



*THE NEW
LAND CRUISER
250 SERIES
MAKES ITS
DEBUT AT
CRUISE MOAB*



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WORDS:
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PHOTOS:
CLIC OUTDOOR

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The regular Land Cruiser edition is called simply Land Cruiser. You can identify it by the rectangular headlights which were designed to look like the beloved FJ62.

If you're like me (and I know I am), you've been raptly watching every detail of the new Land Cruiser. I was taking screenshots of the vehicle silhouette when they were still teasing the big reveal last summer, and I've been devouring the specs and trim levels as they've been released.

Now the wait is over. New Cruisers are arriving at Toyota dealerships. People who put their name on the waiting list are paying their money and driving away in an all-new model of Land Cruiser. Many of our favorite Toyota aftermarket vendors have taken delivery of their own new Cruisers and are now hard at work figuring out what's needed to turn your 250 into an unstoppable sexy offroad machine. Capitalism at its finest, baby.

Despite all this, I still hadn't seen one in real life. Then Toyota brought two of them to Cruise Moab.

Over the past few years, two groups of Toyota employees have regularly attended Cruise Moab. The first group are the engineers who take various Toyota 4x4 vehicles out on the trail and talk quietly with one another around the campfire. They kind of do their own thing. The second group is the Toyota marketing team who are super friendly and outgoing. Both groups are as enthusiastic about all things Toyota 4WD as we are, including the older models we all love. This year, the marketing group brought out two new Land Cruisers to show off at Cruise Moab and hit the trails. The new Land Cruisers were both prototypes rather than production vehicles, but the differences were negligible.

On the second day of Cruise Moab, Toyota sponsored the Dome Plateau trail run and brought the two Cruisers with them. In fact,

Jackson Philby and Kurt Williams actually led the trail from one of the new Cruisers. Dome Plateau is a maze of interconnected trails which gives you many options as well as the ability to get lost if you don't pay attention. Jackson and Kurt chose a route that was a little less severe than the normal one since the new Cruisers were completely stock.

I don't know about you, but it's been a long time since my Cruiser was stock. I've built my 80 over two decades to tackle almost anything. A stock 80 comes with tough parts right from Mr. T, but in stock form it's low to the ground with puny street tires, has a stupid spare tire under the back that reduces clearance, and sports low hanging running boards that can be easily ripped off by small obstacles causing real damage to your truck. I mention all of this because comparing a stock 250 series to any built Cruiser isn't fair.

So this isn't a report of how the new Cruisers performed on the trail. They didn't let me drive anyway despite my strong masculine charm and subsequent begging. This is a quick review of my impressions followed by a discussion I had with Toyota's marketing leader for the new Cruiser.

I got the chance to check out the new Cruisers up close at our lunch stop on Dome Plateau. I sat in the driver's seat, I sat in the second row, I inspected the cargo area in the back, and I jumped up on one of the rear tires to check out the roof rack. When you see them in person, it's interesting how much it feels like a Land Cruiser. It's not like any other current Toyota 4x4 vehicle. Toyota has purposely designed the new 250 series to be a continuation of the Land Cruiser tradition, and it really comes through in person. A lot of it has to do with the seat position — you get a commanding view out the windows to see the trail ahead or the outside menu at the Starbucks drive-thru.

Now that I've finally checked out the new Land Cruiser for real, here are my thoughts:

The seating position is awesome. You feel like the king of the road.

The second row has plenty of leg room, even when the front seat is positioned all the way back.

The rear cargo compartment is significantly shallower and narrower than any Land Cruiser wagon I've ever seen. I was surprised. I don't think the big Dometic fridge in my 80 would fit unless I turned it sideways and used the whole compartment.

On the plus side, there is no third row of seating to remove and store in your garage forever. In the U.S., the new Land Cruiser is only built for five people.

There's also the matter of the raised floor in the back that accommodates the 288V sealed Nickel-Metal Hydride battery with 1.87 kWh capacity. The big lump in the floor will add an obstacle when you're sliding lumber into the back, but it does provide fuel efficiency and extra oomph when you press down on the go pedal.

Both the entry-level 1958 model and the regular Land Cruiser models are awesome. I'd love to build my own combination of the best of the two models (big touchscreen plus JBL speakers plus sweet cloth seats minus sunroof) but that's not something you can do right now. Hell, you're lucky if you can get your hands on one at all.

The biggest thing I miss from previous models is the split tailgate and hatch. Tyler Litchenberger from Toyota told me she's heard that a lot. Apparently the 300 series doesn't have a tailgate either, from what I read on the Internet. The folks at Toyota must not make sandwiches.

My overall impression is this is a huge step in the right direction. The 200 series is a chunky rhinoceros. The new Cruiser is a dainty ox.

Tyler Litchenberger was a driver of one of the new Land Cruisers at Cruise Moab. She's also the U.S. head of marketing for the Land Cruiser, Tundra and Sequoia vehicles. A few weeks after the event, I gave her a call and we chatted about the new Cruiser. I had a big list of questions prepared and she answered most of them. Litchenberger is a true Cruiserhead: she owns a 2000 100-series and her daily driver is a 2021 Heritage Edition 200. She also has a 250 on order. She says, "You can never have enough Land Cruisers in the driveway." Truer words were never spoken.

Here are things I learned from Litchenberger.

The First Edition model of the Land Cruiser, which is the spendiest model with nearly every option, is limited to 5,000 vehicles. Once those are sold, there will be no more. The


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The 1958 edition followed by the regular Land Cruiser edition.

entry-level 1958 edition and main Land Cruiser versions are here to stay.

The 1958 model is meant to be the off-road enthusiast's dream. It comes with cloth seats and fewer premium features. Toyota has built this version to be the platform you can easily modify and build. Seriously. Litchenberger says the chief engineer on the new Land Cruiser wanted to make sure you don't have to make hard decisions like cutting the front grille and body panels to install aftermarket equipment. If you want to replace the plastic front bumper with one made from heavy steel, Litchenberger says it should be pretty easy.

The 1958 edition has very nice cloth-covered seats made from recycled PET-plastic water bottles used and collected by Toyota employees in Japan. Toyota doesn't have to purchase the plastic from an outside vendor and the whole process is completely self-sufficient. Toyota employees carefully peel off labels, wash the bottles, and deposit them in the recycling bins located in every Toyota office and factory in Japan. Then the bottles get chopped up, turned into fiber, and woven into automotive seat cloth. From Toyota's lips to your ass. There's a 5-minute video on the Toyota website showing the whole process. The video is boring, but the process is incredible. Only Toyota would go to these lengths to make sure they have a steady, inexpensive supply of recycled plastic for Land Cruiser seats worldwide.

The main Land Cruiser edition comes with more creature comforts and options. You get a bigger touchscreen on the dash, JBL speakers, power heated and ventilated seats made from a space age fiber called SofTex®, and a stabilizer disconnect mechanism that frees your sway bars to get all flexy. (SDM=

stabilizer disconnect mechanism ↻ new acronym alert!)

You can also upgrade the Land Cruiser model with the premium upgrade package which includes a heads-up display, leather seats, and console cool box.

Here's the stuff that comes with every version of the new Cruiser: center & rear diff lockers, a 2400 watt AC inverter, the 2.4 liter 4-cylinder hybrid engine, and 12 cup holders (for 5 people).

I asked Litchenberger if Toyota is going to make more Land Cruisers for the U.S. market than they were during the 200-series years. They were not easy to find. A Toyota salesman once told me it was his goal to someday sell a new Land Cruiser, but since the dealer only got 1-2 Cruisers a year, he was dubious he would ever get his chance. Litchenberger gave an enthusiastic yes. She said the 200 series sold just over 3,000 per year, but Toyota is planning to sell 5,000 of just the First Edition alone this year, plus plenty more of the 1958 and Land Cruiser models. She said the Toyota team recognizes that name recognition for the Land Cruiser has ebbed during the last couple of decades and they don't want nobody calling it a stinkin' Land Rover. (Those were not her exact words). They are motivated to turn that around.

The most striking change to the new Cruiser is the smaller size. Compared to the 200 series, it's a bit shorter and a lot narrower. Litchenberger says the new Land Cruiser has switched segments: it's moved from a "large SUV" to a "mid-size SUV."

That leads up to the question: why is Toyota selling two 4x4

off-road vehicles with such similar specs? Just a few months ago, Toyota revealed the new 6th generation 4Runner, which will be available in the coming year. Its dimensions are very similar to the new Land Cruiser. In fact, the two vehicles are both built on the same Toyota TNGA-F platform. (So is the 300 series).

Litchenberger said this is the #1 question she gets asked now that the new 4Runner has been revealed. Customers are more concerned about this than the Toyota team! She says there is a place for both models since the mid-size SUV segment is healthy and growing. There are a few key differences between the two vehicles. Here's a weird one: the 4Runner will have the option for a third row of seating where the Cruiser will strictly be offered as a five seater — a switcheroo from how it's always been in the past. She says the Cruiser will be offered with a third row of seats in other markets but not in the U.S. It sounds like this decision was made because the Land Cruiser will be sold only as a hybrid model in the U.S., so you lose a couple of inches of interior height in the back because of the battery under the floor.

She says the Land Cruiser and 4Runner can both be considered “rugged” vehicles within the mid-size SUV segment. According to the research Toyota did on past buyers of the two models, the Land Cruiser owner is typically a bit older and is looking for “refined ruggedness” for off-road adventures. They probably have a family but they're past the car seat days. 4Runner customers are younger and have younger kids. They use their vehicle more for “rugged recreation.” She says having two choices from Toyota is a good thing: whichever model you pick, you're getting a quality Toyota 4x4 built to get you home.

I was curious which vehicle Toyota considers the challenger to the Jeep and Bronco. She mentioned that they also include the Defender to be in this segment and then changed the subject. My guess is the 4Runner is more of a direct competitor but that's just speculation on my part.

There's one question I've been burning to ask Toyota for at least a decade: will we ever see a new Toyota 4x4 with a removable top like the FJ40? Her answer was not encouraging. She said Toyota prioritizes meeting safety standards not only in the U.S. but globally, and Toyota wants to get the best possible rating everywhere. A removable top makes that more difficult. She wasn't quite willing to say “Never,” but I didn't get the feeling that Toyota has any plans whatsoever to directly challenge the Jeep and Bronco. She said they do listen to customers, and we need to keep asking for it so they can bring it up with their engineering teams.

Essentially, no. Not now, probably not ever. Toyota is selling tons of 4Runners and Tacomas already, right?

The conversation turned to the hybrid drivetrain in the new Cruiser. Litchenberger mentioned that the Land Cruiser is a global vehicle, and that brings different considerations than a vehicle made for only a few markets. Toyota has taken a “portfolio approach” to their drivetrains and focused on hybrids rather than all-electric models because many countries

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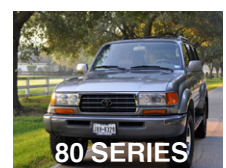
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around the world have zero infrastructure for EV charging. Toyota doesn't want to build a different version of the Land Cruiser for every market. The hybrid drivetrain is being sold in other markets, not just the U.S. Of course, Australia will get every possible drivetrain option in the new Cruiser, including a diesel engine. Mark a date on your calendar 25 years from now and you can import one.

I asked if she thought Toyota would ever sell the 300 series in the U.S. with the Land Cruiser name (as you likely know, the only way to buy a 300 in the U.S. is from your friendly neighborhood Lexus dealer where it's called an LX 600 and comes with an enormo front grille). She says she thinks the 300 is off the table, at least for the near future. She said with the Tacoma, Tundra, 4Runner, Sequoia, and now the new 250-series Land Cruiser, they believe they have the right mix of vehicles for the U.S.

Speaking of Lexus, the Lexus GX550 is the sister version of the 250-series Land Cruiser. One of my buddies noticed that if you shop for a GX, you can buy tons of aftermarket goodies including ARB recovery kits and compressors, Yakima bicycle and ski mounts, Dometic fridge/freezers, and even a dog hair remover (the dog hair remover costs \$19 — I looked it up).

Litchenberger says Toyota will be rolling out many more parts and accessories in the coming months not just for Land Cruiser, but for all their 4WD vehicles.

The 1958 series is the platform for upgrading – does Toyota have plans to offer their own upgrades like a lift kit, steel bumper, or winch? She said she couldn't comment on future offerings but did give me a hint by mentioning the Trail Hunter editions of the Tacoma and 4Runner with her next breath. She said, "The Trail Hunter editions are built to go far, whereas the TRD models are built to go fast." Toyota looks at Trail Hunter as being built from the ground up: you get a lot of upgrades included like ARB bumpers and a tuned suspension.

This is just speculation on my part, but I wouldn't be surprised if the replacement for this year's First Edition is a Trail Hunter edition of the new Cruiser in the next year or two.

My final question for Litchenberger was if there are features on the new Cruiser that were included specifically from customer feedback. For example, when Ford was planning the new Bronco, they sent engineers out to Easter Jeep Safari to ask 4x4 owners for their suggestions. The results were features



Left: Two 250s plus the mighty 80 on Dome Plateau.

Right: Here's most of the Dome Plateau group. Not pictured: Matt & Karie Farr (we took the hard way out).

like the cool accessory mounting bar on the front dashboard for GPS units and GoPro cameras and making the Bronco's removable doors and top lighter than the Jeep Wrangler's.

Litchenberger told me that many design choices were made with the long-time Land Cruiser enthusiast in mind. This includes the round "FJ40 lights" on the 1958 edition, the rectangular "FJ62 lights" on the regular Land Cruiser, and TOYOTA spelled out in the front grille for all models. Also, the beltline of the Land Cruiser is lower so the driver can roll down the window and lean out to get a good look at the trail ahead. She mentioned the shape of the hood is lower in the middle to help with visibility on the trail. And all the glass, especially the windshield, is more vertical (less angled) than other vehicles, which is more like Land Cruisers of yore.

The last time we had a new model of Land Cruiser in the U.S. was 2008, and it was not accessible to your average schmuck like me. The new Cruiser is super cool, affordable, and the fun is just getting started. In the next few years, we're going to see built 250 Cruisers out on the trail with modification options from mild to wild. I suspect we're also going to see even more options and models from Toyota. What a time to be alive, my friends! 🍷



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