

big foot

John Pearson tests Land Rover Experience's latest launch support vehicle in Iceland. It's a 2.4-litre four-cylinder diesel Defender with 38-inch wheels – and a lot more besides

I'm high above the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik. Behind me are stunning views of the rugged volcanic island and the cold North Atlantic waters that surround it. Ahead of me is the steepest rock face I've ever attempted to drive up.

I'm behind the wheel of Land Rover's Big Foot – a new 2.4-litre four-cylinder diesel Defender fitted with giant 38-inch wheels, and festooned with equipment that has transformed it into one of the most desirable Land Rovers on the planet.

And I'm getting the impression that it's probably capable of driving to even the most extreme places on the planet.

Alongside me is David Sneath, the boss of Land Rover Experience, who commissioned Big Foot through the company's Special Vehicles department. 'We wanted a go-anywhere, do-anything Defender to act as a support vehicle on press and dealer launches,' explains David. And he's got it.

This is an extremely confidence-inspiring, awesomely capable vehicle – the upcoming rock face might be beyond the outer limits in terms of steepness that a standard Land Rover could cope with, but I have no doubt that Big Foot is going to step up to it with ease.

I'm already in low range, and I snick the six-speed Defender's gearlever into first. Then I reach for one of its secret weapons, the lever that operates the Ashcroft Underdrive – a reduction device fitted to the rear of its transfer box that provides a super-low range for rock and glacier crawling.

Fifth gear in low, low range is equivalent to first in normal low. The beauty of the Ashcroft Underdrive is that normal high and low ratios remain unchanged.

Then I engage its air-operated ARB rear diff locker; both rear wheels are now harnessed to work together. It does also have a front diff locker, 'but I only use that in extreme circumstances', says David, who's concerned about imposing too much strain on transmission and driveshaft components.

I rev the four-cylinder engine, engage the clutch and, yes, Big Foot is moving, but only

just. Extra revs don't seem to make a lot of difference, either: progress is slow, very slow as we crawl towards the rock face. Then the big front wheels start to ease their way up the slope, the huge Dick Cepek Mud Country tyres finding plenty of grip on the dry volcanic rock.

Up we go. It's a strange sensation as our weight falls back in the seats – positioned like astronauts on the launch pad – while Big Foot goes climbing.

Once over the top, I stop to ease the Underdrive lever back into the normal ratio position and we continue ascending the mountain track at a relatively speedier pace.

This four-cylinder version is actually Big Foot 2 – hereafter known as BF2. The original BF (now called BF1) was a 38in-wheeled, Td5-engined Defender, and there's also a 2.4 Little Foot, fitted with 33in wheels – and all three are here today.

They're on Iceland as extreme back-up vehicles for the launch of the Freelander 2 TD4 automatic that I reported on in the July issue of LRO.

The standard Defender is very capable, but David Sneath's vision was to build something equipped to go anywhere, in whatever weather conditions this country's highly unpredictable climate can throw at it – or any other country's, come to that. Land Rover can't afford to take any chances when the safety of a group of journalists could be jeopardised by extreme weather conditions.

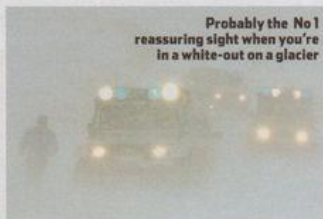
BF2 is on hand to tow out hapless journo's if they get stuck, or rescue them in the event



**BIG-WHEELED
DEFENDER**

*'Dropping down from the summit I'm again
impressed by Big Foot's capability. Whether on
rock, shale or mud it just gets on with the job'*





Probably the No1 reassuring sight when you're in a white-out on a glacier

of a freak blizzard. On another occasion it might be doing service in Morocco's big sand dunes, or even the deep mud at the company's Eastnor Castle proving ground.

Yesterday, I was reassured to see BF2's distinctive shape looming ahead of me during a white-out on a glacier.

On the way up this mountainside today, I've powered it through deep, muddy ruts that would have proved too much of a challenge for a standard-wheeled Defender – the towering ground clearance is impressive. And it has made easy work of loose, rocky climbs towards the summit, its big tyres floating over the surface.

You're sitting a long way up there, and I can imagine LRO's resident Icelandophile Mark Saville and his shorter legs struggling even to clamber up into the cab.

David Sneath talks me through the to-die-for list of equipment while we unload its impressively well-stocked luggage compartment for a photo (above right).

He's obviously a fan of Devon 4x4's kit, because the South Moulton specialist has supplied a lot of BF2's armoury. This includes the competition front winch bumper with stainless fairlead, the suspension dislocation cones, alloy sump guard and sexy black Mach 5 split-rim wheels – to name a few.

The wheels feature two valves – one has a normal core fitted, while the other is hollow for rapid lowering of pressures. David tells me they can be used as low as 2-3psi without the risk of tyre creep.

Springs and dampers are Old Man Emu with a two-inch lift, but standard spring rate. The Defender's rear anti-roll bar has been removed to improve articulation.

Protection and Performance, the Yorkshire company that fitted the centre bulkhead replacement bar to LRO's project 90 in the



Kitchen sink not included...

...but just about everything else is in the back of Big Foot 2.

Personal protection includes dry suits and sleeping bags. There's a satellite phone, Panasonic Toughbook laptop computer and hand-held Garmin GPS. Armoury includes various axes, pickaxe, shovels and a chainsaw. There's a

comprehensive tool set, extensive first aid kit and emergency items, lightweight compressed air container, Viar compressor, full winching accessories, the inevitable Hi-Lift jack with plastic base; and possibly enough rope and strops to stretch right around the Earth's circumference.



June issue, crafted the North American-spec -style roll cage. It also fabricated the roof rack, which only sits on the Defender's gutter at the rear (the gutter is a potential weak point when carrying heavy loads). The rest of it is supported on saddles that are welded to the roll cage.

Worklights are attached to either side of the rack, while four powerful Lightforce driving lamps at the front turn night into the next best thing to daylight.

An old-style tubular snorkel is fitted because the roll cage prevents the more modern plastic moulded type being used.

David prefers the Warn 8274 winch at the front for its high-speed action. At the rear he uses a demountable Warn M6000; both have synthetic ropes. Southdown rock sliders replace the body sills in case the going gets too extreme.

Big wheels require big wheelarches, and these glassfibre monsters have been custom-made by Land Rover Special Vehicles.

Inside, the spec is no less impressive. A big-screen Garmin 7200 GPS looms up from the dash; there are twin Odyssey batteries with a split-charge system and both vehicle-to-vehicle and vehicle-to-base radios.

Under the back seat is a Tudor-Webasto diesel-fuelled heater to keep BF2 cosy even in extreme minus temperatures; there's a 600-watt inverter that allows items normally requiring mains electricity to be plugged in.

There are Mantic rear window guards, an internal roll cage and a cargo barrier to stop all of the items shown in that picture above shifting forward and clobbering the occupants in extreme conditions.

Dropping down from the summit, I'm yet again impressed by BF2's capability.



Even this high up, steering is protected

Ashcroft Underdrive rock-crawl here we come!



Roof rack is supported mainly on roll cage (except at rear), minimising load on gutter



Garmin 7200 GPS shows route, even on mountains and glaciers

BIG-WHEELED DEFENDER

One of the valve stems is hollow for rapid tyre deflation



David Sneath prefers to use glassfibre waffles



Specially made mini mud flaps



Whether on rock, mud or shale it just gets on with the job. I'm in low-range first on some incredibly steep descents, my feet away from the pedals other than covering the brake. On one very loose gravel and rock area, I'm ready to snick into second if it starts to toboggan; but it just keeps on gripping.

On the road to our next test location, BF2 doesn't look anywhere near as outrageous as it would in the UK – because many Icelanders drive similarly large-wheeled 4x4s.

Predictably, it feels a bit floaty on tarmac but there's less roll than I envisaged. Neither are the aggressive tyres as noisy as I had expected, although the howl inevitably does get louder as speed increases.

With its extra weight, plus the massively increased drag caused by the mega tyres, BF2's performance is inevitably blunted compared to the normally more lively stock 2.4 Defender – but that's due to be changed by remapping the ECU. 'The four-cylinder engine produces more power in other applications,' says David, referring to the Ford Transit van. 'So there's scope there.'

Today's final location is known as 1000 Rivers – a misnomer because it's a single river that meanders along a wide riverbed. It's shallow in parts, but there are deep pools ready to drown any unwary vehicles – and we're heading for one of these to test BF2's wading ability, and to shoot the photo used for this issue's front cover.

This is a desolate area, even though it's under an hour's drive from Reykjavik. BF2's tyres crunch over the dark gravel riverbed. Sitting up this high is an almost unfair advantage when it comes to wading – you can boldly go where other Land Rovers would drown themselves.

We find a deep pool on a corner of the river, and decide that the best angle for photography is for it to be taken from the middle of the river. And all credit to photographer Nick Dumbleby, who borrows one of the dry suits from the back of BF2 and immerses himself chest-deep in the icy waters that probably originate from a glacier somewhere high in the mountains.

There's a fairly shallow section before a sharp ledge drops you into the pool. BF2 slithers down it, water splashing over the bonnet, but those big tyres find plenty of grip on the the riverbed and it clammers out the other side, albeit at an acute angle.

Land Rover Experience people tend to name locations after people or events. I'm now honoured to have a small corner of Iceland named after me – yes, the deep-water section we were splashing through is hereafter to be known as 'John's Pool'.

Anyway, the original Big Foot was a mythical giant ape-like creature said to inhabit North America's remote forests, but this Big Foot is the real thing, and it has certainly left an impression on me. **LRO**



Vehicles (from left): Big Foot 2, Little Foot and Big Foot 1. People (clockwise from rear left): David Sneath, Natasha Waddington (Land Rover's UK PR manager), John P. Louis Morret, Alex Brown and Moi-Torrellardona. Background: Reykjavik



