

Since 1964, Western Australia-based company Arkana has been building specialised stretched all-wheel-drive vehicles, based on Japanese models. On a recent trip to the West, **PETER THOEMING** got the inside story on a company which has gone from supplying mining companies, into the domestic tourism market, and which is now looking for export markets.

One of the new six-wheel-drive 14 seaters ready for the tour-operator market.



STRETCHING THE POINT

ALUMINIUM ROOF RACKS

SUPER STRONG 4FT, 6FT, 8FT

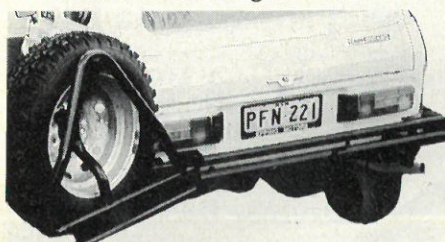
- Fully polished
- Sturdy mesh floor
- Optional wind deflector
- Heavy duty legs

Now available to suit: Toyota, Nissan, Mitsubishi, G.M.H., Suzuki, Lada Niva.

ALSO MADE TO ORDER

REAR WHEEL CARRIERS

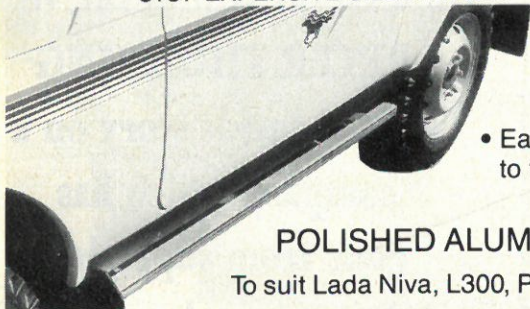
- Rear bumper replacement available
- Durable and tough — Quick release lock



60 series
Landcruiser
Lada Niva
MQ Patrol
L300

SILL PROTECTORS

STOP EXPENSIVE SILL DAMAGE



- Easy to fit

POLISHED ALUMINIUM

To suit Lada Niva, L300, Pajero



HEADERS

POWER + ECONOMY

- Easy to fit — up to 30% power gains.

Toyota, Nissan, Mitsubishi, GMH, Suzuki, Lada Niva.

**NEW
RELEASE**

- ROOF RACK WINDFLECTOR KITS \$65.
- DUAL BATTERY CARRIERS SUIT GQ PATROL & MAVERICK \$98.

PHONE OR MAIL ORDERS ACCEPTED
WE FREIGHT ANYWHERE

JUST
PHONE

(02) 833 2333

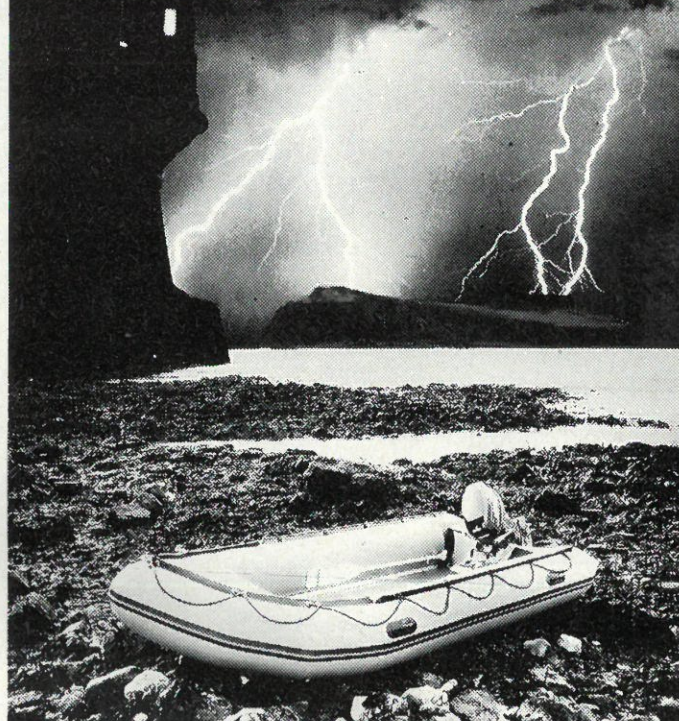
CALL IN OR
WRITE TO

11 FORTHORN PL.
ST. MARYS NSW 2760

FORMULA OFFROAD

B/CARD • VISA • M/CARD ACCEPTED

NO-ONE STEALS OUR THUNDER



The conditions some inflatables are expected to put up with... no wonder more and more people trust Avon. And no wonder they are the only inflatables to meet the stringent requirements of the British Standard MA16, not to mention the strict technical standards of many other countries.

Avon inflatables are used by naval and rescue services around the world. With high performance designs to give you safety and stability in the most adverse conditions, you really can trust your Avon come hell or high water.

The unique Hypalon* fabric is virtually unaffected by the elements, oil, petrol, and the abrasive rigours of hard use. Combine special bonding of proven fabrics with outstanding craft designs, built to the highest industry standards, and it's no wonder an Avon takes some beating. We wouldn't include a 10 year fabric guarantee certificate if it didn't!

*Hypalon is Du Pont Registered Trade Mark

Now Proudly
Distributed
in Australia
by

**RFD
SAFETY MARINE**

I'd like details on the full range of Avon inflatables.
Please send free colour brochure

Name _____

Address _____

AVON

UNBEATABLE INFLATABLES

Send to your nearest RFD office or contact them for the name of your local Avon inflatables agent. RFD SAFETY MARINE (VIC) 306-308 Chesterville Rd. Moorabbin. Ph. (03) 555 5211. (NSW) 1/7 Kent Rd. Mascot. (02) 667 0208/0209. (Qld) 1/36 Randall St. Slacks Creek. (07) 808 1988.

STRETCHING THE POINT



Colin Duffy makes a point about improved door design (left). Subcontractors (below) at work on a dual cab ute.



COLIN Duffy knows all about soil and grass roots. He spent a long time as a farmer before buying into Bill Bergsma's Arkana — the company that's synonymous with stretched all-wheel-drive vehicles in Australia. After five years in the motor body building industry he knew quite a lot about that, too, so when he bought Bergsma out he was well prepared to take over the firm.

Listening to the grass roots has been one of the habits that have enabled him to make Arkana work. He has listened to the customers, which in the past has mostly meant the mining companies, and then he's produced what they wanted; and he's produced it fast. The six-wheel-drive bus he is about to put into production, for instance, took all of six months to develop. A major car company takes at least three years.

"When customers want a product," he says, "they want it *now*." But more of the new bus a little later.

Duffy has other habits that have helped, such as the habit of organising his workforce to best advantage. He employs 25 highly skilled tradesmen, not a large number when you consider the volume Arkana produces, but none of them is on the payroll. All work as subcontractors.

"It encourages them to work hard," says Duffy. "They can work until midnight if they want to, in fact it's not unusual for us to keep going all night."

Duffy's workers are paid according to their productivity, which is the best incentive of all, he says. This system also adds to the flexibility of the factory — there are no shiftwork hassles or time-off problems. When a job has to be done by a specific time, the required tradesmen can simply be asked to do it. You get the impression that they rarely refuse.

This doesn't mean that Arkana simply punches out as much product as possible. Duffy is not keen to grow too much.

"Let's not get too big; let's concentrate on doing it right," he says.

"Big assembly lines are not our aim, although it's nice to have a line. But you can't gear up too much if you're at the mercy of the primary manufacturer."

Considering his obvious problem of having to buy the basic vehicle from Toyota, Nissan or whoever, I asked Duffy would he consider becoming a

STRETCHING THE POINT

primary manufacturer himself and making vehicles from scratch?

"Maybe," he muses, "but we're too expensive. That's why we're going for exclusivity."

Duffy believes in keeping Australian production in Australia, and even goes so far as to source every possible bit of material in Western Australia. The seats, for instance, come from Matrim Seating in WA.

There's no shortage of international vision, though. Arkana gets a lot of enquiries from overseas, especially from Asia, for the cab chassis and dual cabs. One such expression of interest still rankles Duffy, although it's quite some time back — "We first built the Arkana Van in 1968," he says resignedly, "and the Japanese copied it to make the Troopie."

Arkana has still done all right out of that original design; they've built more than 2000 of them at time of writing, practically all for the mining industry. Mining companies are the real grass roots of the business; in fact it was kicked off in the 1960s by an enquiry from Mt Newman Mining for a vehicle that could carry extra crew and tools.

"Mining companies are excellent customers," according to Duffy. "They order in bulk — Mt Newman buy 25 at a time — and they trust us because we've always given them a good product at a good price."

"Their work goes on the production line, and a dual cab conversion with tax costs only \$8400. Then the vehicles retain their resale value. We're now getting work from miners in the eastern States as well," he said.

A new six-wheel-drive 'in the raw' (right) in Arkana's Balcatta factory. An early dual cab (below).



TROUBLE UP NORTH

THE tourism business is a bit more difficult.

"Early tour company vehicles were overloaded and misused," says Duffy, "so we have redesigned them to produce the new 14-seater. We expect that to replace all the old 13-seaters eventually, and we've already built 40 of them in the last year."

The 14-seaters have wider axles and GVM is up from 3.035 tonnes to 4.36 tonnes.

But the tourist bus troubles don't end at overloading, especially in Queensland. Theoretically a market with excellent potential for Arkana, Queensland posed some peculiar difficulties.

"We had a letter welcoming our vehicles, from the Queensland Department of Transport," Duffy said.

"Then, when we had four vehicles there, they wouldn't let them in. Meanwhile a Queensland firm was

copying our design. We gave them a decent vehicle, but they made it hard."

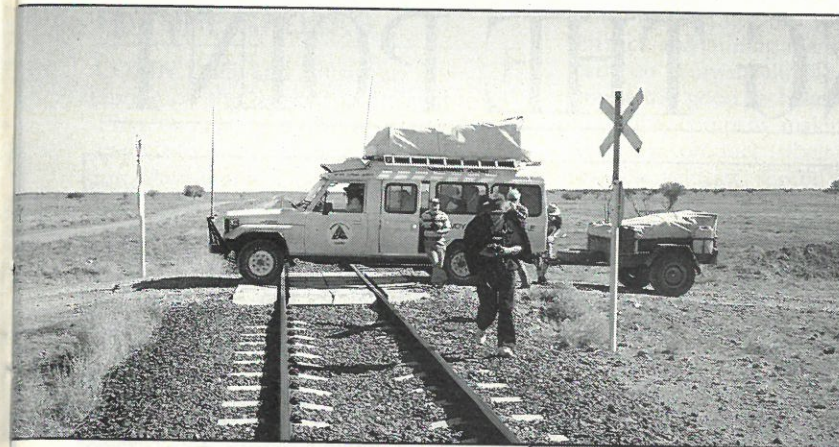
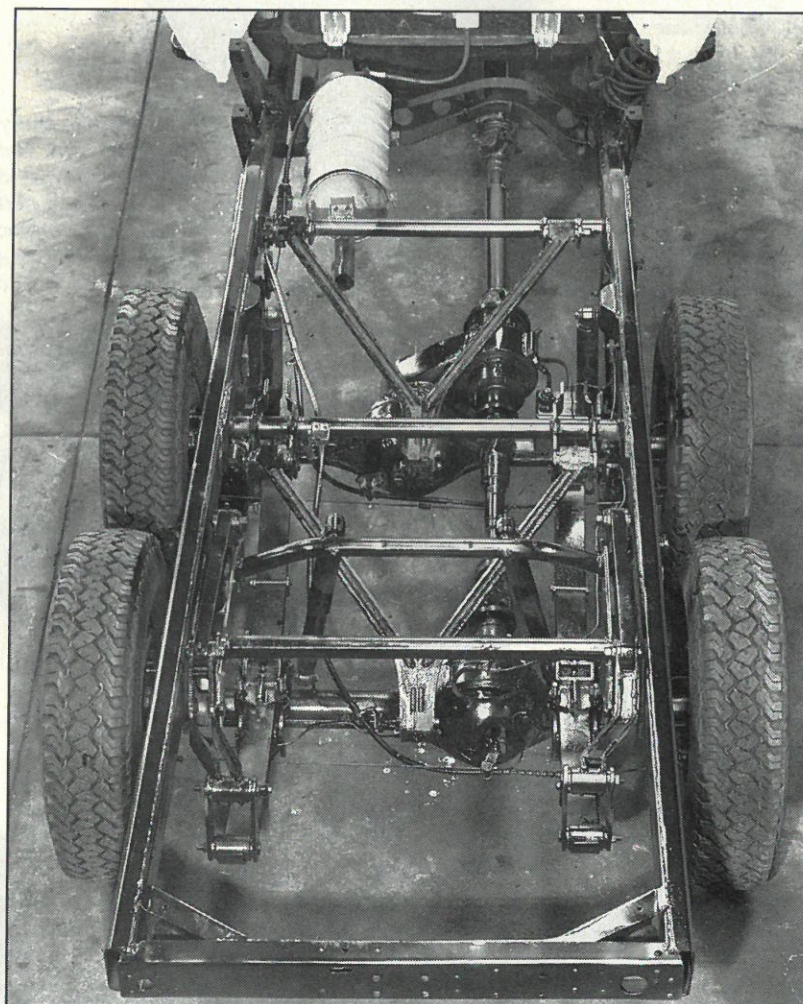
Duffy insists that Australian-made vehicles haven't been getting a fair shake during testing.

"The Arkana four-wheel-drive bus was tested to limousine standards in Queensland," he says, "and if you did that to imported buses they'd never pass."

But things are improving.

"The bureaucrats are beginning to realise that we give them a good product, and they're accepting it more readily," he said.

Arkana started out back in 1964, building dual cabs on HJ45s. Most of its subsequent work has been on Toyotas, partly because that's what the market wanted and partly because they're easy to work on. Toyotas have removable body panels while Nissans need to "have surgery". But Arkana will build anything the client wants by way of a Toyota or a Nissan — within reason.



"Yes, we will build one-offs," says Duffy, "but we won't do two-offs. If we make more than one you need compliance plates. Even just putting in skylights requires a special plate. And just the brake testing alone, for ADRs, costs \$9000. We need a production run of at least ten to make all this worthwhile."

Compliance testing is clearly a major pain.

"All it takes is for the manufacturer to change the specs, and new testing is required!"

When he took over Arkana, Duffy put more style into the body designs and you can see his input in the very classy lines of the 14-seater bus.

Regular production these days includes two-tonner dual cabs, with or without extended chassis; extra cabs in 4WD and

Arkana vehicles have been popular with tour operators (top and right) since their introduction. The WA Police are also aware of the advantages of the conversions (below).



STRETCHING THE POINT

6WD; and the 14-seater buses both in 4WD and 6WD.

Duffy has great hopes for 6WD vehicles with the defence forces; he claims they're better than Land Rovers. The 6WDs start out as cab chassis, but are all new from the back of the cab on. The front is heavily plated along the side of the chassis, and the vehicles use the load share suspension designed in Geelong by Frank Parsons. The rear diffs are locked in by a power divider, giving permanent four-wheel drive, and the normal transfer lever is used to throw in the front wheels as well. GVM is up by 2.8 tonnes to 5.8 tonnes.

"We'd like to build more of the 6WDs," says Duffy, "because they make a really upmarket tourist vehicle."

"Two of them have done close to 80,000 kilometres by now and they're going well."

Complete price of the tourist-standard 6WD is \$95,000, but it can be optioned up to about \$120,000. Arkana has built 13 of them in the last few months.

The original Arkana van which, according to Colin Duffy, was copied to make the Toyota Troop Carrier.



FUTURE SHOCKS

COLIN Duffy and Arkana are not resting on the laurels accumulated since 1964. A new, larger 6WD intended as a specialised tourist vehicle is about to go into production, based on the Hino Fleeter and using a similar drive/suspension setup to the current 6WDs. The difference is that the new vehicle offers 26 seats in eight rows of three (plus two in the cab) and a 350 litre fuel tank which will take the six-cylinder diesel about 1000 km between refills.

The Arkana *Sandrifter* has already excited a lot of interest both in Australia and overseas — European enquiries have come mostly from the snowfields.

"The trunnions on the load share suspension allow the wheels to move straight up and down," explains Duffy, "and that makes it easy to fit chains."

"There is big potential both in the snow and the desert for this vehicle."

Arkana is well on the way to becoming a major specialist vehicle builder for the

world market; not just the Australian outback and mining market where it has learnt so many invaluable lessons. It's almost too good to believe that an Australian company making an Australian product (albeit one based on Japanese vehicles) should have itself so well sorted out and have such a bright future. So I asked Colin Duffy if there were any clouds on the horizon. "Development costs are high," he said.

"We spent \$200,000 developing the 6WD. But we hope to sell a hundred of them a year."

"I'm happy that the 6WD will pay off. The biggest problem is the pressure to get bigger. We may be forced to expand, but the demands on our specialists are already very high. We hold over a million dollar's worth of orders at the moment," said Duffy.

Would that we all had such troubles...

4WD



One of the four-wheel-drive 14 seater buses (right) and an artist's impression of the new Sandrifter (below) the company's latest and most ambitious project.

ALLTRACTION

LIMITED SLIP DIFFS

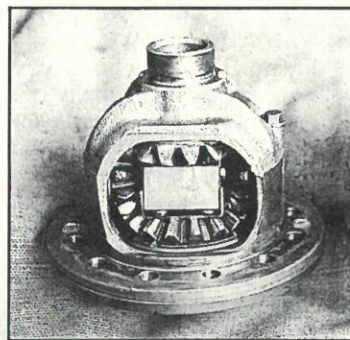
TO SUIT MOST 4WD VEHICLES

ALLTRACTION GEARBOX & DIFF CENTRE

UNIT 29, MACKIE HOUSE, SOUTH PINE RD,
STRATHPINE, QLD 4500. PHONE (07) 205 5225

AGMECH TRANSMISSIONS

FACTORY 5, LOT 15 CLARE ST, BAYSWATER,
VIC. 3153. PHONE (03) 720 3651, 729 4447



To receive maximum traction from your 4WD talk to us about a limited slip diff to suit your vehicle.

THE BEST PRICE AND QUALITY DIFFS AVAILABLE

GEARBOX AND
DIFFERENTIAL SPECIALISTS
★ CARS ★ COMMERCIALS ★ 4WD's
• Reconditioning • Repairs • Exchange Units



arkana
SANDRIFTER

OVERLANDER, January, 1990