

Robison on Rovers

How to choose the correct shop - correctly.

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Many of you have read my posts on the Rovers North and DiscoWeb bulletin boards, and some have corresponded with me on various topics. For those who don't know me - I manage J E Robison Service - on the web at www.robison-service.com - an independent Land Rover specialist shop in Springfield, Massachusetts. I've worked continuously with Land Rovers since their re-introduction to North America some fifteen years ago. In my column, I can answer your questions at greater length than is possible on the bulletin boards. Each issue, I will take on a few of the interesting questions I receive or will address a topic of interest to Land Rover owners.

I am a longtime Land Rover owner. I've had many Land Rovers over the years, and currently have a 2000 Range Rover P38A, a 1996 Discovery I, and a 1966 Series. My father has a 1995 Range Rover Classic, and my brother has a 2003 Discovery II. So we're a Land Rover family.

If you have questions or issues you'd like discussed email: robison@robison-service.com



Welcome to the fall edition of Robison on Rovers. In this column I'd like to talk about selection of a good shop for your Land Rover. At some point, all of you will need one.

Many of you reading my columns here are do-it-yourselfers. I'm all for that! Fixing your own Land Rover teaches fortitude and self reliance. When your truck breaks down in the middle of nowhere there's no substitute for being able to help yourself. Faced with a breakdown on a desolate mountain top some of us will rise to the challenge and motor home, while others will sit helplessly as night falls and the denizens of the woodland close in and carrion eating birds circle above.

A person who can handle any repair on his Land Rover will have the confidence and basic skills to handle many other challenges life may throw at him. Such a person will remain unruffled when faced with clogged toilets, minor electrical fires, or leaky roofs. All of us encounter such things in life.

But until you arrive upon this plateau - master of Land Rovers, electricity and plumbing - you will need to engage the services of a repair shop to keep your trusty Land Rover running. I'd like to offer some suggestions to help accomplish this.

The first thing I'd like to talk about is attitude. Many times I hear questions like "how can I get my car fixed without getting ripped off?" The implication is that repair shops are dishonest, and you need to protect yourself. In my experience, nothing is farther from the truth. Very few shops set out each morning to cheat their customers, despite people's opinions to the contrary.

Crooked repair shops and crooked mechanics are very rare. But well intentioned mechanics that lack the skills to do the job right - they are all too common. I cannot tell you how many times I've seen trucks come in with cross members left off "because they weren't necessary"; check engine lights removed because "they just kept coming on"; paperclips in the fuse box because "the fuse just keeps blowing." All those things and more result from a lack of skill or knowledge on the part of the person fixing the car. Many of these things are dangerous, all can be costly. How to avoid them?



Start by identifying shops in your vicinity that fix Land Rovers. How do you do this? Here are a few suggestions: Call Rovers North and ask if they know a good shop near you. They deal with shops all over the country. Ask your local Land Rover club. Look at the list of Land Rover shops online at www.bushducks.com. Look at the Cartalk site - www.cartalk.com/content/mechx/

Once you have found a shop (hopefully you will find several), the next step is a handshake. Meet the people who are going to be fixing your pet. Before you bring your Land Rover to a new shop I suggest you interview them for the job of fixing your Land Rover just as you'd interview someone for a job. Don't be bashful - this is an important step! Why do they want to fix Land Rovers? What are their qualifications? How long have they done it? Do they have references? I have been servicing Land Rovers since they returned to America, and potential clients ask me these questions every week.

I'd like to stress that the most important factor in having a good service experience is good communication with the repair shop. You need to feel confident that they care about your concerns, they understand them, they are smart, resourceful, and they can solve your problems. Well, at least your car problems.



Each make of car has its quirks and idiosyncrasies, Land Rover more than most. It is imperative that you find someone who

knows their way around these cars. Experience with Chevrolet or Mazda will not prepare someone to fix the ABS system or the air suspension on your Range Rover. Look for people who have training and certification. ASE is one organization that tests and certifies auto technicians. Land Rover also certifies dealer technicians.

You can learn a lot by asking the shop manager about the shop's policies. Can they take you in the shop and show you what's wrong with your truck? Will they give you a tour of the place? Can they explain how the systems on your Rover work? Ideally, you will find people with a passion for Land Rovers.

When you arrive at a new shop, have a look around. If you're neat and clean look for a shop that's neat and clean too. If you treat your Rover with respect bring it to a shop where the technicians treat things with similar respect. Do you mind your interior getting a little messy? Well, dirty footprints on the floor won't matter now, will they? Are there other Land Rovers in the yard? It's always comforting to be one of many. There's nothing more disconcerting than being the only Range Rover in a service department parking lot full of Hyundais and Mitsubishis.

Ask about parts - does the shop use genuine parts or aftermarket? Do they offer a choice? There is more than price to the selection of parts for your Land Rover. A good shop will have a parts philosophy that matches yours, and they will be able to advise you well. I'm not going to presume to tell you what parts YOU should use, because people have different priorities. You may want the least expensive brake job, while your friend may want maximum stopping power for the mountains. And I may want long pad life, and my father may want brake pads that don't cover his wheel rims in dust. A good shop is one that can accommodate all those individual desires.

What about price? Most shops bill out labor and parts individual-ly. Labor charges may be based upon the actual time worked - as



at our shop - or they may be derived from a labor estimating guide. The latter group of shops are called "flat rate" shops. Such shops may press their technicians to "beat the book time" to make more money and quality can suffer as a result. It pays to know how your shop bills time. Parts can vary in price from shop to shop depending upon the brand of part used. A Genuine Land Rover brake rotor may cost \$68 from the dealer. An independent that has to pay more may charge \$75. Another shop may use a lower quality aftermarket part for \$50. Yet another shop may use a higher performance cross-drilled aftermarket rotor for \$99. I'm not advocating one over the other - just know what you are getting.

Shops do two kinds of work - maintenance and repair. Maintenance is the regular changing of oil, the replacement of tires, the replacement of wiper blades and the many other things found in the factory maintenance schedule. You should be able to get a price in advance for most routine maintenance jobs. Remember that the price may vary if differing grades of parts are used. For example, a fluid service with Mobil 1 or Amsoil will be more expensive than one with petroleum base oil.

When comparing prices for such services keep in mind the possible differences in labor, parts, and also the scope of work. What's that? Here's an example: One place may quote a brake job with

new pads and rotors for \$400. They've been taught to replace pads and rotors together. Another shop - more conscious of budget - measures the rotors and finds them re-usable. They quote \$200 for pads only. Is the \$400 quote a rip-off? No. It's a higher price for a more comprehensive job. The more costly job will certainly stop more quietly and smoothly, and it will last longer. Do you want to pay \$200 more for the better job? That's up to you. When comparing prices make sure you are comparing comparable services.

Repair is another matter. Repair prices often cannot be determined in advance. When someone comes in with a rough running Rover with a check engine light on the first thing they may say is "how much to fix my check engine light?" I say "the first step will be for us to test your car, to find out what's wrong. Once we know what's wrong we can figure out what the repairs will cost." In some cases an iterative process is required to reach this point. For example, you may need to charge the battery to make a towed-in truck crank over. At that point you may need to replace the water pump so the vehicle can be driven. And only at that point do you discover that the head gaskets were blown from overheating and the truck needs a \$1,500 repair in addition to the work already done.

You can help yourself by giving a good description of your car's problem. When does it run rough? You say: "Only on cold rainy days." This simple statement could save you several wasted hours when you bring your car in on a hot dry summer afternoon.



Any shop with standard hand tools can do basic service - oil changes, brake pad replacement, muffler replacement, tune ups. If your Land Rover was made before 1993 you will find most anything can be done with a standard tools. However, if you own a late model Land Rover you will find special tools are needed for diagnosis and repair.

Special Land Rover electronic testers are needed to fix the gadgets on newer trucks. ABS, SRS, EAS, ETC, climate control - these are some of the systems that can only be diagnosed with specialist equipment. Some of you may not even know what these systems are, but when they quit most of you will notice.

OBD II scan tools will not access the systems above. They are limited to accessing fault codes from the engine management system, and they are limited in that area when compared with specialist tools.

There are three test systems on the market. Omnitec Interro makes the T4 systems used by Land Rover dealers. Two independent firms, Rovacom and Autologic, make aftermarket test systems with similar capabilities. Any full-service Land Rover specialist you interview should have one of these systems.

The tools are no use to a technician without manuals with test info, repair procedures, and specifications. Printed workshop manuals are available for most Land Rovers. Land Rover has consolidated all the 1994-2003 manuals onto a CD kit they call RAVE. Last year Land Rover began delivering bulletins and other data via online subscription. The system they use is called Global Technical Reference - GTR. You can check out the service at www.landrovertchinfo.com

I hope this column helps you the next time you need to seek service for your Land Rover. See you next issue.

John