

2026 Hilux: Tough pick-up, surprisingly comfortable

Toyota's legendary work-horse is evolving. A long drive from Kampala to Karuma reveals how the 2026 Hilux blends rugged utility with the comfort, technology and refinement of a modern SUV.

BY ROLAND D. NASASIRA

The 2026 Toyota Hilux signals a shift in philosophy before you even open the door. The revamped exterior of this Australian-assembled, Japanese-branded icon indicates a clear move towards the sophistication seen in Toyota's SUV range. The changes are subtle yet impressive.

Firstly, while many previous models of the Hilux were known for their large, square headlights, the 2026 version features sleek and modern headlights that illuminate the road more brightly and clearly at night. At the rear, the lights are now unified into one long strip, elegantly incorporating the reverse and brake lights with different coloured bulbs.

Secondly, the cargo tray has received a significant upgrade. Unlike the practical, no-frills tray of its predecessor, the 2026 version includes a provision for covering fragile cargo, providing flexibility and security whether driving with the cover on

or off. Mechanically, there are thoughtful design modifications. Previous models had solid block bumpers, but the 2026 Hilux features flexible, modular bumpers. Taking inspiration from the Toyota Land Cruiser Prado 250 Series, both the front and rear bumpers can be removed in sections. This design makes repairs easier and more cost-effective if a part is damaged, and it also allows for the installation of a stronger metallic guard.

However, it is important to note that removing the factory bumper will also eliminate the integrated safety warning sensors, so caution is advised when reversing. Additionally, instead of having two reverse lights, the 2026 Hilux has only one located on the left rear.

Finally, a practical new addition for loading and unloading is a side step positioned between the rear tyre and the light on either side. This feature allows easy access to the tray without having to step on the tyre itself.

Interior

During my test drive at the weekend from Kampala to Karuma and back, I observed that many of the interior features, especially those on the dashboard, are remarkably similar to those in the Toyota Land Cruiser Prado 250 Series. In essence, you get many of the premium features of the Prado wrapped in a pick-up's body.

For example, the warning chimes, whether for an unfastened seatbelt or proximity alerts, are identical to those found in the 2024 Prado. The steering wheel is another highlight; like the Pra-

2026 HILUX SPECS

Engine: 2,800cc diesel

Transmission: Automatic

Drive type: 4x4

Maximum speed: 200 km/h

Fuel consumption: Approx. 16.8 litres per 100 km

Infotainment screen: 12.3-inch smart display

Connectivity: USB Type-C charging ports (front and rear), Bluetooth

Safety features: 360-degree camera, parking sensors, proximity alerts

Braking system: Electronic parking brake (automatic handbrake)

Cargo tray: Upgraded tray with provision for protective cover

Lighting: LED headlights with unified rear light strip

Emissions system: Diesel Particulate Filter (DPF)

do, it is soft and light to turn. This characteristic is excellent for manoeuvrability but at relatively high speeds, you must hold it firmly to prevent the vehicle from veering off course. Additionally, the steering wheel is equipped with various control buttons to operate different vehicle functions.

Dashboard and tech

On the dashboard, Toyota has modernised the connectivity ports. Instead of USB-A ports, the 2026 Hilux comes fitted with faster Type-C charging ports; two on the dashboard and two behind the middle console for rear passengers.

On the co-driver's side, practicality is enhanced with double storage glove boxes: one larger box that opens downwards in the traditional way, and a smaller one whose lid opens facing the windscreen. Even the cup holders have been repositioned; they are now located on the right side of the driver, next to the steering wheel, with a matching spot for the co-driver on the opposite side, instead of the usual spot on the centre armrest.

Comfort and convenience

For enhanced comfort, particularly for older drivers who may experience back pain, the driver's seat is equipped with a button located on the lower right side. This feature allows you to adjust the lumbar support, ensuring that your lower back aligns properly with the seat, which helps prevent fatigue and discomfort.

Another convenient feature is the automatic handbrake. If you press a button to engage it, the system automatically prevents the vehicle from rolling. Instead of the traditional foot-operated or lever handbrake, you will find a button marked with a circled uppercase "P" on the console next to the gear lever. A press of this button engages the brake, while lifting the same button will disengage it.

Rear passenger legroom remains comfortable over long distances; knees will not touch the back of front seats.

Performance and economy

In terms of road performance, the 2026 Hilux is a significant leap in comfort compared to its predecessors. For example, driving on uneven roads in the 2025 model at 50km/hr was unsettling, as if the vehicle was veering off the road.

In the 2026 Hilux, I drove over road humps from Miggyera to Luweero at speeds between 80km/h and 120km/h. Regardless of the speed, it refused to be knocked off its steady feeling planted and secure in a way predecessors never could.

Powering this confident ride is a 2,800cc, four-cylinder turbo-diesel engine, shared with the Land Cruiser Prado 250 Series, though in a different state of tune. With the new plant, the Hilux proves to be the more economical pick-up of the modern generation, covering 100km using an average of 16.8 litres, which equates to roughly 5.95 kilometres per litre. The vehicle achieves a top speed of 200km/hr.

Safety tech

Safety is where the 2026 Hilux flexes its SUV-inspired muscle. The 12.3-inch smart screen, a large view button gives you a complete bird's-eye view of the surroundings. When I hit the Mega traffic jam, this feature proved invaluable. Whenever motorcyclists close, the all-around cameras provide a live video feed of their position, allowing me to steer to safety with confidence.

Similarly, when you connect your phone via Bluetooth for navigation, the smart screen shows real-time traffic conditions, helping you avoid congestion and make quick decisions to reach your destination.

A note on the DPF system

On the driver's door, there is a small indicator that the vehicle is equipped with a Diesel Particulate Filter (DPF) system. This means that the car has a special filter in the exhaust system that traps black soot produced by the diesel engine before it is released into the air.

Diesel engines naturally produce carbon particles, which are often visible as black smoke from older vehicles. The DPF functions like a sieve, catching these particles to significantly reduce pollution.

Occasionally, the filter becomes clogged with soot. When this occurs, the vehicle automatically burns off the soot at a high temperature, turning it into a small amount of ash. This process is known as regeneration, and it typically takes place during normal driving at road speeds.

Pricing
Derrick Mubiru, the managing director at Mighty Rides on Lugogo Road, says a brand-new 2026 Hilux at a mileage costs Shs300m, including taxes.



The 2026 Toyota Hilux combines rugged pick-up strength with SUV-like comfort, featuring a sleek new design, upgraded cargo tray, and modern tech for city and country drives. PHOTO/ROLAND D NASASIRA.