

SOFT OPTION

Converting to a Canvas Top

Spring and summer are just around the corner. So now's the time to do it. Here's our guide on how to start a new life under canvas.

I want one

Of course you do. Land Rovers and canvas are the perfect combination, and once you've driven one on a summer's evening down your favourite bit of road, you'll never want to go back to a boring old metal roof.

The thought of taking the roof off in the summer, or just rolling the sides up is *very* appealing. It's great experience, unlike any other convertible vehicle, and it's mildly addictive. Properly fitted and waterproofed, a canvas roof is just as water resistant as a solid top (sometimes more so). And there's something that that looks so right about a Land Rover with a canvas roof.

Security is obviously a problem – it's impossible to make a soft-top Land Rover impregnable – and the noise might annoy you. At speed, it's like being on a badly rigged yacht in a force nine gale. And at some point, it will need replacing. A canvas roof is like a thatched variety – it won't last forever but, if it's looked after it will do you very well.

What do I need?

Whichever roof your Land Rover has at the moment, you'll need a complete hood frame, a canvas and the fixings that secure it to Land Rovers. A hood frame essentially comprises the hoops, which span the width of the body; longitudinal spars to connect the hoops together; two gutter rails that fit above the doors, and a windscreen rail.

It's all made from galvanised steel tube and, provided it hasn't been badly bent, makes a good secondhand buy - there are plenty about. Just look out for cracked welds, bent sticks and missing fixings. If you can find a complete example to take a look at before you buy, you'll know exactly where all the kit goes.

New frames are available from Land Rover and also from aftermarket suppliers, but they are really quite expensive. Most popular are the ex-military frames with a built-in roll bar to fit 90s and 110s. Expect to pay up to £400, used.

Canvases are available all over the place - you'll pay from around £140 for a plain, short-wheelbase hood - and most are made of traditional cotton duck fabric, with roll-up sides and tailgate. You can have plastic windows added. Why not choose different colours or bust the budget and go for mohair? It's the warmest and most luxurious, but also the dearest.

How do I fit it?

When you've got your canvas, the first job is to remove the existing roof. Hard tops and truck cabs are held in place with a minimal number of bolts - one per corner and a couple of extras down the sides and should lift off easily. You may have to cut the seal between the windscreen and the roof with a big, sharp knife.

You will probably need to drill a few extra holes in the body to take the frame fixings and, if you have a newer Defender, you'll need to fit the tabs, hooks and staples - the ropes of the tilt loop through these. Series vehicles have these fitted as standard. If you need to fit them yourself, they rivet to the galvanised capping and through the rear body.

Take measurements off another vehicle to ensure things line up. If you can't find a suitable motor, add the frame one piece at a time, working from the windscreen frame back. Converting will take about five hours, including removing the original roof.

Fitting the canvas to the frame can be the hardest part, because of the myriad ropes and straps used in the design. If you have an old, secondhand canvas that's shrunk, try wetting it and fitting it damp, stretching it to fit over the frame and then tying it down really tight. See the step-by-step guide on how to tie a canvas properly.

If your Land Rover had a rear door, you'll need to fit a tailgate. Simple fit to vehicles that have hinge holes welded on the rear cross member, as they require a couple of hasps on the rear body. If you don't have them, try welding some on, or use a pair of rear door hinges to attach the tailgate.

Step-by-step guide to fitting the canvas:



Start with the windscreen rail.
The webbing strip hooks onto the screen rail.



Thread the strap between the hood frame
and the flange that holds the front door seal.



Tuck the edge of the hood inside the flange that holds the door seal on the hoodstick.



Tie a knot in the rope on the curtain sides (at the front of the vehicle) to form a loop.



Fit the loop at the front (on both sides) over the fitting by the rear of the door.



Pull the webbing tight and hook on to the gutter rail tabs above the door.



Pass the rear webbing strap down and through the tailgate loop and buckle up



Hook or thread straps at the front on or through the windscreen rail, and tighten up



Loop the rope under the tabs on the body panels. Do on both sides of the Land Rover



Pull the rope tight on both sides, and tie the end to the hoops on the rear quarter panels



Thread the rope on the tailgate flap through the outside of the eyelet on the curtain sides



Tie the rope to the hoop. Don't pull too hard or the hoop will pop out of the panel



Push the ends of the tailgate flap through the pockets on the sides and buckle up



Loop the rope under the three tailgate tabs pulling the rope through after each one...



...and pull it through tightly. Then tie it up on the other side, using the metal hook



Tighten up the curtain side straps inside (partially obscured by the seatbelt mounts)

Some problems:



You'll need to fit tabs to the body



Series vehicles come with tailgate hinges



Shrinkage usually most obvious at the rear

Life under canvas

If you've replaced a leaking hard top with a well-fitting canvas roof, you're going to stay dry. A good tilt that's properly tied down won't let water in. And if you want to keep it that way, look after it. Your canvas maintenance regime should kick off with making sure it's lashed to the frame, and tightly. Canvas shrinks when it gets wet it's made from natural fibres - and the only way you're

going to stop this is to make sure you do everything up really well. The most usual area for shrinkage is the tailgate flap, and it's not uncommon to see soft-top Land Rovers with huge gaps between the tailgate and canvas.

New canvases come waterproofed, but the protection doesn't last for ever. If you've bought secondhand, you may as well re-proof it. Fabsil, the benchmark material waterproofer, is ideal for Land Rover canvases but, if you want to save money, Thompson's Water Seal works just as well (although we don't know what the long-term effects of using this product on canvas would be - it's actually designed to keep water off masonry).

Cleaning your canvas is a good idea. Wash with warm water and soap - don't use harsh chemical cleaners - and don't soak it. Clean plastic windows with a soft cloth and don't use an abrasive cleaner.

If you have to repair a canvas, then a DIY stitch-up is going to be very difficult. Manufacturers use industrial sewing machines; but if you want to do it by hand, visit a chandler and see if they have the needles used by sailmakers. Sailmakers will repair canvas for you. We called a local craftsman, and were quoted £25 to repair a two-inch tear in a Land Rover canvas. Holes can be patched using pieces of canvas stuck down with Copydex, which is ideal for sticking canvas-to-canvas. The rope traditionally used on Land Rover soft tops can be replaced with sash cord, as used in sash windows and available in DIY stores. Or, if you want to do away with all that tedious rope, change for shock cord, which makes removal a lot easier.

To roll the sides up, first peel up the tailgate flap. Then, do the sides, using the straps on the inside and the buckles on the outside to secure them. And if you don't like the floppy appearance of the rolled sides, stick a broom handle down the rope sleeve to keep them straight.

Changed your mind?

If you want to convert back, it's not going to be easy. It's very difficult to get a hard top/truck cab to line up well once you've taken it off. Getting one with a snug fitting, leak-free roof will be tough. There's so much flex in a hard top - and in a Land Rover body - that getting everything lined up will be a lengthy process. Still, it's not impossible, but you'll need lots of patience and plenty of time.

And if you want to sell the soft top and frame, you won't have any problems finding a buyer. Used canvases aren't worth much, but good frames certainly are - and they're in demand.

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