



The Buyer's View



Buyer's View: Land Rover



Discovery 3

The Iconic Brand

When *World Leather* carries out research for the Buyer's View, we visit many different companies that use leather in some form in their product ranges. Some of these companies are better known through their products than their name but there are some whose names have become so well-known that they have established themselves as iconic brands.

Such a company—Land Rover—was visited recently at its headquarters in the Midlands of Britain.

Redefining concepts

Year by year, Land Rover models have redefined the world's 4x4 categories and with its long tradition of rugged off-road vehicles Land Rover has carved for itself a unique place in the league table of car suppliers. It has managed to become an iconic brand, which stands for go-anywhere capability coupled with luxury and a "country" style.

The first Land Rover appeared in 1948—a brilliantly simple and inventive working vehicle. Brothers Spencer and Maurice Wilks, Land Rover's creators working from the new plant at Solihull, developed a vehicle that combined utilitarian simplicity

with rugged, dependable quality. By the mid-1950s, the Land Rover name had been firmly established as a watchword for durability and off-road excellence. Military and agricultural users, as well as sectors such as recovery and emergency services, all found in Land Rover the qualities they valued in a vehicle. And by 1959 the 250,000th Land Rover was rolling off the production line.

Modern classics

The current product range starts with the Defender which is equally at home on a farm, carrying troops into action or cutting a swathe through the cut and thrust of the school run. Used extensively worldwide due to its ability to reach some of the most inaccessible parts of the planet, the Defender is the number one choice for explorers and adventurers alike. The history of this unique vehicle reveals a remarkable consistency of engineering vision, from the earliest models to today's Defender, over 55 years later.

The original Discovery—launched in 1989—represented a bold departure for Land Rover. The all-new shape included many distinctive design features such as an upright stance, low shoulder line, stepped

roof and Alpine roof lights to the rear of the vehicle. And it didn't stop with design. Discovery launched it with advanced technologies such as permanent 4x4 and the legendary Hill Descent Control included as standard. Although a completely new vehicle, it was clearly a Land Rover and it rapidly established itself as the desirable Sports Utility Vehicle.

Launched in 1997, Freelander showed once again that new Land Rover products always redefine their sector of the market. The Freelander launched Land Rover into a new area of the 4x4 leisure market and expanded the brand's appeal well beyond traditional 4x4 buyers. Within a year, Freelander's sales more than doubled and it became the biggest selling 4x4 in the UK, its wide span of capability, from car-like handling to authentic Land Rover off-road ruggedness, proving irresistible to buyers.

Rugged luxury

In the mid 1960s, Land Rover became convinced that the market for a more luxurious four-wheel drive vehicle was about to take off. And so began Land Rover's mission to develop a vehicle which would combine saloon car levels of performance, handling, ride comfort ➤



THE BUYER'S VIEW

The Range Rover Sport is the best-handling and best-performing vehicle that Land Rover has ever built.



and refinement with all the ruggedness and 4x4 ability of a Land Rover.

The result of this exercise was the vehicle, which has come to epitomise the ultimate genuinely multi-purpose vehicle—a luxurious practical load-carrier that could also double as a long-distance express. In 2001, New Range Rover was launched. It has been described as easily the most capable luxury vehicle in the world, with new chassis, new suspension, new drivetrain and new styling.

Dave Adey purchasing manager explained the influences on the use of leather by Land Rover. The product range slots generally into a usage profile which runs from the Defender farm transport up to the Range Rover executive cross country express. The use of leather in these ranges mirrors this. The Defender has a very small percentage, whilst the Freelander, the Discovery, the Range Rover Sport and the Range Rover have proportionately more vehicles sold with leather trim. There are also national variations with North America being a stronghold of leather interiors.

Non-standard interiors

There are of course exceptions to every rule and there is a constant demand for special order colours and styles in all models. This is especially the case for Range Rover, which as a favourite of celebrities is often specified in non-standard exotic leather trim. In these cases Land Rover send the vehicles to a specialist

trimmer such as Anderson & Ryan (*see World Leather vol 15 no 5*) who fit out the vehicles to the exact customer specification.

Land Rover uses three qualities of upholstery leather in its ranges:

The Base level leather is a full grain printed chrome retanned hide, the Premium leather is a higher selection with fewer faults and the Luxury leather is taken from selected top grade hides. There is no specification for country of origin for the raw hides with the exception of South African hides for the South African vehicles.

The Luxury leather is also finished with a softer feel than the Base and Premium hides. The main selection is undertaken in the tanneries at the wet blue stage and all the leather supplied has to conform to the full Land Rover specification. This specification covers all the usual physical properties with particular emphasis on very high rub fastness due to the unique way



that the greater seat height of a 4x4 leads to the outer edges of the seat being subjected to extra wear as passengers slide out of the vehicle.

The instrument panel is finished with a wet white tannage which is pre-shrunk to give the tight shape retention required on the extreme shapes. This is also an area of the interior which is subject to extremes of heat.

The steering wheels are covered in finished split, which is very satisfactory owing to the solid construction allowing minimal flex in the surface.

Tough customer

Land Rover works in partnership with a selected number of tanneries, known as its Legacy suppliers, who are situated in Europe and worldwide but the company is always ready to consider new suppliers for its leather. Although the companies are usually well known to the vehicle manufacturers, they will have all the requisite ISO accreditations and will already have a reputation for being on-the-ball as a competent business. Certain vehicle applications could require a leather which might lend itself to a particular tannery's techniques or range but Dave Adey added that it is not a matter of just sampling a leather from a new supplier. After an initial presentation there would be up to 6-8 months of testing to verify every possible performance characteristic coupled with visits to the manufacturing plant to check the facilities.

Land Rover nominates the hide supplier to selected cutters and sewers who provide made up seats to the car plant in Solihull. The seats are delivered on a Just-In-Time basis so no stocks are held at Land Rover.

A fine cut

The cutting operation is one of the key steps in the seat making process and is also a crucial step in selecting the quality of the leather used in the interior of the car. The cutters are trained to recognise and understand the various natural characteristics of upholstery leather. The company employed a well-known furniture maker to explain what kinds of scars and marks customers will and will not tolerate. This information was used to prepare an A4 sized base guide of pictures of leather surfaces with scars graded from 1-4. The cutters were then trained to know where to place the leather, from the highly visible fascia area to the insides of map pockets.

Land Rover does not have any preference as to the method of cutting, leaving this to



the cutting companies. These use a variety of methods including operator selection and cutting by hand or pressknives, electronic scanning and cutting by knife or water jet. There are pros and cons for each method with a high skill factor and labour cost in the former and a high initial equipment cost in the latter.

The sewing operation is not necessarily carried out by the same company as the cutting, the choice being dictated by the economics of the operation.

The quality control process is an absolutely essential part of the whole operation of car trimming and can be divided into three main sectors. First, there are the stringent technical, logistical, quality, environmental and production specifications which all leather products have to meet. Second, the aesthetic properties of the upholstery leather are checked and controlled at the cutting/sewing stages of the process.

Meeting demand

Adey reported that most tanneries are



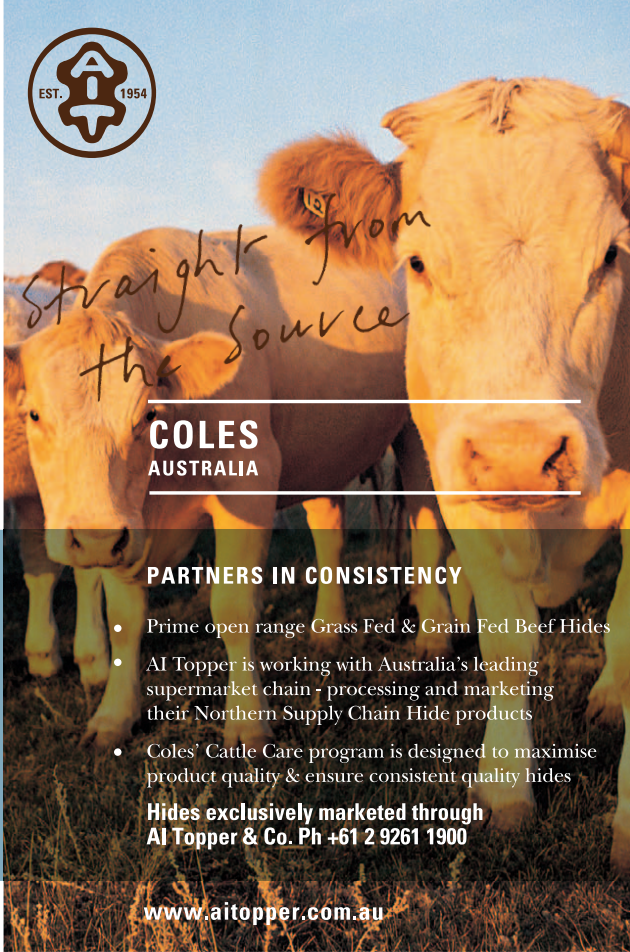
very good at responding to the aesthetic demands of the sector with trends to a particular feel, grain pattern or finish colour being easily accommodated. There are regional trends for particular markets; in the USA seat foams tend to be softer, requiring softer handling leather compared to the firmer seat foams and firmer leathers used in many European markets.

The third arm of the quality control process is made up of the warranty results and claims. As is well known, customers seem always more ready to complain about a shortfall in a product or service than to

praise good performance, so the warranty results are a valuable source of customer feed-back. Warranty claims usually lead to very rapid response in problem solving and any corrective action can result in improvements in the production processes.

Customer feed back is also sought through the colour trend and design departments who talk to selected customers to try to gauge and spot trends as early as possible. Customers are also given information on care techniques for leather upholstery by means of leaflets and swing tags. Land Rover also sells a leather cleaning kit with full instructions for day to day care of the vehicle interior.

As already discussed the car making process is highly specified but there does seem to be some understanding that upholstery leather is a natural product which adds to the vehicle interior that extra special touch, feel and ambience which cannot be written into a specification. It is this special property which enhances the already unique brand image so readily recognised in Land Rover. 



COLES AUSTRALIA

PARTNERS IN CONSISTENCY

- Prime open range Grass Fed & Grain Fed Beef Hides
- AI Topper is working with Australia's leading supermarket chain - processing and marketing their Northern Supply Chain Hide products
- Coles' Cattle Care program is designed to maximise product quality & ensure consistent quality hides

Hides exclusively marketed through
AI Topper & Co. Ph +61 2 9261 1900

www.aitopper.com.au



ALBER

Perfect in every respect

We produce splitting bandknives
for all splitting machines and all purposes.

RUDLOF ALBER GmbH & Co.
Sägen • Bandmesser • Maschinfabrik
D-73055 Ebersbach PO Box 1109
Telephone 907163) 1690 Fax (07163) -169-30
Visit us at Tanning Tech Hall 33 Stand A13