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MY RIDE

Love for a Luxury-Free Land Rover

This old 110 from the British military has few of the comforts of commercial vehicles, but its American owner has driven it all over

By A.J. Baime

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Chris Snell, 45, a software engineer living in Carlisle, Pa., on his 1987 Land Rover 110, as told to A.J. Baime.

When I was a kid, my uncle bought a Land Rover Defender and I thought it was the coolest thing. In 2005 I bought it from him—my first Land Rover. I was clueless, but I didn't have money to pay people to work on my truck, so I worked on it myself, trial and error. It became fun. I started doing trips with buddies that also had Land Rover trucks. We would go to the desert, camp for a week and drive our trucks.

Land Rover started building utilitarian trucks in Britain in the late 1940s. The vintage trucks in particular are getting popular today because they are so iconic and unique. A vintage Land Rover 110 is not comfortable to drive. It is not luxurious. It reminds me of the quote often attributed to Dolly Parton: "You'd be surprised how much it costs to look this cheap."

Photos: Adventures of a Retired Military Land Rover

A software engineer shows off his 1987 110, a former military communications vehicle



Chris Snell first fell in love with Land Rovers as a kid. He rebuilt this 1987 110 with a more modern Land Rover engine and chassis. MATT ROTH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Seven years ago, my friend Ben Little found this company in the U.K. that was selling castoff British military Land Rovers. I called the company and told the guy to pick me out the best one he had. He laughed and said, “I have 3,000 vehicles on my lot. I’m going to go pick you out the first one I see.” Both Ben and I bought trucks sight unseen. My Defender 110 cost \$15,000, delivery included. [People refer to these trucks as Defenders, though the name Defender was not officially used until 1990, according to Land Rover.]

When it arrived via ship in the port of Galveston, Texas, I flew down. I had learned through research that my 110 had been a British military communications vehicle. The back was still filled with cables. The steering wheel was on the left side, presumably because the vehicle was built to drive outside of the U.K., where people drive on the right side of the road. I got in the truck and drove it straight to Colorado.

After a few trips, I started to think the engine was underpowered. My wife is in the Army and we were stationed in Tacoma, Wash. I took the truck to a buddy’s place called Defenders

Northwest, in Gig Harbor. We worked out a deal where I would do the work and he would tutor me.

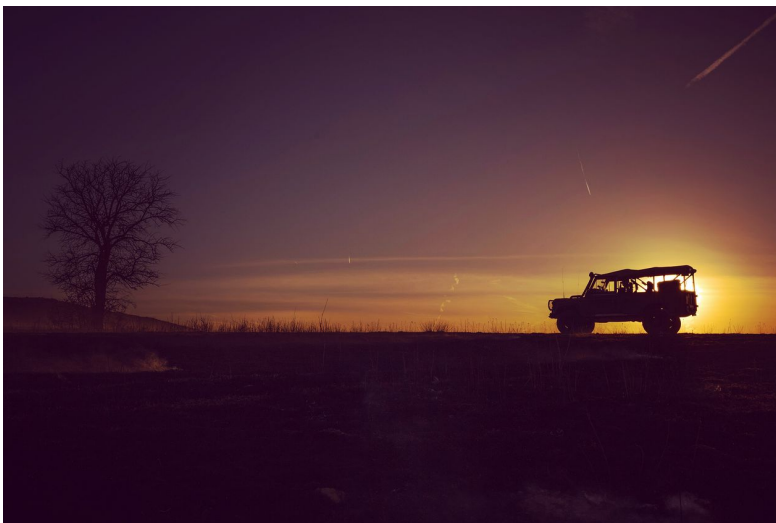
These trucks were built to be field-serviceable. With a small set of tools, you can take the thing entirely apart and put it back together—which is exactly what I did. However, I used a new chassis and a rebuilt Land Rover motor, so the guts of this truck are basically new, while the body and interior are from 1987. This work required eight weeks and a very patient wife.

The truck is happiest on dirt, at about 50 mph. I started mapping out trips where I could drive almost entirely on dirt. When we moved to Kansas, I mapped out a way to drive to Utah and Nevada, almost entirely on dirt roads, sleeping in the back at night. I am already planning my next trip, to the Owyhee Desert, way out there in Idaho and Nevada, in May.



This road trip shot is from 2014, on a stretch of dirt road in northern Idaho.

PHOTO: CHRIS SNELL



Mr. Snell took this shot of his Land Rover 110 when he was living in Kansas, in the field of a neighbor's farm.

PHOTO: CHRIS SNELL

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