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Best of both worlds

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ON a clear and windy morning, standing at the top of the ridge of Mazlan Harun's farm, Tanamera, members of the media enjoyed the vista of oil palm green hills rolling into the horizon, towards the Straits of Malacca.

Immediately in the foreground, parked on the dry lawn, were five shining new Kembara, the first major car to be launched in Malaysia since the start of the Asian crisis in May last year.

Bernard Chin, an ex-rally driver and navigator, and now an agency owner, had been contracted to design and operate the test track on the occasion of the soft launch for the Press on August 20.

"It's steep downhill just 100 metres from the start line, and the rain has softened up the muddy stretch after the river. It's very slippery and tricky. Take care," he cautioned the reporters who were waiting for their turn to drive the cars.

Chin had vivid images of cars being driven too fast on the slippery track, and cars flipping three metres down into the muddy river because of steering over correction.

But if that was his problem, there were others who had their own worries.

For the past 12 weeks, there had been reports in the Malaysian media about the new lifestyle car to be launched by Perusahaan Otomobil Kedua (Perodua). Photos of the Daihatsu Terios, which is the platform of the Kembara in a Malaysian setting were published much to the chagrin of Perodua managing director Datuk Rahman Omar.

For Rahman, it was quite a predicament. He is very open with the media, yet he had to preserve the newsworthiness vital to the success of the official launch of the Kembara on August 24 by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Gamely hanging on to his faith in the media, Datuk Rahman carried on with the pre-launch for the media. But this time, there were three written notices about the embargo and several verbal reminders by assistant manager (public affairs) Norafidah Mohamed Akhbar Khan.

There were more than 60 journalists waiting for their turn round the 1.7km laterite test track which featured a 30/15m descent, a fast action along the river, then a 70 metre boggy stretch.

Another worry for the brass was the evaluation of the motoring Press. Would they evaluate the car on the benchmark of a macho 4x4, or would they, more fairly, rank it with other light duty 4x4s?

To rate the Kembara against an off-road, industrial duty 4x4 machine like a Toyota Land Cruiser II, or even the Suzuki Jimny - just because all share the 4x4 drive system - is quite unrealistic. If one wanted to compare a Daihatsu 4x4 against other industrial duty 4x4s, one should use the Daihatsu Rocky for the comparison.

Thus, one has to look at the Kembara as a class by itself and not define it as a 4x4 purely because it has a 4x4 drive system. The most important difference is that the Kembara makes no pretensions about being an industrial duty off-roader.

It must be judged on its own merits as a zippy run-about town, but with some degree of off-road capability. The Kembara is a lifestyle car, for young people and young families. It has no low range gearbox, so forget about it being a truck which can also double as a workhorse in a timber camp or a hydro project.

But it has a full time 4x4, and this means safety. Safety because a full time 4x4 gives maximum grip and superior road holding. This full-time 4x4 is a good system to counter the higher centre of gravity of all 4x4 trucks, vans and MPVs. Since the Range Rover was introduced in 1970 with full-time 4x4, the other manufacturers have equipped their top models like the Toyota Series 80 VX, or the Nissan Regulus (Infinity QX4) with 4x4 drive systems.

With the higher seating position, it is a friendlier car to drive because one can look over other cars, and anticipate better, because one can see further ahead. What should be said, pending a more in-depth review of the car after the official launch, is what the car can do, and what the fuel consumption is.

It is a 4x4 and, even without a low box, that means it can go to far more places than a normal car.

It has a higher clearance than a car, that means again that it can go to far more places than a car can. It has four doors, and for the price or RM52,000, you can have it with automatic transmission. I think this is the best bargain in town - if one has a need for a car that can go almost anywhere except a 4x4 competition type event.

The Kembara is a fun machine to have in town, where we spend 90 per cent of our driving. It is great with the automatic, great because KL and Klang valley roads are a war zone of potholes, washouts, road diversions and badly-lit road works. You need a tall nippy car, with 4x4, and an automatic. The fuel economy is also important, but more on that later after our test drive.

But here is the interesting part - there are many adventure trails in Malaysia which can only be reached in a car with 4x4, and high ground clearance. These are the same tracks which the anglers used to try with their Peugeots, Alfasuds and such type cars before buying the Isuzu Trooper, the first Japanese 4x4 to make an impact in Malaysia.

Prices range from RM45,898 for the manual model without power window and central locking, to RM52,276 for the automatic version with all the options.

The down side is space, or lack of it. It is not uncommon to see four girls and a guy go on camping trips in a two-door Suzuki Jimny. I wonder how the Kembara will handle this?

Perodua will also have to make that extra special effort to teach drivers/owner how not to use the centre differential lock. At the pre-launch, one could see several journalists driving the machine with the centre differential lockout engaged for the whole duration of the drive.

Fortunately, the test track was on loose surface and this allowed the front and rear axles to slip out the locked differential via the individual tyres. But if a full-time 4x4 machine is driven with the diff lock engaged all the time (for more than 100km anyway) on a tarmac surface, you can expect differential wind-up leading over a number of months to differential damage, high tyre wear, and least worrisome of all, high fuel consumption.

This is a full-time 4x4 system and there is an additional gearbox connecting the front and rear axles, allowing the front and rear tyres to move at different speeds encountered when braking or accelerating. There is also a device to lock out this differential movement between front and rear axles if, for instance, the vehicle's back axle is stuck, rear tyres spinning furiously in the mud, while the front has got grip but all the power is being fed to the madly spinning wheels at the rear.

With the differential gear locked out, the front and the rear axles will be directly connected again and move at the same speed, thereby doubling the chance of getting unstuck. This differential lock-out mechanism should

only be used when the vehicle is in such a slippery condition that wheels are spinning or losing traction. After negotiating such a section, the differential lock should be disengaged again.

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