

CUTE UTE? FREELANDER'S ALSO A TOUGH LITTLE BRUTE

BY LARRY EDSALL

Photo: Ford Motor Company

They're the "cute utes," the compact sport-utility vehicles that are fine for picnics in the park or even for bringing home the groceries through a couple of inches of snow. But you wouldn't necessarily want to venture very far from pavement with one, would you?

Built for the job

But playing in the mud and surviving the Sahara and outlasting the Outback and returning from the rain forest and are precisely what Land Rovers are designed to do.

Just like its larger siblings, the new Freelander can get you into – and then out of – some remarkably nasty but spectacularly beautiful places. But unlike its larger siblings, it does all that for the price of a compact 4X4X4-door pickup truck or a sports sedan with all-wheel drive.

Our test vehicle is a 2002 Land Rover Freelander SE, and for its \$27,775 base

price you get a V6 powertrain, permanent four-wheel drive, Hill Descent Control (which we'll write more about in a few paragraphs), a stiff unibody chassis with long-travel, independent suspension, 17-inch wheels, keyless entry, power

everything – including the rear window – lots of storage nooks and cup holders and two full glove boxes and privacy glass, plus leather seats, a thick, leather-wrapped and tilting steering wheel and a CD player.

There's also a Freelander S model for \$24,975. It has cloth seats and 16-inch wheels. Or there's the HSE for \$31,575 with a power sunroof, special Alpaca beige leather, special "flat-spoke" wheels, a 240-watt Harmon Kardon audio system, in-dash six-CD changer and a navigation system.

Can we mix and match? We'll take the S version but with the 17-inch wheels and tires from the SE. And as long as we're at it, we also want the SE's fat, leather-wrapped steering wheel that provides such a secure grip and yet such precise and properly weighted feedback whether we were zipping along the

THE EAST VERDE TRAIL IS RATED A "4" IN OUR OFF-ROAD GUIDEBOOK. NOT A PROBLEM.

Interstate or allowing Hill Descent Control to control our descent on a steep off-road trail above Arizona's East Verde River.

Hitting the trail

The East Verde River Trail we follow is rated a "4" in our *Backcountry Adventures: Arizona* off-road guidebook, which recommends high-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicles for routes of this difficulty. The trail begins just north of Prescott with a turn off from Arizona 87 onto forest road 209 at mile marker 256. The route is scenic, includes river crossings, some narrow roadway, beautiful scenery and takes you past the entrance to the Crackerjack Mine. It also takes you through several gates designed to keep cattle on one side or the other; if a gate is closed as you approach, be sure to close it after you've driven through.

The East Verde River Trail ends near the old East Verde settlement site, and if you don't want to backtrack, you can return to Prescott on the Mazatzal Wilderness Trail, a much easier off-road trail to drive. However, be cautious, we encountered some oncoming, high-speed ranch-hand traffic the day we drove this route.

The Freelander's front suspension provides only 7.2 inches of clearance to the rocky road, but its independent suspension offers more than seven inches of front-wheel travel, with more than eight inches of travel at the rear.

The Freelander's 175-horsepower, 2.5-liter, double overhead-cam V6 also has the torque (177 pound-feet) to easily get us up the steepest climbs, and then Hill Descent Control simply walks us down the other side.

The Freelander has a five-speed automatic transmission that never has to hunt for the right gear, not even on the winding four-lane mountain road that brought us to the trailhead. The all-wheel-drive setup includes viscous coupling that gets the engine's torque to the wheels that have the best grip. Electronic traction control system then limits dig-in, or what some call "surface polishing," that often happen when a wheel spins without achieving grip.

It's all about control

But the technology we appreciate most is Hill Descent Control, which works the vehicle's special all-terrain antilock braking system in conjunction with the

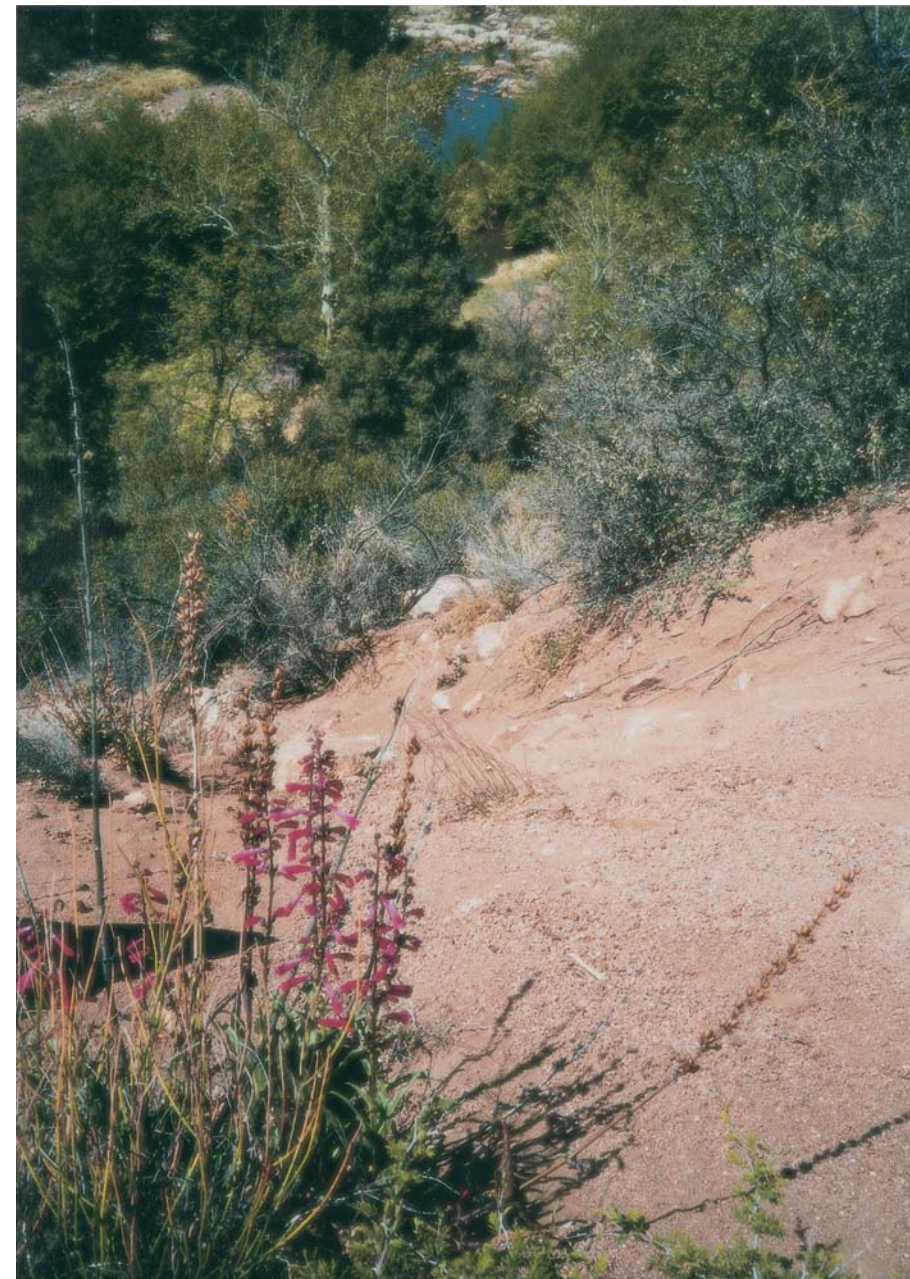


Photo: Larry Edsall

■ The East Verde River Trail is narrow and provides some steep inclines as it also provides some stunning views of the valley northwest of Prescott. The Freelander thrives on such a tough trail.

engine management system. The driver steers, you keep your feet off the pedals, and the Freelander descends the hill at a walking pace (actually, at 5.6 mph). If you encounter a sharp turns or really rough surface during the descent, the system's sensors respond and reduce your speed to 4.4 mph.

The system can be engaged – by pushing a button on the center console — in first gear or reverse. Why reverse? Sometimes you find a hill so steep or slippery that even a Land Rover can't climb all the way to the top. Imagine how terrifying backing down is in a vehicle

without Hill Descent Control.

Been there. Don't that. It wasn't pretty. Although designed primarily for off-pavement conditions, HDC also works if you find yourself trying to negotiate a steep, icy street or driveway.

The 17-inch, 225/55 aspect Michelin 4X4 Synchrone XSE tires are wonderfully sure-footed on this trail even though they are primarily on-road tires and thus very quiet even at Interstate speeds. They work through the MacPherson strut suspension, rack-and-pinion steering

KEEP RIGHT >>



Photos: Ford Motor Company



■ The Freelander may be a tough little brute, but there's nothing brutal about its interior, which includes all the features you expect from a luxury brand such as Land Rover.

■ Freelander's 2.5-liter V6 provides 175 horsepower, more than sufficient to meet the demands of the East Verde River Trail, and it more than holds its own on urban freeways and rural Interstates as well.

heavy to pull down hatchback. Another nice feature: the rear door glass is a power window that goes up and down.

The driver's seat has adjustable lumbar support. The driver also has a full glove box, just like on the passenger's side. There are expandable cup holders in both front doors as well as a smaller cup holder that pops up out of the top of the dashboard.

Passengers in the back seat have plenty of legroom and a good view of the town or country thanks to "stadium"

style seat architecture. They also have an armrest, with cup holders, that folds out of the middle seat back and ceiling-mounted cargo nets to stow small items.

For larger objects, the Freelander provides 19.1 cubic feet of cargo room behind the back seats. Or you can fold those seats flat and the area expands to 46.6 cubic feet.

Pretty cute, this ute. But pretty tough, too. Maybe we should call it the "cute brute." ■

After working as a sports editor for daily newspapers in Michigan, **Larry Edsall** was on staff for 12 years at *AutoWeek* magazine, most of it as managing editor. He has driven more than half a million miles testing cars on four continents. He moved to Phoenix to help launch www.izoom.com, an automotive website, and also helped to found PAPA, the Phoenix Automotive Press Association. His book on concept cars is scheduled for publication in Italy in the fall of 2003.



Photos: Ford Motor Company

■ Land Rover already sells the five-door version of its Freelander (top) here; soon the three-door model (lower) will be available here as well.



system and that nice, thick steering wheel to provide the feedback and balanced, confident control a driver wants — on road, off road and even, and maybe especially, when the "road" is the rocky bed of the East Verde River, which we ford several times this day.

The Freelander is Land Rover's first unibody vehicle, but the company tried to live up to its rugged body-on-frame tradition by incorporating box-section rails and eight integral crossmembers

into the chassis and with special construction techniques to strength the upper body as well. The body is rigid, which lets everything attached to it better do its intended purpose, and its sound structure and very good sealing help provide a very quiet passenger compartment, even at Interstate speeds.

Although the Freelander was introduced in Europe in 1997, some 70 percent of its parts were revised before its recent North American launch.

The exterior styling is "cute ute," but uses non-rusting polymer composite

front fenders and ruggedly protective polypropylene for the front bumper, wheel-arch moldings, lower rocker panels and lower part of the cargo door.

The fuel tank is a molded polymer and is mounted inboard of the rear differential, and is further protected by a skid plate. The bottom of the engine is similarly protected and the exhaust system is tucked up under the floor pan to help keep it from being whacked by a boulder.

The Freelander's rear door hinges on the passenger side, which means it opens and closes like a real door, not like a

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