



THE FLYING SQUAD

We all know the Land Rover Defender can go anywhere. But who knew it could go anywhere at high speed? David Lillywhite tries one built for stage rallying

Photography Drew Gibson

IT MAKES NO SENSE, THIS. Land Rovers are surely not meant to be driven this quickly, this sideways, but the madman beside me is urging me to go faster, to keep my foot in when every instinct is to back off and return to trundling gently over the bumps, rather than – literally – flying over them.

Instead we head fast into a tight, deeply rutted turn, and the front ploughs forward in chronic understeer. 'Power, more power!' shouts the madman over the clatter of stones and the roar of the diesel. The understeer fades and immediately the back swings out. 'DON'T LIFT!' the madman screams. I manage to overcome the urge to bring my foot off the accelerator, I keep on the power, and the rear tyres dig in as we scabble round the corner, bounce wildly out of the ruts, slew part-sideways down the straight – 'Change up. Faster!' – then straighten out and prepare for the next bend, and the same assault on my senses.

This is possibly the scariest, most difficult thing I've ever done in a vehicle: rally training in a short-wheelbase Defender, with only half a day available to learn a skill that feels completely and utterly alien.

The madman is Edd Coble, renowned Land Rover off-road instructor and racer, who has taken it upon himself to give me an intense course in the skills required in the popular Defender Challenge series.

Not heard of it? Well, basically it's a series of seven UK hill and stage rallies, but instead of an Escort, or an Impreza or an Evo, everyone drives Defender 90 Hard Tops modified by Bowler Motorsport to FIA T2 regulations. The idea is that the series is not only a relatively low-cost way into rallying, using vehicles that can fulfil more typical 4x4 duties in-between rallies, but also a possible stepping stone into rally raid events such as the Africa Race and even the legendary Dakar.

The Defender I'm in is Bowler's own, and typical of a Challenge vehicle. The interior has been stripped out and equipped with MSA-approved rollcage, plumbed-in

extinguisher system, competition seats, six-point harnesses, smaller-diameter steering wheel, Peltor intercom, Terratrip and map-reading light, fusebox moved to the centre console, seatbelt cutter and glass hammer within reach, emergency spares package tucked away under the seat.

It has a 2.2-litre, four-cylinder diesel, not the rip-snorting petrol V8 that you might expect, but that's fine because it's torque that's needed here, and there's 332lb ft of that, along with 170bhp, thanks to the Bowler upgrade. The transmission is the stock super-tough six-speeder but suspension is by Bowler, with upgraded coils and anti-roll bars, Bilstein dampers and control Cooper tyres on Bowler 16in wheels. Bumpers are lightweight items by Bowler, as are the door shells. And I think that's it – though there is an optional brake upgrade, and you could also pay out for full Bowler service support. So, back to the madness...

HOW WEIRD IT feels climbing *up* into a race seat, and it's weirder still to start the engine to a diesel clatter that vibrates through the entire structure, and mine too. With harnesses tight it's a stretch to shove the long gearlever into first, having first pulled the low-high ratio selector out then back into high, just to double-check it's fully engaged.

We pull away, straight into second with another stretch, and clatter over the bumps, the stiffer suspension immediately obvious. The steering wheel fidgets and fights, but should I let it move as you would in slow-speed offroading or should I grip it tight? Edd advises not to fight it but to guide it between the ruts, as we build up speed and I get used to that odd sensation of feeling 1800kg of 2m-high vehicle shifting around constantly on the rough surface. This isn't easy!

'Faster!' comes the Coble command over the roar of the engine, the whine of the transmission and the clatter of the stones, and we're bouncing around, steering wheel going this way and that, heads shaken side to side, backwards and forwards, internal organs taking a →





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Clockwise from top Splash! Defender copes with deep water but is built more for rally stages; Edd Cobley explains to David how to be mad; full cage offers much-needed protection; competition seats and small steering wheel feel incongruous.

pounding, my arms flailing and hands getting in the way of each other as I attempt to twirl the wheel fast enough to compensate for the slides of a vehicle that’s only a little bit longer than it’s wide and tall. ‘Crikey,’ I’d have cried if I wasn’t instead muttering foul obscenities.

And then Edd throws in the joker, calling the corners in co-driver style, ‘100 left 4’, ‘50 right 2’, and I add attempt-to-gauge-distance skills to my off-road floundering. Thirty minutes in and I’m exhausted, mentally even more than physically, head pounding and mouth dry.

A quick break and another go, faster this time, and it feels like I’m getting the hang of it, chasing down another, more experienced Defender Challenge competitor, until we start sliding at high speed (though high speed here is probably 50mph) and I lift off, lose the back end and go clattering dramatically off the track.

I’ve lost the fight, and want nothing more than a nice cup of tea and a biscuit, not this rally madness. We swap seats, and Edd is on it immediately, much faster, much

smoother, much – well – madder... If we spend any time at all actually heading in a straight line or with all four wheels on the ground then I missed it. Incredible!

It’s not easy, this Land Rover rallying stuff, not easy at all, but my goodness it’s exhilarating, and the most unexpectedly brilliant alternative to the usual stage rallies that could be imagined. I’d like another go soon, but I’d better man-up and mad-up before I try it again.

ONE LAST THING, and it’s important. One of the Challenge teams is Mission Motorsport, the charity that helps injured servicemen back into everyday life. With sponsorship from Land Rover, a new Mission Motorsport team of four – two technicians, driver, co-driver – enters each round of the Challenge. Look out for them in the final UK stages in Ludlow, Pickering and The Borders. **END**

THANKS TO Bowler Motorsport, Edd Cobley, Phil Price Rally School, and Protrax Overland Adventures.