

Rewriting the SUV Rule Book

The intimate relationship Rolls-Royce has with its patrons is unquestionable. The British marque doesn't do mass crowd-pleasers; instead it takes in its clients' eccentricities and delivers vehicles that directly cater to them. The fact that the first year's production of the Cullinan - Rolls-Royce's answer to the SUV - sold out, plays testament to that, discovers **Cindy-Lou Dale**.



Rolls-Royce isn't fashionably late to the SUV party but has really been waiting and watching other manufacturers. It's reconstructed the SUV concept and perfected it, delivering a vehicle of choice for kingmakers, powerbrokers and high net-worth individuals.

The Cullinan is an off-road Phantom, with a different purpose. It's ostentatious and outrageous, and oversized but to see the Cullinan in motion is a thing to behold – it commands monumental presence.

What lies beneath the unique-to-Rolls-Royce architecture is a recalibrated version of the Phantom's vast 6.75-litre twin-turbo V12 and, despite the near 2.7-tonne kerb-weight, it drags the Cullinan to 60mph in just five seconds.

On the tarmac, the Cullinan purrs along productively, sequestered from its surroundings. The V12 is almost silent (hello 100kg of insulation), the silky ZF eight-speed automatic-only gearbox is magnificently smooth, and thanks to foam lined tyres, wind and road noise is barely perceptible. Regards handling, witchcraft embeds it to the road, which is what you'd expect from the world's most refined SUV.

There's a perverse pleasure in pointing the Cullinan up a rocky pass and letting it get on with it (whilst keeping the Dom Perignon chilled). Off road it disguises its heft well and can be confidently hustled along, driving with nothing more than telepathy. On twisting country roads it's particularly able and delivers a satisfying roar when driven boldly.

Aided by a camera system that reads the road ahead, the SUV glides over dirt tracks with a self-leveling air suspension that miraculously absorbs off-road ruts and bumps. But the fun starts with a flick of the 'Everywhere' switch. This is when the Cullinan tightens its muscles to tackle some off-piste action.

Although the Cullinan is graceful, with a modern energy, the traditional concept of beauty here is superfluous. The roofline gets faster as your eye travels along its length; there's strong metal touch-points throughout, and large protective spears above the sills that break up the body's side volume. If ever there was a statement car, this is it.

At almost 7ft wide and 17ft long, the body is stumpy. Add to that a height of 6ft and you've got yourself a mobile viewing platform, with a mean-looking warrior face, and laser headlights, complete with vertical and horizontal lines. To emphasise the car's tough remit the long bonnet sits higher than the front wings and the traditional hand-polished Parthenon grille sits proud of the bodywork.

The opening price is US\$325,000, which most customers will double by the time they've added their own bespoke extras like the Recreation Module – a motorized drawer which is a viewing platform, complete with folding leather chairs.

This is, in so many ways, a ludicrous car. The looks may be defiant, the price daunting, and whether you actually like it or not is irrelevant – this is what Rolls-Royce customers want: a boutique off-roader that's rewritten the SUV rule book.