

4x4 OF THE YEAR

2004 • COMPACT GROUP •

1st

LAND ROVER FREELANDER V6-AUTO ES



It was the way the little Land Rover plodded steadily through the thick mud and up the slippery slopes of our testing 'bomb-hole' off-road route that finally secured its position as our favourite compact. Mind you, the Freelander had a lot going for it even before taking its off-roading abilities into account. For one thing, of all the cars in this group it's the only one that has true off-road styling, exuding exactly the sort of image that evokes thoughts of rolling African plains, just as portrayed in those 'Been anywhere exciting lately' advertisements. For another, with the 2.5-litre V6 engine mated to tiptronic-style automatic transmission, the Freelander has lively on-road performance that would put it ahead of any of these rivals both in a dash away from the lights, and in terms of sheer top speed.

SMART CHOICE

The three-door Freelander is the good-looker of the range, the cheeky thrust-up chin of the front balanced by the slope of the C-pillar down to the stubby tail, the add-on vinyl roof section at the rear hinting at the possibility of cabrio-style fun. The smart styling continues inside, where light-coloured, pleasingly-textured plastics on dash and door trims are set against quality-feel cloth or, in the ES version as featured here, leather upholstery. The interior styling is practical as well as attractive, the low-set dashboard heightening

the feeling of outdoors airiness while providing shelf space with non-slip surfaces, while the big door bins are particularly useful, featuring flexible bottle grips. There are two gloveboxes, a lidded cubby between the seats and a locking storage space of sensible dimensions in the boot floor.

The V6 engine needs to be revved to deliver its best performance, but it does so readily and sweetly. The five-speed auto shifts smoothly, kicks down readily and can add to driving enjoyment when used in its tiptronic mode to allow anticipatory downshifts when approaching quick corners or preparing to overtake. The Freelander also rides well, the all-independent, all-coils suspension soaking up bumps, while remaining firm enough to allow quick cornering. Height-adjustable steering and a comfortable driving posture contribute to long-distance driving comfort.

Though lacking low-range gearing, the beefy power of the V6 and the torque converter slippage of the auto box allow the Freelander to cope with steep climbs, with wheelspin on slippery terrain effectively controlled by the electronic traction control, a feature standard on all versions. Though 4WD is added automatically, through the action of a viscous coupling, the Freelander's behaviour off road outstrips many others with more complex systems. Though it's not the cheapest option, it's well-equipped, it looks good, it's fun to drive and it's competent on and off the road, marking it as a sure winner in this category.

SPECIFICATIONS

Price:	£23,595
Engine cc/bhp:	2497/175
Transmission:	5-speed automatic, auto engaging 4WD

RATINGS (0-10)

Comfort:	7
Refinement:	7
Off-road:	6
Value:	6
Style:	9
TOTAL:	35

WE LIKED: beefy V6 engine, semi-cabrio styling
WE DISLIKED: lack of low-range gearing

V6