

# Time Machine

**Every day of my life I need to be in at least two places at once, and every free slice of time has stuffed into it a whole pie of urgent things to do so a fast sports car would be handy, right?**

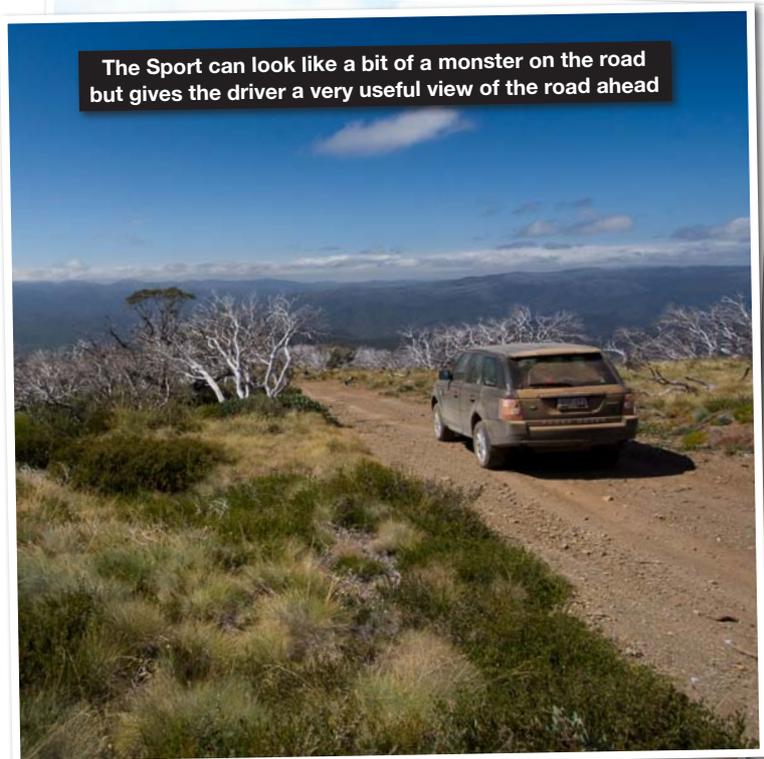
**Words and Photos by Robert Pepper**

**W**hat I need is a time machine like Doctor Who's Tardis, to cut travel times down to nothing, so I can bid my colleagues farewell with one breath and be reading my kids a bedtime story with the next. But of course a story book is the only place you'll find such a machine. For today, the car is still the ultimate transportation answer for people who need to get from A to B via an unplanned and urgent diversion to C. The only improvement would be a Transformer car; one that changes into a tiny buzzbox for the traffic and parking, before metamorphosing into a roaring grand tourer V12 for the open road, the sort of car that goes from 0-100 in half a grin. Then it turns into a screaming all-wheel-drive rally weapon for dirt roads, followed by a conversion into a real 4WD for the terrain that would have your roadcar cowering behind the nearest bush, dribbling fluids in abject terror. Oh, and it would be able to carry assorted camera gear,

laptops, people and whatever else needs to be moved, with a range sufficiently great so you could refuel it when you want to, not when you have to.

This, then, would be the chariot of choice for a journalist who agrees to cover one event, and then shortly afterwards, without checking any of the e-diaries as his disposal, agrees to be a guest speaker at another event some 330km distant – at the same time.

Clearly, either I needed a hugely impressive excuse, or a hugely impressive time machine. The latter sounded like more fun, so I called Land Rover, which is always inventing new ways to move around the world. But it appears that the company has been a bit slack and hasn't yet got any form of Tardis on its press fleet - or even a rudimentary teleportation device. Land Rover did, however, lend me the next best thing, which is a Range Rover Sport. This is a car 'conceived', to use marketing-speak, as a sports tourer. In other





words, it is meant to achieve the diametrically opposed goals of being a sports car and a 4WD. In lieu of a Tardis, that'll do.

This has been tried many times before, but where others pretend, the Sport starts to succeed. This is because the car can be tailored to the terrain; the air suspension means it can sit low on the road to minimise body roll, yet raise the ride height when off-road. It can change the throttle response and gearshift points with Terrain Response. It's like a slick salesman who can go from bit o' rough tradie to cultured blueblood depending on who walks through the door.

That is the marketing, and we are here to tell you how well the RRS manages to be two different animals. Around town the Sport is an auto diesel, so you don't get an instantaneous response, but it's nimble enough. In my Defender I have to forsake gaps in the traffic for chasms, but the Sport can go for the smaller spaces, if not the sort of crevices suited to zippity towncars. ►



**It'll get you there! and not at a snail's pace either**

The 11.6m turning circle is good, and if you drop the air suspension it's less than 1800mm tall, so car parks – no problem, especially with the great all-round visibility.

Sports car owning friends of mine made rude remarks when they discovered the RRS weighs 2400kg, offers 140kw, is diesel and achieves a 0-100kph time of 12.7 seconds which is more regally slow than gut-churningly quick. All-out acceleration does not leave the driver a gibbering mess, innards pulped by g-forces as the car hurtles towards the horizon. The tyres begin to squeal at cornering speeds that a sports car would consider a warm-up. In short, on a racetrack the diesel 2.7 Sport would be left floundering well behind any ordinary saloon.

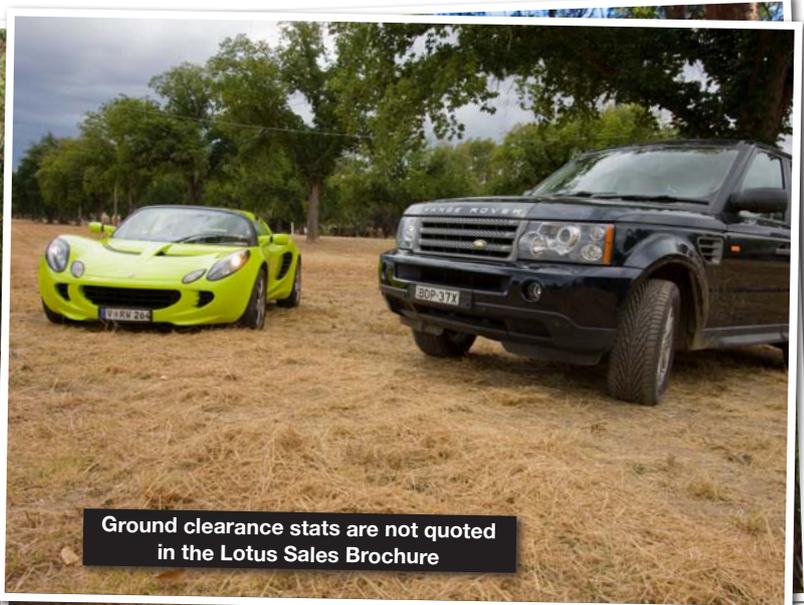
But the Sport, despite the name, is not about track days. It is about real-world speed, when you need to be somewhere else, rather quickly. And when I am, as usual, in that sort of situation, my preferred teleportation device would be a Sport, not some snarling sportsmobile, because I'd get there quicker. Yes, even with that 12.7

second acceleration figure sneered at by my ignorant mates. Now allow me to justify the heresy.

Firstly, not all roads are smooth, especially the Aussie rural ones I find myself on. For example, on the way home some maintenance workers have cut the tarmac to install a pipe, leaving a temporary gravel patch. In the Sport I didn't even slow down and barely felt the bump. A sports car driver would have left a trail of plastic body parts all the way to the chiropractor. Rough roads? Again the Sport simply wafts over seriously damaged roads, which would see road cars gingerly crawling in second, or having brown-trouser moments should one be foolish enough to enter at speed. Any advantage the road car gained through the smooth twisties would be well and truly erased in the first moments of dirt road driving. That is, of course, assuming the sportsmobile was actually quicker through the bends to begin with, and it may well not be. This occurred to me when I had a chance to drive a Lotus Elise back to back with the Sport.



**Get too close and the Lotus disappears from view**



**Ground clearance stats are not quoted in the Lotus Sales Brochure**



**On-Road, Off-Road, through water, the Sport can tackle them all with absolute confidence**



The Elise is one of my favourite cars of all time, a sort of slightly oversize go-kart you wear rather than get into, and control more by telepathy than actual physical effort. It is as much fun as one can have with one's clothes on, and should be prescribed as an anti-depressant. There are at least ten variations all beginning with 'E' offering slightly different versions of automotive ecstasy, and I want them all, in orange. But not as a daily driver, because they're slow.

If we remain in the real world, at real speed limits, let's also assume you are going to drive quickly, but safely. Which means stopping within the distance you can see ahead, as per Roadcraft and my IAM driving instruction. Now from the cockpit of a Sport, that is a long way. As you arrive at a hairpin, standing on the excellent brakes, you glance sideways, and see that the apex and exit is indeed clear. Then you can attack the corner, secure in the knowledge that the suspension, tyres and all-wheel-drive will help deal with any mid-corner irregularities.

In, say, the Elise, you glance sideways and get an excellent view

of the tops of grassblades, with the local bugs peering down at you, little insecty eyes bulging in awe. Whatever dangers the corner may hold will not be apparent until you're almost through it, so you need to go slowly. Then you also quickly discover the road is not quite as smooth as it seemed from within the Sport, and that does nothing for confidence. Every nuance of the road, every undulation is faithfully transmitted through the vehicle and up along your spine where it reverberates around inside your skull. It is this oneness with the road that makes the Elise the experience it is, but such intensity is not conducive to covering the miles. So you end up going slower through the corners, yes, slower than the diesel 4WD and you're limited by law to the same top speed anyway.

Similarly, consider being stuck behind Mr Sunday Driver on a straight road with lots of small hills. You can't overtake Mr Sunday until you see it's clear ahead, and if you're in the Elise, with a perspective of the road akin to that of a luge rider, by that time you're past the crest of the hill. ►

The Sport driver, although driving the slower car, will have seen it is clear many seconds beforehand and have diesel'd his way past. The Elise driver is still waiting, twitching foot over loud pedal, wondering if there is indeed convoy of trucks in the dip.

Hence my contention that a quick 4WD is often quicker, real world, than a quick sports car. I might add that the Sport can be loaded with all my photography and camping gear, and much more, whereas the Elise is chocker after taking on a small digital camera.

Now you can argue all you like about what makes a sport car and what doesn't, and to be frank I'm over the whole measurebator zillions of kilowatts and fractions of a nanosecond 0-100 times. My definition is quite simple; does the car make you want to take the long way home via the bendy bits and put a smile on your dial? Or does it not?

With the Sport the answer is simple – I find myself irresistibly drawn to curvy country roads – but I can play with the Sport all I like without losing three quarters of my wealth. One of the drives of my life was indeed that 330km run in the Sport from Cooma via the Snowy to Mitta Mitta. I got out, did a 45 minute presentation. Got back in and drove 330km back to Cooma. Let me tell you, that was an automotive experience ranking with the very best. Can't put it any simpler than that. And I did it without needing to refuel either – very important when you're dashing around. I have joked that the Range Rover Sport is really Discovery Short, and that may be true enough for a laugh but it sells the Sport's abilities...short.



But enough about on-road. By definition, every all-rounder is competent at lots of things. But they also tend to have a speciality, and for the RRS, it's low-range work. There are other 4WDs that can match or exceed it for at-speed dynamics. But the only ones that can keep up with it in the rough would be blown away like confetti on the smooth stuff. The Sport has, for an indie suspension car, long wheel travel with cross-linked height adjustable air suspension. Translation; clearance is not a problem. It's manoeuvrable. Ample

torque, and thanks to the tailored throttle response you can request another quarter-Nm and it is delivered instantly, thank you sir. Great traction control. The car just works off-road, and I now believe the Land Rover exec who told me it was better than the Defender. My litmus test is simple; with all-terrain tyres, would I hesitate to point the car's nose down any 4WD track in the wet? Not in the Sport.

So is there anything to criticise? Well, I think it looks terrible from the back, but that's as much of a problem as the inside of

Cameron Diaz's nose not being very attractive; I simply won't look there. There's other niggles too, but all are forgivable, in the big scheme of things, because the Sport has that most desirable of features, desirability.

You see, I've just spent quite a lot of time driving Toyota LCV8s. And I have developed a huge respect and affection for the big Toyota, in the same way you become fondly appreciative of a very well-designed fridge that just always works and isn't offensive or troublesome in any way. That's not desirable though, and life is too short to spend it on admiration of white goods or things that merely work, car design is beyond mere function. Desirable is your new MP3 player that feels just right, associated with the fun and exciting times in your life, something that has a frisson of thrill to it. A joy of ownership you don't get from a kettle, no matter how good the cup of tea it produces. Whatever it is, the Sport has it for me. It's the sort of car that small boys would have on a bedroom poster.

So if the Sport was an athlete, it wouldn't win any swimming contests. It wouldn't be first to finish the marathon, or take home the gold in cycling, and it certainly wouldn't hear its national anthem sung after the 100m sprint. But if the content was the triathlon – a medley of open highways, dirt roads and offroad tracks, oh and throw weightlifting in too – then I would be betting that not only would very few would finish, but the Sport would be on the central step of the podium, and looking charismatically good to boot. It's my choice for a Time Machine. **LRW**



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