

164-PAGE CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

DOUBLE ISSUE

AUTOCAR

FIRST FOR NEWS AND REVIEWS EVERY WEEK

autocar.co.uk

12/19 December 2018

2018'S BIGGEST VERDICT

3 SERIES DRIVEN

'An outstanding driving experience'



+ ALL THE LATEST NEWS AND REVIEWS

New Macan rated



● New Skoda Scala - first pics
● Used Saabs: you won't regret it

BEST OF 2018

Your ultimate Xmas
survival companion

PLUS Ruppert's
12 cars of Xmas

- Jimny vs Xmas tree
- 2018's best cars
- We bring back the Capri (as an SUV...)
- Lambo's tractor
- RNLI 'road' test

haymarket

Established 1895





LUMBER HACK

In 2017, we delivered the office Christmas tree from Scotland to London atop an Aston Martin. Can the new humble little Suzuki Jimny manage the same feat this year? **Richard Webber** finds out

PHOTOGRAPHY LUC LACEY



The acutely brief brief from editor Tissah arrived in August. “Christmas tree road trip, v2.0. Different car, different tree, different route. Will leave you to sort.”

Last year’s festive foliage was delivered from a hillside in Argyll to the Autocar office in Twickenham atop Aston Martin’s athletic bruiser of a GT, the DB11 V12, which devoured its task as does a local council woodchipper on the 13th day of Christmas. Choosing a different route would be easy, and a different tree was a given because 2017’s might well have become the paper you’re holding.

But what could trump the Aston? This time, off-road skills would be

helpful so we could source our tree from a wilder spot, and 2018 had delivered some fascinating new high-riding, all-paw contenders: Urus, Cullinan, new G63 and I-Pace, to name a few. Ultimately, the choice was simple, and it didn’t hail from Sant’Agata, Goodwood, Affalterbach or Whitley, but from Kosai, Shizuoka Prefecture, which has produced a budget car to draw more affection than any of those pricey and aspirational machines. Yes, our hero’s name is Jimny.

The fourth generation of Suzuki’s Min Pin of a 4x4 has united motoring journoes in lustfulness more than would the prospect of a complimentary branded fleece. It’s a genuine performer on the rough

stuff and brings enough visual charm and value for money for most to overlook its inevitable on-road compromises. But how would it fare over more than 500 miles of mud, rock and Tarmac – and with its own length in Christmas tree strapped to its roof?

Cometh the hour, cometh the man named Ian. Owner of Highland All Terrain (see 4x4toursscotland.com), Ian Brown could not be better suited to kick-start our mission – he’s a former tree surgeon who now provides off-road training and tours across Scotland. Brown has offered to lead us into the wilds from his base at Kinloch Laggan in Cairngorms



This is the one: Ian Brown prepares the payload

National Park in search of a seasonal shrub to carry south.

We follow his Land Rover Defender 110 off the blacktop and onto a potholed, gravelly track – our pairing a quadrate goose and gosling shuffling along between towering, ancient evergreens, mossy banks and bright orange pine straw. The greenery thins to reveal Loch Laggan and the snow-dusted Munros that

FIR FROM HOME

Our off-roading took place near Kinloch Laggan, Inverness-shire, then we drove south to Edinburgh for an overnight stop. The scenic A68 took us across the border at Carter Bar and on to Newcastle to visit its Christmas markets. Our second night was spent near York, before visiting the city itself and making the final motorway dash to south-west London.



Loading cargo atop the 1725mm-tall Suzuki Jimny is easy for a pair of six-footers

40 litres

Jimmy's fuel tank capacity, which is less than half that of the Defender 110's. Trip computer predicted 238 miles from a full tank.

surround it, and we engage four-wheel drive for the first time to recce a little beach by the loch.

So far, the 1.5-litre petrol four's 100bhp and 95lb ft have been channelled rearwards, but shifting the overtly mechanical transfer lever from '2H' to '4H' engages drive to the front axle, then the 'All Grip Pro' system's electronics lock the front air hubs to get those otherwise free-spinning wheels milling too.

We slide about a bit on sodden patches of loam, but the 50:50 front-rear torque split and LSD-mimicking brake trickery make light work of it – there's almost more of a challenge in keeping the Jimny's tiny 1405mm track abreast of the trail's raised centre.

Ascending into the hills, we pass a herd of deer blending subtly into the autumn-washed drumlins of the wide, glaciated valley. Our Jimny's shocking Kinetic Yellow paintwork couldn't stand out more, yet it feels entirely at home here, happy to be driven in wellies and to get mucky inside and out. We fringe a pair of windswept lochans, engaging low range with a standstill shuffle of the transfer lever, thereby doubling the gearing to tackle a quick-fire progression of pebbles, sand and water.

Frozen pools smother the trail, and we send shards of ice into the verge

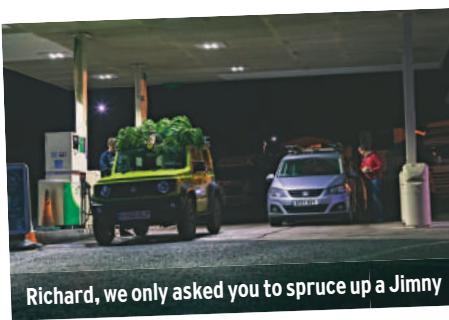
like smashed glass. The potholes are relentless now and the Jimny pitches about at all angles, its live axles and diminutive 2250mm wheelbase conspiring to amplify every rut and rock. Hill descent control (limited to 3mph in low range) then ushers us down a steep slope, the brakes gnawing at each corner to keep progress steady.

Then it's through an exposed riverbed of big, slippery rocks. I wait for the underbody thud as we tackle the boulders, but it never comes. The Jimny's 210mm of ground clearance is enough and its tight turning circle and slow steering allow an accurate course to be plotted, while that short wheelbase brings a greater breakover angle than on Brown's Defender. Likewise, while the 110's tail is in danger of striking masonry climbing the far bank, the Suzuki's minute rear overhang clips past with ease. It gets thrown around like a rag doll as we scale the exit point, but a big dose of revs lets the brakes work their torque-routing magic and we grapple up and out first time. What a little trooper.

The Jimny's off-road skills confirmed, we loop around to Laggan Wolftrax, a mountain-biker's paradise managed by Forestry Commission Scotland, to source our special payload. Last year's Norway spruce shed its needles within moments of landing in Twickenham – whether from homesickness or a 759-mile rooftop battering, we're unsure – so this time we've chosen something less traditional but →



Our off-road specialist cleared every hurdle the Scottish Highlands threw at it



Richard, we only asked you to spruce up a Jimny

RULES OF THE LOAD

The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 specify that sufficiently restrained loads that project up to two metres at either end of your vehicle require no special arrangements beyond being clearly visible. So – in theory at least – which cars can carry what loads under these rules?

- Smart Fortwo (2695mm long), Ikea Söderhamn four-seater sofa
- Morgan Plus 4 (4010mm long), 13-year-old *Fraxinus excelsior* (European ash tree)
- Nissan Qashqai (4394mm long), world's longest beetroot (7956mm long)
- Rolls-Royce Cullinan (5341mm long), 9K52 Luna-M Soviet tactical ballistic missile

Note: Racing boats propelled by oars and certain other vehicles have slightly different requirements.

more robust in the form of a sturdy Lawson cypress.

Given the Jimny's reputation for punching above its weight, we're also going for a taller tree – something big enough to dust the chandeliers in Tissshaw's office – and

Brown has picked out a 3.5-metre candidate that looks perfect, right down to the aero-friendly kink in its trunk. A flash of chainsaw and the deed is done. Roof bars have been fitted but the protective vinyl we ordered didn't show, so instead we put down a layer of foam, mount the tree and lash up the ratchet straps that served so well on the DB11.

Cargo secured, we pick our way down a rocky mountain bike trail, say a grateful farewell to Brown (the most obliging off-roading ex-arborist one could wish for) and in the 4pm darkness point both tree and Jimny south towards an overnight stop in Edinburgh. As we get up to speed, there's the sound of a distant flat tyre, but it's just the foam layer flapping against the roof. Photographer Luc Lacey reaches outside with some duct tape and the problem's solved.

We bound along at a decent lick, the little four-banger's sweet spot between 3500rpm and the 6300rpm redline belying the Jimny's lacklustre 11.9sec 0-60mph metric, and our car's long but tidy gearshift operating with more slickness than the example road tested last month.

The steering's relaxed responses become more apparent with speed, but on this dark, dry, still evening, the tree-topped Suzuki cuts through the Highlands and down the motorway with sufficient pep and comfort, the steady patter of fronds on metal and glass the sole reminder of our perennial passenger.

Day two brings warnings of gales in the west, so instead we make for Newcastle via the A68. But up on Soutra Hill, the furiously whirling wind turbines show it's just as blustery here, and the tree is squirming dementedly like a wounded alien, the rear-view mirror filled with flashes of green limbs. The Jimny's top clip is 90mph, but with

gravity, wind and branch-induced drag against us, we struggle to hit 45mph on the ascent.

We cross the border at an equally tempestuous Carter Bar, then give the national speed limit a scare while slipstreaming a Honda Jazz that's veritably cleaving through the air ahead of us. We reach Newcastle as darkness – and the rain – begins to fall. Some hardy revellers brave the squall among the Christmas market beneath towering Grey's Monument, but this is an evening for warm pubs, not open-air stalls, so we soon cross the Tyne Bridge and push on southward.

The now-torrential rain seeps through the foam, which shakes →

It's quite tight in here, so beware of pines and needles



62mph

Maximum speed for switching into four-wheel drive. It's not for normal road use, though, as there's no centre differential.





← free of the tape – never to be refastened – and the tree itself is heavy with water, so we endure a torrid 80 minutes plodding along the dual-carriageway with a din from above and steering into violent crosswinds. Our stop-off in Easingwold, North Yorkshire, can't come soon enough.

An inevitably flawed but nonetheless published survey named York as the UK's most festive city last year, so we can't forego a visit the following day. As we saunter through its centre, nimbly slicing up ancient lanes, drivers and Christmas shoppers can't help but smile at the big tree on the small car, while children pull on parents'

arms and point. But when we stop – as throughout our journey – all questions concern the car, not the cargo. When's it out? (January.) What's it cost? (From £15,499.) How big's the boot? (Tiny, until you fold the rear seats.) Can adults fit in the back? (Yes, if they're small ones.) Is it good off road? (Yes.)

One man says he'd been keeping his Ford Transit until the new Defender appears, but reckons he might retain the van for longer trips and load-lugging but buy a Jimny for everything else. Makes sense to me.

It's time to dash for the finish, but the gales aren't abating, so we dive into Fields Garden Centre at Sherburn-in-Elmet where they kindly

truss our tree for improved aero and stability, and we ditch the foam layer. Thus optimised, and with the treetop now wagging behind us like an excited puppy's tail, we press for home.

We maintain a steady 65mph over the final 200 miles, but still have crosswinds and HGV turbulence to contend with, so come 8pm we're glad to see the bright lights of Twickenham. Moments later, our tree is tickling the office rafters, a piece of the Highlands bringing Christmas cheer to TW1.

We had been unlucky with the weather and the challenges that brought – I'll admit to thoughts of



No one warned him about HQ's revolving door

re-engineering our Lawson cypress so it would fit in the boot, but a pile of kindling wouldn't have been so well received at HQ. The Jimny isn't designed for such long slogs, but it came through nonetheless, from glaciated glen to city suburb with half a thousand miles between. Would I volunteer to drive it back? Yes – but only if I could keep it. □



Newcastle Christmas market: 'Would you like fries with your reindeer, Madam?'



Nothing says Christmas like a conifer dressed in electric-blue ratchet-strap tinsel