

Suzuki History



After more than a decade of proving their 4x4 prowess in countries all over the world, Suzuki introduced the all-new SJ410 (nomenclature signifying 4-wheel-drive, 1.0 liter engine) in 1982. This truck was also known as the SJ30, the Sierra, the Jimny, and also re-badged as the Maruti Gypsy in India, as well as the Holden Drover in Australia. Larger and more modern than the LJ series, the SJ30 expanded on the LJ's pluses and



addressed many of the minuses. The 970cc 4-cylinder engine was a larger version of the LJ80's power plant, delivering 45hp and an even bigger improvement in torque, helping to haul its additional 300lbs over that of the LJ more quickly to its identical top speed of 68mph.



Differences from the familiar Samurai included of course the smaller engine, the narrower track width front and rear with leaf springs mounted further inboard, 12% lower transfer case ratios in high and low range, 10% lower differential gears, a 4-speed transmission, front and rear unboosted drum brakes, a transfer case

mounted drum parking brake, seat and dashboard design, lack of a roll bar, and availability of half-door convertible, pickup, hardtop, raised-panoramic-roof, and no-glass hardtop versions.



In Britain a "gentlemen's agreement" between British and Japanese industries limiting Japanese cars to a mere 11% of the market left Suzuki, a latecomer, with a very small allocation of market share. The popularity of the SJ series forced Suzuki to investigate overseas production. The Spanish company Land Rover Santana SA wanted a product to



complement their Land Rover production, so Suzuki took a 20% (later increased to 32%) shareholding in [Santana](#). This arrangement resulted in over 60% European content, allowing the vehicles to be exempt from Suzuki GB's quota.

Beginning in 1983, Suzuki saw a market for a larger version of the **SJ410** and **413**. By stretching the wheelbase 13.5 inches and the overall body length by 23 inches, the long-wheelbase SJ was born. Available as a 4 or 6 seat convertible, raised-roof hardtop, 3 different body styles of pickup, and a very rare 4-door hardtop (In fact, the "4-door hardtop" may actually be a hoax. Does anyone know for sure?), Suzuki had a vehicle to meet anybody's small-truck needs. As popular as it has been, the SJ series is still in production today, but has gone through several updates.



By 1984, the SJ series received its first major update. With the addition of an available all-new aluminum 1324cc 64hp engine, the SJ series was headed upscale. The new **SJ413** (4wd, 1.3 liters) received power front disk, rear drum brakes, a new dashboard and seat design, and a switch from the vertical-slat metal grille to the plastic unit with which we are familiar.



Note: The brakes were still not power on the SJ410 through 1985. The metal grille was kept through 1985 on the SJ410 as well -- [Eric Bewley](#)

By this time the popularity of the Suzuki due to its price, performance, and reliability allowed it to be sold in the roughest countries in the world, and Suzuki responded by adding assembly factories in Spain and India to supplement the huge Hamamatsu factory in Japan.



Until this time, Suzuki had never officially sold any of their 4x4s in the United States, but some 3000 or so SJ410s followed various unofficial paths into the U.S. With the success of the SJ series in over 100 countries around the world, they saw a huge market ready for such a vehicle.

Suzuki took the **SJ413** as the basis for what was to be called the **Samurai** and

made the few important changes from the SJ413 listed above. Unfortunately it was only offered to the United States in short wheelbase convertible and hardtop versions.

1985 was the year that the 1986 model year Samurai was released in America, and it was an instant hit. Starting at \$6200 and fully loaded at \$7500, many people



simply could not resist it. Starting with a mere 1200 trucks imported per month, sales increased exponentially to 8000 vehicles per month and Suzuki quickly found themselves with 47,000 Samurais sold by the end of their first year. Not only was it the top-selling convertible in the United States, but it also captured the best first-year sales record of any Japanese car company.



Keeping in mind the success of the VW Bug, Suzuki planned to always revise - not change - the vehicle, therefore retaining its style and simplicity. The 1988.5 model-year brought the first significant changes to the Samurai. In an effort to improve the ride quality, softer springs and shocks were installed, while a larger front anti-sway bar

was used to reduce body lean around corners.

The 5th gear ratio was reduced to improve highway performance, and a new aluminum radiator, a redesigned valve cover, and large transfer case U-joint flanges were used. The dash was totally redesigned from the round air vents to square ones with a better integration of the radio, a 4-spoke steering wheel replaced the previous 3-spoke design, more comfortable seats and rubber shifter knobs, new round-hole wheels and a slightly revised radiator grille summed up the visual changes.



Rumors of a new up market 4x4 from Suzuki proved to be true, when the 3-door hard and soft top Sidekick appeared in the United States in 1989. Built in the new joint Suzuki/GM CAMI factory in Canada, they were briefly powered by the Samurai's 1.3-liter engine, but were soon equipped with a stroked version of that engine, displacing 1590cc and producing 80 horsepower with 8 valves and throttle body fuel injection.



Also sold as the Suzuki Escudo in Asia, the Suzuki Vitara in Europe and Australia, the Suzuki Sidekick, Chevrolet, Geo, and GM Tracker in North America, and the Asuna Sunrunner in the South Pacific and Canada, the new Suzuki proved to be another very popular vehicle. A little larger than the Samurai, it made use

of independent front suspension, coil-sprung rear suspension, an available automatic transmission, and a much nicer interior. With little to no sacrifice in off-road abilities, this new truck enhanced Suzuki's reputation as a builder of serious 4-wheel-drives.

1990 brought further enhancements to the Samurai. Throttle body fuel injection led the list of changes. Horsepower was increased by only 2 ponies to 66, but improved tractability of the engine improved on and off-road





drivability. The engine's displacement dropped from 1324cc (81 cubic inches) to 1298cc (79 cubic inches). Two of the four spider gears in the front differential were removed, and new sealed transfer case and transmission bearings were installed.



In 1991, Suzuki introduced the long-wheelbase, 5-door hardtop version of the Sidekick, expanding the model lineup into even more upscale territory. To motivate its additional weight, a 95 horsepower, 16-valve multi-port fuel injected version of the 1600 was installed. With so many new factories supplementing the main plants in Japan, Canada, and Spain,

Suzuki was able to supply their vehicles to every corner of the world.

The changes for the 1993 Samurai consisted of only a change in the grille design, incorporating the Suzuki "S" in the center of the grille. The following year was the last year for Samurais in California, the only change being the removal of the rear seat due to new safety regulations.



Sadly the rest of the country and Canada lost the truck in 1995.

To make up for that loss, 1995 was the introduction for the decidedly more upscale and sporty Sidekick Sport. Available in the U.S. with an all-new 1.8-liter, 120 horsepower DOHC inline-4, the new engine begged for some unique bodywork. Wide 16-inch wheels were offset by tough-looking fender flares, a bold grille and hood, and a luxuriously restyled interior were all unavailable with the standard engine. But Europe, Asia, and Australia were given an even better version, dubbed the Vitara LWB V6. Its 2.0-liter 24-valve 4-cam V-6 was Suzuki's largest and most powerful engine yet, producing a smooth 134 hp and a broad torque curve.

1996: "Coily" Samurai

For the rest of the world, 1996 brought the biggest changes for the SJ series. The new "Coily" Samurai was most easily identified from beneath, where the all-new coil springs suspended the same live axles, which now housed 3.909 gears instead of the 3.727s. The transfer case ratios were raised from 1.409 high to 1.320 high, and 2.268 low to 2.123 low. A lot of attention was paid to making the Samurai a much more comfortable vehicle. Engine bay insulation, new transmission and body mounts, totally redesigned dashboard, steering wheel, doors, console, and front and rear seats along with additional luxury items, and of course the improved suspension, made it



a much higher-class vehicle. Upgraded brakes, power steering, engine fan, ignition coil, clutch cable, and a new exhaust system squeeze out higher performance. Fuel and radiator capacities were increased slightly and chassis strength was improved though the use of additional bracing and side-impact beams.

Outside, a tough looking hood, fenders, grille, and bumpers smooth out the looks while recalling the style of the LJ series with the twin marker and turn signal lights on each front corner, making this the best-looking SJ series yet. Not all Suzuki factories switched to the coil sprung chassis with the 1996 redesign of the Samurai and not all factories installed the same engines. Japan still used the narrow-track 1.0-liter 550cc 12-valve turbo 3-cylinder, in addition to the updated 16-valve MPFI twin cam 1300.

1996 found a 2.0-liter Mazda turbo diesel inline four introduced to the Vitara destined for the Asian and Australian markets. The following year an intercooler was added to the engine, extracting 23% more power and 29% more torque to the already powerful, tractable engine and further increasing the diesel's fuel economy. For the European markets, the Santana and others factories installed a Peugeot 1.9-liter inter-cooled turbo diesel into the Samurai and the Vitara



Late 1996 brought the introduction of an all-new type of vehicle from Suzuki: the X-90. A sporty 2-door T-top coupe bolted onto the short-wheelbase Sidekick's frame made for a very unique vehicle that sold well in some markets, particularly in island nations, but was ridiculed in others where its styling was seen as being a little too "cute." Just as capable off-road as a Sidekick but designed to emphasize the fun, sporty on-road characteristics of the chassis, the X-90 is a very underestimated little beast.

1998: Suzuki Vitara

After a preview on the worldwide auto show circuit of what was to come, Suzuki unveiled the company's largest and most powerful 4x4 yet. Available as the 4-cylinder 3 and 5-door, convertible and hardtop Vitara and Chevrolet Tracker, and as the V-6 Grand Vitara, Suzuki had a world-class vehicle.



Powered by new, more powerful engines and a luxurious interior of levels never before seen in a Suzuki, this was obviously developed as the vehicle to carry Suzuki through the millennium. The new 2.0-liter DOHC 16-valve 127 horsepower engine was based on the 1.8-liter of the Sidekick Sport, while the new 155 horsepower 2.5-liter 4-cam 24-valve V-6 was based on the previous 2.0 V-6.

The United States only gets 3 models of the new Vitara: The short-wheelbase 3-door convertible Vitara, powered by a choice of either the carryover 1.6-liter SOHC engine or the 2.0 4-cyl, the long-wheelbase 5-door hardtop Vitara, available only with the 2.0 4-cyl, or the long-wheelbase 5-door Grand Vitara with the 2.5 V-6.



Other parts of the world, however, have the additional choice of a 3-door hardtop Vitara, and even a 3-door hardtop Grand Vitara. Additionally, they are also given the choice of the 2.0 4 cylinder intercooled turbo diesel in any of the models. Some markets, in which the old boxy Vitara is sold alongside the curvy new one, use the name Vitara for the older model and Grand Vitara for the newer model, regardless of engine choice.

1998: Suzuki Jimny

Also new in 1998, but not available in the United States or Canada, was the totally reworked Jimny. It continued with the coil sprung live axles front and rear with the venerable 1300cc single overhead cam engine, and while it was intended to still be a basic, inexpensive, rugged 4x4, it was also designed with comfort and luxury never before found in the SJ series. Such available features as power windows and an automatic transmission were intended to make this the most city-friendly Jimny ever, but its live axles, ladder frame, and dual-range transfer case show that behind its cute new face is a serious truck to be reckoned with.



2000: Suzuki XL6

Suzuki's latest concept car -- the XL6 -- continues Suzuki's expansion into building larger SUV's. Based on the mechanical components of the Grand Vitara including the ladder frame, 2.5-liter V6, and 2-speed transfer case, Suzuki decided not to stray far from their success with building true 4x4's. However, the



[XL6](#) is much larger than any previous Suzuki, allowing room for three rows of seating for six or seven passengers. Obviously shod with low-profile tires and concept car guise, this could be a glimpse of the near future.



Suzuki has always been known for building "cute" little 4x4s, but their dependability both on and off road on any corner of the Earth has earned them a solid reputation.

Contrary to the path taken by many other auto manufacturers today, Suzuki has never built a 4x4 that wasn't a true truck. No unibodies, no car-based all-wheel-drive systems, no weak street-biased suspension. Every Suzuki 4x4 has always been a hard-working truck that, although small, has had the ability to go anywhere the bigger trucks can, with the added benefit of small size and weight that gives them the agility that no other trucks possess. The qualities that Suzuki 4x4s exhibit can be appreciated

anywhere in the world: Dependability, affordability, efficiency, agility, reliability, functionality, safety, attractiveness, and most importantly, fun.

It is for this reason that today Suzuki has a network of 57 production facilities in 27 different countries, providing cars and trucks to almost every country on Earth. Suzuki's vehicles have always had personality, something which cannot be said of many other vehicles, which is obviously appreciated by the owners of the 25 million cars and trucks Suzuki has sold and the near 2 million new and returning customers each year.

