

Gadgets, Gadgets!

I recently replaced my venerable 1983 Landcruiser with a 2001 Hilux after the old beast got yellow-stickered for illegible number plates while on a flying trip. Farewell my steadfast steed for rutted dirt roads, towing power, capacious interior for flying expeditions and the sort of car for moving a dead sheep if needs be.

by Rob Holmes

Those cops must have had a good laugh after they let me go. I needed a push to make the change from a rust-bucket and diesel guzzler that was heading for a yellow sticker sooner or later. About time, so no regrets.

Anyway, the 'new' diesel is my kind of car: no bloody gadgets and buttons. It has temperature and fuel gauges and, apart from a speedo and rev counter, nothing else except little red lights that go on if there is trouble under the bonnet – which I won't worry about until one lights up, a blue high-beam light of course. And no central locking – what on earth would I want that for? So, I'm pretty smug that my ute isn't going to nag me to put on a seat belt while driving on private property.

A modern selling point is the amount of cheap digital gadgets that can be loaded up into just about any product with buttons and controls – most you won't bother to get your head around, you don't need anyway, or are just waiting to fail.

Then there's that beaut little 4/3rds camera I bought – just the right size to take flying with me. I reckoned it would be nice to take aerial shots with aperture priority, but the manual has 325 pages! The awful slow dawning as to what I had bought... It has taken me months to get even vaguely familiar with the darn thing and if I have to put it down for more than a few weeks, I have to start over again. My old Nikon FM film camera was a beautifully crafted, metal-cased body with superb lenses that hefted a feel of quality and the only body settings were ASA and shutter speed with the simplest exposure meter on the internal screen display. With ASA and speed set, focus and aperture were all you had to think about and I once won a photographic competition with it. I can't even think of producing photos like I could on my Nikon without spending inordinate amounts of time going through the freaking manual which I'll forget anyway! So why can't a manufacturer reproduce the simple limitations of my Nikon in a high-quality digital camera? The huge con is that all



the gadgets are there to make photography easy for idiots! Of course, most people just take snaps with the damned thing on auto.

One more gripe: After going through a couple of cheap UHF transceivers, in the end I reckoned I'd save myself the trouble and get something that could take the bits that go with my helmet – an lcom, a solidly reassuring device. I'm sure lots of readers here own one and will sympathise. This one has a manual with 48 pages, and without taking a radio operator's course somewhere, I don't even have clue (and don't want to know) as to what three quarters of this stuff is all about.

The other day on launch, I queried the settings needed so we could communicate. The group has agreed on a CTC-whatever code-selection to filter out locals and their kids, who never seem to stop crapping on about nothing on every available channel here. I didn't have my 48-page manual with me, so I couldn't set the code – to a few guffaws from the assembled para-waiters.

So perhaps I might just go back to using a cheap little device that has intuitive settings – intuitive, mark you! Or just start carrying the manual around.

This brings me to the core subject of this article and a marvel of good design – my recently acquired Ascent h2 variometer which has replaced my 10 year-old device that had a long list of 'settings' I never really understood nor remembered which button did exactly what.

The Ascent is small enough to strap to your wrist like a smart watch whose amazingly miniaturised internal workings can be controlled by four buttons. Only four buttons! One of these turns the thing on and doubles as a down button, the others covering the remaining three screen directions.

The menu consists of five options and a battery display. But with only four buttons, what can it do? First of all, the h2 model includes a GPS device that searches for satellites when you select 'fly' mode – and after satisfying itself that it has enough satellites for reliable functioning (which can take a few minutes), it enters 'fly' mode, telling you your altitude, then waits patiently for you to launch.

After faultlessly launching in front of a mob of critical spectators, your little device – reading from the top in very readable heavy black script – will give you altitude, vertical speed, ground speed, heading, wind speed and glide ratio. And while

you are flying, if you have nothing else to keep you busy, you can look at four alternative screens that present other information. You can fiddle with the loudness of previously set beeping options (which I hate since we are supposed to be communing with nature and anyone should know if they are going up or down anyway). If in doubt, it only takes a glance to see if there's a plus or minus on the vertical speed.

And there's more, no, not steak knives! In 'settings' mode you can set alarms for sink rate and airspace (the latter to arrive in a later update) – as if you didn't know you were sinking like a brick! But it's nice to have options you can switch off without looking at a manual to work out how.

Back home, you can plug it into either an Apple or Windows (of course) PC, download log-book data and track log in either of kml or igc format. Log-book data includes what you would need to verify where you started and ended up and, of course, the track log will tell how you got there in multiple dimensions.

It comes with car and mains chargers for the internal battery that should last for 10 hours if you don't wish to be beeped at top volume, and a choice of straps for wrist, riser or lap cockpit and a nice carry case.

There's even more to learn if you want to download the manual before you decide to buy (A\$419).