

CLASSIC DRIVER

Testing the Toughest: 65 years of Land Rover

Lead

Exactly 65 years ago, the Land Rover marque was born. To celebrate, Land Rover assembled 138 of the most innovative, remarkable and downright bizarre cars from the last 65 years at the Packington Estate, its original testing ground. We drove some, goggled at some, and picked our five favourites...

Learning to swim





“No, no, no,” said the instructor, as I reached for the seat belt seat of this amphibious Landie. “That’s the last thing you need. If something goes wrong, you want to be able to bob out.” The car’s huge, inflatable side pods are removable, their design copied from 1960s military prototypes, but ours stayed in place as we trundled through woods to the lake.

Ah, the lake: here we are and our heart rates rise. As it turns out, however, getting into the lake is the easy bit: you simply drive into the water and switch from prop-shaft to genuine propeller. Steering is harder; you pull on the delicate control between the seats and, for many long seconds, nothing at all happens. Then the floating Landie starts to swing round – and keeps swinging, almost always too far, so that you find yourself progressing via a series of zig-zags across the lake. Finally, back at the bank, the trickiest bit is getting out again: drive by propeller to the edge, switch to normal engine drive at just the right moment and –

theoretically – the 4WD simply carries you up and out. Theoretically.

Minimalism



Range Rovers have that touch of luxury, eh? Not this one. We tried off-roading in the demonstration chassis from the first production Range Rover and the thrill of seeing the coil springs working and the propshaft turning half-convinced us that not only is it possible to do without air-con and audio system, but you don't really need a body at all. It just spoils the fun.

We also spoke to Roger Crathorne, a Junior Development Engineer under Spen King when the first Range Rover was designed: "In some ways the original Range Rover was better off-road than the Land Rover. The coil spring suspension had much more travel than leaf springs, for example."

Butch boys' toy





Drive any Land Rover on the road and it gives you a feeling of invincibility. But the Defender is the toughest toy of them all – especially when you’re behind the wheel of the new Special Edition ‘LXV’ (roman numerals for 65, to celebrate the marque’s 65th year) with its 16-inch Sawtooth alloy wheels in Santorini Black. There might be full leather seats in the cabin, but the atmosphere is more Mad Max 3 than Range Rover Evoque. It gives off a sense of “don’t mess with me”.

In low-ratio first gear, you feel you could climb a wall; and when our route suddenly ‘ended’ at river that crosses the private Packington Estate, there was no need for inflatable side-pods. The Defender simply waded on through.

Bog-crosser



Climb up into the 'Cuthbertson tracked conversion' and it gives a new meaning to the words 'commanding driving position'. It's like sitting on the top floor of a bus.

Built in the 1960s, the road wheels of the Series II were replaced by four tracked 'bogies' to raise the vehicle's height and minimise ground pressure, enabling it to cross boggy ground. Much as we'd have liked to take the bizarre bog-croser for a spin, the owners of the Packington Estate were none too keen to see their croquet lawn turned to bogland, so we simply sat in the cabin and struggled to overcome vertigo.

1989 Camel Trophy winner





For extreme off-road adventure, there was little to beat the Camel Trophy – competitive expeditions exploring the most demanding terrains in the world. In 1989, the route was through the Amazon basin and the eventual winners were the brothers Bob and Joe Ives, from the UK (the only Britons ever to win the event).

We jumped at the chance of an off-road drive in the actual winning Land Rover One Ten: not exactly 1,062 miles of hostile Amazonian rainforest, but what a feeling to pilot this well-worn but beautifully maintained vehicle. The long gearstick is wobbly, but never grates as you move it firmly into place; and there are always the sand ladders and shovel to get us out of trouble should we fall foul of a few sheep droppings.

Photos: Land Rover

Gallery

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