

The BMW X5 and Land Rover LR3:

A Competing Pair of Super SUVs

By Roger Witherspoon

It was that early time of morning when the sun is just sliding over the mountains and extending warm tendrils to the dark surface of the highway and breaking the lingering morning mist. The deer have trotted off to sleep off the night's grazing, and it is too early for traffic to disturb the morning crickets.

Which made it a perfect time to floor the pedal of the BMW X5, watch the gears seamlessly shift through six gears as the speedometer nudges past 120 and the New England roadway passes in a grey-green blur. This model had only a 3.0-liter, six-cylinder engine, but it could quickly top out at 130 miles per hour – more than enough for a morning jolt that was better than coffee. The only sounds were the mellow notes from *Trane's Blues* wafting over the car's 12 speakers with the two subwoofers amplifying the bass line from the single CD player.

At times like this, it is easy to forget that the X5 is an SUV, essentially a small truck which, if it were not made by BMW with all wheel drive, roll-over and traction control, would have no business approaching triple digits. But then, BMWs are meant for those who like power and finesse, style and speed, and that tradition was not lost in the shift from a sports car to a small truck.

But in the afternoon I was in a different mood. The sun was high, the heat was oppressive, and the highway was baking and covered with carbon-belching traffic while steam shimmered above the lakes not far from the road. The big, 4.4-liter V-8 could push the Land Rover to about 125 miles per hour – but not at this time of day. Which meant it was time to leave civilization behind and roam. So I turned the Land Rover LR3 off the highway, went down an embankment and followed a dirt track. I switched the navigation system to “off-road” mode, so its satellite system not only tracked where I went, but would remember the trail and bring me back to the highway when the exploring was over.

It was no time for mellow. So I gave Coltrane a rest and slid Gerald Levert into the LR3's six-disc CD player, cranked up the 550-watt, 14-speaker sound system till it reverberated off of the hills and followed the dirt and gravel road through a small, muddy, meandering stream about a foot deep. Land Rovers began life as off road commercial trucks which were refined into luxury all-round SUVs. As a result, bounding through more than two feet of water or bumping over rocks and downed logs are jolts easily absorbed by the LR3's air suspension. Levert never missed a beat during our forest ride, or when I bounced back onto the highway and continued home.

If you have reached a point in life where you have need for a flexible SUV which, in a pinch, has three rows of seats, a bucket full of amenities, and a price tag of about \$60,000 then the BMW X5 and the Land Rover LR3 offer two distinctly different choices.

If you are looking for style to tool around the city and its suburbs, then you will probably gravitate towards the X5. It has the svelte, angular, stealth fighter look of this generation of BMW vehicles, the kind regularly parked in front of the fancier restaurants. It is not the fastest in the fleet – the six cylinder engine cranks out only 260 horsepower.

BMW does offer a more powerful, 4.4 liter V-8 engine producing 350 horsepower, but that boosts the price by about \$10,000. In either case, the X5 is an SUV designed to rule the roads.

The X5 is intended for effortless driving in comfort. Gear shifts are seamless, and there is no play at all in the leather steering wheel – the car responds instantly to the slightest turn. The SUV has an airy feel, primarily because of the panoramic sun roofs over the front and second row of seats. But the third row of seats, located at the push of a button in the cargo area, is designed for children only. It is difficult to get into, there is no real leg room, and a passenger more than six feet tall could only sit there with his head bowed in a permanent state of prayer. It is also plush, with thick leather seats and padding accented by real wood trim.

This is also a car for the computer age, with virtually all functions controlled by BMW's iDrive computer system. This system is not intuitive, and has a steep learning curve which older drivers might find daunting. But once you learn it, the system is comprehensive. It will pair up to four cell phones, for example, and recognize them as they come near the vehicle.

If you ask the computer for a traffic update, it will show the level of traffic on all the roads on your route and, upon request, will find you an alternate route around the major bottlenecks. The entertainment system in the test vehicle had an iPod connection, but no satellite radio, which is surprising in a vehicle in this price range. Generally, X5 buyers have to choose between satellites and iPods, though for a fee they can have both.

The designers of Land Rover had a different concept in mind in crafting the LR3. It's boxy, rugged exterior – resembling the Marlboro Man of vehicles – is an acquired taste. But the LR3 does not skimp in interior luxury – complete with leather seats and wood trim – or off road capability. On the highway, the LR3 also has traction and rollover control. At 5,700 pounds, the LR3 outweighs the X5 by half a ton, but has a 300 horsepower engine to handle the extra load.

Off road, the LR3 is not going to rule the woods – that's still the top terrain of the Hummer and Xterra – but it does come close and has many of the capabilities of the larger and costlier Range Rover. The LR3 is capable of rolling figure 8's on the side of a 45-degree slope, bounding over rocks or tree trunks without jarring the passengers or causing the CD to skip.

The designers at Land Rover, unlike their counterparts at BMW, put together vehicles for motorists who are more comfortable with show and tell than with computer simulation. As a result, if you want to drive over rocks or water, you look for those images on the dash, push the lever and the LR3's drive systems shift accordingly. The same system also lets you lower the chassis to make it easier for people to get into or out of the car.

The LCD screen in the dash is touch activated, which makes it easy to look at what you want and then order it. For entertainment, the LR3 has satellite radio and an iPod connection, as well as DVD and game players and individual screens inset into the rear of the front head rests. This allows the two second row passengers to simultaneously play different movies, or play a movie and a video game while wearing wireless headsets so they neither hear nor disturb the front and rear passengers who are listening to separate CDs.

You still have to fold out the second row of seats to access the third row in the cargo area, but the LR3 has enough head and leg room to comfortably put two six-foot, six-inch passengers in the rear with room to spare.

The Land Rover LR3 and BMW X5 provide two very different experiences for those who need an SUV to cover all their work and play needs. But if you match one to your lifestyle, you'll have few reasons to complain.

08 BMW X5

MSRP:		\$59,975
EPA Mileage:	15 MPG City	21 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		6,000 Pounds
Top Speed:		130 MPH

Performance/ Safety:

3.0-Liter DOHC 6-cylinder, magnesium/aluminum composite engine producing 260 horsepower and 225 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; full time all wheel drive with electronically controlled, front and rear torque split; stability and traction control; hill descent control; double wishbone front suspension; multilink rear suspension; 4-wheel, antilock ventilated disc brakes; xenon adaptive headlights; halogen foglights; driver and passenger's front airbag; front and rear compartment head protection and side impact airbags; 19-inch cast alloy wheels.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM high fidelity radio with 12 speaker sound system; CD player, USB port and iPod connection; panoramic sunroof; powered, leather seats; heated front seats.

08 Land Rover LR3

MSRP:		\$60,450
EPA Mileage:	12 MPG City	17 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		7,716 pounds
Top Speed:		124 MPH

Performance/ Safety:

4.4-Liter DOHC aluminum alloy V-8 engine producing 300 horsepower and 315 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed, electronically controlled, automatic transmission with manual mode; two-speed transfer gearbox; permanent four-wheel drive with locking torque converter; normal, sport, and command shift manual modes; 4-wheel anti-lock disc brakes; electronic air suspension with automatic load leveling; dual front and thorax air bags for driver and front passenger; side curtain airbags for second and third rows; 19-inch alloy wheels.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; iPod connection; 6-disc CD player; iPod and MP3 connection; 550 Harmon Kardon sound system with 14 speakers and 2 subwoofers; 2 DVD players with wireless headphones and headrest screens; touch screen, on and off-road navigation system; 3-row sunroof; leather seats with wood trim.