

in other markets.

The hood is a particularly smart arrangement that has hydraulic struts to ease erection and secures using a lever at the top of the windscreen which pushes two bolts into place. It's a versatile set up as you can fold back just the front section or unzip and tie-back the windowed rear section depending on your mood. The standard of manufacture of the hood is first-class and attracts only a small price premium over the hard top Defender 90 in France.

What is also surprising is how civilised the Xtrem is in action. It's perfectly comfortable to hold a conversation at 60 mph with windows up and the hood down. Everything else will be familiar to any Defender driver which means

comfortable seats, good power steering, easy to read dials and well sorted controls. The dash is basic, and the flap vents not effective as they could be. Still it's not bad, despite not having been changed for ten years, with plenty of space for oddments.

A passing local, who had no doubt seen the convoy earlier, pushing his bike along the beach as we were taking photographs, certainly thought it a winner. 'C'est magnifique. C'est Jeep?' Never mind.

There will be only 220 Xtrem's built, costing £20,500 apiece, so there's little chance of the secret getting out other than in France.

The Xtrem may not please Land Rover but it'll still turn plenty of heads - I guarantee it.

FOR all its brilliance the Xtrem exposes failings in the old stager. Despite its famed toughness and ability Solihull should build them even better and it's time to look at key areas such as the dash. Just look underneath the steering column and there are about five different bits of plastic to screw together, some of them none too accurately. Without changing the basic concept, and everything the Defender does so very well, there are ways to improve and simplify production, cut costs and build a better vehicle. For example, a one-piece moulded dash would do nothing to harm the vehicle's invincibility in the Gobi desert but would do wonders for sales to the County set. But there's a catch.

Say it in hushed tones, but Land Rover make less money per vehicle out of the Defender than out of its other models. It takes 40 per cent more man hours to build a Defender than it does a Discovery - even more for the new Range Rover. It's been ten years since the Defender last had an update and improvements are overdue in certain areas. Silly details problems such as non-galvanised body cappings are not helping the legendary image. The competition is getting tougher all the time. Jeep, for instance, has just spend millions on revamping the extremely popular Wrangler with coil springs and a new dash.

Land Rover says the Defender's medium-term life is assured thanks to the recent massive military contract. This will soon produce some worthwhile improvements to civilian versions such as easier access to the radiator. But with so much investment cash going into the new Discovery and CB 40 small Land Rover, big expenditure on the Defender is not a priority. There must also be a question mark over whether Land Rover will need a four model range, especially if versions of the new models can satisfy military and commercial customers.



Centre, with hood up the Xtrem's profile is still headcatching. Above, on-road convoy