

Review: Land Rover LR2 HSE

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The Land Rover LR2 is part of a small-but-growing segment: small, luxurious SUVs that won't dent the wallet like their bigger peers, which can easily be double or even triple the price. Others in this category include the BMW X3, Acura RDX, the new Mercedes-Benz GLK Class and the coming Audi Q5.



The Landy likes to play dirty.

All start in the 30-grand range and promise a high-class image and the versatility of a SUV, fuel-savings compared to their bigger brothers, and a modicum of off-pavement ability.

It's in that latter category that the LR2 stands out in this crowd. The LR2, which debuted in the 2008 model year, is still a Land Rover, and that means it was built to tackle much more than shopping-mall speed bumps.

In my week behind the wheel of a 2009 LR2 HSE model, I found this vehicle more than capable both on road and off. I'm even feeling some separation anxiety now that it's gone.

While several passersby were surprised to learn that Land Rover makes a smallish, "entry-level" vehicle – the LR2 is just a couple inches bigger than a Ford Escape – it's not Land Rover's first foray into this segment.

The automaker, which along with fellow British marque Jaguar was owned by Ford until last year and is now part of India's Tata Motors, used to make a small model called the Freelander. That model didn't find much favor with consumers or critics, and was scrapped in model-year 2005 after a three-year run (though the LR2 carries the "Freelander 2" name across the Pond).

While the LR2 has a similar profile as the Freelander, I found the new model much more beautiful both outside and in, with distinctive air slits aft and above the front wheel wells and a dual-sunroof system that allows all passengers (up to five) to enjoy seeing where the adventure takes them.

Speaking of visibility, the LR2's is amazing. The heated, plush leather driver's seat affords not just a commanding view, but cradles the commander in comfort. There were times when I just wanted to go out to the garage and sit in the thing, though navigating the plethora of audio and climate controls from the seat can be a challenge. The folding rear seats provide a similar measure of comfort.

On-road manners in the LR2 were very good. The SUV has sharp steering feel for its class and brakes that bring the 4,255-pound vehicle to rest in a hurry. The 3.2-liter inline V-6 engine creates 230 horsepower and 234 lb.-ft. of torque. It was willing and went through its six speeds without much drama, but I suggest the “sport” mode for passing and accelerating up freeway on-ramps. Mileage is rated at 15 city, 22 highway, and the LR2 drinks the pricey stuff at the pump.

While it’s doubtful that many Orange County buyers will take this vehicle – which starts at \$36,225 and can top \$43,000 with options – to extremes more daunting than the gravel lot at the local playground, it’s assuring to know that the LR2 is capable of conquering almost any terrain.

With permanent all-wheel drive; modes for grass, snow, gravel and mud; hill-descent control; and 8.3 inches of ground clearance, the LR2 has no fear of the muck. When I took it into the (relative) wilds of Trabuco Canyon, the LR2 didn’t hesitate to crawl through ravines, roll over rocks and tear across dirt in a manner that bewildered onlookers in jacked-up Chevys.

A big question mark for this model – and Land Rover vehicles in general – is whether they can overcome their reliability issues. Consumer Reports gives every model of Land Rover its worst mark in “predicted reliability.”

While it’s yet to be seen what the long-term reliability will be for the LR2, I know that in the short-term, I’m missing mine.

