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## Untapped Resources: Top 10 Off-Road Luxury SUVs

By Jim Gorzelany  
ForbesAutos.com

Even though most drivers would shudder at the thought, some of the priciest, most luxurious SUVs relish trouncing through mud, bounding over boulders and powering up steep inclines. Think of them as well-mannered brutes, frustrated for lack of opportunity to display their brawn.

As car buyers abandon truck-based SUVs for car-based ones — called “crossovers” by industry insiders — to gain more on-road comfort and capability, it’s the costlier truck-like models that continue to flaunt true rock-crawling abilities. (Click [here](#) to read about the difference between car- and truck-based SUVs.)

“This is the carryover from the idea that any ‘real’ SUV had to be able to get to the top of the mountain with its 4x4 system,” says George Peterson, president of AutoPacific Group, a California-based automotive research firm. In many ways, this makes a luxury SUV the vehicular equivalent of costly professional-quality stove and oven ranges sold to wealthy people who don’t cook much but would like to think they have the tools to whip up a gourmet meal if the need ever arises.

“Substantially less than 10 percent [of luxury SUV owners] indicate that they actually go off-roading,” says AutoPacific’s Peterson. “We actually think that the percentage that actually off-roads is less than 5 percent, but we have to go with what the owners report.”

While some lower-cost SUVs like the [Jeep Wrangler](#) and [Nissan Xterra](#) boast the largest percentage of “real” off-roader enthusiasts — [Jeep says 60 to 80 percent of Wrangler owners take their vehicles to the trails](#) — some large luxury models are equipped to tackle tough terrain. “The price of a [Land Rover](#) has always been higher than many other four-wheel-drive vehicles, based not just on luxury but on capability,” says Bob Burns, off-road events manager for Land Rover North America. “[Range Rover](#) customers want to buy the best and want to experience what their vehicles are built to do.” Go to the [Land Rover Showroom](#) to compare prices for different models.

[Land Rovers have the highest off-road penetration among luxury SUVs, with 26 percent of all LR3 owners engaging in “real” off-roading, and 22.2 percent of all Range Rovers and 14.8 percent of Range Rover Sport drivers occasionally leaving the pavement. By contrast, the study found that no Cadillac Escalade EXT, Infiniti QX56 and Volvo XC90 owners ever venture off-road. \(See the chart below for more data.\)](#)

### Defining 'Off-Road'

Slideshow:

#### Top 10 Off-Road Luxury SUVs



The Land Rover Range Rover Sport is fifth on the list.

[view slideshow >](#)

How motorists define off-road driving affects those numbers. “Off-road for some of these folks could be in the shopping mall parking lot,” Peterson says. “We try to get at that by differentiating ‘real off-roading’ with ‘getting to fish/camp/hike sites’ in our study.” In other words, AutoPacific defines “real” off-roading as driving on rugged off-road trails, versus merely traversing a dirt or gravel path to access a fishing, hiking or camping site, for instance.

“The definition of ‘off-road use’ varies greatly, and we’re OK with that,” says Land Rover’s Burns. “Some customers consider it to be the snowy driveway to the ski house, while others may well define it as scaling the Sierra Nevada mountain range.”



The Mercedes-Benz G500 ranks seventh.

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Industry analysts agree that among all luxury SUV brands, Land Rover does the best job of creating an active community of off-roaders. For starters, most dealerships maintain their own off-road test courses, which can range from a simple hill climb to a full-blown facility for buyers to test their vehicles’ mettle and their own fear threshold. Beyond that, Land Rover dealers help make sure their customers have access to an assortment of off-road events and excursions.

“Our owners have the option of learning how to drive their vehicles off-road at a driving school, a retailer-organized event, or they can take a dive off the deep end by signing up to attend a Land Rover Adventure,” Burns says.

SUVs have been around for decades, arguably starting with limited but growing enthusiasm for truck-based station wagons post-WWII that were generically called “Suburbans” (long before Chevrolet trademarked the name. Luxury SUVs are a more-recent phenomenon. Born out of the SUV boom in the 1990s, today every mainstream luxury brand except for Jaguar offers at least one SUV.

Not everyone agrees that upscale SUVs are up to the task of tackling the harshest terrain. “All the automakers advertise the extreme capability of their vehicles in their brochures — in real life that’s not true,” says Harald Pietschmann, who conducts SUV expeditions in the U.S. and Mexico. Specializing in tours across the rugged Rubicon Trail in Northern California, he discourages participants from attempting to tackle the toughest terrain in anything more opulent than a short-wheelbase Jeep Wrangler.

“The main limitation luxury models have is what I call their ‘body armor,’ the big plastic bumpers, side cladding, running boards and so forth,” Pietschmann says. Not only do such components tend to get gnarled up and damaged while negotiating rugged trails, Pietschmann feels they also compromise the vehicles’ otherwise inherent abilities. “The 4WD systems on all these vehicles are capable of doing the Rubicon, however most of them just don’t have the body clearance to do it,” he says.

And then there’s the issue of exposing a leased luxury SUV to a potentially injurious off-road environment, which can be costly once the vehicle is turned in at the end of the lease period. Nearly 60 percent of all luxury vehicles are leased, according

## Kings of the Off-Road

Vehicle	Percent of owners who drive off-road
Acura MDX	1.4%
BMW X3	7.4%
BMW X5	4.3%
Cadillac Escalade	2.2%
Cadillac Escalade EXT	0.0%
GMC Yukon XL	6.1%
Infiniti FX	2.2%
Infiniti QX56	0.0%
Land Rover LR3	26.0%
Land Rover Range Rover	22.2%
Land Rover RR Sport	14.8%
Lexus GX 470	6.1%
Lincoln Navigator	9.1%
Mercedes M-Class	3.1%
Porsche Cayenne	10.5%
Subaru B9 Tribeca	3.5%
Volkswagen Touareg	9.8%
Volvo XC90	0.0%

to J.D. Power and Associates, and all lease agreements penalize a lessee for anything above and beyond minor wear and tear issues. “SUV lessees would take a huge hit if they damaged their vehicles during the lease period,” says AutoPacific’s Peterson. “In that case, they probably treat them with kid gloves.”

#### Average Luxury SUV

7.15%

Source: AutoPacific Inc, 2006 Research Suite

Land Rover, at least, seems to take a more circumspect approach to owners driving leased vehicles off-road. This could be viewed as testament to the company’s confidence in the robustness and off-road capabilities of its vehicles. “Abuse and/or user error is considered on a case-by-case basis,” says Land Rover’s Burns. “Our owners tend to be very responsible and proud of their vehicles overall and maintain them to a high standard.”

### What to Look for

There are some basic parameters that every SUV must have for serious off-road duty. Primary among them is a four-wheel-drive system with low-range gearing that enables a slow crawl often needed to negotiate rough terrain. (For a definition of various four- and all-wheel-drive traction systems offered on SUVs go to the [next page](#)).

Other important specifications include ground clearance, approach and departure angles, and fording depth. Go to the [next page](#) for definitions of these terms. A host of expensive accessories are available to improve off-road performance and safety. But instead of focusing on expensive add-ons, like brush guards and winches, those serious about off-roading should invest in training, off-roading expert Pietschmann says.

“The main thing you want to have when you’re off-roading is a prepared driver,” he says. “Ninety percent of everything off-road has to do with the driver — only 10 percent depends on the equipment.”

Bill Burke, an off-road driving instructor who runs 4-Wheeling America, in Fruita, Calif., stresses that drivers should adhere to the “three Ps” of off-roading:

- **Patience** – Drive slowly enough to be able to gauge the terrain and react accordingly.
- **Planning** – Stop and decide exactly how to negotiate an obstacle rather than just plow forward without a plan.
- **Practice** – Learn the capabilities of your vehicle and its equipment in safe surroundings before setting out to conquer a remote trail.

It’s also imperative to always be mindful of how the vehicle will impact the environment, Burke says. “Treat the outdoors where you drive like your own home — take care not to damage it or clutter it.” Land Rover’s motto of “tread lightly” encapsulates this idea.

Click [here](#) to see a slideshow of the [Top 10 Luxury SUVs for Off-Roading](#) or go to the [next page](#) to find out more about 4WD systems and how we came up with our ranking.



Important specs include ground clearance, approach and departure angles, and fording depth. Pictured is the Volkswagen Touareg.

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