

# Yuppie Four-wheel Drives



**F**orty years ago, four-wheel drives were for farmers, soldiers, hunters and the odd explorer. They were listed in most car guides as commercial vehicles, along with pickup trucks and goods vans. The sight of a four-wheel drive on main street simply meant that Farmer Brown had come to town for the day.

Two things changed all that. The 1970 release of the Range Rover saw the birth of a new form of transport: suddenly a small, select few could tow the horse float up the muddy road while they rode up front in luxury. And the Range Rover wasn't just good looking, it was class-leading when it came to the rugged offroad stuff. This gave it credibility with both the motoring press and the gentlemen farmers who bought them. It took a while, but the motoring world gradually cottoned on to the idea that the Range Rover wasn't just a fad.

As the stock market boomed in the 1980s, Mitsubishi put out the Pajero/Shogun, which alarmed Land Rover enough to prompt the quick release of the Land Rover Discovery in 1989. The Discovery was a hit with the British army, explorers and farmers alike, but it also made a big impact on young urban professionals (yups for short) on both sides of the Atlantic, the brash young men and women of the stock market boom who quickly became known as yuppies.

Soon many young English (and a few American) stockbrokers' families were driving to the weekend cottage in a Range Rover or Discovery. During the week the husband would drive the Porsche to work while the wife dropped the kids off at the private school in the Land Rover; the Discovery was perceived to be upmarket, practical and a safe way to move families around at a time when many popular cars were death-traps. As yuppie four-wheel drives gained a largely undeserved reputation for safety, their use spread throughout the Western world, until they became the fastest growing segment in virtually all sections of the luxury car market.

The original yuppie four-wheel drives were genuine offroad vehicles designed for the rich. It was up to America to take the craze into the mainstream.

The 1980s were a manic era that began with depression and ended with a hangover. The 1970s were over and it was no longer fashionable to seek your full potential as a human being outside the mainstream. People who lived in characterless suburbs and worked in offices still wanted to be cool, however.

The American yuppie four-wheel drive is a hybrid of the Range Rover and the redneck pickup truck. As detailed in the book *High & Mighty*, Ford's researchers discovered that four-wheel drives: "offered the promise of unfettered freedom to drive anywhere during vacations. These customers might have given up their childhood dreams of becoming fire fighters, police officers or superheroes, and had instead become parents with desk jobs and oversized mortgages. But they told Ford researchers that [offroaders] made them feel like they were still carefree, adventurous spirits who could drop everything

and head for the great outdoors at a moment's notice if they really wanted to do so...These buyers knew that most people going to national parks and other wilderness areas had no need for four-wheel drive, and that park rangers discouraged offroad driving in most places anyway. The buyers knew perfectly well that they probably had only two or three weeks of vacation a year, and would spend all but a week of it visiting relatives. None of that mattered to buyers... What counted was the fantasy of what they might want to do during a vacation, and the ability to show their friends and other motorists that they really were the bold people that they liked to see themselves as."

In other words, they had once aimed for the moon, but now they were settling for a lunar theme park.

The fuel crisis of the late 1970s was over by the early 1980s, but America's car manufacturers had largely stopped building the big gas-guzzlers because no one had wanted them a couple of years earlier while the price of petrol was still high. Therefore, as fuel prices dropped again, there were plenty of buyers for mid-sized American station wagons but few sellers. Although Jeep never expected the Cherokee to become a yuppie four-wheel drive, they did see a market for an offroad vehicle that would appeal to middle class customers who also had city lives. The basic clues as to how to achieve such a vehicle were already there on the Range Rover, so the Cherokee was given four doors (most offroaders had two, which limited their use for families) a passably car-like interior, and even unheard-of features like power steering. It was an immediate hit with middle class families.

Ford soon followed with the Explorer, which was first proposed



by Range Rover owner Edsel Ford II, but initially rejected as having too limited potential. After the Cherokee's wildfire success, however, Ford rushed the pickup-truck-based Explorer to the market. Unrestrained by the safety and fuel regulations governing passenger vehicles, the Explorer was both cheap to build and extremely profitable.

There was another twist to the saga. After Jeep lost a longstanding contract with the US army in the early 1980s, Jeep's management were looking around for new customers, but there were doubts that the public would buy such a vehicle in sufficient numbers to make fullscale civilian production worthwhile. However, the marketing whizzkids did a deal with jeanmaker Wrangler, the new Jeep Wrangler became trendy, and the rest, as they say, is history. With the teenagers of America buying (and often rolling) Wranglers in huge numbers, there was little incentive to improve the vehicle, so the Wrangler was left largely untouched till the late 1990s and has remained in its own evolutionary blind alley to this day.

The Germans came late, but they aimed far higher up the food chain with the BMW X5 & Mercedes M-Class.

The original yuppie four-wheel drives were largely the domain of the rich, and the object of quite a bit of envy & amusement – after all, the nearest they got to going offroad was when they were parked on the pavement outside the private school waiting for the kids.

Now every major passenger vehicle manufacturer is earning a significant percentage of its total income selling offroad or pseudo-offroad vehicles that are all clones of one or more of the models above. But designing a new model costs

money and takes time, so carmakers, rushing to cash in on the offroad lunacy, have simply raised the suspension of ordinary passenger cars like the Honda Civic, added imitation four-wheel drive and re-issued them as pseudo-offroaders (in this case, the CRV). The common term for this type of vehicle is 'softroader', because it's simply not designed for real offroad use. Every sector of the passenger car market has been transformed by the yuppie four-wheel drive, even the mini car sector, with makers like Daihatsu issuing 'puppy four-wheel drives' – tiny passenger cars in offroad clothes trying to gain credibility through a vague resemblance to more upmarket models.

The typically rugged genuine four-wheel drive is now almost a dying breed, replaced by a sea of vehicles aimed at everybody from the very rich to the very poor, but having in common that they appeal to the Arnold Schwarzenegger in us all. The granddaddy of them all was the now-discontinued Hummer H1, three tonnes of pseudo-military vehicle, which appeals, according to one of Hummer's salesmen, as: "a vehicle for people who like to make a statement."

The Hummer's basic statement is "fuck you". Hummer's own market research shows that the typical Hummer buyer is vain, insecure, self-centred and has little concern for the consequences of his or her actions on others. The overall yuppie four-wheel drive attitude to safety is also "fuck you". The basic idea is "I'm bigger than you, so if we have a scrap, you're going to come out second best." Not true, unfortunately. Although a yuppie four-wheel drive's massive bulk ensures that it will be the winner in a simple head-on collision with a smaller vehicle, that's often not what happens in the real

world. First, yuppie four-wheel drives are far more likely to roll than the average vehicle, and when they roll the occupants often aren't wearing seatbelts, because they don't think they need them.

Second, because they are so bulky, they are harder to handle, so they are far more likely to be in an accident. Hitting a bridge or tree in a yuppie four-wheel drive can be just as hazardous to the occupants as if they were in a normal car. Sometimes it can be worse.

As an investment, upmarket yuppie four-wheel drives are appalling – they often plummet in value, and they tend to be on the less-reliable end of the market. Repair prices for the more expensive models are typically at the luxury car end of the scale. Fuel economy is invariably appalling also. A Model T Ford gives better fuel economy than the average American four-wheel drive. When you get millions of vehicles giving poor fuel economy, you need to secure ever greater amounts of fossil fuels to run them, which may well mean going to war to secure a steady flow of oil.

The four-wheel drive craze was inevitably doomed. America, still the world's largest market for vehicles, is running record deficits, and few people expect this situation to improve soon.

The price of oil has made the larger yuppie four-wheel drives far less attractive for the average motorist. With more and more of the world's automotive factories irrevocably geared towards four-wheel drive production, a head-on collision between supply and demand is inevitable •

