



It's the thrill of the chassis

First Drive: 2007 Land Rover LR2

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THE SPECS

Type of vehicle All-wheel-drive compact SUV

Engine 3.2L DOHC in-line six-cylinder

Power 230 hp@ 6,300 rpm; 234 lb-ft of torque@ 3,200 rpm

Transmission Six-speed manumatic

Brakes Four-wheel disc with ABS

Tires P235/60R18

Price: base/as tested \$44,900/\$47,075

Destination charge \$995

Fuel economy L/100 km 13.3 city, 8.8 hwy.

Standard features Power door locks, windows and mirrors, Park Distance Control, AM/FM/CD player with nine speakers and MP3 compatibility, steering wheel-mounted audio controls, power driver's seat, cruise control, power glass sunroof, information display, tilt steering, leather seats, heated front seats, auto on headlights, dual front air bags, side thorax air bags, side curtain air bags, driver's knee air bag

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The LR2 and I didn't get off to an auspicious start. Parked prominently in the National Post parking lot by Land Rover's delivery service, the golden-hued Freelander replacement garnered all manner of gawking looks and appreciative stares. This included -- just as I was about to get in and drive it for the first time -- the grand pooh-bah of all things CanWest, who just happened to be in the market for something to replace his end-of-lease Infiniti FX35. Being the kind, caring soul that I am (OK, I was sucking up big time), I offered him a ride.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get the damned vehicle to start. I pushed the newfangled "start engine" button repeatedly, "expertly" wiggled the gear lever and even, thinking it had a cleverly disguised lock-out switch, waggled the steering wheel--all to no avail. We weren't going anywhere and I was very red-faced indeed.

A quick call to Land Rover's public relations lady reminded me that, unlike most other manufacturers with the faddish pushbutton start -- only requiring the keyfob to be in the general vicinity of the car -- the LR2 still requires the "key" to be inserted into a holder. And, of course, it's fairly well hidden. It does have some green LED light thingies to mark its precise location, but, in that rare May sunshine we were enjoying at the precise moment of my humiliation, they were washed out. (I wasn't the first to experience the problem nor will I be the last. The security manager, who had to move the LR2 overnight, took 20 minutes to figure it out.) Still, I'm pretty sure I'll be the only "expert" auto journalist to so embarrass himself in front of the man who signs his paycheques. The LR2 had a lot to make up for.

Thankfully for the Land Rover Canada folks now sweating an anticipated full Booth rant, it did more than that. Let's start with the good stuff first. The chassis is as rigid as a forged anvil. Land Rover claims an astonishing torsional rigidity of 27,000 Newton metres per degree of twist, which is right up there with Porsche's oft-lauded and much more expensive Cayenne. Also, while the LR2 doesn't handle with the sports car aplomb of the Porsche backroad bomber, it is a step ahead of the compact sport-utes against which it competes. More important to the average SUV owner is that a rigid chassis is the foundation of all good road going manners in any vehicle.

This results in an impeccable ride, especially for a vehicle so capable off-road. Toronto's sorely tested pavement posed no challenge for the LR2's long-travel suspension and its well-calibrated damping. Nor was the handling all pillows and puff. Despite its compliance, there's a fair amount of control in the LR2's handling, certainly more than in most SUVs.

The downside of this comportment is the same as when I first drove the baby Land Rover. The LR2 pays a hefty price for its rigid chassis, one that can actually be measured. At 1,930 kilograms, the LR2 is as heavy as some mid-sized SUVs and just a smidgen lighter than Acura's MDX -- which I had labelled as too heavy for a mid-sized sportute.

With so much of its avoirdupois mounted high, one can assume the LR2 would handle even better were it 100 or 200 kilograms lighter. All Land Rovers of late have been lardy beasts -- it's something the company has to work on.

The weight also lessens the performance of the 3.2-litre inline six. Still more than capably fast and incredibly smooth, the LR2's 230 horsepower would be that much more liberating if it didn't have to drag around the extra steel. Nonetheless, performance is more than adequate. Only Toyota's powerhouse RAV4 V6 has substantially better performance and it offers nowhere near the LR2's compliant ride.

Ditto the Land Rover's luxurious interior. Every LR2, even the \$44,900 base SE, comes fully loaded with a plethora of gadgets, safety items and luxurious appointments. These include leather seats, heated front seats, a wonderful stereo (that only costs \$375 to upgrade to 14 speakers) and Land Rover's neat Terrain Response system that automatically sets the brakes, traction control and all-wheel drive system to the optimum settings for the road or trail ahead.

I could carp that rear-seat legroom is less than superlative. But, then, there's no other compact SUV in the segment offering substantially more. About the only semi-serious foible is a fairly elevated liftover height at the back. At least the trunk is fairly spacious.

Neither can I diminish the appeal of the LR2's style. Though diminutive in stature, the LR2 captures the essence of Land Rover, from the fashionably square haunches to the Range Rover-inspired fender portal. It's tough to look butch when you're this small, but the LR2 manages to mostly pull it off.

The only options available, besides the 440-watt Dolby Pro Logic 7.1 audio system, are a navigation system, bi-xenon headlights and a personal phone integration system. That brings the grand total of the fully loaded tester to \$47,075, a princely sum for someone comparing the Land Rover to a similarly sized Hyundai Santa Fe, but marvelously economical compared with an LR3 or a Range Rover. The LR2's attractiveness will definitely depend on the thickness of your wallet, but those forking out the extra cash won't be disappointed.

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