



Land Rover Discovery



THIS IS THE FIRST COMPLETE REDESIGN of the Discovery since the model was introduced in 1989. It's pretty radical, too, but customer research showed that, while buyers wanted the model to look like a Discovery, they wouldn't say no to improved ride and handling and greater steering accuracy. Extra interior space wouldn't come amiss, either. These, then, are the key areas in which changes have taken place.

Although it may not look it, the zinc-coated steel, five-door body, mounted on a ladder-frame chassis, is completely new – except for part of the tailgate. Extra width is designed to give the vehicle “a confident, securely grounded stance”. It's 16½cm longer, as well, to improve accommodation, particularly at the back. Four levels of trim offered: base, S, XS and ES.

There's a choice of two power units: the petrol engine is the familiar four-litre V8, but with 9 per cent more torque now at 2600rpm – that's 500rpm lower down the rev range – for improved lower-speed pulling and better response in the mid range. Power goes up by just 3bhp at an unaltered 4750rpm. It's an eager engine that gives 0–60mph in about 11sec (12sec with automatic transmission) and a maximum speed of 106mph. It's smooth and amiable and ought

to be quiet, too, but its inherent hush is marred by an underbonnet whine (like chain “wow”) that's particularly noticeable at tickover and low revs.

The vast majority of buyers, however, will opt for the 2.5-litre turbo-diesel model. This has an all-new five-cylinder engine that uses individual, camshaft operated injectors, with ultra-precise electronic control of the injection period and timing. A flat torque curve and 136bhp result, as well as a Combined official fuel consumption figure of 30mpg. Sophisticated oil filtration extends service intervals to 12,000 miles and Land Rover claims that this Td5 engine is so “clean” that no catalyser is required to meet current emission regulations.

While there's noticeably less diesel rattle at idling speed, this still isn't exactly a sweet-running oil-burner, becoming quite boomy beyond 3000rpm; that said, the automatic transmission (when specified) seems to have a beneficial damping effect on the engine, making it feel rather more refined. Although it's a somewhat unusual combination, it works well in the Discovery, particularly as the manual shift isn't anything to write home about. Come to that, neither is the stubby lever working the transfer 'box – it's stiff and awkward to operate.

In manual form the diesel is said to reach 60mph in 14.2sec (but 15.8 for the automatic), both topping out at 98mph. Among the engine's refinements are a drive-by-wire accelerator with anti-shunt control, and a two-stage throttle response which, when low range is selected, gives a longer travel to the pedal over rough terrain.

The new Discovery is laden with so-called dynamic control systems, including anti-lock brakes (a bit too light and "sudden" for our liking), electronic braking distribution, electronic traction control and hill descent control. The last was first seen in the Freelander, since when it's been given electronic control and an irritating "beeper". It's a formidable array of braking wizardry, but the technology doesn't end there: cue ACE (that's active cornering enhancement). Combined with the self-levelling air suspension, this system (standard on XS and SE) applies roll-resisting forces to the suspension via hydraulic actuators. It works well, too – it feels quite uncanny to hustle a big Disco into bends without any body lean, though to be honest, unless you drive the thing like a sports car, it's difficult to justify. This system allows softer springs to be used, but the ride remains somewhat jiggly and fidgety on less than smooth surfaces.

There have to be suspension compromises here, of course, and when the going gets tough off road, all is forgiven; the ride over ruts and rocks is excellent, with no sudden kick through the modified steering, which is nevertheless positive enough to enable the driver to cope with country road gaps with confidence.

Superb though the Discovery is off road, it isn't infallible. Despite the ECU's ability to detect that the vehicle has grounded at low speed and to pump up the rear springs to help it over the obstacle, we got well and truly stuck in the mire and had to be hauled out.

The cabin features new seats (leather and six-way powered on the ES) which give firm support, but are short in the cushion for long-legged drivers for whom there's only just enough rearward travel. These grouses apart, the "Command" driving position is excellent, with forward vision improved by a taller windscreen. Ingeniously the centre back seat has a head restraint which lowers when the armrest is pulled down, thereby improving the view to the rear. The top of the (lowered) spare wheel is still visible, though.

The latest facia and interior trim have an impressive solidity and quality feel to them, but the early cars we drove suffered from wind noise at speed and the doors fidgeted on their seals over rough ground. Later production models may be free to these irritations. Tyre noise, even on coarse road surfaces is uncannily low, it has to be said.

The increase in length means an extra 9cm of legroom and 3cm of kneeroom for rear passengers, so accommodation is even more generous, with good footspace and ample headroom. The extra space has enabled a pair of forward-facing child seats (with flip-up head restraints in the roof) to be incorporated on all but the base model, in place of the former, less-safe, sideways mounted perches. They're pretty weighty, but with a practised twist and lift action, they stow neatly in the recessed flanks of the roomy, uncluttered load area. This can be greatly enlarged by double-folding the divided centre row seats. A headphone system is available for youngsters who can listen to a cassette while their parents enjoy the 320-watt, 12-speaker "concert hall" in-car entertainment option.

Air conditioning is standard on the ES (optional on S and XS) and is automatically controlled with independent side-to-side settings; an optional rear air con system is available on any seven-seater model.



Numerous storage spaces, door bins and stowage pockets are provided, and there's even a "curry hook" for your takeaway.

An upgraded security system includes a standard alarm and immobiliser, together with improved central locking. Only the base model lacks a front passenger airbag, but all have full three-point seatbelts and head restraints. A lot of work has also gone into making the body stronger, safer and better protected.

VERDICT

The new and roomier Discovery is teeming with new technology, which makes it safer, securer and more pleasing to drive. Choose the V8 for

effortless performance (and a big thirst) or the Td5 for less refinement but improved economy. And don't dismiss the Td5 automatic – it's a worthy compromise.

Whichever model you decide on, you'll be impressed by its on-road ride, especially with ACE, but we still think that the best of the latest MPVs give smoother and more supple progress. But then, of course, these aren't trying to reconcile two conflicting requirements.

Thanks to the wizardry of its sophisticated control systems, the new Discovery improves even further on its legendary off-road prowess. Seems a shame that so few owners will ever experience even a fraction of its formidable capabilities.

FACTS AND FIGURES

	Diesel Td5	Petrol V8
ENGINE		
Type	in line five cylinder	– longitudinal – V8
Capacity	2495cc	3950cc
Valves	single OHC, 10 valves	single OHC per bank, 16 valves
Fuel/ignition	electronic unit injection with turbocharger and intercooler; compression ignition	multi-point injection integrated with distributorless ignition
Power	136bhp at 4200rpm	182bhp at 4750rpm
Torque	221 lb ft at 1950rpm	250 lb ft at 2600rpm
TRANSMISSION		
Type	five-speed manual (four-speed automatic optional) with high and low ratio transfer 'box and permanent four-wheel drive; electronic traction control	
Mph per 1000rpm	manual 25.4 automatic 26.8	– in top gear – manual 26.7 automatic 26.8
CHASSIS		
Suspension – front	live axle with radius arms, coil springs and a Panhard rod, twin-tube dampers and an anti-roll bar or active cornering enhancement; self-levelling	
– rear	coil- or air-sprung live axle with radius arms, Watts linkage, twin-tube dampers and anti-roll bar or active cornering enhancement; self-levelling	
Steering	worm and roller with hydraulic power assistance; 3.5 turns between locks	
Wheels	7J alloy with 235R16 tyres	
Brakes	ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with servo assistance; ABS and electronic brake distribution standard	
DIMENSIONS		
Length	471cm	
Width (including mirrors)	219cm	
Height (without roof bars)	194cm	