

Behind the Wheel: Land Rover LR2

Sunday, March 1, 2009 1:30 AM EST

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Of The Oakland Press

Land Rover has always enjoyed a certain cachet.

After all, it is one of the Queen of England's favored brands. It also has an intimate link with exotic places, such as the wide open, nearly trackless African savannas, which the company's marketing teams have artfully deployed to keep the brand aloft on a crowded planet.

Nevertheless, while every buyer of a sport utility vehicle has a little bit of Walter Mitty, SUVs are meant to be practical vehicles.

Thus, the exterior package of the Land Rover LR2 is pretty standard. The vehicle's nose is distinctive, thanks to a unique combination of the hood and the grille, while the rear of the vehicle is handsome.

The LR2 is smaller than a standard Range Rover, but overall it's still a very nice package, though a bit more headroom would have been welcome. Overall, it also leaves the impression that its comfortable on and off the road and in the suburbs or the bush, and it seems to do it rather effortlessly.

The interior is a blend of luxury and practical. But it's not so plush that you wouldn't take it fishing or camping. The cup holders and critical controls are all within easy reach of the driver, and the view from the driver's seat is excellent.

However, the LR2 polishes up nicely and has enough plush stuff to fit comfortably into the luxury vehicle category without much fuss.

The comfort and convenience features include dual-zone climate controls, leather seating surfaces, a leather-wrapped steering wheel with tilt and telescoping features, power windows and dual-panel sunroof with one panel each over the front seat and the rear seat.

The LR2, which is outfitted with front and rear fog lamps and halogen head lamps, also comes equipped with a 320-watt, nine-speaker Alpine sound system and steering-wheel mounted sound controls.

The DVD-based navigation system with bluetooth connectivity and rear-seat audio controls was optional on the LR2 that I drove.

Power for the vehicle comes from a 3.2-liter engine that is both powerful and responsive, and seems well-matched to the 6-speed transmission, but the fuel economy isn't great.

In addition, the transmission is augmented in an intelligent all-wheel-drive system borrowed from Volvo and traction control, which gives the vehicle some extra grip on slick roads.

The ride and handling also was impressive as the vehicle operated quite smoothly on ordinary road surfaces. I didn't get to take the LR2 off road, but I did take it for a spin on dirt road, suffering from the winter blues and it really showed its stuff.

After all, the LR2 is built with an independent and front and rear suspension with long-travel coil springs and an anti-roll bar that helps curb the side-to-side motion in the cabin.

The four-wheel disc brakes are augmented by an all-terrain ABS system, an electronic brake force distribution system as well as hill-descent and cornering brake control systems.

Clearly, LR2 isn't for everybody. It's just a wee bit pretentious, and at \$41,400, it's also on the pricey side. There are a lot of SUVs that will deliver the same level of performance for less money.

But it does offer a combination of sophistication, refinement and capability that's hard to match.

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