

Barnstorming the Back Country

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by Dan Clarke

We meet Mark Curtsinger in front of a restaurant on Dolores Street in Carmel. He will be driving us to our Land Rover Experience, where he will also be our instructor.

His first request is that we sign papers releasing his company from liability if something bad happens to us. I've just finished a nice lunch in the sunny courtyard of Le St. Tropez and am feeling quite relaxed . . . right up to this moment at least. Driving on cliffside roads in California and on the Amalfi Coast has caused me some trepidation in the past. The release is just a formality, Mark assures us and, as it turns out, we'll pursuing an inland course.

The press trip agenda has offered our group a choice this afternoon. We can visit a spa or opt for something called the Land Rover Experience. Just two of us intrepid souls take the latter route. Janet Fullwood, a freelance travel writer, will be joining me.

Mark drives us over to the Quail Lodge in Carmel Valley, which is home to the Land Rover facility. We're in a 2014 Range Rover Sport, which will be the vehicle we use for our introduction to off-roading. It has a 340 horsepower six-cylinder engine, which is sufficient to propel it from 0 to 60 in just under seven seconds—very quick for a vehicle this size. But as we get into the hilly roads just south of the Lodge, it's apparent that speed isn't the game here.

We're at one of four venues in North America that host the Land Rover Experience. In Quebec, there is the Fairmont Le Château Montebello. In Manchester Village, Vermont, it's the Equinox Resort and in Asheville, North Carolina the site is the Biltmore Estate. The Quail Lodge is well known for its restaurant and golf course and the atmosphere is a sort of laid-back elegance. Right next to this gentility is some rugged back country.

We climb into the hills just south of the Quail Lodge parking lot and after driving about 10 minutes Mark finds a fairly level place to stop. We get out and familiarize ourselves with our vehicle from the outside while he explains our pending adventure. There are some similarities between downhill skiing and what we're about to do, he explains. I wonder if taking a sports car quickly down a winding road is also similar. Apparently it is. Mark has made analogies that his tyros understand. But knowing a little theory doesn't assure success, I think as I slide behind the wheel for my part of the driving experience.



Mark will guide us through the woods

Our instructor explains each section of the course as we approach it. The roads, if you can call them that, are dirt. They wind. They go up and down. The surfaces are extremely uneven. There are dips and holes. Little rocks and big rocks. And trees. I'm no longer worried about plunging off a cliff and into the Pacific, but I am thinking that I don't want to damage this expensive carriage. Mark has the poise of a good leader or a good teacher. His instructions come across as suggestions, rather than commands. He obviously knows what he's talking about and doesn't seem at all stressed. At least a little of his confidence rubs off on me.

The Range Rover offers tools both mechanical and electronic to help us deal with the terrain. Braking and accelerating are aided by multiple options of our automatic transmission. A screen on our dashboard gives graphic information about things like whether all our wheels are in contact with the ground. This seems like wonderful technology that must make operating a vehicle in these circumstances much easier—for someone who's had more time to familiarize himself with it. I'm experiencing some sensory overload and decide to rely on a combination of natural intuition and Mark's good advice.

Some of our wheels were touching the ground

While we never attain much speed, power is important. There are sections of our path filled with potential hazards. Once we decide on the line we want to take to deal with them, the judicious application of power and braking seems to be the key. There are no four-wheel drifts to get quickly through a corner on pavement, but even going very slowly our big and solid vehicle will slide a bit on these roads that seem to slant in all directions.

I've been reasonably successful in negotiating some of these obstacles without getting us stuck or damaging the Range Rover, so Mark poses another challenge. A recent group of drivers has participated in a team-building exercise which left residual slalom gates.

Competing teams had points taken away when they failed to negotiate these gates flawlessly. Can I drive between the poles without touching them? Well, the road here slopes gently downward and it doesn't look too tough. However, as we get closer the gate seems only a few inches wider than we are, so it's going to be tight. I get the front end past these two poles unscathed, but we touch one of them before we've passed entirely though. How did that happen? Since it doesn't seem likely that the back half of the Range Rover is wider than its front, I figure that our road slanted in ways I hadn't realized and that we drifted just a bit on the loose road surface as we were passing though the gate. A few more of these slalom gates appear before I relinquish the reins to my colleague, Janet. I get through one or two ok, but not all of them. No formal scorekeeping is taking place, but it's obvious this exercise could get intense in a competition.

Dash display gives visual clues

We haven't seen all of the property, Mark tells us as we are concluding our visit. Today the weather has been pleasant and we've had a fairly dry track. On another occasion it might be different. Rain could mean slippery conditions necessitating our choosing different routes through these hills.

All my prior experiences in four wheel drive vehicles were a while ago and none was in a Land Rover. Most of the time back roads meant back aches. Not so today, as our ride has been cushy on both paved and very unpaved roads. I've had fun and I've learned lessons about driving in rugged conditions that would apply to any vehicle.

Editor's note: The Land Rover Experience at Quail Lodge accommodates both individual participants and corporate groups. Further information can be found at www.quailodge.com. This is the third in a series of articles on Carmel. If you're planning a visit, you should check out the Monterey County listings in [Taste California](#)

[Travel's Resource Directory](#). There you will find links to the websites of hundreds of Lodging and Dining options, as well as links to the sites of wineries and craft beer specialists in the area.

Don't clip that tree while focusing on the gate

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