The LR4 uses integrated body-frame construction, featuring a steel unibody mounted on a rigid boxed full frame.

By Steve Schaefer

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It’s a rare treat to test a Land Rover. Designed to tackle the challenges of driving off the pavement and also to look sharp at the country club, these upscale British vehicles have a long history and a special panache.

At the top of the lineup, the Range Rover is king. But a little smaller and easier to manage — both to drive and to finance — is the Land Rover LR4.

You can tell it’s a Land Rover, from the bold upright textured grille to the tall rear windows to the side scoop in front of the front doors to the name stamped across the rear asymmetrical tailgate. And inside, it’s a special experience too, with rich leather, handsome metallic trim and a killer sound system — as well as highly sophisticated off-road driving technology.

The LR4 is a polished beast. Despite its medium-size SUV appearance, it weighs 5,659 pounds. This gives it a real sense of owning the road (it’s pressed down onto the tarmac pretty forcefully). Luckily for its pilot, though, the LR4 comes with a mighty 5.0-liter V8 that churns out 375 horsepower and an equal amount of lb.-ft. of torque. That’s good for about a 7.5-second zero-to-sixty time — if you feel like stepping on it.

Of course, you do pay at the pump, and I eked out just 14.7 miles per gallon over my test week. The EPA gives the car ratings of 12 City, 17 Highway. The environmental scores are mixed: the

Air Pollution score of 6 is surprisingly good, but the Greenhouse Gas score of 1 is the lowest I've seen on a test car since the military-based Hummer H1 (like Arnold's).

Inside the car, all is padded, top-quality, and looks like it can withstand any rigors you toss at it. There is a triple sunroof overhead, and two gloveboxes and room for seven folks with all the seats up. With the rear seats folded flat, the 40/20/40 folding second row makes carrying long slender loads easy — even with four passengers. The bass fit in easily — and with the luxurious carpet and low cargo floor, it was a snap.

The front seats themselves are worthy of any posh club or your living room. The leather is old world — soft and supple — and the cabin feels friendly and familiar. The wood trim on the front console looked faux, but the doors were lovely to look at.

The audio and video in the car was a top-of-the-market harmon/kardon system with the

825-watt Logic7 system that boasts 17 speakers! Rear riders get twin video screens on the two front seatbacks and cordless headphones to watch whatever their hearts desire.

If you choose to venture off road, turn a dial on the center console to engage the Terrain Response system. It offers five different settings, each represented by an icon:

• General Driving — Where I kept it for my test week

• Grass/Gravel/Snow — When you're worried about your wheels slipping

• Sand — Sand Launch Control makes it easy to start out without getting bogged down

• Mud and Ruts — Bad dirt roads become smooth

• Rock Crawl — It applies low-level brake pressure when you're maneuvering around on rocks in first or reverse at low speed

Other technological marvels include Hill Descent Control, which keeps you from rolling too quickly when going downhill. Gradient Release Control also pitches in, supplementing braking even when you’re not pushing on the pedal. Gradient Acceleration Control works on the brakes to keep them ready for anything.

What goes down must sometimes go up. For that, there's Hill Start Assist, which keeps you from rolling backwards when you're climbing a hill and move your foot from the brake to the accelerator. That’s welcome when tackling the hills in San Francisco.

The remarkable Surround Camera System gives you a near 360-degree view around the car, thanks to five digital cameras installed in strategic sites. It’s just as good at exposing rocks as it is parking curbs.

Pricing? If you’ve been shopping Range Rovers, this will seem like a bargain. The “standard” LR4 begins at $49,950, including shipping. The HSE model, like my tester, comes to $54,175. The cheapest Range Rover is $80,275.

The feeling of driving a car like this is intoxicating, but may lead to bad behavior if you don't control yourself. The high, royal driving position, along with the sports car engine power, led me, in a fit of impatience, to change lanes and cut someone off. I knew I could make it, but the man was not amused and told me so. He was right, and I apologized. With great power comes great responsibility; if you buy one of these, be careful how you use it.