

GALICIA WHERE'S THAT?

John Pearson visits Spain's best-kept secret in the latest Discovery Commercial. The country's north-west region offers a wealth of remote mountain tracks and spectacular scenery between its ancient towns and villages

PHOTOS: BOB ATKINS

I'm really looking forward to getting into the Galician mountains with this Discovery. Its spec list sounds quite off-road tasty, featuring active locking centre and rear differentials, adjustable air suspension, 700mm wading depth, the latest Terrain Response 2, and the purposeful 236bhp/317lb ft 2.0-litre Ingenium diesel engine.

Although you might think that it's a normal seven-seater Discovery from the outside, when you look inside it's actually a commercial, with a sturdy load platform where the two rear rows of seats normally go and a tough mesh bulkhead to keep your cargo in the back. There's more than enough space here to stow my expedition kit, photographer Bob Atkins' camera gear and plenty more besides on this ARDventures winter trip in the Galicia region of northern Spain.

I found LRO's Discovery 3 to be useful for greenlaning and long adventures in commercial trim – just as long as I never needed to use more than its two front seats, of course.

This latest Disco Commercial may be bigger than its D4 predecessor, but it is a lot less lardy thanks to its strong but much lighter aluminium chassis and greater use of aluminium panels. In contrast, the D4's steel chassis is a weighty structure. You can understand why the D5 Commercial, at 2287kg, is a not-inconsiderable 335kg lighter than the D4.

One obvious benefit of this weight reduction is that while the D4's oh-so-smooth 3.0-litre SDV6 produces 252bhp compared to the new Discovery's 236bhp, the Commercial is nonetheless half a second quicker accelerating to 60mph, at 8.3sec. And its top speed is 121mph compared to the D4's 112mph.

I get an unexpected opportunity to test the Discovery 5's ability as a motorway cruiser when Storm Dennis intervenes in my plans to travel to Spain via Portsmouth-Santander with Brittany Ferries. The UK is battering down the hatches, flights are postponed and forecasters are saying that the Bay of Biscay, through which

we would be sailing, is going to be lashed by severe Atlantic storms. In the circumstances, I'm very happy that Brittany Ferries has cancelled our crossing and we're offered the alternative of a ferry to Caen, which we follow with the long drive through France and across the top of Spain to get us back on track.

In fact, the more I drive the D5, the happier I am. It's comfortable, with its electrically adjusted cool black leather seats and black interior, and wafting down the smooth French autoroutes. Despite dastardly Dennis whipping ferociously across France, the Discovery is quiet and commendably stable in the strong sidewinds. It's loping along at just 1700rpm at 70mph, and averaging almost 40mpg.

As with all modern Land Rovers, I can personalise it to suit my requirements through the steering wheel-mounted control – so I switch off the things that I hate, such as drive-away locking and auto dipping, and change the digital speedometer to km/h for continental roads.

I can assure you it felt just as spectacular from the inside



Many homes in remote villages had these traditional crop storage buildings



Little-used tracks were overgrown



Street-pattern tyres coped extremely well

ADVENTURES

Russell Dykes launched his adventure travel company last year after being involved with a couple of other organisations. He's an experienced tour operator and off-road instructor, guiding 4x4 adventures throughout the UK's greenlane network, in Europe, Morocco and Western Sahara. Euro destinations include the



Alps, Pyrenees, Spain and the Balkans, plus a weekender blast in the sand dunes at Marquenterre in northern France.

Russ also recently took on the 4x4 Experience Centre in the impressive grounds of Carlton Towers, a 17th century stately home near Selby, North Yorks. For info see ardventures.co.uk.

I don't have to do anything with the headlights, because the beam pattern is suitable for driving either on the left or right.

Day 1 Leon to Allariz, 219 miles

I'm with a small group of adventure enthusiasts on this ARDventures trip in Galicia, led by Russell Dykes, an experienced guide and off-road instructor. He's in his Disco 4 Commercial, and there are two Defender 110s and a Toyota Land Cruiser. We overnight near Poitiers, then at Leon in Spain before venturing off the tarmac east of Xinzo de Limia, close to the Portuguese border. The first track is a slippery climb into the hills, and a degree of tyre/wheel anxiety is starting to hit me. The D5 is shod with Pirelli all-season tyres, with a street-pattern tread that could possibly struggle if the going gets much more slippery than this. And with the track dotted

with some vicious rocks, I'm worried about scratching the pristine 19-inch alloy wheels. The surrounding forests of Mediterranean oaks appear to still be in the grip of winter, but a closer look reveals small buds are forming, and some of the gorse bushes that flank the tracks are bursting with vibrant yellow flowers. Then the D5's impressive off-tarmac capability reveals itself on a steep, slippery climb. A large exposed rock in the track centre means that we have to veer over to the right halfway up the hill to clear it, and there doesn't look to be much grip. I've got the D5's off-road info panel on the centre dash screen and can see that both the locking centre and rear diffs have automatically engaged as I approach the slippery section, and I'm around the rock and out the top with no wheelspin. That locking rear diff is an optional extra, but a good investment. Ahead of us is an even tougher test. We swing left at the top of the climb and downhill into a scary-looking descent with a badly washed-out

V-gully. To make matters worse, the camber angle looks likely to pull me inexorably towards the left bank unless I can get the Pirellis to bite into the loose gravel surface. I've known Land Rover's press fleet manager, Lindsey Dipple, for many years. She's a lovely lady, but I'll be in big trouble if I hand the D5 back with scratched or dented body panels after contact with this bank. I'm in low range and ease the eight-speed autobox into first with the paddleshift, then inch down the hill, left foot on the brake. As I descend further, the front left wheel goes into the gully and the offside rear wheel is spectacularly way up in the air, giving a clear view of the underside to everyone watching. From the driver's seat it feels as though I've just driven off the end of the earth. Gently does it. I inch down further, watching Russ Dykes intently as he expertly spots me into the trickiest part. The wheels are sliding inexorably towards the bank and I'm getting worried. But Russ calmly gets me to apply full

right-hand steering lock, pushing the front tyre on to the bank and keeping the bodywork away from it. The wrath of Lindsey is avoided. We drive more mountain tracks – some rutted, some rocky – and the D5 is coping well. One section has encroaching gorse. It's the sort of going that I'd push through with my Defender, but in the circumstances I stop and cut back the vegetation to keep the D5's flanks pristine. We climb to just over 3000ft before dropping back down to tarmac at the end of the day. The

The effect of cool air lower down has caused the amazing phenomenon of a cloud inversion

sun's shining, and it's a lovely place to be despite a lack of snow in these here hills. We've taken a big loop out from Xinzo, and are now heading north to the town of Allariz, where we'll be staying at a hotel on the outskirts for two nights.

Day 2 Allariz loop, 92 miles

After a delightfully inexpensive but exceptionally tasty meal of wild boar stew and local red wine in Allariz's old town, we're out into a sharp frost the next morning. On with the heated seats, then, as we climb again to more than 3000ft on some rocky tracks. The effect of cool air lower down has caused the amazing phenomenon of a cloud inversion. The sky is clear blue once we've climbed through the cloud, yet we're looking down on cloud in the valley all around. Hill and mountain tops are emerging through the whiteness like islands in a sea of whipped cream.

The D5's satnav actually shows most of the tracks we're on as roads, including the highest and longest one of the day – the Estrada a Rebordechao. It's initially paved, but soon turns to rough, rocky climbs through heather-covered hillsides into an area of big rock outcrops at more than 4800ft. There are some demanding rock crawls and slippery ruts to deal with on the way up, but it's going back downhill that proves to be the most troublesome. We stop for a windswept picnic lunch at the top, and the frost thaws out from the track's top layer while we're parked up, turning it into a treacherous, slippery blancmange. I'm struggling to keep the D5 pointing straight in places, and with ditches lurking both sides of the track waiting to snare me should I get too close, I'm down into low-range first gear, and at a crawl. More spectacular tracks take us on a big loop out towards the Canyon de Sil. Reckoned to be the most picturesque in Galicia, it's more than

Typical Galicia: great driving routes with a stunning backdrop



This local resident doesn't look very 'a-moo-sed'



Spectacular cloud inversion



Giant electricity turbines dwarf our convoy up here

WHERE WE DROVE

After crossing the Pyrenees and driving west across the top of Spain, we took a meandering route through Galicia from Xinzo de Lima to historic Pontevedra.



30 miles long and some of the rock walls are up to an incredible 1650ft high.

Our next climb takes us around a hill like a veranda, before turning sharply through a hairpin into a severe rock crawl. There's limited space to back up for the turn due to the rear end hanging over a scary drop, but the D5's steering lock is definitely the best in class here and I'm soon around the turn and clambering over another series of big rocks. With the suspension raised to off-road height I'm not actually touching anything down underneath, and if I keep it really slow I'm not risking bouncing around and crashing down on to a sharp rock.

Day 3
Allariz to Ourense, 86 miles

The next day we're backtracking north-east from Allariz before taking another big loop towards Esposende near Ourense, where we're

overnighting. The hotels that ARDventures uses are all well-appointed and good value, and getting food and drink in the local towns and villages is inexpensive. It's out of season now, but there are plenty of cafes and restaurants open. Although, as always in Spain it's hard to get an evening meal before eight or even nine o'clock.

It's frosty again, which means we're treated to more spectacular cloud inversions as we climb into the Parque Elio de Sil. The blades of giant electricity turbines swoosh high above our heads as we pass along a series of gravel tracks before entering a gnarly, washed-out descent.

We pass through remote ancient villages, many homes having their own distinctive crop storage buildings called hórreos, which are also common in Portugal where they're known as espigueiros. Built of wood and/or stone, they are raised off the ground, usually on mushroom-shaped pillars to prevent rodents getting inside. Most are disused; young people increasingly desert out-of-the-way villages and move away for work.

Today's tracks are varied, from loose gravel to rutted climbs through woodland to yet more rock crawls. It's been scenic although not as tricky as the two previous days – but tomorrow is going to be another tough one as we take a big loop out west from our village near Ourense. First, though, we're out to another local village restaurant for a truly splendid T-bone steak.

Day 4
Ourense loop, 56 miles

There's yet another spectacular cloud inversion as we emerge from the small village of Minmenta, where elderly men tend their allotments in the bright sunshine. As we continue we're into an area where dramatic fires swept through the forests a couple of years ago, and some of it still looks rather desolate.

Initially we're on some gentle tracks, but turning left on to a forested climb it all suddenly

gets serious again. The track is initially tight, twisty and potentially scratchy – so we're cutting back the bushes and heaving fallen trees out of the way. Then we reach a washed-out section with a large protruding tree trunk to the left and a rock bank to the right. Immovable objects could meet bendable D5 bodywork unless I'm very careful. Russ's D4 just squeezes through, his rock sliders keeping the rest of his Land Rover off the trunk, but there isn't enough space to get the D5 through unscathed. We've already

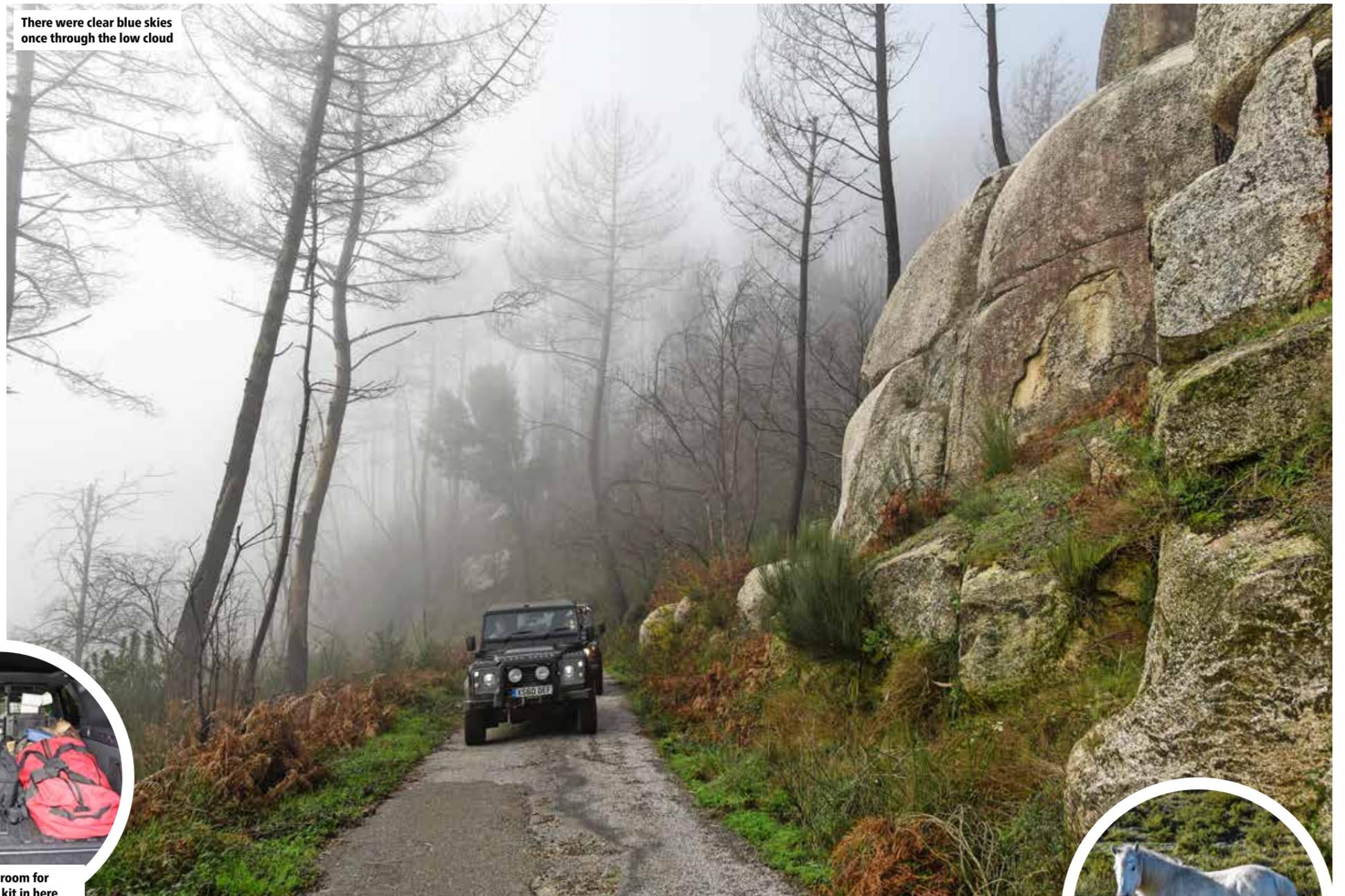
Immovable objects could meet bendable Discovery 5 bodywork unless I'm very careful



D5 was highly controllable on loose, rocky surface



Plenty of room for expedition kit in here



There were clear blue skies once through the low cloud



More than one horsepower needed for this log haul



come through some testing sections and there's nowhere to turn around; forward is the only way.

Russ has a battery-powered multi-saw, which is just about powerful enough to hack off sufficient wood from the trunk for me to squeeze through. He is watching my left-side bodywork and Defender driver Graham Sumner is spotting me past the rock face; both have pained expressions on their faces and I can see how close it is on the D5's Drive Assist cameras. It's a tight squeeze, so I ease gently through at a slow trickle.

After what seems like a very long time, I'm out at the top. The others wriggle their way past the same obstruction and we're on our way. It's been a great team effort, with everyone pitching in to clear the track and get me through unscathed.

There are some more woodland tracks, fortunately a lot milder than the one with the tree trunk. However, there's a sting in the tail in the form of a washed-out climb with some seriously testing rock crawls. There is the bonus of wonderful views over a rolling valley, though.

We climb to 2900ft before descending through more crawls over big rocks. I've been looking after the Pirellis and they've stood up well to assault by the unyielding rockery.

Day 5
Ourense to Pontevedra, 61 miles

The final day of off-tarmac driving sees us back out in the hills and climbing quickly to

The drystone-walled track that approaches the river is only a couple of inches wider than the D5

2800ft. We've turned north-east off the road to Pontevedra and will be making a big horseshoe-shaped loop, before overnighting in the historic old town. It's now 19°C, the sky is cloudless and this is a splendid place to be, especially as news reports are showing incessant rainfall and widespread flooding back in the UK.

The going is straightforward until we reach a steep, loose, rock-strewn descent towards the village of A Airoá. I could rely on Hill Descent Control to deliver me to the bridge over the Ceino river at the bottom, but prefer to select low-range first gear and trickle down even slower than HDC's 4mph minimum.

Our last track takes us alongside the river Vertugo, before turning right to cross it. Trouble is, the drystone-walled track that approaches the river is only a couple of inches wider than a Disco 5. I'm breathing in as Russ Dykes spots me through it and over the ancient stone bridge. Getting on to it is tricky because the lane approaches the bridge at an angle. Russ has to

guide me as far over to the right as possible, with the offside front wheel scarily half over the edge, at which point the nearside rear wheel has just edged on to the bridge.

We drive more woodland tracks, but there's nothing too demanding – apart from some overgrown bushes to cut back – before we hit the road again and drive to our hotel in the centre of Pontevedra.

There's a winter festival going on in the old town and we're all celebrating what has been a great adventure. Galicia is probably Spain's best-kept secret; many people don't even know where it is, especially if they're accustomed to blasting due south after exiting the Portsmouth-Santander ferry. But they're missing out on some fantastic scenery that's a world apart from the popular Costa seaside regions – and there's great off-tarmac driving on what have turned out to be totally deserted mountain routes.

The Discovery proved to be more than capable of everything we've asked of it. It's a supreme

Galicia weather was stunning, even though it was winter



long-distance cruiser on the tarmac, whisking us down through France and Spain after the ferry was cancelled. It's also significantly more frugal at the pumps than all the other Land Rovers on the trip, much to the chagrin of Russell Dykes, who put a lot more diesel in his D4.

And it ticks a lot of boxes as an off-roader. Some of the tracks we drove were technically demanding but it just got on with it, Land Rover's awesome electronic systems helping it to find grip on slippery, loose climbs and descents, where my brain was telling me there was none.

Some of the tracks we drove were wide enough for the Defenders on the trip to get through easily, but were a bit squeezey for the wider Discovery. This did call for some judicious spotting on the tight, rocky bits, or cutting back intrusive vegetation to spare the paintwork.

The Commercial conversion proved to be really handy for our purpose, swallowing our kit, with loads of space to spare. The load volume, at

1856 litres, is 12 per cent smaller than that of the Disco 4 Commercial but would be ideal for, say, a professional like a country vet who wants a stylish, practical, capable 4x4 commercial, with big capacity and doesn't want to look like a white van man. This, the poshest van on the market right now, does cost £2k more than the seven-seat D5 SE, because of the work that has to be done for the commercial conversion.

There are tax benefits for commercial users, with lower vehicle excise duty and company car tax. But the downside is lower speed limits – 50mph on single carriageways and 60mph on dual carriageways (but 70mph on motorways).

Would the Commercial make a good adventure truck? Most would likely plump for the tougher new Defender at similar money, but the D5 is a capacious, viable option if that doesn't float your boat. I'd fit a set of all-terrains, rock sliders and underbody protection, but it's a comfortable, capable way to travel to remote places. **LRO**

TECH SPEC

- **Model** Discovery Commercial SD4 SE
- **Price** From £54,765; as tested £57,875 (extras inc Advanced Off-Road Capability Pack, with Terrain Response 2 and active locking rear differential, plus detachable towbar and advanced Tow Assist, with Corris Grey metallic paintwork).
- **Engine** 2.0 litre SD4 Ingenium, 236bhp/317lb ft 0-60mph 8.3sec
- **Maximum speed** 121mph
- **Transmission** Eight-speed auto, two-speed transfer box
- **Economy** Claimed 30.4-33.7mpg, actual 32.39mpg overall
- **Weight** 2287kg
- **Off-road specification:** approach angle 26°, departure angle 24.8°, breakover angle 21.2°, ground clearance 207mm, wading depth 900mm
- **Cargo space** 1856 litres, 1635mm long, 939mm high and 1411mm wide
- **Maximum towing capacity** 3500kg