FLEET-FOOTED ROVER

Rover's 825Si is close to the Honda Legend under the skin, but boasts an identity all of its own, as Mike McCarthy discovered

FIRST OFF we should remove any doubts. Rover's new 825Si is no clone of the Honda Legend. They really are different cars, even though under the skin the two cars are close kin, sharing the 2.5-litre V6 power train, much of the running gear, and the basic floorpan.

Many of the differences are subtle, but they certainly exist; you can tell by the way the Rover feels.

Besides bringing many of the qualities already familiar in the Legend, the 825Si adds other features, not least the cabin's consciously "English" atmosphere. In that way the 825Si gets a distinct identity.

The 825Si needs to be good of course, because it lines up against some very classy competition. Apart from facing the Legend almost head on, although at many thousands of dollars more, the Rover's rivals include the Audi 100, Volvo 760, Saab 9000 Turbo, 5-series BMW and also, say the marketing men, the Ford LTD. Those models between them occupy a price envelope that begins near the $45,000 mark and extends through to the low $60,000s. Rover starts the 825Si about halfway along that price scale. The standard Si manual (as tested) opens at $54,380 while automatic transmission lifts the ante to $55,980. Rover expects one in four cars sold to be manual; the Legend manual is available only to firm order.

Beyond the Si, Rover also offers a Special version at $58,320. This has automatic transmission as standard, Connolly leather instead of ribbed velvet, alloy road wheels instead of steel, rear headrests adjustable instead of fixed, and the inclusion of rear map pockets. Those extra trimmings come on top of what is already, in Si form, an impressively well-stacked equipment list.

Among the Si's standard inclusions are bronze tinted windows, manual tilt/slide sunroof, electrically adjustable and heated exterior mirrors, power windows, air conditioning, a six-speaker anti-theft AM/FM radio-cassette system, infra-red remote central locking, adjustable height driver's seat and steering column, rear window sun blinds, lockable remote boot release and a timed rear window heater.

There are many nice detail touches too, like the illuminated vanity mirror, the console cassette holder, the integrated antenna, the strut-assisted and check-held bonnet, the boot lid stopper and the foam-boxed tool kit.

Having outfitted the 825Si so comprehensively, Rover has also done its best to ensure the package stays tightly together and doesn't rot away. In addition to a two-year/unlimited-km warranty on the car as a whole, Rover also provides a three-year/unlimited-km cover against bodywork corrosion and flawed paintwork. To that end the bare body undergoes seven-stage phosphate cleansing during production, followed by cataphoretic primer application. All body joints are guarded by plastisol sealant while hot wax is injected into hollow body sections and the underbody is protected by a pvc sealant. All that plus plenty of sound deadening and the high equipment level helps explain why the Rover tips the scales about 50 kg heavier than the Legend.

The 825's extra mass doesn't have any serious effect on the performance, which is good to sparkling depending on where and how you unleash it. The engine is both addictive and deceptive; one because it's a real joy to use, and the other because its performance is as smooth as it is swift. The V6 is also remarkably free from coarse noise but thankfully not totally insulated, because its aural qualities are worth listening to. Always well muted, never unpleasantly intrusive, the engine responds to the driver's call with a superbly sporty note which is sheer music to enthusiasts' ears.

It doesn't take long to learn that the engine's powerful lilt is no coincidence; it has plenty to sing about. Like 0-100 km/h in just 8.6 seconds, for instance, and the standing 400 metres in 16.7 seconds. Those and the other standing start times clearly show the 825Si is no mean performer when wound out through the gears. Far from being stretched by the effort, the free-revving V6 eagerly runs to the 6500 rpm redline even in fourth gear, which translates to 195 km/h. Given its head in fifth the Rover will reach the high side of 5200 rpm and over 200 km/h.

Of course top speed runs and tyre-chirping, snap-shifting, redlining through-the-gears acceleration tests are only part of the overall performance picture. Some might say they're the lesser part; that the in-gears flexibility and response are better measures of performance for real-world situations. It's on those grounds that some testers have criticised the Honda V6 for allegedly lacking punchy response below about 3500 rpm, and the coming 2.7-litre engine is seen as a response to this comment. However our tests show that the rolling start incremental times are quicker than they feel. From low to middling speeds the Rover is much quicker than the Saab 9000 Turbo for instance, and indeed keeps the likes of the Alfa 75 honest.

For all its undoubted flexibility, fifth gives almost 39 km/h per 1000 rpm, which is fairly tall for an engine that develops peak power at around 6000 rpm. So fifth is best regarded as a cruising cog, leaving fourth and third for more urgent work. Of course it helps to always be in the right gear at the right time but you don't have to be fanatical about it because the Rover's response is elastic enough to allow ample leeway in the shift points. In more than 1300 km of widely varied driving conditions from performance testing to peak-hour commuting we never had the feeling of being caught short in too high a gear or of having to row the V6 along with the gear lever.

In any event the gearshift is great with light, easy and very precise movement of the short lever and a set of ratios that fully complement the engine's power output. Curiously, though there are no specific differences between the engines, Rover quotes 110 kW at 5800 rpm and 207 Nm at 4500 rpm whereas Honda says 120 kW at 6000 rpm and 213 Nm at 4500 rpm. British conservatism, or Japanese one-upmanship?

Either way, the engine combines versatile performance with very reasonable consumption. Our 8.2 km/l (23.1 mpg) worst result ▶

Great care is taken with the Rover's paint quality, sound insulation

◀ wasn't bad at all considering it included the gas-guzzling performance test session. At the other extreme we saw 11 km/l (more than 31 mpg) for our standard fuel loop check, so the Rover should be at least that economical in everyday cruising conditions. We repeatedly logged 10 km/l (28+ mpg) and better from mixed town and country driving. The 9.1 km/l (25.8 mpg) overall figure is indicative of the Rover's ability to return good economy even with hard driving included. Another bonus is the ease with which the 68-litre tank can be filled.

Like the Legend, the 825Si's running gear consists of wishbone type front suspension, strut type rear suspension, four-wheel disc brakes and speed-related power-assisted rack and pinion steering. But there are differences between them, not just in the details such as the steering and suspension settings, but also in the hardware. The Rover has narrower tyres for instance (195/65 v 205/60 on the Legend), and boasts Boge Nivomat self-levelling rear struts.

Those changes bring perceptible differences in the cars' dynamics. In general the Rover's chassis has a traditionally European flavour, slightly firm but well controlled, contrasting with the Legend's softer quasi-American accent. For those who appreciate chassis qualities, there's no doubt the Rover's differences lead to better ride and handling in most conditions. On the other hand, its similarities in the front suspension and steering mean it also shares the Honda's inability to cope with rough roads as well as it ought. Gaping potholes and sharp-edged big bumps are the bane of this front-end; lacking sufficient travel and absorbency for the job, the front suspension reacts harshly and noisily as its wheels fall into holes and trip over bumps. Noticeable enough when travelling straight, the deficiency is all the more obvious on corrugations, especially through rutted corners.

Despite that bit of gloom, the Rover chassis frequently impresses on average roads, though more for the assurance of its handling than, perhaps, the refinement of its ride. But if the ride lacks consistency and ultimate refinement, the handling goes a long way towards compensating in driver enjoyment. Ordinarily the Rover is so well balanced, with only mild bias to understeer, that it is difficult to tell which end is driven. It simply goes where it's pointed; there's no torque steer or front-end tugging under acceleration, and very little tendency for the nose to tuck-in when the throttle is released during cornering.

In hard cornering the understeer increases to the extent that you're aware of needing to feed in more and more lock to keep the car from running wide. Even at this point the Rover remains confidently sure footed, its whole attitude nicely throttle-responsive and utterly predictable.

One instinctively takes the Rover's fine roadholding almost for granted. It may take a little longer to become completely comfortable with the steering. There's a little slack in the system at straight ahead, and at first the whole thing seems ridiculously light for parking. However the speed-related power assistance is progressively reduced as the car gets moving and once you're into stride the steering strikes a happy medium between effort, feel and directness.

The brakes earn commendation, too. With ventilated rotors at the front, solids at the rear, the all-disc system gives immensely powerful yet finely progressive braking. On test, successive hard stops had no obvious ill effect on braking efficiency, for the stopping distances and pedal pressures remained virtually unchanged. The pedal is a model of its kind since it calls for moderately firm pressure and responds with remarkably progressive feel.

Besides giving excellent grip for braking, cornering and accelerating (in dry and wet alike), the Michelin tyres are notably quiet; very hard cornering can provoke a squeal from them but normally they generate very little tyre/road noise. It's a quiet car in other ways too. Excepting the front-end's clonks and rattles on rough roads, there are no unpleasant mechanical noises to speak of, just the stimulating sound of the engine and the lightly burbling exhaust. Wind noise is minimal, too; mainly just a ruffling from around the mirrors.

That sets the tone for the interior accommodations.

PRICES & OPTIONS

Make	Rover
Model	825 Si
Base Price	$54,380
Five speed gearbox	stnd
Automatic transmission	$1600
Power steering	stnd
Airconditioning	stnd
Sunroof	stnd
Stereo radio/cassette	stnd
Price as tested	$54,380

ENGINE

Cylinders	V6
Valves	4/cyl sohc
Induction	fuel injection
Comp ratio (to one)	9.0
Bore/stroke (mm)	84/75
Capacity (cm³)	2494
Max power (kW/rpm)	110/5800
Max torque (Nm/rpm)	207/4500

TRANSMISSION

	Ratios	km/h per 1000 rpm
First	2.923	9.3
Second	1.788	15.2
Third	1.222	22.3
Fourth	0.909	30.0
Fifth	0.702	38.8
Final drive	4.2	

CHASSIS

Drive	front
Front suspension	wishbones, coils, anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	self-levelling struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Brakes	servoed four-wheel discs
Steering	servoed rack and pinion
Turning circle (m)	11.1
Turns lock to lock	3.5
Kerb mass (kg)	1430
Fuel capacity (l)	68
Tyres	195/65 VR15 Michelin MXV

BODY

Claimed Cd	0.32
Exterior (mm)	
Wheelbase	2760
Front track	1492
Rear track	1450
Length	4690
Width	1730
Height	1400

PERFORMANCE

Top speeds (km/h/rpm)			
Gear			
First		60/6500	
Second		99/6500	
Third		145/6500	
Fourth		195/6500	
Fifth		203/5250	
Standing start (secs)			
0-50 km/h	3.1	0-100	8.6
0-60	4.2	0-110	10.1
0-70	5.0	0-120	11.9
0-80	6.0	0-130	14.1
0-90	7.2	400m	16.7

In the gears	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
30-60	3.2	4.4	5.9	9.8
40-70	3.0	4.4	6.7	9.0
50-80	3.0	4.8	7.6	10.1
60-90	3.1	5.3	8.2	11.2
70-100	3.3	5.4	8.6	12.1
80-110		5.5	8.7	13.2
90-120		5.6	8.8	14.5
100-130		5.7	9.0	16.4

Speedo km/h	**Actual km/h**
50	45
70	70
90	91.5
110	113
130	130

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Km/l(mpg)	
Best	10.2 (28.7)
Worst	8.2 (23.1)
83 km test loop	11.0 (31.1)
Overall	9.1 (25.8)
Minimum range (km)	550
Test distance (km)	1300

"British" styling of the interior is echoed by 825Si's European dynamics. Muted engine noise is sweet, wind noise minimal

The 825Si's cabin is a nice place to be, especially if you're driving. Then your supportively firm and comfortable seat offers not only backrest rake and lumbar adjustments but overall height adjustment too. Even with the seat set towards the bottom of its travel, one sits properly high, with a commanding view across the low cowl. The steering wheel is also height-adjustable, making the driving position that much more adaptable and comfortable for the short, the tall and the in-betweens.

The steering column stalks for the wipers and the lights/turn indicators are very functional — except that they're wrong-handed for a right-drive car. Ergonomically, the turn indicator ought to be on the right too. There's also a quibble with the instruments, specifically the speedometer, which is awkwardly numbered at 30, 60, 90, 120 and so on. Even with familiarity, none of our crew found it easy to speed read the 100 and 110 markings for instance. The speedo was also variably inaccurate at different steady speeds and the needle lagged lazily during acceleration. As with the speedo, the matching tachometer's markings are rather spidery, but like the other instruments (fuel, water temperature, oil pressure and battery) are very legible. White on grey by day, the markings are illuminated orange.

Deliberately remindful of Rover tradition, the facia features an elegant burled walnut panel which is repeated on the door trims. Another familiar Rover vein is the flat shelf above the glovebox, with a spiky rubber mat to hold oddments.

The main bank of four rocker switches for the electric windows is on the front, upward-sloping ramp of the driver's door armrest, well placed except for being too close to the switch that shifts the mirrors' position. Some drivers may wish for a left footrest and many may wonder at the lack of cruise control in a car so suited to long-haul cruising.

The front passenger may also find that while the armrest grip is a good one, it isn't always a good substitute for the missing overhead handle. Besides, rear passengers get both. They also get comfortable and reasonably roomy accommodation; not as spacious as a Magna, perhaps, but certainly on a par with the Commodore for the outer occupants, and much better for a centre-sitter because of the comparatively small tunnel in the Rover.

Even large people find adequate knee-room, shoulder width and headroom in the rear of the Rover. The retractable roller blind sun shades on the rear shelf are a thoughtful touch. Though the side windows aren't especially deep, the fact that they're long and each of one piece enhances the interior impression of airiness. But it also means the rear windows drop only about halfway down inside their door.

And so to the boot, a usefully large cavern made all the more practical by having the lid open to bumper level.

It all adds up to a car that has a lot going for it in quality, luxury, performance, drivability and sporting character. Now, if it proves as faithful as it is enjoyable, this Rover could be one of (driving) man's best friends.■