

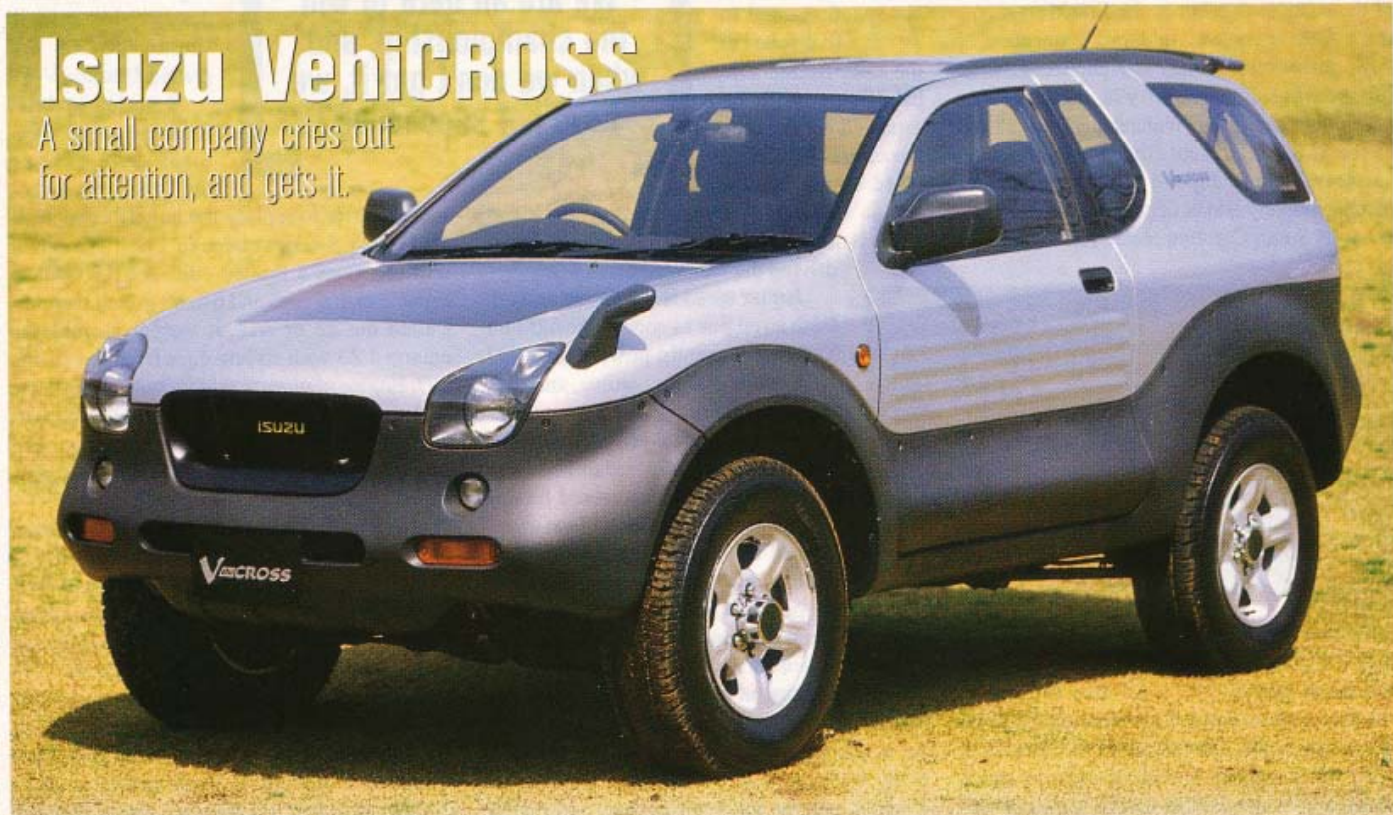
Upfront

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Isuzu VehiCROSS

A small company cries out for attention, and gets it.



When a moderately outrageous Isuzu sport-ute concept made its debut at the Tokyo auto show in 1993, it was regarded as simply a styling exercise, with little real-world application. After all, it had a carbon-fiber and aluminum composite frame, a 1.6-liter stratified-charge, direct-injection engine, and eye-catching looks penned by Simon Cox of the Isuzu Technical Center in Europe. There were no plans to market the vehicle, but positive public reaction caused Isuzu to rethink the matter. After all, Isuzu had just abandoned the passenger-car market and needed to bolster employee morale, and perhaps this project could do that.

At the New York auto show in March this year, Isuzu premiered the VehiCROSS, a production sport-ute that still looks like a concept vehicle. Gone is the carbon-fiber and aluminum frame and the stratified-charge engine, but the attitude remains. A small run of about 2000 is being built and sold in Japan, where the mini-sport-ute market is red-hot. At this writing, all but 200 have been spoken for. With no initial plans for export, the New York reaction was such that Isuzu is rethinking that, too: Maybe after the Amigo is reintroduced to the U.S., and the restyled Rodeo is unveiled, we'll get the VehiCROSS. That's what Isuzu executives are hinting.

And exactly what would the U.S. get? We drove a Japanese-spec VehiCROSS to see.

The name suggests a crossover between an on- and off-road vehicle, with the concept being an "all-terrain world tourer." To help keep the costs down, the chassis from the three-door Mu model SUV (the previous Amigo, no longer available in the U.S.) was chosen, with a much-modified and lightened 212-hp (SAE net) 3.2-liter DOHC V-6 from the Trooper under the hood. The only transmission is a four-speed automatic, coupled to a torque-on-demand four-wheel-drive system that can adjust from 100 percent rear-wheel drive to 50-50 front- and rear-wheel drive, or any percentage in between.

Although slightly larger than the original concept vehicle, the VehiCROSS looks quite compact. There is no optional equipment—the only choice is one of five available colors. The upper part of the body is zinc-plated steel; the lower part is bolted-on, unpainted polypropylene plastic. Inside, the conservative interior contrasts with the futuristic exterior. The Recaro seats are, as usual, comfortable and supportive. Outward visibility is more like that of a sports car than a sport-ute, meaning it's lousy. Fortunately, a rear-mounted camera, its image seen by the driver through a five-inch color display on the dash,

helps out when backing up. The spare tire, enclosed inside the tailgate, limits rear visibility to the point where we were using the camera's help even when going forward.

The control-arm front suspension and the four-link, coil-sprung live axle in the rear, bolstered by aluminum shocks, result in a rather rough ride but surprisingly sharp handling. The VehiCROSS is capable of off-roading, but it's more comfortable on pavement.

The VehiCROSS is an attractive package and seems considerably underpriced at 2.95 million yen, or a bit less than \$24,000. Reportedly, the success of the VehiCROSS has given Isuzu the confidence to make plans for limited-production runs of other concept-inspired vehicles. And confidence, especially in the U.S., is something the company needs right now.

—Yasushi Ishiwatari

Manufacturer: Isuzu Motors, Limited
Tokyo, Japan

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear/4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 3-door wagon

Price (Japan): \$23,412

Engine type: DOHC 24-valve V-6, iron block and aluminum heads, Isuzu engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement193 cu in, 3165cc
Power (JIS)215 bhp @ 5600 rpm
Transmission4-speed automatic
Wheelbase91.7 in
Length162.6 in
Curb weight3850 lb