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Off the Beaten Path

By: Jill Gleeson

I admit I was a tad shocked when my instructor told me how much the vehicle I was about to take off-roading cost. I was standing in the Carmel, Calif., offices of the Land Rover Experience Driving School, signing a waiver and chatting about the spectacular machine I'd soon be piloting through the rough-and-tumble terrain outside. So I asked my instructor, Mark, how much it was worth.

"Well," he said in a California voice so soothing I wondered if he was trying to hypnotize me, "this is a super-charged V-8 Land Rover — and the way it's equipped? I'd say around \$120,000. Or maybe more like \$140,000? Would you like me to check?"

"No," I answered quietly, waiting for the black dots sprinkling my vision to fade.



“Please don’t.” If I owned a house, I recall thinking, that car would cost more than it. Mark led me to the Land Rover, a magnificent, menacing white beast of a thing that looked like it could take a direct hit from a howitzer and spit out the shell from its gleaming grill, unfazed. It was beautiful, and I decided immediately that if and when the zombie apocalypse ever happens, my first stop would be at the local Land Rover dealer.

As we climbed in, Mark began to talk about the SUV’s many outstanding features, most of which I can’t remember because a) Mark looked distractingly like movie star Luke Wilson, and b) I know almost nothing about cars except that I know what I like when I see it. There was something about a two-speed transfer case (which I think helps control the vehicle) and electronic air suspension and auto terrain response and some other stuff that sounded very impressive.

Inside, the control panel looked like something you’d find on the space shuttle, and I was glad Mark was taking the first turn at the wheel. The two-track trail, which wound around the mountainous terrain surrounding Carmel’s Quail Lodge & Golf Club, was pitted with holes not inches but feet deep and studded by rocks and massive hillocks. Mark took it slow — like, 5-miles-an-hour slow. This, he explained, was expedition-style off-roading, not the high-speed, Baja style popularized by movies and television.

And then Mark and I were switching seats, and he was detailing everything I needed to do to make the beast move. It seemed like a piece of cake. I managed to execute a hairpin turn, clear low-hanging tree limbs and climb a hill so steep that if I were hiking it, I would’ve had to stop for a beer and a nap halfway up. Upon cresting it, I found I was looking down into a slash in the earth so deep it was less a hole than a long, slender pit.

“Nuh-uh, Mark. No way,” I whined. “That ... that ... *chasm* is going to EAT this car.”

“Jill, this is what this vehicle was made to do,” Mark answered calmly. “Now, I want you to switch it into first gear, low range and very slowly descend into the right side of the hole.”

“But the whole left side is so much higher — we’re gonna flip!”

Mark just gave me a gentle smile, and with a heavy sigh, I guided the beast into the pit. Sure enough, the farther we went the more the driver’s side rose, until it seemed we would end up perpendicular to the ground. I heard my camera and purse, unsecured in the back, crash to the passenger side and felt my seatbelt tighten as the car tilted higher and higher. I have no idea how it managed to stay on four wheels, but it did.

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