

**Defender looks a natural as a convertible especially with alloys and metallic paint job. The hood folds down flat well out of the way**

It seemed like an age but in reality it was milliseconds. As soon as we ploughed through the pool of stagnant water, throwing most of it skyward, the terrible realisation hit us that it was coming back down. There we were sitting targets in a convertible Defender with the hood lowered. The torrent duly came back to earth producing spontaneous laughter from a sodden photographer Nick Dimbleby and I. Getting wet was the last thing we were expecting in Corsica. In truth it was the only time I wished we had the hood up in the two days we were to live with this special edition 90.

It's astonishing, in this age of niche marketing, that it took a Rover subsidiary to develop the only true convertible in the Land

Rover stable. Perhaps the stagnant pool was a secret trap by product planners at Solihull who had expressed strong reservations when Rover France brought the idea to them back in 1995. *Non*, they said when its French arm claimed there was a market for a proper convertible 90 with an easily folding hood and a more upbeat image. Fortunately, the independently minded French (how could they be anything else) declined to take *non* for an answer and promptly went off to find a company to build them the snug-fitting hood they required and raided the Genuine Parts bin for the relevant roll-bar from the US-spec Defender, spare wheel carrier (a particularly neat mechanism) and tailgate.

Presented with this *fait accompli*

their lords and masters at Land Rover, somewhat grudgingly, gave official approval to the project and the Xtrem was born. Spared from the more severe limitations of American safety regs, the French were free to only use the roll bar immediately behind the cabin, ditching the slightly cumbersome rear cage arrangement required Stateside. This in turn allowed the hood manufacturer, based in Lille in northern France, to develop a neat, easy-to-use folding mechanism rather than the pull-off cover on the US version.

Combined with the familiar frugal Tdi engine, rather than the V8, the French rag-top version becomes a more economic proposition this side of the pond than its Stateside Defender counterpart.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK DIMBLEBY

