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RANGE ROVER IS THE 4WD ROLLS

By PEDR DAVIS

New four-wheel-drive designs are coming so quickly that some pundits predict many family sedans will soon be available with optional 4WD.

Subaru has established the principle with its station wagon and Range Rover has shown that a full scale 4WD can ride almost as comfortably as a sedan.

But it is unlikely that a vehicle in the Range Rover class will come into the popular price class.

With its sophisticated suspension, powerful V-8 engine and comfortable accommodation, it is too expensive for mass production.

Even so, an indication of the popularity of luxury off-roading is that Australia is Range Rover's largest export market.

When first launched in 1970, Range Rover was the most expensive and technically advanced 4WD available.

It still is. The main difference is that buyers can now choose between two and four doors, manual and automatic transmission and optional air conditioning.

Advanced technical specifications include direct acting power steering, four wheel disc brakes and a self-energising levelling device for the rear suspension.

The four door version, only just on the market, costs \$1525 more than the 2-door, but, 80 per cent of buyers pay the extra.

The large doors open to 85 degrees, giving easy access to the rear bench. To make room for them, Leyland has reduced the size of the front doors.

The bench has also been repositioned backwards, reducing the luggage space but enhancing rear seat legroom. The bench is not split, but folds down in one piece, extending the luggage floor by 620 mm.

Two and four door Range Rovers are assembled at Leyland's plant at Enfield, near Sydney. They sell rapidly. Even the automatic version, costing \$3350 more than the manual, is in strong demand.

Australia had the distinction of producing an automatic Range Rover before the U.K. which has only just released its version.

Range Rover prices start around \$22,550 for the two door manual model, rising to nearly \$30,000 for a four door automatic, equipped with air conditioning and elaborate sound system.

Though a large and heavy machine, it is easy to drive, quiet by 4WD standards, and lively.

Agile enough for regular use in the suburbs and roomy enough to use as a family hack, the Range Rover is at its best on long trips covering a variety of road surfaces.

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It is superlative in sandy conditions as well as being the best riding and most stable 4WD available on horror stretches.

When you first step up to the rather high driving position, the initial impression is that the car will be a handful to control.

This impression is false. The controls are light, the driver has a commanding view on all sides and the Range Rover proves unexpectedly manoeuvrable.

The more it is driven, the more the outstanding handling and riding qualities are appreciated.

Leyland has introduced a number of new mechanical changes.

These include engine refinements which, together with a completely new transfer box and a taller overall ratio, are said to improve fuel economy by 20 per cent.

Even so, fuel bills are high. The automatic test vehicle used 18.8 litres of fuel per 100 km (15 miles per gallon) in suburban driving and 15.7 litres/100 km (18 mpg) on the open road.

Leyland has yet to produce a diesel version, possibly because the attractive performance is one of the selling features.

Range Rover is one of the few 4WDs sold with constant four-wheel-drive.

The design features a differential lock for main-



taining traction in mud, snow and ice.

The automatic version is as agile as the manual on mountain goat country. First gear in low range has an incredible ratio of 28 to 1 and can almost climb a brick wall.

Despite a number of new features and mechanical improvements, the design is less than perfect.

The driver's seat lacks an adjustable back.

More storage space close to the driver would be handy, as would a coat hook and a grab handle for the front seat passenger.

An odd design feature is the need to open both rear doors before folding the rear seat, otherwise it hits the door pulls.

These blemishes notwithstanding, the Range Rover is the most impressive four-wheel-drive vehicle on the road today, a veritable R-R of the outback.