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HD **Final Falcon flies into a storm**
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COVER STORY The best of the badge to date marks the beginning of the end for Australian manufacturing

THE moment the godfather of the modern Ford Falcon stood to make his speech about the last ever model, the heavens opened and the charcoal sky cracked with thunder and lightning.

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Trevor Worthington, the softly spoken engineer who has overseen or had a hand in the Falcon for more than half its lifetime, pressed on over the noise of the torrential rain pounding the roof.

It was another portent of doom for Australia's oldest surviving automotive nameplate — on the earlier media test drive, a four-cylinder Falcon blew an engine hose and the aircon conked out on another car. Then a tiger snake found its way into the hotel where media were staying.

The end is indeed nigh for the Falcon. When this model ends production in October 2016, there will be no more.

It's difficult to gauge just how many people care because we're certainly not buying Falcons the way we once did. Ford sold just 10,000 last year — down from a peak of 81,000 — and last month was the lowest sales tally in 54 years.

Yet the car that has carried three generations of Australians will always have a place in our hearts and the history books.

The new FG-X will also be remembered as the car that marked the beginning of the end of Australia's automotive manufacturing industry.

Holden and Toyota also lock their factory gates in 2017, having confronted the same harsh reality as Ford: local manufacturing costs are too high, export opportunities too limited and the market flooded with choices.

The Falcon may be a long way from its glory days as Australia's top-selling car — it last led the market in 1995 — but it didn't deserve to die.

This model is without doubt the best yet, even if it lacks some basic mod-cons found on countless imports such as a sensor key, fuel-saving stop-start technology, radar cruise control or blind spot warning. Or such bare essentials as power windows that close with one touch.

The Falcon failed to move with the times. Not even a powerful yet thrifty four-cylinder, developed as part of a wider \$230 million green engine initiative, could save it.

Despite having exactly the same performance as the six-cylinder, just 1800 "Ecoboost" Falcons have been sold.

The Federal Government contributed \$42 million towards the four-cylinder Falcon and other fuel-efficient models but its own departments bought just seven Ecoboost cars.

Private buyers bought 200 examples, confidential figures show, while fleets have accounted for 150. Ford, with 600 company cars, is the biggest single operator of Ecoboost Falcons.

Contrary to perception, fuel economy is not the reason Australians have fallen out of love with big cars. They have simply embraced small cars, SUVs and utes that better suit their needs.

ON THE ROAD What's it like to drive? Exactly the same as the Falcon that's been on sale for six years. It's a style over substance makeover.

Only the bonnet, front fenders, boot, lights and bumpers are new. The doors, roof, glass and rear fenders are unchanged and engines and transmissions carry-over, with a new six-speed automatic from China.

Ford could afford little else. As sales dived, there was less money to reinvest in the new model.

This Falcon was signed off before Ford announced its factory shutdown, which explains the numerous visual changes. Had Ford Australia known the end was near it may have soldiered on with the old model.

The new face follows Ford's global styling direction, and is designed to warm us to the look of its eventual replacement, the Mondeo.

Suspension and mechanical parts are as before. The XR8 has been revived by using the best bits — including the supercharged V8 — from the previous Falcon GT.

Inside there's a new eight-inch touchscreen with digital radio, rear view camera and clever emergency assistance that dials 000 if you have a crash in which an airbag deploys.

Best of all, though, prices have come down. Savings are claimed to be up to \$9600 on the outgoing Falcon but the reality is that no one paid full price for one before.

The range starts at \$35,990 for an XR6 and tops out at \$54,690 for the XR8. As roomy and comfortable as ever, the Falcon soaks up bumps with ease. New energy-saving Michelin tyres on the base model are quieter, with more grip.

The engines, whether LPG, four-cylinder and six-cylinder, produce effortless power.

The same bugbears remain: the seating position is too high; the steering wheel is too low and doesn't reach close enough to the driver.

Are these enough to stop someone from buying a Falcon? Probably not. Ford is not counting on a sales resurgence but expects to have enough orders to keep the factory running until October 2016. For better or worse.

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