

4WD BUYERS GUIDE

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

LARGE UTES

Just when we thought the box-shaped Defender was surely dead it had a 2007 rebirth. Land Rover cab/chassis and utes have always had the best off-road design credentials, but specification and production quality issues at Land Rover let Japanese competitors have a field day.



Quality improvements began with BMW's ownership of Land Rover in 1994, but the real turning point was the Ford takeover in 2000.

Since 1983 the little-changed Land Rover ute bodywork has sat on top of coil springs that provide a ride quality no other one-tonne 4x4 ute can match. When Land Rover developed the Defender 130-inch wheelbase model from the traditional 110-inch model the coils were retained and the rear springs were fitted with inner auxiliary coils to better handle the 130's increased payload, without compromising unladen ride quality. Along with the ride quality of coils all post-1983 Land Rover utes have featured full-time 4x4 operation, thanks to a standard centre differential and only recently have some Japanese utes caught up with this superior driveline.

The Land Rover driveline incorporates a lockable centre differential, but this isn't automatically engaged in low range, allowing the Land Rover to manoeuvre at very low speeds, without the risk of expensive driveline damage that plagues all other ute drivelines.

The Defender also continues with a powerful, reliable transmission-mounted handbrake and doesn't rely on drum rear brakes for handbrake performance, or on a set of tiny drum-in-disc handbrake shoes.

The new 2007 Defender has minor exterior bodywork changes that will go largely unnoticed, but Landophiles will be onto the bonnet bulge in a flash. The bulge is necessary, because the Defender's new powerplant – a modified Ford Transit ZSD light-truck diesel – is taller than the outgoing TD5.

The new 2.4-litre four puts out 90kW, which is enough power to go with the Defender's brick-dunny shape, and 360Nm at 2000rpm. Importantly, the new engine has 315Nm at a low, 1500rpm - more torque than the five-cylinder did at any point in the rev band.



Real Landie freaks will also note that the twin fresh air vents at the base of the windscreen have been replaced by a blanked-off panel. Curiosity will lead the Defender-savvy to open one of the hand-assembled doors, ignoring by habit the waves, indentations and varying gaps that are characteristic of these 'flat' aluminium panels. Inside is revelation.

The 2007 Defender dashboard is unlike anything that has gone before it: a single-piece moulding incorporating a plastic-covered binnacle with large, legible instruments, including – be still my beating heart – a rev counter! But there's more: four, fan-fed air vents that pipe real, air-conditioned air (not the mildly cooled and dried puff of yesteryear), a CD/radio, switches for the front powered windows and a passenger-side bin with a solid grab handle. Incredibly, the passenger's right foot no longer needs to fight for space with the heater plenum.

Fear not, Landie friends: the clock is still analogue, not digital.

New seats are still a tad short in the cushion, but there's more shoulder support than previously and the second-row seats are quite comfortable for adults. Yes, the front seats are still too far outboard and too close to the door panels, but they're slightly better than before.

A new gear stick pokes out of the sound-deadened transmission tunnel, stirring a six-speed manual gearbox that's derived from the Disco 3 manual. A new, stubby lever operates the old transfer case and centre diff lock.

In the best Land Rover tradition the starting battery is under the passenger seat, away from the battery-destroying effects of engine heat. It used to be easy to slot a second battery under the driver's seat, but that area is partially filled with engine electronics. There's room for a 55AH deep cycle volt box, with some relocation of modules and cables. An alternative location is via the back doors, in the full-width, box-section void under the rear seats.

Class-leading, long-travel coils with new spring and damper rates suspend live axles that have full-time 4WD.

The Defender ute range in Australia consists of the 110 single-cab cab/chassis, 110 pickup and 110 crew-cab pickup, and the 130 single-cab/chassis and 130 crew cab pickup. ABS brakes and traction control are options on the 110 models, but not on the 130s.

On and Off Road

After playing around in the mud and the ruts in Land Rover's latest we were sitting around a NSW Blue Mountains campfire working out the lineage of this boxy machine that has changed little visually since the Series II Land Rover. If the company hadn't interrupted the model sequence with name changes to 'County', '110' and 'Defender' we worked out we'd have been driving a Series Nine Landie!

This is by far the best Land Rover Series/County/Defender to date. The Transit's common-rail, light-truck diesel is built to lug happily and is fitted with an 'anti-stall' function like Big Trucks have, making hill starts and steep, off-road climbs a breeze.

The six-speed teams well with the engine and transfer case, giving an overall reduction of 63:1 in low-low and a cruising speed of 100km/h with only 2000rpm on the clock in overdrive sixth (0.74:1). There's useful gradeability in top gear, so most freeway hills can be handled without a downshift.



Shifting isn't difficult, because the lever action is superb and the clutch is light enough, if somewhat lacking in friction-point 'feel'. It's a quirky clutch action and you'd expect something to be quirky – it's a Land Rover, after all. But, surprisingly, the transfer case lever works positively, selecting low range or centre diff lock functions without baulking.

The rated towing capacity of up to 3500kg shouldn't worry the new powertrain. We did a bush recovery job, flat-towing a stranded competitor vehicle for 25km and the Defender hardly noticed the two-tonne imposition.

Dare we suggest it's time that cruise control was added to the Defender specification? It shouldn't be a difficult fitment, because the engine electronics are already cruise-enabled.

The new interior is much more refined than previous Defender cabins and the noise level is way down. For the first time, a quality sound system is a worthwhile inclusion.

The aircon system makes up for the loss of the windscreen-base fresh-air vents.

The front seats are still a tad on the small side, but our taller testers found them quite comfortable for long trips. The rear seats can accommodate three adults in more comfort than most crew-cab utes provide.

This latest incarnation of the boxy Land Rover ute is the last update we'll see before 2012, when a replacement vehicle is scheduled. European safety legislation will by then have caught up with the Land Rover's 1970s' bodywork design, dictating passive safety changes.

Previous Models

Old Defender 130 utes look the same, but lack the bonnet bulge, new engine and transmission.

Old LR diesels are slow, but great off road.



Bush Modifications

Some of the latest Defenders have traction control, but older models have open front and rear differentials.

A pair of after-market diff locks is the traction solution.



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