

THE ITALIAN JOB!

Is the new ARES Design Defender an Italian stallion
or just another show pony with zero functionality?
Patrick Cruywagen investigates



Tarting up Defenders has become a pretty big business. Just ask Charlie Fawcett of Twisted in Yorkshire or Simon Dearn of Urban Automotive in Milton Keynes. These chaps count royalty, actors and football premierships stars among their clients. The formula is pretty simple. Buy a good, newish Defender and give it a makeover. Improve engine performance, fit suspension upgrades, retrim the interior and give it a paint job. In fact, you can just about replace or improve anything on a Defender. Finally, charge more than the price of a new big-body Range Rover for your creation, and job done. Yes I know, it is a little more complicated than that, or is it?

Even Jaguar Land Rover jumped on this tarting up of Defenders bandwagon a little while ago with their limited edition Works V8. With a starting price of £150,000 - this craziness is making it harder for the average Joe to buy a Defender because suddenly the owner of a thrashed rustbucket thinks it is worth a minimum of £15,000. Three years ago you could pick up the same Defender for a couple of grand.

It is with these thoughts milling about in my head that I land at Bologna airport in Northern Italy as a guest of ARES Design. You've all heard of California's Silicon Valley, the home of social media and technology giants? Well this part of Italy is known as Motor Valley as it is home to Lamborghini, Ferrari, Ducati, Maserati... and ARES Design. Petrolheads from around the world come here to visit the car manufacturers, autodromos (racing circuits) and museums. In fact, the first thing I saw after clearing immigration was a couple of Lambos on display.

I am here to drive a Defender built by ARES Design, of course. Who are they? A newish (started in 2015) Italian coachbuilding company who according to some of the slogans on their hospital-white walls 'make automotive dreams come true', while at the same time waging a 'war against mediocrity'. How do they do it? They take standard (mostly top-end) vehicles, then they get their team of designers to collaborate with their clients in order to design and then build something bespoke. Which is why the showroom I am walking through is home to a Corvette Stingray, Bentley Mulsanne, Porsche 911 GT3 Targa and the



Story: Patrick Cruywagen Pictures: ARES Design

Ares X-Raid, a Mercedes G63 on steroids. Thank goodness for the X-Raid's lowering side-steps which deploy when you unlock it because a vertically-challenged lady or gentleman would not be able to climb into it without them.

The decision to build an ARES Design Defender was taken after a customer put in an order for several of them. ARES will build 53 in total and source donor vehicles from around Europe. I was one of several journalists invited to drive the prototype 110s. The starting price of an ARES Defender is a whopping €215,000 Euros, making it the most expensive Defender currently for sale. If you order one now you can expect delivery in about eight weeks time as they are rather busy with bespoke builds at their new three-storey 18,000 sq metre facility.

Stephan Cimbal from the ARES marketing team elaborates for us: "Everybody loves a Defender and we allow our customers to create their dream Defender." After walking through the showroom we are taken to see the Defenders for the first time. If my standard Defender 110 was a McDonald's Quarter Pounder then the ARES Defender is Burger King's Triple Whopper Sandwich (which has three quarter-pound beef patties by the way) with all the trimmings.

"We wanted to make something that was more powerful than the original and looked tough while giving it a more comfortable interior. It is very important when you work with something that is 70 years old you must make it better. If you don't then no-one will buy it," says Andrea Galletti, ARES sales advisor.

Every ARES Defender build begins the same way, with a total strip down so that the soundproofing process can begin. Puma engines are then cast aside and replaced with Land Rover V8s which start out life as a 4.5-litre engine but are then rebored to 4.7, thanks to the kind folk at JE MotorWorks in Coventry. The engine also features larger injectors, new camshafts and gas-flowed cylinder heads. Gone too is the standard five-speed manual gearbox; these vehicles have a six-speed tiptronic auto system.

This all translates to 282 bhp and 325 lb-ft of torque. This is what we would be experiencing later today. For those that are looking for a little more from their V8 ARES Defenders, there is a supercharged version of the engine available, and it delivers a whopping 475 bhp and almost 480 lb-ft.

My first thoughts as I walk around the Italian stallion is that it is massive, and that's because it is 75 mm taller than a standard Defender 110. It has certainly been beefed up to the max. On the supercharged version this increase in height is only 50 mm. The 18-inch wheels are certainly bigger than my

The impressive three-storey facility in Modena



Defender's and they are shod in 305/70 R18 Cooper tyres. A good choice in tyres except they stand wider than the carbon fibre wheel arch extensions, which are not the only external parts to be covered in this material. The bonnet, grille and headlight surrounds have also received the same treatment.

For some reason the vehicle has two customised snorkels. This has nothing to do with the fact that petrol engines do not swim as well as their diesel counterparts – it is purely cosmetic, I am informed.

Sadly, for insurance reasons, we are unable to drive the V8 on public roads, so instead we ride shotgun in them to a nearby off-road track. Mario (not his real name), our driver, smiles as the meaty V8 roars to life. He does not hold back, and with a press of a button (just like on the Range Rover Sport SVR) the exhaust flaps open and the crescendo of the roar intensifies. Oh, the roar of a Milltek Sports system. I do hope that Mario will still be smiling after I have taken it off road.

Before climbing into the Defender I was happy to report that the only part of it that had suffered from a chequer plating were the sills. Not so for the interior. The load area behind the bench seat was covered in the stuff. So too the floor, door cards and even some parts of the dash. Whatever happened to less is more, or original is the new bling? I have never in my life been in a Defender with more chequer plate.

The rest of the interior felt more Ferrari-like than Defender-like with all the leather, carbon fibre and, lest we forget, chequer plate a-plenty. As our little convoy wound its way around the suburbs of Modena I asked about brakes and suspension. The suspension system has enjoyed a makeover with bigger springs and Fox high-pressure dampers while

From concept to reality: the ARES Design Defender



We have always said that the Defender is a supercar



ARES Design will only produce 53 V8 Defenders



"If you don't make the Defender better, then people won't buy it..."



Never before have I driven a Defender with more chequer plate



ARES DESIGN DEFENDER
To find out more about ARES Design or if you would like to order an ARES Design Defender (with a starting price of €215,000) see <https://aresdesign.com>.



Just as cramped as a regular Defender



Do two snorkels really look better than one?

brakes have been upgraded to an AP Racing setup, which consists of 362x32 mm front discs clamped by six-piston calipers. But will it all be able to stop and control this beast?

At last we reach the off-road site. Time for another quick walk around the truck before taking it for a slow spin. I have to give ARES Design their due as they have created something that looks as if it can still take a battering off-road. This is achieved through decent front and rear off-road bumpers, recovery points at both ends and side steps. Plus, if there are any Jeeps or Toyotas that come unstuck, a Warn winch can be used to recover them. It does not stop there. It has also been fitted with ARB lockers so at least on paper it should be more capable than a standard Defender. This is certainly no show pony.

At last my hands are holding the small leather steering wheel while my butt enjoys the firm black leather seat. Oh my goodness! It has an electronic handbrake on the centre console. My right knee says thank you for this small detail. Remember we are in a LHD Defender. First up is an axle-twister and so we pop it into low range. I take a tougher line than the one suggested by the instructor. Soon I hear the familiar twang of a super-extended spring, but still the Defender slowly crawls forward. This is not bad at all.

Next up is the mother of all descents. I should actually lock it into first gear and put both feet on the slippery, shiny black chequer plate floor. My instructor says definitely not. As soon as we crest the hill and start the decline the Defender runs a bit faster than a manual Td5 or Tdi would in first gear low range. I am left with no choice but to depress the brake because right now it all feels a little out of control. I depress it about halfway. Nothing happens. This is not good. I push it three quarters of the way. Still, nothing happens. I try and push it through the floorboard. At last, the Defender starts to slow down and it feels as if I have regained control. A racing brake system when off-roading in a heavy V8 110? They might need to go back to the drawing board with that one.

We get down the incline and make our way over some gentler tracks. So much power and torque and nowhere to play with it. A tricky incline awaits us. I want to try and get stuck on it and think about going as slowly as possible. My instructor tells me to engage the lockers. Spoil sport. The



Engine work was done by JE MotorWorks in Coventry, UK

“On paper it should be more capable than a standard Defender”

Defender effortlessly burbles up the incline. It feels as if I am driving an Icelandic Bigfoot Defender around the hot, dusty tracks of Modena. Soon the short drive is over but I get another go at driving the same track later in the day.

The ARES Defender certainly has an aggressive presence about it. They just need to look at a way of solving that braking issue and also see if they can get that big V8 to go into a slow, controlled rock-crawling mode, especially on the steep declines. Off-roading in a Land Rover is supposed to be all about as slow as possible, as fast as necessary.

Never in my life have I driven such an expensive Defender. The V8 certainly makes all the right noises and is able to offer more than enough power when off-roading. As for styling and interior it is over the top though the masses of chequer plate bring it crashing back down to earth again. At the end of the day it is still just a Defender and it probably leaks oil just like mine. Though if I was to order one (should I win the lottery) I would insist on asking for a little centre console fridge to keep the San Pellegrino Sparkling Mineral Water chilled. It was rather hot in Modena...



Bigger wheels and a 75mm lift