

**LET'S OFF-ROAD:** OUR INTREPID MOTORING CORRESPONDENT HEADS FOR THE HILLS – IF SHE CAN JUST WORK OUT HOW TO USE AN AUTOMATIC

# ROUGH AND READY...

Considering one of the most traumatic challenges I ever faced was learning to drive, I was surprised that on a frosty morning, I was heading for an off-road driving course - and actually looking forward to it.

The Land Rover 4x4 Driving Experience at Rockingham Castle is, well, certainly an experience, as hundreds of positive comments and exclamations immortalised in the centre's visitors book testify.

And I was pleased to be told by East Midlands managing director Vince Copley that the Rockingham franchise is the second busiest 4x4 centre out of nine in the UK.

That delightful statistic told me I had more than an outside chance of not being the worst candidate on record.

A short briefing on the basics told me I would need – a machete or billhook to ward off obstructive branches and hedgerows, a shovel to escape from sticky situations and a recovery rope.

Fortunately for me, I had the only formidable weapon I needed to get me out of the wilderness alive – instructor Ray



BY GEORGE DRYDEN

Cooper, a man with a winning smile and, thankfully, a patience level to match.

The time had come for some serious mud churning (with retrospective apologies to Rockingham's estate manager).

Ray drove me about for a while and took me down a slope, the gradient of which gave me stomach churning flashbacks to the log flumes at Alton Towers, but without the fun.

## GRAVITY

Somehow defying every last law of gravity, we managed to stay wheels down.

What I wasn't prepared for was Ray making me drive down it myself and back up – and within minutes of putting me behind the wheel. Placing my thumbs around the outside of the steer-

ing wheel (to prevent them snapping back and breaking mid-descent), I felt scared and sick, but equally determined not to let a slope more akin to the north face of the Eiger get the better of me.

Five seconds later, it was muddy slope nil, quaking driver one, and I started to feel a bit more confident.

I did get stuck in the mud further on, but made a fine recovery (Ray's words, not mine).

He actually got out and left me to it on a couple of occasions, not in despair, but to make me think of the best way out of the terrain we were in.

I emerged victorious once again, without the phrase "recovery rope" ever crossing Ray's mind.

But forget gradients, weird gearing and transmission wind-up – it was something much simpler which got me every time.

Having never driven an automatic in my life, it was only natural to dip the brakes every time a gear change was order, making for just about the roughest change you could imagine.

Then, of course, I couldn't find the brakes when I really needed them, thinking the left hand pedal was the clutch.

But in fairness, 10 years of pedal dipping is difficult to snap out of in half a morning. That's my



**FORMIDABLE WEAPON:** Instructor Ray Cooper, with George Dryden and Experience managing director Vince Copley

excuse and I'm sticking to it.

I was faced with another unexpected challenge when we swapped vehicles so I could wield my basic awareness skills on a defenceless Defender.

I was relieved to see a manual gearbox in situ as I settled down in the driving seat, but that wasn't going to do me any good, as I quickly found out.

With only 150 miles on the clock, getting the gears into first required the strength of at least two Mr Universe contenders, which I didn't have. Fortunately, Ray did, so for the last half an

hour, he was my co-driver, in the most practical sense.

But I'm equally proud and amazed to report that we arrived back at base without a scratch on either vehicle.

Much as I wanted to stay for the rest of the day, I have to admit I was quite thankful at avoiding the task every regular off-roader must dread – the big clean up.

## Your chance to win an off-road **experience**

IF the report alongside sounds like your perfect day, the Land Rover 4x4 Experience at Rockingham is offering an acclimatisation course for two people in the castle's grounds.

The session – morning or afternoon – starts off with a coffee and briefing session, after which you will be shown your vehicle and taken out to the off-road course for a short drive with an instructor.

After the familiarisation drive, it's your turn to "Test Your Metal" on the drops, climbs and side slopes on the advanced section.

To have a chance of winning, all you have to do is answer the following question:

How many Land Rover off-

road centres are there in the country – (a) 2 (b) 6 or (c) 9?

Write your answers on a postcard or sealed down envelope, including your name, address and phone number, and send to: Off-Road Experience, Drive, PO Box 5, St George Street, Leicester, LE1 9FQ.

## ANSWERS

Answers to arrive no later than March 21, 2003. Usual rules, as printed in the classified section of the Leicester Mercury, apply. The editor's decision is final.

For more information on the Rockingham Experience, you can either log onto [www.offroadmasters.com](http://www.offroadmasters.com) or [www.protrax.co.uk](http://www.protrax.co.uk)



**FREELANDER:** Just what you need when it's time for some serious mud churning