

Land Rover do-over: LR2 is a strong effort to regain credibility

by Mark_Maynard

Sometimes it takes more than good hardware, a good reputation or a good design to attract buyers to cars. It takes good marketing to create the image and set the mood, which is particularly true for the luxury brands. And particularly true when repairing a broken image.

LAND ROVER - Land Rover's new LR2 takes the place of the Freelander as its compact-class sport utility vehicle. CNS Photo courtesy of Land Rover. Take Land Rover, for example. Its first attempt at a compact-class sport utility vehicle, the Freelander, filled a gap; however, it was a second-cousin platform that was heavily upfitted for Land Rover capability. It did OK off road and on, but it wasn't particularly stylish, the interior materials were economy class and it had mechanical problems.

Sales waned and it was replaced this year by the LR2, which uses some technology and "architecture" from the Volvo S80. The LR2 is smaller than the midsize LR3 and Range Rover Sport, which are smaller than the full-size Range Rover.

At first look, the LR2 is a real Land Rover, not a freeloader. Open the door and the aroma of Land Rover leather wafts out and pulls you behind the wheel. The driver position is upright as it should be to see dangers ahead when fording a stream or watching the line of traffic. The interior has that squared-off, padded, manly ambience. Controls are straightforward, mostly. The front seats are full and supportive with the traditional Land Rover adjustable-angle armrests.

Storage areas can be a challenge in small SUVs, but this one handles it fairly well. Door-panel pockets bow out slightly to allow more space and a cup holder. There are seat-front pockets, storage boxes and a spacious glove box that, oddly (or cheaply), has no lock.

The center instrument panel knobs and switches have an industrial-tech appearance and are rubber-coated for a tactile statement. Stainless steel sill plates announce Land Rover at the front doors. And more stainless scuff plates at the side doors boost the steely image. There are multiple styles of carpeted or heavy-gauge rubber floor mats. The steering wheel has the right fit and density in the hands.

Outside, the Land Rover "gills" at the trailing edge of the front fenders embrace this model as a family member. Stylish alloy wheels and large, 18-inch Continental Cross Contact tires enhance the vehicle stance (but they will be costly to replace). A "panoramic dual-pane sunroof" is standard equipment.

These types of details set the stage for marketing theater - the emotional gray matter between need and want.

The show begins when the driver inserts the key pod into the ignition and hits the start button. The sound of the 230-horsepower, inline six-cylinder is hearty and reassuring. Reach for the gearshift at the floor console and it feels sturdy, as equipment on a Land Rover should. It pulls securely into gear and the six-speed CommandShift automatic has Sport and Manual modes.

The driving experience is enjoyable under most conditions. The engine has adequate power, and the transmission's manual mode is versatile for spiking up performance or holding gears on long downhills or off road.

Using premium fuel, I was getting 18.5 mpg in combined city and highway driving, according to the onboard computer. EPA ratings are 16 mpg city and 23 highway.

The suspension is firm not harsh. And the fairly long wheelbase gives a smooth ride on the interstate. The all-wheel-drive system continuously varies power front to rear as needed, which allows the driver to pitch the LR2 into sharp corners without body lean and tire squeals. The steering isn't heavy and the 37.1-foot turning circle allows nimble maneuvering at the mall.

Because it's a Land Rover, there are driver-controlled traction settings, ruggedly titled "Terrain Response."

The system defaults to the general setting for on-road conditions. Turn the dial on the center console to engage grass/gravel/snow for "generally firm but slippery surfaces." Mud and Snow mode allows some wheel spin to maintain momentum. The Sand setting makes adjustments to engine, transmission and traction control to maintain forward motion.

I did not dip a tire off pavement in my week of driving, but I'm told this system is quite capable off road, though not with the extreme crawling and climbing ability of the larger Rovers.

My time was spent as most drivers would use the LR2 - as a sedan. And I liked it, except for a few points that would prevent me from buying one:

- Back seat knee room is tight for growing teenagers (I have two), and the seats should be raised for a better view.

- The push-button starting is halfway there. This could/should be a keyless system so the driver doesn't have to plug the remote into the key port, step on the brake and push the button.

It's a time saver when the system recognizes the key when it's in the driver's pocket and the doors unlock when the handle is pulled. Then it's just a matter of hitting the start button while buckling up and checking the mirrors. The LR2 setup is awkward because the key port is in a congested space on the instrument panel, and I kept hitting the wiper lever and activating the rear wiper.

- The electronic throttle response is uneven. The acceleration is quite responsive with a firm push of the pedal but vague at slow speeds. This is ideal when edging over the rim of a creek bank and small increments of power are desirable. But it creates a maddening bungee effect in stop-and-go traffic.

There's an electronic numbness to a gentle press of the accelerator, but pressing harder brings too much response and then a shift to second gear. Too little response meant another driver would dive into the space I'd just allowed to be created ahead of me. Too much meant I was back on the brakes, then on the throttle and back on the brakes.

And if you think that kind of driving doesn't thoroughly irritate the spouse in the passenger seat, then you're married to a saint.

Building a Land Rover requires a certain level of engineering to at least give the perception of capability. This one comes with such off-roading enhancements as Hill Descent Control to pulse the brakes on steep downhill crawls and Gradient Release Control, which releases brake pressure slowly on a steep downhill when the driver lifts off the pedal to move ahead.

There are some features on the LR2 that most owners won't need or use, even if they live in the Yukon. But the LR2 seems to have earned its Land Rover badging.

And if you don't buy into all that branding and image hype, check out a Hyundai Santa Fe. It's what most five-passenger crossover buyers need, but maybe not what they want. SPECS

2008 Land Rover LR2 SE

Body style: compact, five-passenger SUV with full-time all-wheel drive and four-wheel traction control

Engine: aluminum, 230-horsepower, 3.2-liter inline six-cylinder with 234 foot-pounds of torque

Transmission: six-speed CommandShift automatic with Sport and Manual modes

0-60 mph acceleration: 8.4 seconds

EPA fuel economy estimates: 16 mpg city, 23 highway

Fuel capacity: 18.5 gallons

DIMENSIONS

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.2/41.9/57.6 inches

Curb weight: 4,255 pounds

Wading depth: 19.7 inches

Ground clearance: 8.3 inches

Tow capacity: 3,500 pounds with brakes

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: push-button start and keyless entry, dual-zone automatic climate control, leather-trimmed seats, leather-wrapped tilt and telescopic steering wheel, power front seats, power tilt and slide sunroof with second pane over the back seat, split folding rear seat, power windows and mirrors, trip computer, nine-speaker (320-watt) audio with six-disc, in-dash CD changer, twin-pocket halogen headlights, front and rear fog lights, rear park distance control, rain-sensing wipers, 18-inch Continental 235/60R V-rated tires on alloy wheels

Safety equipment includes: seven air bags, including a driver's knee bag, dual-threshold front bags, side-impact front bags and side-impact curtains; dynamic stability control; roll stability control; cornering brake control; emergency brake assist; all-terrain anti-lock braking

PRICING

Base: \$34,700, including freight; price as tested, \$39,950

Options on test car: Technology package, \$3,500, includes navigation system, 440-watt Dolby Pro Logic II 7.1 surround sound audio, Sirius satellite radio, rear-seat audio controls, Bluetooth phone mode; Lighting package, \$1,050, includes bi-xenon headlights, adaptive front lighting, approach and puddle lights, memory driver seat and mirrors; Cold Climate package, \$700, includes heated windshield, heated front seats and heated washer jets

The competition: Acura RDX, BMW X3, Infiniti FX35, Hummer H3

Where assembled: Halewood, England

PLUSES: Full Land Rover experience.

MINUSES: Small back-seat space; awkward push-button ignition; hesitant slow-speed accelerator uptake.

Land Rover do-over: LR2 is a strong effort to regain credibility by Mark_Maynard