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ISLAND ROVER

The remote Scottish island of Islay is Land Rover's spiritual home. **Richard Webber** heads north with its most metropolitan model yet, the Range Rover Velar, for an unforgettable pilgrimage

PHOTOGRAPHY LUC LACEY



"My wife's grandmother was mad keen on fishing," says Anthony Wills. And thus, the butterfly effect did its work, and now more than seven million vehicles have worn the 'Land Rover' badge. It's true: thanks to an angling granny, the mud-plugging moniker was first coined on the remote Scottish island of Islay, which became an unofficial Land Rover testing ground for nearly a quarter of a century. The whole story – both versions of it – is told on page 51.

And so it is that photographer Luc Lacey and I are bound for Islay in a brand-new Range Rover Velar. With us, a 1967 photo of a white-haired, flat-capped Spencer Wilks – then president of Rover – fording Islay's River Laggan in chassis '100/1', first of the 100in-wheelbase station wagons that would become the Range Rover. The top-secret 100/1 was badged 'Velar', from the Latin *velare* – to veil or conceal.

But despite Range Rover's present-day synonymy with opulence, the original was relatively spartan. And the modern Velar's monocoque has more in common with Jaguar's XF and F-Pace than its Range Rover stablemates. So, with its lavishness and saloon-derived underpinnings, can the Velar not only take us to Islay in cosseted comfort, but also tackle the rough stuff once we're there?

Such was the original Range Rover's significance in industrial design, it was exhibited at the Louvre upon its launch in 1970. We're toeing that line by starting our journey at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, the Velar's sharp features and imposing silhouette nestled between the gallery's neo-classical Modern One building and Landform, a substantial, rippled earthwork sculpture of grass and water by Charles Jencks. I'm torn between deep ponderings about the validity of mass-produced cars as art and a strong urge to blat up/over/through Landform in a spontaneous test of the Velar's climbing and wading abilities. We depart before it takes hold.

Our Velar is an HSE P300, meaning top specification and top performance thanks to a

turbocharged 2.0-litre Ingenium petrol four-pot delivering 296bhp and 295lb ft. It saunters agreeably out of town, the eight-speed ZF auto keeping shifts gentle and revs low. Then it's an easy mooch west along the M8, where the Velar delivers the imperious waftage requisite of the Range Rover badge. The engine is silent at 70mph and power sufficient; additional cylinders would be frivolous here. The cabin feels luxurious, too, but that's as much down to its avant-garde design as the materials used, which are neatly applied but not quite as plush as you'll find further up the range.

We turn north, loping alongside lochs Lomond and Long, then the landscape becomes wilder in craggy Glen Croe where we summit Rest and Be Thankful then push for the north bank of Loch Fyne. The smooth and winding lochside road is stippled with ambling holidaymakers, but the Velar soaks up the task with ease and frustration is allayed by stop-offs in the isolated Georgian idyll of Inveraray and the cosy harbour at Tarbert.

From there, it's a short hop to Kennacraig to board the substantial MV Finlaggan, part of Caledonian MacBrayne's red-funnelled fleet that so often heralds island adventures. It's blowing a hoolie at sea, but we venture on deck to marvel at the imposing, mountainous and barely inhabited Isle of Jura before landing at Port Askaig, a tiny collection of whitewashed buildings crammed into a lush ravine on Islay's east coast.

Inspired by the enchanting setting, we indulge in an exploratory evening recce. On the single-track road through the moors of Dunlossit Estate, the Velar feels wide (it's a third wider than the first Land Rovers) and seems to consume the road, only sharper humpbacks testing its composure. In a series Land Rover, four senses would be bristling, but the Velar's cabin feels more like an insulated viewing gallery from which to observe the scenery.

We visit Port Ellen, with its little white crescent beach, and breathe in petroleous peat smoke from the village's enormous maltings – our first encounter with Islay's world-famous whisky industry. The road →

“
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Range Rover badge
”



A temporary exhibit at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art



Top-spec Velar HSE P300 conceals its utilitarian roots well



ROVER'S RETURN

From Edinburgh, we headed west to Glasgow, then north along Loch Lomond before cutting across the Cowal Peninsula. We traced Loch Fyne for 48 miles before crossing Kintyre to the tiny port of Kennacraig for the two-hour sailing to Port Askaig on Islay.



Our man is dressed too casually for Monarch of the Glen aspirations

Pump it up

Optional air springs would have increased our Velar's ground clearance to match the Defender's, while maximum wading depth would rise to 650mm.



← to our overnight stop at Bowmore then arrows past stacks of freshly cut peat among the bog cotton and reeds on one of those glowing, still evenings that let you forgive Scotland its wilder moments.

Spencer Wilks's Laggan Estate was sold in 1998, but his granddaughter, Kathy – whose father, Thomas, may or may not have invented the Land Rover name – still occupies the farmhouse with her husband, the aforementioned Anthony Wills. The Wills family is one of the Wilks branches not to have continued with Rover but instead embraced the industry of its terroir, Anthony having founded Kilchoman Distillery on Islay's west coast in 2005. Unique on the island, Kilchoman is a 'farm distillery' that sources a quarter of the barley it needs from its own 2000-acre farm that's also home to 450 Scottish Blackface sheep and, soon, Aberdeen Angus cattle. Where better to test our Velar's off-road mettle?

We meet Wills on a balmy morning, the heady aroma of distillation billowing around Kilchoman's industrious cluster of buildings old and new. Before we let loose on the farm, he takes us on a tour to show how the distillery produces the equivalent of 600,000 bottles of single malt annually.

"Islay is very fertile, so you can grow barley, you can burn peat to dry it and there's lots of water. The peat on Islay has a salty, iodiney character versus mainland peat, helping give Islay whisky its distinctive style,"

Sorry, but this loch's not for fording



There's no driver setting to smooth over this journey



Wills explains. From malting floor to peat kiln, mashing, fermenting and distilling through two copper stills, we follow the process from grain to clear alcoholic spirit, which is decanted into imported bourbon or sherry casks for maturation. After a minimum of three years, you have Scotch whisky.

We must wait for a taste, though, as fantastically named general manager Islay Heads is ready to take us around the farm. He'll be leading in Kilchoman's own Defender 110 workhorse, and we'll attempt to follow. Along the dusty lanes, the 110 shuffles on its live axles, revealing surface imperfections we're oblivious to in the Velar. Then it's into a field and we engage the Terrain Response system's 'grass/gravel/snow' mode, which retards the throttle and remaps the gearbox to ward off wheelspin. Though our Velar features 37mm less clearance than the Defender, we traverse a nasty ditch without trouble, then our miniature convoy tackles some side slopes, and Hill Descent Control (HDC) edges us steadily down a steep gradient, my feet free of the pedals.

The Velar's central multi-plate wet clutch sends most torque rearward in typical road driving; it's been silently doing its work and we've felt no wheelspin at all. In fact, it's the Defender, which is wearing road-biased rubber, that blinks first, momentarily breaking traction as it slithers up a steep, grassy hill. The Velar gallops neatly up with some throttle. →

We swing back towards some dunes that frame the resplendent golden sands of Machir Bay. There's a 10-metre sand bank that Heads suggests as a photogenic backdrop. It's a pretty spot, but around the corner is a steep dune that's several times bigger, with a step halfway up (and a pile of animal bones for full desert effect). We didn't come to give the Velar an easy ride, so after some discussion that includes the phrase "At least I'll be here to pull you out" from our host, we resolve to give it a go.

We engage 'sand' mode, allowing readier distribution of torque between the axles and more aggressive throttle – momentum is key. Run-up room is limited, but with a generous squirt of unleaded, we're off. It feels like driving through butter – we're clipping along, but I can feel our kinetic energy seeping into the sand. Over the ledge, then more throttle, the engine roaring as I aim for the top corner of the dune while keeping steering inputs soft. The Velar pounds on up, and for a moment all I can see is sky, before we crest the summit safely. So safely, in fact, that we HDC our way back down and do it again. Heads is impressed – as am I.

In search of further challenge, Kilchoman's production manager, Robin Bignal, leads us to an old track that's been reclaimed by marshland and is now marked as a dead end. He thinks the gravelly surface between the reeds should still be hard enough to drive on, but the peat-tinted water obscures it, and Lacey's wellies aren't high enough to make sure. Our wading limit is 600mm, exceeding the Defender's by 100mm, so another metaphorical finger pokes the air and we go for it. An uncanny sloshing noise invades the cabin, but traction and water resistance are well up to scratch as the Velar trudges along the sodden lane, the central mohawk of reeds springing up behind.

The Velar impressively acquitted, we say grateful goodbyes then head to the

airport for Lacey's flight home. But before turning into the terminal, we decide to visit Big Strand, a seven-mile beach bordering the runway. At its north end is the River Laggan, as waded by Spencer Wilks in his 'Velar' 51 years ago. We've been trying to arrange access to Laggan Estate all day, but the owner isn't forthcoming. We can, at least, visit the river mouth.

It takes longer to reach than expected, and time is short. We ford the river, but the Velar barely flinches, so I suggest driving upstream for some deeper wading. We again break the cardinal rule of off-roading by not fully appraising the obstacle ahead (and another, by driving into the current), but we're up against it, and we've got this far, right?

It goes well... until it doesn't, when our nearside wheels sink into the saturated sand, and no amount of coaxing, mode-wrangling, traction-toggling or 'low-traction launch' setting can shake us free. Would the optional Active Rear Locking Differential (another multi-plate clutch job) have helped? Possibly. But even the gamekeeper's Defender struggles in the same spot, so possibly not. We're dragged out by the farmer – a recovery necessitated by over-ambition above anything else.

Lacey catches his flight (just) and I take the return ferry. It's twilight, and the Loch Fyne road is deserted this time, so I can at last give the Velar a blacktop workout. The steering is alert and well weighted, the front end surprisingly keen and the adaptive dampers help contain body movement neatly. Gearchanges could be swifter, especially going down, but only occasionally might you want a little more grunt between the bends – the Velar can really carry speed, and enjoyably, too. After all, it's lighter and nimbler than the other large Range Rovers.

Yet as we proved, it also provides greater off-road skills than most will ever need. Despite its glossy image, the Velar is still a veritable rover of land. **A**

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Number of years without a new distillery on Islay until Kilchoman opened. It operates 15 hours a day, seven days a week.

Kilchoman is just the place for a wee dram and some off-road testing



No low go

The Velar isn't available with low range, hence the absence of a Rock Crawl function in the Terrain Response system.



Scotch is Islay's other claim to fame



A TALE OF TWO TALES

Kathleen Hillman, daughter of automotive pioneer William, married Spencer Wilks, who became managing director of Rover in 1933. Soon after, the couple bought the Laggan Estate on Islay as a holiday retreat. A sporting estate featuring 5.5 miles of river, it satisfied Kathleen's love of angling.

From here, the story bifurcates. Spencer had a Rover 10 P2 modified with raised suspension to tackle the estate's rough tracks, and one account has it that Laggan's gamekeeper, Ian Fraser, christened it the 'Land Rover'. (Fraser would later take delivery of the 27th pilot-production Land Rover.)

The alternative version - retold in James Taylor's excellent 65th anniversary Land Rover book - posits that Spencer was picnicking on the estate with his son, Thomas, and nephew, Richard, in the summer of 1947. The famous Centre-Steer prototype was in development at Solihull, and a name was needed for the production vehicle. Richard's suggestion of 'Overlander' was too close to the Willys-Overland Jeep that had helped inspire the project, but Thomas suggested 'Landrover', which the board later ratified as 'Land-Rover'.

Pick your preferred yarn, but Islay is where the name was born, and where a multitude of prototype Land Rovers would be brought for testing until Spencer's death in 1971.

It was Spencer's engineer brother, Maurice, who conceived and developed the Land Rover project. Each would later become the company's chairman. Their nephew, Spen King, dreamed up the Range Rover, a project that also involved both Spencer's son, Nick Wilks, and another nephew, Peter Wilks, who managed development following King's move to Triumph.

Source: Range Rover, The First Fifty, from Brooklands Books



Sand mode thankfully did its job



The Defender made more of a mountain of the grassy hill



Unlike Webber's Velar, Wilks's surfaced