

TESTED NEW GENERALS

General Tire has revamped its 4x4 range with the introduction of the all-terrain AT³ and mud-pattern X³. Neil Watterson tries them out

There's no room for complacency as a 4x4 tyre manufacturer. You can't cobble together a tyre and expect it to sell – it needs to be right in every respect. All-terrains need to work on every surface and mud-pattern tyres must take us to places that would strike fear into hatchback drivers.

So, launching two 4x4 tyres at once is a brave move. Get it wrong and you'll lose customers. But get it right and you'll reap rewards. And, from what I've seen of its new Grabber AT³ and X³ (see overleaf), General Tire has got it right.

AT³ – a tyre for all seasons

Launched in the blistering heat of the Spanish late summer – not ideal for testing – the AT³ is General's new all-terrain pattern tyre.

It's quiet – meeting the tighter tyre noise regulations that come into effect in November

– but it's also good off-road, being designed to have a true 50/50 on/off-road capability.

But the AT³'s selling point isn't just the fact that it's a quiet tyre with all-terrain properties. Its snow performance is such that it can carry

the three-peak snowflake symbol, showing it's a true winter tyre – in fact, the tyre dealers I spoke to feel that this would be the ideal all-year-round tyre.

Despite carrying the same name, there are two tyres in the AT³ range. SUV versions have higher speed ratings, while the light truck (LT) ones have greater load capacity and a slightly redesigned tread. The tread differences aren't obvious – the SUV tread has a maximum of six sipes in the blocks, while the LT has just five, adding rigidity to the blocks. The tread on the LT versions is also deeper.

Rim protection ribs protect wheels from kerb damage and the tyres will be available for all Land Rovers – there's even a V-rated (149mph) 275/40 R20 size in the pipeline.

Stocks are due from the end of October, with an expanded range due in early 2017 – expect to see them on Land Rovers near you soon.



'The AT³ is one of the best all-terrains I've tested. It works really well and I think it will suit most 4x4s'

ANDY SARGEANT, RACER



GRABBER AT³

Evolution of General's all-terrain tyre

The AT³ takes the best parts of the AT2 and AT and builds on them

General Tire's AT2 was well received – it looked right, and had great all-terrain ability and mileage life. The subsequent AT maintained this performance, but looked too road-biased.

'The AT is a great tyre,' says General designer Matthias Urbanek, 'but it

doesn't have the right visual perspective for the market.'

The AT³ fuses the centre tread pattern of the AT2 (pictured near right) with the noise technology included in the AT (far right) to make a quiet, competent all-terrain.



On-road performance

AT³ is quiet and refined on the road

A lot of work has gone into reducing the drive-by noise – the figure quoted on the tyre label.

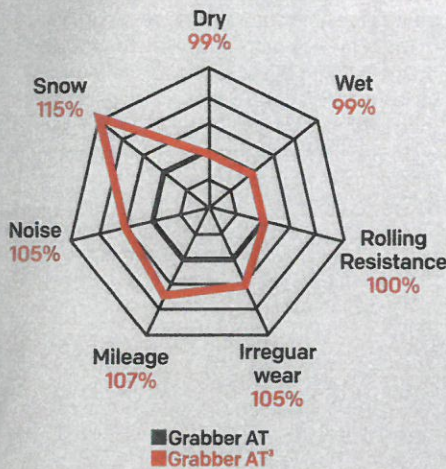
The noise level of the benchmark tyre size has reduced from 75dB to 73dB. That doesn't sound a huge amount, but it's about a 60 per cent reduction – and all of that has been achieved by pattern optimisation.

The blocks are slightly closer together with more of a circumferential overlap – that helps keep the noise down, as does ensuring that there are no flat edges hitting the ground. It's all about the angles.

On the road, it's very quiet – wind the window down while travelling in a straight line and tyre noise is barely discernible, but corner enthusiastically and it's audible – though nowhere near as loud as other all-terrains.

High-speed manoeuvring on the test track proves it has plenty of grip – and it stops well in the wet, having a 'C' rating on the tyre label.

You'd be pleased with this tyre's performance even if you never venture off-road.



Comfort

The uniform block geometry has low stiffness variation, improving comfort and on-road manners.

DuraGen

Ultra-high-strength steel belts are used to give exceptional penetration resistance and stability under all load conditions.

Shoulders

Open-tread shoulders help with looks and also improve self-cleaning action in mud and on loose off-road surfaces.

Pockets

Traction pockets and multi-angled sipes have a high number of biting edges and give excellent traction in all directions.



All-terrain, all year performance

It's a true 50/50 tyre – so it's good off-road all year round

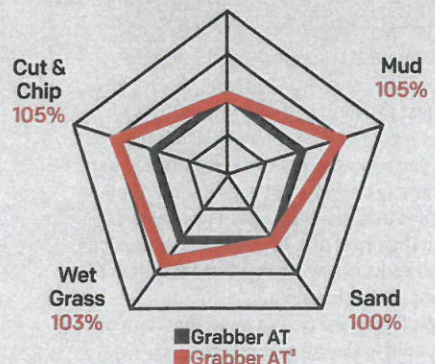
The dry and dusty Spanish tracks I tried the tyres on aren't the toughest test for an all-terrain tyre. But they worked well – even under heavy braking.

We didn't get to try it in deep mud, but General Tire claims that mud performance is improved by five per cent compared to the AT, and it's also better on wet grass – the Achilles heel of many tyres.

Multi-angled sipes give a huge number of biting edges, and traction ribs in the voids give even more grip off-road.

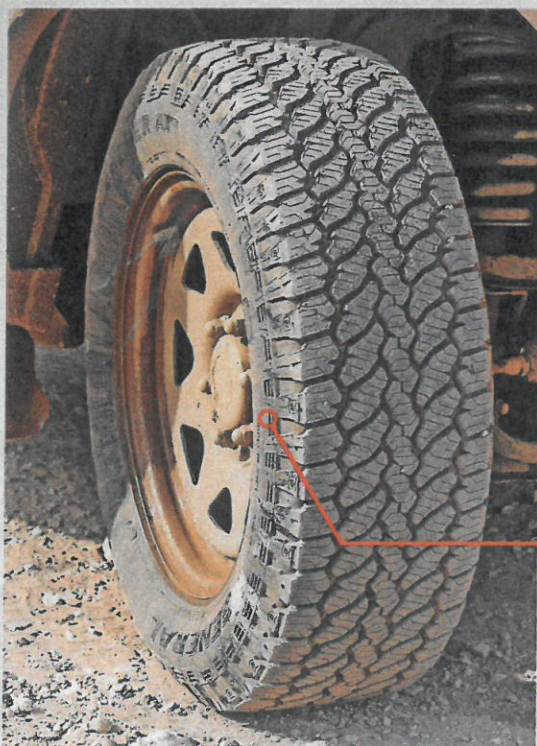
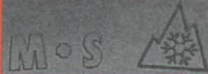
Improvements to sidewalls have increased durability, shrugging off stones and rocks and reducing the chance of picking up a damaged sidewall. The alternative scalloped shoulders help the blocks find traction off-road.

Dirt/loose rock 100%



Winter tyre

The AT³ carries a three-peak snowflake symbol, showing the tyre has enhanced winter traction – it's suitable for driving all year round.



GENERAL GRABBER X³

Better than the MT?

The old MT was fine, but...

We've had a set of the original MTs (pictured below for comparison) on test for a couple of years and have generally been pleased with them, but we have found that the correct tyre pressure is critical to getting the best from them when mud-plugging.

It was also only available in four sizes, so you had to go for the nearest possible size – I prefer to run relatively narrow (by modern standards) 235/85 R16 tyres on Defenders, but I had to settle for a wider version because that was all that was on offer.

Some people like the looks of the wider tyres (all of the sizes had quite a wide tread area) but the X³ will be available in a much greater range of sizes, so you're more likely to get the size you want, rather than the one you're forced to accept.



Because mud-pattern tyres are designed for a certain job rather than for all-round use, regulations concerning them are slightly more lax. But there are still some quirks.

Curiously, you're not allowed to have a tyre that is marked professional off-road (POR) – the category that mud-terrains fall into – and also M+S (mud and snow). That's something that tyre manufacturers are trying to change, but for the moment the law doesn't allow it.

Why does that matter? Well, most, if not all, mud-pattern tyres are also suitable for driving in snow, so should be allowed to wear the M+S marking. And the new Grabber X³ is no exception. In fact, the X³ is 10 per cent better in snow than the superseded MT. And it's also better in sand, on dirt/loose rock and in the wet. Oh, and it's quieter too. They were all criteria that engineers wanted to improve upon.

Greater durability

The X³ also benefits from General's DuraGen technology, having a three-ply construction, cut- and chip-resistant tread compound and ultra-high-strength steel belts. These combine to create excellent puncture resistance and improved tread life off-road, even in high-torque applications such as rock-crawling.

The alternating sidewall protection lugs and deflection ribs are the most obvious changes, making the tyre more resistant to damage, even at reduced pressures. The stone bumpers, carried over from the old MT, help release stones caught in the deep treads, preventing them from drilling into the tyre's carcass. Also, the extra rubber enhances puncture protection.

Alternating shoulder scoops help neighbouring blocks find additional paddle grip and, combined with the large voids, give improved self-cleaning to expel mud from the tread area.

The third area of improvement is within the block chamfers and traction notches – these combine to give improved grip on loose surfaces.

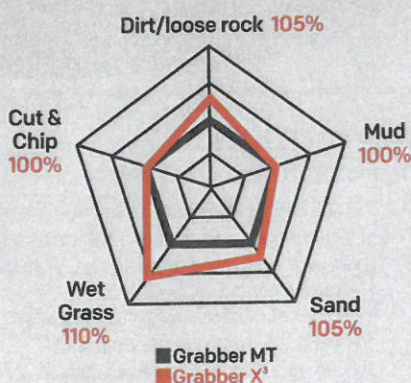
What's in a name?

These three areas form the basis for the tyre's name: it's extreme to the power of three, suitable for driving in mud, dry dirt and rock.

Unlike the old MT with its restricted availability, the X³ will be available in 19 sizes, catering for most Land Rovers. All are 'Q' (99mph) speed-rated and range from 205 R16 for Series Land Rovers and early Discovery 1 to 255/55 R19 for Discovery 4. As you'd expect, all are suitably heavy-duty, with high load ratings.

Initially they'll only be available with black sidewalls, but if you're after something to make your Land Rover stand out a little, there will be the option of sidewall red lettering (SRL) on some sizes from autumn 2017.

These will cost more and will no doubt appeal to those fitting the tyres for looks rather than performance, but it's a nice option to be able to offer. Although I reckon we'll see one or two sets with SRLs fitted to Land Rovers, I think they will appeal more to Jeep owners. **LRO**



Void pattern

The high void pattern design helps give high traction levels in mud. Stone bumpers help release stones caught between the tread blocks and block chamfers, while notches provide additional biting edges.

Sidewall lugs

It's difficult to see in the picture but the sidewall lugs alternate in and out, to give additional side grip and are up to 8mm deep – that's a lot of protection to the sidewalls. Deflection ribs between the lugs push obstacles away.

Off-road performance

Rocks and stones give no problems

Our Spanish test route didn't include any proper UK-type mud so I haven't been able to test the tyres in proper gloop, but there was plenty of dust, small stones and rocks. As you'd expect, none of these caused the tyres any bother – not even the marble-like stones that were harvested by the voids and then spat out. The sidewall protection kept rocks at bay, even when I took less than sympathetic lines.

We'll give the tyres a more thorough test in UK mud in the coming months.

