (see page 54) seemed a good excuse to do a Nostalgia feature. We had briefly seen the vehicle and thought the 'restoration' looked particularly faithful to the original. There would surely be some great photographs of the Vitara stripped back to its bare ladder frame chassis, showing where all the rust was being removed. There would be good anecdotes of where all the replacement parts were sourced; did Suzuki still have them in stock, or were they sourced through enthusiastic club members, or even bought via eBay? Then there would be stories

about how the engine and transmission had been rebuilt, lots of new parts fitted obviously. After all, a vehicle that is now 23-years old was probably falling apart when Suzuki acquired it. How wrong we were...

The full story came with a smile and a firm handshake from Dirk Frischknecht, Manager Field Staff and Special Sales of Suzuki Europe. It's the 'special sales' part of Dirk's title that explains what he does, as he is responsible for Suzuki's growing heritage fleet, an indication that the company is taking its history very seriously. Dirk's smile remained as he said that the Vitara was 100 per cent original: "It's all original. It's not been repainted, nothing like that. There is a ►

NOSTALGIA

1992 Suzuki Vitara

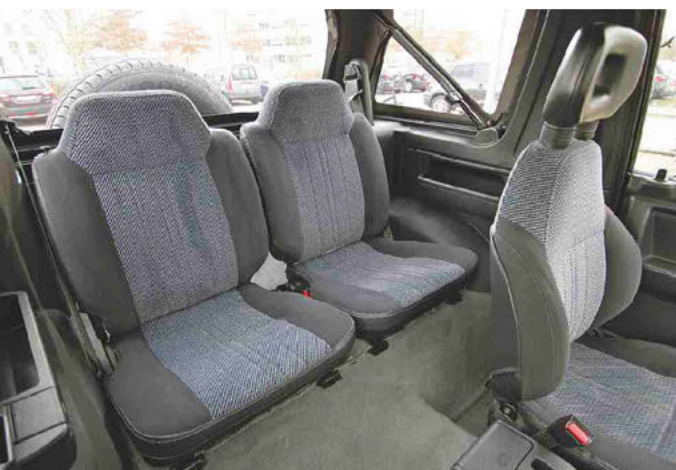


◀ small area of rust under the driver's seat and we haven't even bothered to repair that yet. Oh, and we have painted the front bumper, but it's all original. I couldn't believe it when I saw it. I just had to have it."

This Vitara came to Dirk's attention because of the 2009 scrapage scheme in Germany. Similar to the UK, the scheme was created to artificially increase new car sales. In Germany, it was the law that vehicles over a certain age actually had to be scrapped and this Vitara arrived at a Suzuki dealership, with the owner trading it in for a new Swift. Amazingly the Vitara had been a demo car, then sold and only had three owners – two of which were in the same family. When we

Above: Family fortunes: The 1992 Vitara with its brand new 2015 cousin outside Suzuki Europe's German HQ at Bensheim

Below: It's a squeeze getting in the back of the three-door Vitara. Note the individual seats, it's only a four seater, for sure



drove it, the odometer registered just over 46,000kms and they are genuine kms – it's now too precious to be worked too hard, so our drive was particularly special.

It is actually a Canadian-built Vitara. At the time, they were produced in Canada, Spain and Japan. Dirk explained that this does give the vehicle an advantage, since North American built Vitaras were coated with quality underbody protection, which has obviously inhibited the rust problem. According to Dirk, Japanese models were nearly as good, but that Spanish ones were... well, not quite so well produced!

The Vitara doesn't have any

aftermarket accessories so as Dirk explained, it doesn't "have holes drilled all over it!" It was the J1X model complete with what at the time was called the 'Power Pack', which meant power steering and electric windows. Plus we would think, the electrically adjustable wing mirrors, which certainly surprised me when I tried to adjust them; remember this was an inexpensive vehicle back in 1992, so electric windows and wing mirrors must have been quite the thing.

But it wasn't actually the visual condition or mechanical history that really surprised, it was the way it drove. There's no denying that getting behind the wheel of an 'old' car, and a heritage



museum display vehicle at that, is a little daunting. Behind the wheel it feels a little different to today's SUVs, with a very upright driving position and seemingly big, simple, button-free steering wheel. For some reason I actually looked down at the pedals before the off, and my how small they seem to the great rubber plates we have today; they are quite delicate as well, super light. As we mentioned, the fan belt slipped just a fraction on the very first turn of the ignition, but not again throughout the whole drive. The electronic ignition immediately held the engine at around 2000rpm to warm, but quickly dropped to under 1000rpm where it ticked over so quietly, I almost laughed out loud. Mirrors adjusted, seat back raked slightly we were off into the German traffic buzzing around the industrial estate where Suzuki Europe has its HQ. Massive juggernauts, and

impatient Mercedes-Benz drivers (a prerequisite for ownership perhaps) meant that no quarter would be given to the little Vitara. Until we got to the quieter country roads, it was going to be a battle getting on to and off the speed limit-free *autobahn*; the far left lane best left for those Mercedes-Benz drivers battling it out with equally impatient Audi saloons. What was great, however, was just how together the Vitara felt. Times have changed, SUVs have developed, gained weight, accessories, comfort, more powerful engines and way more technology, but do you know what? It doesn't matter to this Vitara, it felt as good today as it did back in the 1990s, and what's more it was considerably more fun to actually drive than scores of the latest SUVs I have tested over the last few years.

It felt light and easy to drive, delicate in some ways, perhaps even fragile but

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Above left: The Vitara's interior dates it somewhat; big flat, basic steering wheel and check out those pedals... and fag end I didn't notice when photographing! It's not mine, either

Top right: Centre console, complete with Blaupunkt stereo cassette player! Note tiny transfer box lever

the 1.6-litre injected engine still pulled smoothly and wanted to accelerate up to the 5000rpm mark. In some of the sweeping country roads the Vitara does lean more than a modern day SUV, but it's not dramatic and the ride and handling offer comfortable and confident progress. The further we drove, the more fun it became.

We didn't take the Vitara off-road, seemingly inappropriate for a museum display vehicle! It was, nevertheless, comforting to look down and see that dinky transfer box lever that could take you from 2H, up to 4H and then to 4L. Perhaps it's a shame that the vehicle has probably never been mud-plugging, but perhaps it's not so important now it has entered its retirement.

What is much more important is Suzuki's commitment to building a heritage vehicle fleet, and to supporting people owning 'old' models. And much of this is the drive from Dirk Frischknecht whose enthusiasm for retro vehicles knows no limits. Close to Suzuki Europe's HQ is a local dealer where the heritage fleet is housed. The highlight has to be Dirk's absolutely gorgeous LJ80 Suzuki 'jeep'. This vehicle has been restored and it is perhaps surprising to learn that the 'duck egg blue' colour scheme is actually an original colour, while it looks particularly modern. Alongside it is another of Dirk's 'originals', a special edition Samurai, complete with stick-on giraffe panels on the doors – this is not vinyl wrapping, back then it was more like wallpaper!

Although not a 4x4, we had to smile at the Suzuki Alto in the collection. Ridiculously tiny, it looks like a big Matchbox toy. How we ever used to ➤

NOSTALGIA

1992 Suzuki Vitara



◀ drive such things is a mystery; you'd probably be able to park four on the footprint of a 2015 Range Rover!

As you read this, Suzuki's heritage collection will have been on display at Retro Classic, claimed to be Europe's greatest classic car exhibition, which was in Stuttgart at the end of March. For the first time, Suzuki will have had a display exhibiting the LJ80, an early Suzuki Swift GTi and an X/90 – surely the oddest, and daftest, small 4x4 any manufacturer has ever produced, but one that has a strong following in Germany. The model Dirk has found is yet again an original, although to this writer, that doesn't make it any less odd!

For owners of older Suzukis, these developments bode well as April sees

the establishment of the very first Suzuki heritage dealer, a place where owners of older cars will be able to source parts and perhaps more importantly speak to experts who have hands-on experience of older models. Dirk is planning for there to be five such specialists across Germany.

But for us, it has to be all about the 1992 Suzuki Vitara JLX. As regular readers will no doubt recognise, I am lucky enough to drive a lot of the very latest 4x4 SUVs on the market. In doing so, it is all too easy to get submerged in the fascinating comfort, technology and abilities of models, some of which can cost up to and above £100,000. Being behind the wheel, at speed, of a Range Rover Sport can be a great place to be.

Effortlessly climbing a rock strewn and rutted hill in the latest Jeep Wrangler on new BFGoodrich KO2 rubber is highly satisfying. That you can also listen to your favourite radio station on the latest multi-speakered, sub-woofered, graphically-equalized DAB digital radio is also a treat for any music lover. However, my only disappointment was that I forgot to take any of my old C90 cassette tapes to Germany to slot into the – original, of course – Blaupunkt stereo fitted to the Vitara. Apart from that minor oversight on my behalf, bumbling around the German countryside in a 1992 Vitara has to be up there with one of the best drives this writer has experienced in many a year. Doing so, puts you firmly into the very heart of what made this vehicle such a success, and such a trendsetter. It still felt as fresh and fun as when it was launched, and there are quite a few modern SUV manufacturers of highly successful 4x4s that could learn a lot from this Vitara.

While Suzuki started this SUV trend back in the late 1980s, drive some of the latest bland, sanitised products to come from Japan and you can actually feel where the computer has taken over from any enthusiastic, human, design engineer. And these are not the mutterings of a grumpy old man bemoaning that, 'they just don't make them like they used to', it's the celebration that one company has rescued such an original, and my appreciation of the fun I had in getting behind the wheel. Viva Vitara! **4x4**



Suzuki's heritage collection includes a magnificent LJ80 and the special edition Samurai – complete with giraffe side 'wallpaper'!

SELLING THE VITARA

During its long career in the UK, the Vitara was marketed as the ultimate in trendy 'lifestyle' 4x4s. Paul Guinness looks back at some of the ads and brochures of the time

TRENDY TWOSOME

In both hard- and soft-top guises, the short-wheelbase version of the Vitara was a 4x4 for the fashion-conscious buyer – as well as the perfect vehicle for anyone who'd previously bought an SJ but now craved something a tad larger and better-handling. So it comes as no surprise to discover these two period press shots showing the Vitara in a couple of 'lifestyle' situations from the '90s.

The soft-top is parked next to a marina, with a plethora of expensive looking yachts as the backdrop; but to emphasise the fun aspect of the car, a good looking young couple gaze at the Vitara, her clad in a skimpy swimsuit and him sporting an unfeasibly tight pair of swimming shorts. This, apparently, was what we all aspired to at the time.

As for the hard-top version, that was parked outside a Chiquito restaurant, with the same couple – albeit now fully clothed and looking rather smarter – presumably heading out to dinner. Which is, of course, exactly what we were all doing in the '90s.

THE FAMILY VITARA

Issue one of the 'Suzuki Range' publication was published in 1995, featuring the latest five-door long-wheelbase Vitara on the front cover: "Make a powerful statement with the five-door Vitara Estate" suggested the brochure copywriters, who insisted that after just a test drive in this latest version you'd "appreciate the unique strength of character". This was still a Vitara, and still a fun choice; but with extra doors and extra space on board, there was finally a Vitara for folk with families.



THE COMPACT V6

Once Suzuki had expanded the five-door Vitara range to include the new 2.0-litre V6 and the 2.0-litre diesel, the appeal of this family favourite was greater than ever. But it was the V6 version that was particularly interesting, for this was the smallest vee-configured powerplant on offer in any 4x4 or SUV at the time.

With 135bhp on tap, the Vitara V6 was apparently as "smooth as silk yet strong as an ox", offering what Suzuki described as "plenty of mid-range torque and exceptional cruising ability".



THE 4X4 4U?

There was no shortage of special-edition Vitaras offered over the years, one of the most popular arriving late on in its career: the Vitara 4U, with both hard- and soft-top versions available. "You're sure to be noticed" promised

Suzuki, thanks to the 4U's "stylish alloy wheels" and "silver overfender kit" to complement the Miami Blue or True Green metallic paintwork. And that was pretty much it; although, yet again, the ad included a couple of 'bright young things' smiling longingly into each others eyes. **4x4**

Bright young things, plus some brightly coloured Vitaras...