



NANKANG FT-7 A/T TYRES

VS.

ROAD TRIP

BY TIM STANNERS

Tim Stanners tries a set of Nankang's new FT-7s on his latest trip north.



Often, one of the first modifications people make to their vehicle is a new set of rubber boots.

The overarching decision of when to change tyres and which tyres to choose, particularly on a 4WD, will depend largely on the driver's own preference and the type of driving being done. There's certainly a number of factors to consider when choosing new rubber for your vehicle; and an almost endless list of tyres offering different features for different driving conditions and terrain.

The standard 'factory' tyres fitted to most off-road and soft road vehicles are designed primarily for on-road use. They handle well on-road in most weather conditions, they're relatively quiet and they generally provide the best fuel efficiency. But they are often swapped out early, sometimes by choice or after succumbing to the pressures of off-road driving. Whether it be a sharp stone puncturing the tread pattern or a tree root

through the side wall, these standard tyres are simply not designed for the off-road conditions we sometimes subject them to.

Therefore, one of the most common tyre choices for the 4WD enthusiast is a compromise between a tyre which provides good on-road capability, but also has the ability to handle a wide range of surfaces – from rocky dirt tracks and sand to a little bit of fun in the mud. An AT or 'All Terrain' tyre provides this capability.

Although I'd argue that the majority of off-road vehicles (with correctly set tyre pressures and a reasonably competent driver) will perform well in most situations, the different tyre options available in AT tyres (and for that matter, the more radical and aggressive MT or 'Mud Terrain' tyres) do come into their own in terms of traction off-road when a standard factory tyre would simply clog up and lose grip.

Most (although not all) AT tyres these days also come in what is known as an LT or 'Light Truck' rating. Simplistically, this

means they are of heavier construction than standard passenger car tyres due to the use of thicker steel belts and heavier carcass belting.

All Terrain tyres have been around for a long time, but one of the lesser-known AT tyres on the market is the Nankang FT-7. So we fitted a set of the Nankang FT-7 tyres to a Toyota Prado to see how they fared compared to some of the other better known AT brand tyres.

My first impression of the FT-7s was that they were by no means the most aggressive AT tyres available on the market; nor could they be considered 'highway' tyres. They certainly seemed to have a reasonable all terrain tread pattern and decent tread lugs in terms of overall size and depth (measured at approximately 9.5mm at the centre groove) across the tread surface.

The FT-7 has been around for some time and Nankang engineers have refined the tread pattern in order to improve its overall performance, both on-road and



01 The FT-7s really did quite well on the sand.



02 Traction for water crossings was adequate.



03 Tyre pressures were dropped a little lower than usual for the softer sand.



off-road. The tread footprint has been widened and the shoulder groove levelled in order to improve on-road handling, with the main groove adopting an enhanced zig-zag pattern in conjunction with a widened sub-groove for improved off-road ability and better performance in eliminating dirt and sand from the tread pattern. A noise prevention bar has also been added to help reduce harmonics and overall road noise – a feature noted straight away after fitting the FT-7s to the vehicle (albeit after running more aggressive tyres previously).

Like a lot of the AT tyres on the market, the FT-7s have a 2-ply sidewall rating (although Nankang will shortly be releasing a 3-ply version in a limited range of sizes) meaning they will generally provide a softer ride than the their 3-ply cousins, but can be a little more susceptible to sidewall staking. So, how did they perform on-road and off-road?

After running the FT-7s around on the blacktop for a couple of weeks, we put these tyres to the test on a recent trip up the east coast of New South Wales and well into Queensland, then back through central Queensland and New South Wales, clocking up nearly 10,000 kilometres through a range of on-road and off-road conditions. The FT-7s performed well on both dry and wet sealed road surfaces. Although a little subjective without sound monitoring gear, road noise certainly seemed to reduce, and fuel consumption also dropped by just under one litre per 100 kilometres when compared to more aggressive AT tyres on the same vehicle.

Ride comfort, cornering and steering response were positive, even towing a heavy off-road camper trailer. But it was the tyre performance in the white sands of the east coast, and the brown and red dirt of the central regions of Queensland and New South Wales, that we were really interested in.


Airing down in the Great Sandy National Park and the Cooloola Coast in Queensland gave these new FT-7s their first taste of salt and sand. As expected, they performed as well as most tyres at the right pressure for sand driving. Even pulling the camper along this pristine coast proved a simple challenge, as we passed by the coloured sands and over Double Island Point on our trek north.

We thought driving slowly though some deep, soft and very dry sand may present a bit more of a challenge. However, we were able to pull right through without incident. At 18 psi, I did notice a difference with the slightly more flexible 2-ply sidewall compared to the stiffer 3-ply which I normally run ... and this certainly seemed to provide slightly better floatation in this deep, dry sand.

Heading inland and onto some of the dirt and gravel roads Australia is notorious for, we managed to put the FT-7s through a number of different off-road surfaces (including the silent assassin of all surfaces, the great Australian gravel road). Again, the FT-7s performed favourably on the gravel with no visible chipping; and handled the surface well. Self cleaning ability was also pretty good, with the tread voids releasing most of the dirt (and mud, once we hit the wet stuff).

On a very steep ascent with lots of loose, dry gravel, and towing the camper, I did notice a little more slippage than usual. And the tyres did tend to hold onto some of the smaller stones once returning to the blacktop. Given they were still reasonably new, time will tell as to how many kilometres we might get out of them ... but taking a wear measurement at 10,000 kilometres and assuming a mix of on-road and off-road driving, I'd expect to drive approximately 50,000 to 60,000 kilometres before they need replacing.

Overall, I'd consider the FT-7 to be in the mid-range bracket of AT tyres – in terms of tread pattern, overall performance and cost. So as a well balanced tyre, able to provide decent off-road ability as well as on-road performance, they're a reasonable choice and certainly an option for anyone looking for an all round tyre.

For more information visit: nankangtyres.com.au or consult your nearest tyre specialist. 

01 We swapped wheels for a week to give our travelling partner a chance to try them on his vehicle.

02 Nankang's FT-7 All Terrain.

