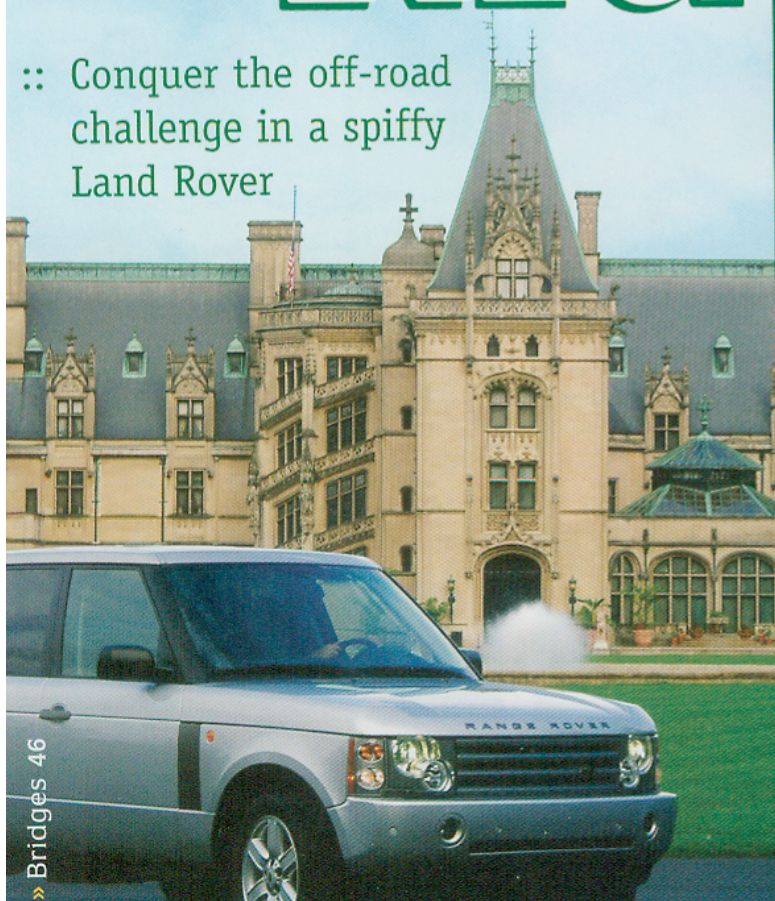




# Wild Ride

:: Conquer the off-road challenge in a spiffy Land Rover



**F**rom our perch above the clouds, we watched the fog dance in the valley below as the morning sun burned through the veil of white.

Our little caravan of Range Rovers had pulled into one of the scenic overlooks on the Blue Ridge Parkway just after the road broke through the cloud cover, revealing the palette of bright foliage clinging to the mountainside. Unfortunately steel-gray clouds wreathed the mountain tops, denying us a peek at their splendor.

Since mountain gazing was futile, Greg Nikolas, the lead instructor for the Land Rover Driving Experience, turned to the group and said, "Had enough?"

I glanced at the other drivers for consensus and said, "Let's roll."

With five gearheads in the group, we weren't inclined to spend much time drinking in the beauty of the Blue Ridge anyway. We were there to drive. Within 30 minutes we would be whipping these \$75,000 SUVs over, under and through obstacles that would make a pack mule weak in the knees.

We jumped in the two Range Rovers and headed down the mountain, back to the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C. The first group took off in the 2005 Java Black Ranger Rover, while I followed in the Giverny Green machine.

We wound back down the Parkway, through downtown Asheville, and onto the 8,000-acre Biltmore Estate. Driving up the winding road to the Inn at the Biltmore, the four-star hotel on the estate grounds, we turned off the pavement and headed into the woods.



Range Rovers are the current incarnation of the Land Rover, a small Jeep-like vehicle launched in England after World War II. Boxy and tenacious, the Landie quickly became the favorite of explorers and serious off-roaders on expedition in India and Africa.

The Range Rover, the current top-of-the-line model, embodies English elegance coupled with terrain-tackling capabilities second only to a mountain goat. Picture Kate Winslet (of Titanic fame) clambering up rocky hills and squishing through muddy pits and you'll get the idea.

Anyone can sign up for the Driving Experience at the Biltmore. You can choose from a range of packages, from a one-hour lesson (at \$150 per vehicle) up to a full-day adventure package (at \$700 per vehicle). Note the costs are per vehicle, so you can bring up to four people, leaving room for the instructor. The Biltmore is one of two places in North America to offer the Driving Experience. The other is at the Fairmont Le Château Montebello hotel in Quebec.

We tackled the Antler Hill trail first. Nearing the first steep hill, Nikolas, the instructor, told me he sees three kinds of drivers.

"There are bad drivers, good drivers, and cowboys," he says. "Bad drivers and good drivers have habits that I can help them with. You never know what cowboys are going to do next."

I hope I fall into the good driver category.

Heading down that first hill, all I can see is red North Carolina clay as the Rover pitches forward. At Nikolas' quiet prompting, I shift the automatic into manual mode, select first gear and reluctantly take my foot off the brake. Unnoticed by me, the hill descent control takes command. This electronic marvel works with the anti-lock brake system to walk the vehicle down the hill with no intervention from the driver. It's sobering to think that at this point I'm just along for the ride.

It's even more freaky doing it up hill. The Rover scales what seems like a nearly vertical incline until all I see is blue sky, like ratcheting up the hill on a roller coaster. Nikolas tells me to lift off the brake again, and the Rover slides backward just enough for my stomach to flip flop. Then the brakes catch the vehicle. We hang there for a few seconds, amazed by the gravity-defying absurdity of it all – this little gadget could have saved Wile E. Coyote a lot of hospital visits.

The key to off-road driving, Nikolas says, is simple. Go as slow as possible and as fast as necessary. Careening through the woods all day, we never go more than maybe 7 mph, although it's hard to tell because the speedometer starts at 10 mph.

We head for a series of side tilts, or slanting terrain, where the Rover crawls along a hill sideways. The hard part, Nikolas says, is to overcome your natural inclination to turn the wheels toward the hill. That could cause the back end to lose traction and send you sliding to the bottom.

We follow the leaf-covered trail until we hit mud pits along the valley bottom, courtesy of Hurricane Frances that flooded the region a few weeks earlier.

Here I learn that everything Mr. Stiger, my high school driver's ed teacher, taught me was wrong. As Nikolas tells me about using my left foot on the brake to power through the mud, I hear Mr. Stiger's voice telling me to keep that left foot on the floor.

I keep the engine running about 1500 rpms with the right foot and use the left foot on the brake to control the vehicle's forward momentum. The sucking sound of the muck grabbing the tires gives us a clue as to how deep it really is. We power through without a hitch, the water rushing back into the pit to wait for the next victim.

After a gut-busting lunch at the Deer Park restaurant, it was time to experience the new LR3, the replacement for the Discovery model. The LR3 recently was named Motor Trend's SUV of the Year. I get a new instructor as well: Randi Arbuckle, a 30-something single mom from West Virginia. She has a non-stop patter and a quick laugh that calms my nerves and helps her lessons sink in.

We drove on the highway to the west side of the estate, normally closed to visitors, and meandered along pine-needle carpeted trails through a tree farm on the way to the Biltmore Estate vineyards. Though vines were bare, it was a lovely setting as the arbors wrapped around a terraced hillside overlooking a small lake.

We forded a gentle stream using left-foot braking again to get to the Vines Trail, a compact, torturous course designed to test the skills of advanced drivers. What am I doing here?

First up was the articulation run, a fancy name for a 20-yard obstacle course of washboard ruts and thigh-deep potholes. Slowly the LR3 crawls through, rocking back and forth as one wheel then another leaves the ground. At one point, wheels on opposite corners dangle in the air, and still we creep forward.

The final obstacle looms: a series of wet logs placed just close enough together to make finding traction almost impossible. The LR3 hunts for grip, as I hold it steady dancing on the gas and brake like a pipe organist. One last spin and we conquer the final log. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until it was over. I conquered the course, not a scratch on the vehicle.

At the end of the day, a few lessons learned: 1) If you get the chance to live the Land Rover Experience, do it. 2) Mr. Stiger was wrong in so many ways. 3) I'm ready for a safari. ■

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