

CLASSIC DRIVER

Land Rovers old and new: 50 years of off-road testing at Eastnor Castle



“The stuff of Land Rover legends,” is how a company spokesman describes the 500-acre estate in the Malvern Hills that has played a vital role in developing Land Rover and Range Rover 4x4s since 1961. I’ve just spent one of my most enjoyable days of 2011 there, driving all-new and classic models, many of which in the extreme off-road conditions for which the venue is so famous.

And didn’t get stuck once. In fact, the biggest drama of the day was a slight *misunderstanding*, ahem, with the handbrake when behind the wheel of the yellow Series 1 86” trials car.

It was a press event (although members of the public can enjoy the brilliant [Land Rover Experience at Eastnor](#)) so, and in the best traditions of the Fourth Estate, it was every man for himself to choose something from the array of all-new and historically important vehicles lined up in the Castle Courtyard.

First of all, a confession: I haven’t done much off-roading. My aim for the day, therefore, was to get as much experience of the slippery and slimy stuff as possible, while keeping it all out of the undergrowth.



We'll be examining the 2012 Land Rover model range in detail another time but, keeping things brief, I was keen to get going in the very latest car. And so it was to a Range Rover Evoque 5-door 'Prestige' that I turned

for my first-ever off-road experience.

Poor little thing: all shiny paintwork and spotless leather, a mini version of the world's most prestigious 4x4 with 21st Century styling and enough extras to satisfy Cecil B. DeMille. Within a few hundred yards we had it on two wheels, negotiating ruts and slopes as easy as anything. Standard wheels and tyres, note, and *hooray!* for the engineer who invented (and tested it at Eastnor, no doubt) Hill Descent Control and Terrain Response.

With the invaluable guidance of one of Land Rover's professional drivers, it was a simple matter of selecting the correct mode on the Terrain Response System, leaving the pedals well alone down dale, and allowing the company's much-copied Hill Descent Control to safely guide the small car back to the straight and level.

Emerging from the woodlands a wiser and highly impressed driver in a much dirtier car, I took the Evoque to nearby Ledbury for a 10-mile road trip there and back. This is a great car, it really is: as good on road as it is off, and the perfect start to the day.





By way of contrast, next up was in the most Spartan car there, the yellow, open-topped Series I 'Trialer'. In the bells and whistles department it was decidedly lacking. It doesn't even have permanent 4wd; you have to stop and then select low-ratio/all-wheel-drive. But, tackling the mini trials course laid out in the woods, the neat little car was in its element.

Carefully driven, obviously. And even with a degree of shouting twixt driver and navigator ("Which way?!... what blasted tree?... and which side of the number!?"), we managed to 'clean' the tight, 10-gated course. I enjoyed that.





And so the day went on, hopping in and out of classics (the amazing, 'desert pink' Land Rover 129 designed for the Middle East oil exploration market; the surprisingly refined Land Rover 100" 4-Door 'Hybrid' that had been demonstrated to the British Leyland Board at Eastnor to gain approval for the new range of coil-sprung models; a quite perfect 1971 'Classic' Range Rover you can read about [elsewhere on Classic Driver](#)) and the latest line-up for 2012.



I didn't try the Range Rover Sport or Range Rover Autobiography in the mud and ruts - you just *know* they can cut it - happy to enjoy the effortless performance and commanding driving position on the public road. For the

Freelander 2, it was a trip to the woods again and another fine showing by the baby of the range.

But if I were to pick a favourite, it would have to be the Discovery 4. For 2012, the world's finest 7-seater has benefited from a host of improvements, including: a rotary gear shift selector; steering wheel-mounted paddles; Hill Start Assist and Gradient Acceleration Control; an 8-speed automatic gearbox; and modified, now 255bhp V6 turbodiesel motor.





Off-road – and this time we really went for it, on some of the tougher parts of the estate – the car’s performance is astonishing. As with the Evoque, you simply dial in the correct setting on the Terrain Response system and then let the car do the rest; but with its twin diff-locks, greater ground clearance and more powerful engine, this is one seriously accomplished car.

It will ford deeply flooded tracks, traverse blind ridges, descend vertiginous muddy slopes with its highly refined Hill Descent Control (now available in reverse, too) and do all the family trip to the Dordogne/shooting in Scotland/towing a horse-box stuff you’d expect. It’s a terrific combination of sophisticated luxury saloon with peerless, jungle-crossing off-road capability.

For a retail price in the UK of the early/mid £50ks, you’d be hard-put to find a better ‘go-to’ car for any journey in any weather. And, being honest, it puts the price of the much more expensive Range Rover and Range Rover Sport into some perspective; it’s that good.

What a great day out – but no time left to enjoy a Defender, curses, in its final days. Another time, and one not too far away, I hope.

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Photos: Land Rover / Peter Robain

Gallery

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