

Backfill

Breakneck Backhoe

With a top speed of 20 mph, most backhoe loaders are unlikely candidates for the passing lane.

The HMEE (high-mobility engineer excavator) is different. Developed by construction-equipment manufacturer JCB for the U.S. military, this vehicle is slated to be the new workhorse of military engineers worldwide. It has a top speed of 57 mph and packs a fully independent suspension, antilock brakes, and four-wheel steering.

It can dig, too. Really dig. Powered by a 5.9-liter turbo-diesel engine, the loader boasts 2 tons of breakout force; its rear-mounted hoe can reach depths of more than 12 feet. The machine shares the same chassis design as JCB's Fastrac tractor, which was conceived to reduce travel time between farm fields. (The company also makes a high-speed telescopic forklift, which offers similarly jaw-dropping speed and agility.)

JCB expects its HMEE contract with the military to be worth more than \$140 million.

Now that the loader has made it through the product development and testing phases, you may start seeing civilian versions racing around job sites. Perhaps one will even pass you on the highway when you're chugging along in your pickup with a trailer full of tools. — *Patrick McCombe*



Despite a drab exterior color scheme, the HMEE's interior is quite plush. Joystick controls and cloth air-ride seats with adjustable armrests ease the fatigue of long hours spent loading and digging.