



JUDGEMENT DAY

After all the fuss, and all the awards, there is only one question that remains about the Range Rover Evoque. Just how good is it off-road? A true Range Rover or a case of Emperor's new clothes?

Words and photography: Robert Pepper

It is something of an understatement to say that Land Rover has a hit on its hands with the Evoque, and you just need to look at it to see why – it's coolly different. I run "guess the 4x4" photo competitions on my Facebook site, and I never use Land Rovers because they're too distinctive, but even by Land Rover standards the Evoque is seriously sub-zero. For example, when Land Rover Australia drivers were running in the press cars, they stopped at a red light and in the adjacent lane a nose-to-tail crash ensued. The driver responsible admitted that he was so entranced by his first sight of the Evoque he smacked into the car in front. But you knew all this; so let's move on. Like any iconic car, the legendary Range Rover reputation wasn't forged by looks alone, but looks with real ability. That badge sets a high expectation. Can the Evoque match up?

On the road, the Evoque is different to the Freelander despite sharing some

common platform sections. It's better. Sharper, more agile, more fun. My first experience was on a six-hour drive one evening, mostly in the pouring rain, at night, through my favourite lanes. Wet roads? Didn't notice. The Evoque just gripped, grabbed and we were gone. The auto diesel was sufficiently powerful with just enough of a rorty note to please, but the transmission can be slow to select a gear, fixed by choosing Sport on the transmission dial, or using the paddle shifts to select gears. Brakes are beautiful, the handling is neutral, controlled and quite simply the Evoque is a fun and rapid bit of point-to-point hardware.

But is it a driver's car? Here I must hesitate. Competence and rapidity are not the same as driving pleasure, and the Evoque is typical of a modern car, just a little too artificial. It does everything perfectly because of the computers, which gently ease the car into line, almost imperceptibly working

to correct, lessen, allow. For me, true driving enjoyment comes from the pure interface between man and machine – control, feedback, adjustment, delight. I don't get that direct sensation of driving fusion from the Evoque, so the icing isn't quite on the cake for me.

This Evoque is, however, much more accomplished and refined in every way than the very basic manual diesel I sampled a few months ago – my strong advice is buy the automatic, and go for the top-end spec levels to get the full Evoque Experience. But does that experience extend beyond the tarmac?

The off-roading question is threefold – how good is the Evoque in the rough, how does it compare to its peers, and finally – does its off-road performance merit the Range Rover badge? To answer those questions we'd need terrain that perhaps the Evoque wasn't designed for, or the target buyers would not wish to attempt. So we ran the Evoque along our standard test loop

Top: The Evoque is at home in slippery conditions, provided you allow for the front-drive bias



Top: The front left wheel is spinning, but neither rear wheel is rotating, hence we're going nowhere. This shouldn't be possible, and is akin to driving a Discovery 2 or Defender with the centre diff unlocked. The 4x4 system should send more torque to the rear wheels, and the vehicle should only fail to proceed when one front and one rear (usually diagonal) wheels have lost traction. The rear wheels have weight on them, so should have more torque to make use of the traction

through Aussie state forests, places I've driven many a vehicle and trained many a driver, so it's terrain I can accurately use to benchmark a car. Of particular note are the Freelander 2 manual and Suzuki Grand Vitara we took out for a side-by-side comparison test. But first, some specifications.

It's unfair to say the Evoque is just a Freelander with a nice body. The 4x4 system is essentially the same, a front-wheel-drive biased, traction control, Terrain Response and a six-speed automatic. Evoques come with the hateful space-saver spare tyre, but can be optioned with full-sizers, and they also come with something even more important, which is extremely rare for the class, and that is recovery points front and rear, hidden behind covers. Land Rover engineers are a bit coy about their use for recovery, but they're as good as you'll get and much, much stronger and safer than the screw-in bolts typically used by vehicles in this class. So the Evoque is off to a good start ahead of its peers with an optional full-size spare, recovery points and a reasonably clean underbody with no serious hang-up points.

The Evoque is necessarily a bit limited on angles and clearance by virtue of size and design, and the real issue is the approach angle of only 25 degrees, even less on Dynamic models. Still, I was looking for it to perform as best it could within those limitations, so the first test was to point it at the same hill the Freelander had failed miserably. A steep hill, rutted, is the toughest test of a 4x4 as it asks a lot of ability to put ►

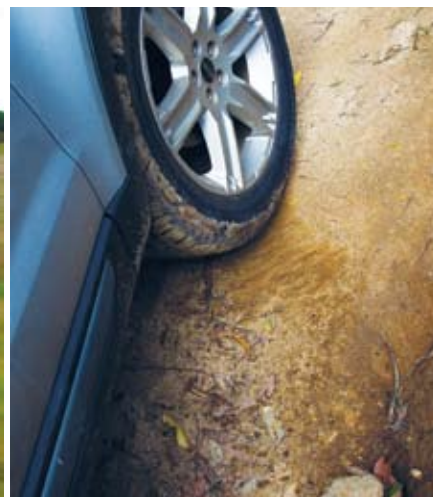


Middle left: All too often a wheel is lifted, which it itself isn't a huge problem if the 4x4 system could cope with it. However, the Evoque always remains stable and balanced.

Left: This is serious off-road terrain. The Evoque managed it, slowly but surely. Therefore, it's fair to say the car does have real off-road capability

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The Evoque surely deserves a 4x4 system similar to what's used on the Discovery 4



power to the ground and the engine to develop useful torque at low speeds.

So at the bottom of the hill, into Mud/Ruts, DSC off, first gear selected and off we go, up this steep but quite short hill which a few months ago a Range Rover Vogue had treated with such majestic disdain I felt like applauding. In the Evoque there's beautiful throttle response, no torque shortage despite the low speed and gradient, and we're climbing, I'm willing it on, we're up on the slope now... and then it happens, just like the Freelander. Wheels are spinning, we're going nowhere, all over. I apply the brakes, and the same problem as the Freelander rears its ugly head. The Evoque isn't going to make this hill unless I drive it like a missile, and the tragedy is it doesn't need to be that way.

The Evoque's 4x4 system biases drive to the front so we had both front wheels spinning, with insufficient drive going to the rears, which have lots of weight on them due to the gradient, and thus lots of traction. Therefore, the car couldn't make it up the hill because it couldn't put its power to the wheels with traction. Then when I reduced brake pressure to come down the hill both front wheels locked, and the rears kept rotating. This is because there's little weight on the front, but also because like every car the Evoque's brakes are biased towards the front for safety and handling reasons. But when the front wheels lock you lose lateral traction on the front, and therefore the car slews sideways if the wheels spin. And that's what happened.

Top left: The Evoque is a very good dirt-road cruiser; assured, confident, nimble and powerful. The electronics do not retard progress, yet keep things under control

Top right: Skid marks showing the Evoque's front wheels slewing downhill as the front drives but the rear doesn't contribute as much as it should

Above right: Evoque has the throttle control and manoeuvrability to deal with obstacles like this, but does tend to run out of approach angle in particular

Now the Evoque looks the way it is for a reason, and is a certain size, and that's why it has the clearance and angles it does. It's a necessary compromise and it would be unfair to expect greater angles or clearance. But there's no reason I can see why it shouldn't have a better 4x4 system more able to distribute torque to where it's needed, as it wouldn't make any difference to the car's looks or style.

So the Evoque failed on the hill other cars with better 4x4 systems have conquered, and this wasn't about low range as it had sufficient power, or even due to its limited suspension flex. The simple reason was the car's lack of ability to put power to the ground in extreme situations. You can replicate much the same effect in the likes of a Discovery 2 or Defender by trying to drive steep hills with the centre diff unlocked. The Evoque sorely needs a 4x4 system similar to what's used in the Discovery 4. The drive-on-demand-to-the-rear system it has is by no means unusual in its class, and the likes of the XC90, CR-V and Santa Fe all suffer from the same problem. So why be harsh on the Evoque? Well, none of the other cars have on the bonnet those words "Range Rover", which is shorthand for "just amazingly good off-road", and I wasn't amazed.

You may be wondering what I'm doing attempting to reverse an Evoque down a hill by modulating the brakes, because that's old-school where the driver does something. So I drove the Evoque up the hill again and did it the Land Rover Approved way - came to

a halt, into reverse, let the electronics do their stuff and was immediately impressed. Gradient Release Control (GRC) ever so gently and smoothly - I do like that - eased off the brakes and eased the Evoque back down the hill, albeit with some considerable noise, and under control. As HDC/GRC brakes each wheel individually you don't have the front-wheel-lockup problem described earlier. Beautiful!

Unfortunately... GRC then decided it had done sufficient easing and the Evoque jumped backwards. Just as I was about to hit the brakes HDC got there before me and abruptly slowed the car to its target speed. One of my test crew was already shaking his head, not liking. Nor me. Dear Land Rover, please make GRC active until the HDC target speed is reached. And while you're at it, quarter the minimum HDC speed, thanks.

The remainder of that drive was a variety of climbs, a few of which the Evoque was unable to negotiate at what I would consider a safe speed, much like the Freelander before it, and unlike the similarly sized Grand Vitara which romped it all - yep, Suzuki was best here. Momentum can conquer all of course, but the limitation on momentum is clearance and angles. The Evoque has a shallower approach angle than the Freelander, and as you build momentum the suspension starts to compress so clearance and angles are reduced even further, and risk starts to build up. One particular climb involved a significant cross-angle at the base, and the Evoque felt like it hit a ►

TECHNICAL

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wall as the front wheels lifted high in the air and the 4x4 system just couldn't handle the torque distribution to the rear. We tried as much momentum as we dared but to no effect, and the annoying thing is the rear tyres had pretty good grip if only they had the drive to make use of it.

Next up was a fairly level, rutted, rocky track with plenty of side-angles and a bit of an incline, one I use for intermediate-level off-road courses. Happy to say the Evoque conquered this one, but we had to do a lot of road-building by judicious placement of rocks. When you place rocks to build often you do so for clearance, so the chassis can be lifted higher, but sometimes also for traction so the car has the weight more equally on all four wheels. With the Evoque we had to do both, and were surprised how little we had to worry about clearance, but dismayed at how much we needed to worry about traction. Same problem again – the drive is biased to the front, so it's apt to lose traction on the front which swings the nose into places you don't want. But on the positive side, the Evoque has truly superb throttle response, especially by the standards of a vehicle without low range, and never ran out of torque. This is an off-underrated feature of an off-roader, but one that's critical to performance. And as a benchmark, the previous test car I took through that track was the Ford Ranger and at times I felt the need to engage its rear locking diff to help it through, and it also needed some momentum in places. But although the Evoque conquered the same track, that doesn't mean to say it's in the same class, as the effort and skill required to see the Evoque through was considerably greater than that of the Ranger.

What didn't help the Evoque was the loss of a famous Range Rover trademark feature, which is the "command position" visibility. This is all due to the styling, which demands a high door sill, raked A-pillar thick with airbag and tiny mirrors for looks which doesn't add up to traditional Range panoramic visibility. Perhaps the designers knew that and that's why the seat was height-adjustable which reduced the problem to a minor irritant. The rear visibility is not the finest either.

We also had a bit of a play in slippery mud conditions. This is where the Evoque is much more comfortable as it is agile, the traction control is effective, and while the front-bias problem is still a problem it is less of an issue on flatter terrain, and the excellent throttle control is a boon. However, it is ultimately limited primarily by underbody clearance, but also the approach angle.

There's one very important point in the Evoque's favour and that is it never gave up, never displayed an



error, and never hesitated even though it was in conditions far beyond most target owners' intentions. Competitor 4x4s would have been cowering in the bushes with half what we asked of the Evoque, dribbling fluids in terror with overheated drivelines copping out in limp modes. So for this performance alone the Evoque has my respect. Sure, it's limited, but it's confidence inspiring within its limitations.

So, that's what happened, but we need to translate that into a result. I'm happy to report that despite appearances, the Evoque has the basic design features you need (not want) in an off-roader, and does indeed offer useable ability in the rough. With decent tyres, I'd happily drive one as far as I could anywhere in Australia and that is certainly not something I would say of its competitors.

As the Freelander has slightly better clearance and angles I'd put it just above the Evoque for off-road capability as if you don't have clearance, not much else matters, although there will be situations which favour the Evoque's lighter weight. Now, is it worthy of a Range Rover badge as an off-roader? Looking back on my first experiences with the Sport and the Vogue, I remember being

truly impressed. Yet I'm disappointed with the Evoque – the 4x4 system could be better with no change to the important looks – so I don't think its off-road capability does the badge justice. Range Rovers did not become a legend by looks alone.

Outside of its class, the Evoque, like all soft-roaders, is not in the same off-road league as most other low-range vehicles primarily because all these have 4x4 systems better capable of putting power to the ground, and greater clearance. The lack of low range is also a relative disadvantage, but not as much as clearance, and indeed the car points the way towards the time when low-range gearboxes will be a faint memory. In fact, if Land Rover was to make just two changes to the Evoque – height-adjustable suspension and the Discovery's 4x4 system – then I'd be pretty close to saying there'd be few places a Discovery could go that an Evoque couldn't follow, at least unloaded. As it is, Evoque owners can rest assured that beneath that stylish exterior, there does indeed beat the heart of a vehicle with real off-road capability, and it's a car I'd take into the Aussie bush over any of its competitors. **4x4**

Top: Can't go over a rock, must go around. We really, really don't want the front end to slide downhill here. Side-angles aren't an issue for Evoque, which is always nice and stable

Above: For the majority of real life owner derived off-road situations, the Evoque will cope admirably