30 years of Vauxhall's Frontera

Published: June 7, 2021

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Online version: https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/30-years-of-vauxhalls-frontera/



Frontera Estate CDX 2.2 DTi.

Frontera still knows no boundaries 30 years on – by Dave Moss.

(Images from Vauxhall Heritage).

During the 1980s the so-called "world car" concept began to take hold. Vehicles were increasingly becoming truly international products, as technology, joint ventures and improving component supply allowed design, development, and manufacture in different

places. This approach facilitated sales under familiar marque names in different territories, with mechanical and trim specifications closely tailored to specific markets, allowing manufacturers, amongst other things, to optimise build volumes, reduce manufacturing costs, and extend product lifetimes.

Among the standout successes and failures in this ever unfolding story of world car projects one particular curate's egg celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2021. British motorists might remember it as the Vauxhall Frontera – Spanish for "border", but it was a vehicle with an interestingly complex background. Transcending numerous international boundaries, it was an early standard setter in making optimal use of General Motors' then sprawling world-wide stand-alone and joint venture design, manufacture, assembly and sales operations.

The story of what Europe came to recognise as the Frontera actually began in Japan in 1988, with the launch of the Isuzu "Faster" TF pick-up truck, which was never manufactured in Europe. However, Japanese-built versions appeared in Britain as Bedford and Vauxhall Brava pick-ups, becoming familiar in the 1990s as AA patrol vehicles.

The Faster TF formed the mechanical basis for the 1989 three-door passenger-carrying short wheelbase Isuzu MU, and its five-door relation, the MU Wizard, with both soon being exported from Japan, or assembled elsewhere. Powertrains were specified to appeal in the appropriate market, for Isuzu and GM could – and did – call on a bewilderingly wide collection of petrol engines for the MU range – almost as many as even BMC could muster in its heyday. They ranged from a modest 2.0 litre 4 cylinder to several different V6s, topped out by a 3.5 Litre 250 horsepower Gasoline Direct Injection example towards the end of Japanese production in 2004.

Different marque and model names were employed worldwide to market the MU. Basically similar LWB versions were badged Isuzu Frontier in South Africa, and Chevrolet Rodeo for some south American markets. Egyptian customers were sold the locally assembled Chevrolet Frontera, while Thailand assembled the Cameo, later renamed the Vega. A joint venture Subaru-Isuzu Automotive plant in Indiana built vehicles for the US market, where

the five-door was badged Rodeo, while the three-door was initially the Amigo, and later the Rodeo Sport. Simultaneously, Japanese-built examples were also sold in the US – as the Honda Passport…

European MU variants were made in what was originally the GM-owned Bedford commercial vehicles factory in Luton, which from 1986 was operated as a joint venture with Isuzu – then 33% owned by GM – and renamed IBC, the Isuzu Bedford Company. Its first product was the Midi commercial, a Bedford CF replacement based on the Isuzu Fargo panel van, followed in 1987 by the Suzuki Carry microvan and its close clone – the Bedford Rascal.

The Opel, Vauxhall, and Australasian market Holden Frontera entered production at Luton early in 1991. All variants were based on the MU, sharing the earlier pick-up's workhorse-style ladder-frame chassis – and much else forward of the front doors – all heavily disguised by appealingly stylish, chunky bodywork. They also inherited the pick-up's dual-range transfer gearbox and selectable four wheel drive, providing off-road ability somewhat restricted by limited ground clearance, while comfort was compromised by the distinctly firm ride quality delivered by rear leaf spring suspension.

The Frontera first appeared in Europe as an Opel, billed as an "all-wheel drive recreational vehicle", at the 1991 Geneva show, competing against products from Suzuki, Mitsubishi, Daihatsu and Nissan. At UK launch that Autumn, SWB Vauxhall Fronteras were listed at £12,288, coming only with an ageing 2.0 113 hp petrol engine familiar in the Vauxhall Cavalier, while a 5-door LWB example with Opel-sourced 2.4 litre 123 hp petrol unit cost £16,345.

With Europe still pioneering passenger car diesel engines in 1991, petrol engines heavily outnumbered smooth-running smaller oil-burners in GM's engine line-up, creating a dilemma which took seven years to resolve. The launch stop-gap was a dated 2.3 litre 99 hp turbo-diesel then found in Vauxhall Carlton models, offered only in 5-door Fronteras, listed from £17,390. From 1995 an Isuzu-sourced 111 hp 2.8 litre diesel replaced it, spreading to

all versions around the time handling, comfort and general refinement were notably improved as European Fronteras gained rear coil spring suspension.



Frontera estate 2.2 DTi.

Just months later, it was replaced by a 113 hp VM Motori 2.5 litre turbo-diesel – as also employed by makers ranging from Rover to Chrysler. That lasted only until a modern 2.2 litre 115 hp DTi turbo diesel finally arrived in October 1998, along with a 134 hp petrol alternative. Both were 16 valve designs used in other Vauxhall/Opel models. Their arrival coincided with the range's only major facelift, which brought much enhanced safety specifications, a lengthy list of improvements – and the European Frontera's only real surprise, in the somewhat unlikely shape of an Isuzu-sourced, 3.2 litre V6, twin cam, 24 valve, 202 horsepower petrol engine, first seen in US-built examples in 1996, and offered across the European range until UK production ceased.

The Frontera became one of several vehicles driving the gradual transition from traditional, workhorse-style, dual-purpose off-roaders towards modern-day SUVs. The launch archive reveals early examples weren't especially refined, spacious, comfortable or quick, but they offered an agreeable range of attractions and talents, and Europe proved a receptive market. Sales gradually faded as the 1990s progressed, with growing competition led by the Nissan Terrano and Ford Maverick fragmenting sales. Ten years on from launch the modern SUV market was emerging, and time finally expired for the European Frontera with the building of example number 329,468 at Luton on December 23rd 2003, which entered the history books as the last Vauxhall passenger car to emerge from what, today, is a Stellantis commercial vehicle factory. It was destined for Vauxhall's heritage collection, from which it was recently consigned for sale at auction, where the hammer fell at £6,862.


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THE FINAL FRONTERA

Frontera's era came to an end last month when no 329,468 rolled off the line at Luton – 11 years after the plant began producing the model for Vauxhall, Opel and Holden.

And workers in General Assembly were there to ensure the last Frontera received a suitable send-off. Pictured inside the car are John Kirwan, unit manager for Frontera General Assembly, and Kamlesh Gandhi, who has worked in GA for 26 years and was the longest-serving employee at the photocall.

Plant Director, Peter Thom praised the teamwork.

References

The official Vauxhall 30 years of Frontera Press release.

The official Opel 30 years of Frontera Press release.

Wikipedia entries for the Isuzu MU series and IBC vehicles are here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isuzu_MU

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IBC_Vehicles

A brief history of the Isuzu TF pickup is here:

cars directory isuzu

Much information about the Vauxhall/Bedford Brava and the Frontera range is here:

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Launch press kit, interviews and driving impressions were also consulted.