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## Mahindra Says Wait and See



The Mahindra Scorpio.  
By NICK KURCZEWSKI  
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MUMBAI, India

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Pik-Up is said to get 30 m.p.g.

IF you go for a drive in this overstimulating, overwhelming city of 20 million, it is best to bring along courage, stamina and a very loud horn. Thankfully, the Mahindra Scorpio sport utility vehicle I recently took for a spin came equipped, at least, with a fine horn.

Jostling with city buses, challenging slow and rickety taxicabs for gaps in the teeming jumble of traffic, the Indian-built Scorpio kept me out of trouble.

For a tall and boxy truck, the Scorpio has surprisingly quick steering. Its high-set seats and large windows provide an excellent view of the road ahead, though good visibility is of minimal value when the foreigner at the wheel misses a road sign and nearly drives down the wrong side of a bustling waterfront avenue. A quick correction saved the day.

Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. will need similarly quick reflexes but better foresight, along with a degree of luck, to make good on its promise to enter the American auto market late this year.

Mahindra says it plans to start sending two- and four-door versions of a truck — here, it is called simply the Pik-Up — to the United States by year-end. Its distribution partner is Global Vehicles U.S.A., an Atlanta-based importer. The second act is to come next year with imports of a version of the Scorpio that I tested, modified for American tastes and

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standards.

Though unfamiliar to many Americans, Mahindra has a history that predates India's independence from Britain. The company was set up in 1945 as Mahindra & Mohammed to assemble Willys Jeeps for American servicemen stationed in Asia. Over the years it expanded into construction, finance and production of trucks and tractors, among other things. But it did not move into the passenger car business until 1995, when it teamed up with Ford to build the Fiesta compact car in India.

Mahindra builds the low-price Dacia Logan sedan in cooperation with Renault-Nissan, and recently introduced the eight-passenger Xylo utility wagon.

The company's core activities, however, remain focused on tractors, trucks and large S.U.V.'s. In the United States, Mahindra's presence has been limited to building and selling tractors and farm equipment. The company also sponsors a [Nascar](#) team and a championship bull-riding series. Nonetheless, Mahindra could find cracking the hypercompetitive American market for light trucks — especially during a [global recession](#) — far harder than hawking tractors or sponsoring all-American sporting events.

John Perez, chief executive of Global Vehicles, says he thinks there is room for an affordable, utilitarian Indian pickup in a market swarming with outsize gadget-laden trucks from Detroit — not to mention those from Toyota, Nissan and others.

Mahindra's American strategy is to offer high value and good mileage from efficient diesel engines.

One thing missing is a name. The company has yet to decide what to call its trucks in the United States — a name previously proposed, the Appalachia, was dropped. Now Global Vehicles says pickups sold in America will wear alphanumeric badges.

Global Vehicles said last week that it had signed up 336 dealers across the United States.

Mahindra could also benefit from the woes of [Chrysler](#) and General Motors, as the two companies cut costs and abandon dealerships. Together, the two bankrupt Detroit automakers have eliminated more than 3,200 dealers this year.

"Ford, G.M. and Dodge have had a lot of years to build this kind of truck, and they haven't done it," Casey McGraw, vice president for sales at Global Vehicles, said of the diesel-powered pickup. "And we know that the price point has to make up for lack of name recognition."

For people willing to take a look, the Mahindra should stand out, with quirky looks, a tough-truck résumé and what Global Vehicles promises will be the best mileage of any pickup sold in America.

Bigger than the compact [Ford Ranger](#) but smaller than the midsize [Dodge Dakota](#), the trucks' cargo and towing capacity will beat the existing models in either category, the company says.

With a 2.2-liter 4-cylinder turbodiesel — rated at 140 horsepower and 236 pound-feet of torque — the pickup will be capable of more than 30 m.p.g. on the highway, Global Vehicles says. The truck will offer a 6-speed automatic transmission and standard safety features including antilock brakes and electronic stability control. Options are to include leather seats and a navigation system. Pricing isn't set, but the company says a well-equipped model is likely to be in the mid-\$20,000 range.

Most dealers will sell Mahindra as a sideline to more established brands. Dealers pay \$195,000 for a franchise, which includes technical training for a mechanic, and are required to set aside 900 square feet of floor space including a "heritage wall" with highlights of Mahindra's history.

"We're not asking dealers to build \$3 million facilities," Mr. McGraw said. "It's more like, 'Put up a sign, and let's go sell some trucks.'"

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