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LAND ROVER DEFENDER 90 COUNTY



JUDGE'S OPINION



With its rugged looks and undeniable off-piste excellence the Defender was almost a sure-fire hit to win this category, despite strong competition from both the newboy Santana and the tried, tested and much-loved Wrangler. It's moved on a lot in just the past year and now, while still without doubt a Land Rover, the Defender incorporates both electric windows and air conditioning – no longer considered creature comforts but expected as standard equipment in a vehicle costing in excess of £20,000. Add this to its incredible off-road ability and agility and the Defender becomes an unassailable 4x4 giant. Forget the fact it's not refined on the road... it's superb off it.

No contest, really. There just isn't another large-volume production off-roader that can compete with the Defender over such a wide variety of difficult off-road conditions. Consider that no one else makes an off-roader with this uncompromising go-anywhere premise, and it could appear that the Defender wins purely by default. Be that as it may, there's no denying that the Land Rover is the most competent off-roader available today. Yet in spite of this focus on rugged off-road capability the Defender is not without its little refinements, and that's not meant as a reference to the almost surprising realisation that you can specify air conditioning, electric windows and central locking. Ride comfort on the highway is not at all bad, in spite of the big beam axles. It may simply be that the sheer weight of the car just doesn't allow those small bumps and ripples to affect its forward progress, but whatever the reason the Land Rover is far from tiring on a long haul.

THE REAL THING

Even the front seats, which seem rather minimalist in construction with little shaping, prove supportive on a long drive. A first-timer stepping up into the imposing cabin and eyeing the spindly gear lever and expansive pedals for the first time might also believe the Land Rover is a difficult, exhausting,

truck-like machine to drive, but nothing could be further from the truth.

The styling is totally simplistic, the body just a big box made up of simple panels, the doors hung on exposed hinges. Even getting fresh air into the cab remains a simple matter of opening the flaps in the front windscreen valance. And it goes deeper, to the uncomplicated box-section chassis on which the body is mounted, and which carries the big coil-sprung axles and mounts the Td5 engine and gearboxes. But with this primitive simplicity comes strength, excellent axle articulation and superb approach and departure angles. Even the Td5 engine, though lacking the latest developments in high-efficiency fuel injection technology, is a steady, hard-working and reliable unit delivering strong mid-range torque and refined high-rev power.

Going off road calls for little preparation, since four-wheel drive is permanent, so all the driver has to worry about is locking the centre diff and deciding whether to engage low range. Users planning much off-road work need to consider the £1250 option of traction control. This electronic system augments the Defender's off-road agility by faking a diff-lock effect when the going becomes slippery or lumpy enough to lift a wheel clear of the ground. The traction control works by dabbing the brakes on any wheel that tends to spin, leaving drive directed to wheels that have grip. With this installed it becomes almost unstoppable.

SPECIFICATIONS

Price:	£21,350
Engine cc/bhp:	2492/127
Transmission:	Five-speed manual, dual range permanent 4WD

RATINGS (0-10)

Comfort:	4
Refinement:	4
Off-road:	10
Value:	8
Style:	9
TOTAL:	35

WE LIKED:
Sheer competence
WE DISLIKED:
Dated dashboard

