

development work.

The next special task with canoes was to prove the undoing of us. After a brief lecture on steering and technical specification we both climbed aboard the canoe. I won't elaborate on our technique. We came in last, but at least we were still floating, if not rather wet!

After a drying out it was time to test the on road capabilities of the Defender which is where it really surprises. With their impressive attention to detail, Rover France shod the Xtrem with 265/75 x 16 B F Goodrich All Terrain T/A tyres as standard. A reasonable compromise choice of rubber for a machine which will spend much of its life on road or the beach. As you get near its limits of adhesion the tyres will squeal to let you know

Below, articulation not compromised by anti-roll bars. Bottom, neat tow bar support seen on US-spec Defenders and anti-roll bar

you are getting too far out of line.

Put simply, I didn't usually need to slow down for twisting Corsican bends because of the taut handling and the fine throttle-steerable Tdi engine. The Defender just holds on and powers round. Far from its off-road ability holding it back on the tarmac, you can feel exactly what the chassis is doing and adjust your right foot accordingly. The anti-roll bars do their job well with minimal body roll and mild understeer the order of the day; breathtaking road manners given the ability the 90 displayed over the rough stuff. This was particularly reassuring as there was little room for error with rock outcrops lining the sides of the roads. The Defender never put a foot wrong and even driving hard is surprisingly easy to place.

The 90's weight distribution is evenly balanced you can sling the 90 into bends, knowing precisely how it will behave.

Power is no problem either, with the deceptively muscular 2.5-litre Tdi never caught out of breath. Output is 111bhp at 4000rpm and the 0-60mph figure is 15.7 seconds. These figures don't tell the whole story though. What counts in a Land Rover is the impressive torque (195lb ft at just 1800rpm) giving impressive flexibility. The 90 the natural home for the Tdi and I can't see how you could beat it.

Off-road with the exhaust note ringing in your ears there's nothing better so it's even more puzzling why has Land Rover set itself against it either as a mainstream version or even as a special edition

