



## OF JEWELS, CROWNS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Sports utility vehicles have become so mainstream, they've become homogenous, says **RICHARD WEBB**. But help is at hand, as he talks to Rolls-Royce at Lake Como.



**T**he label 'SUV' now applies to anything with a two-box silhouette and a hint of off-road capability. But all generalisations are false, of course – including this one – because the most unlikely protagonists are changing the rules.

Previously it was Range Rover's exclusive domain; then Aston Martin, Lamborghini, Maserati, Ferrari, Bentley and now Rolls-Royce have joined the melee. These brands are associated with luxury, performance, style and exclusivity rather than 'utility', so why are they risking their hard-won brand heritage and identity by making SUVs?

Are these deep-set contradictions or do we simply have to unlearn what expect of the future of super-luxury mobility? Rolls-Royce has named its SUV after the world's largest raw diamond, found in Pretoria more than 110 years ago and now part of the Crown Jewels of the UK. The Cullinan (above) comes with high expectations.

Quality and craftsmanship are a given, but why are Rolls-Royce and 'SUV' in the same sentence? I went to Lake Como with BMW Group SA for the world premiere to get some answers from Giles Taylor, then Rolls-Royce director of design, and Torsten Müller-Ötvös, CEO of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars.

'We envisioned an authentic, three-box all-terrain high-bodied car with a convention-challenging design and absolute capability that would satisfy adventurous clients,' Taylor tells me in front of the world's press. 'I knew the car would meet expectations – it has an iconic design with proper Rolls-Royce proportions and uncompromised levels of luxury.'

Sure, it has purposefulness, 'but it's not pretty', I say.

'There is an uncompromising sheerness of the typical Rolls-Royce long bonnet profile, and it's meant to communicate greater toughness,' he responds.

There's no denying that it has a bold, confident character, but how will this dramatic departure impact the brand?

Müller-Ötvös follows up: 'It's an incredibly important car. It reimagines the parameters of super-luxury travel. Our clients have been asking for a car that provides uncompromised luxury wherever they venture. Cullinan delivers this.'

Is this a reach too far for the Rolls-Royce brand, I wondered?

'The response to Cullinan shows that our brand values are well understood,' says Müller-Ötvös. 'Yes, Cullinan is a huge departure for us. We're moving into the very top echelon of a fiercely competitive and very populated sector, and we will win more active, younger buyers we've not had before.'

Plans for exotic SUVs have outraged some brand purists, but profitability trumps any dissenting sentiment. There appears to be solid business logic behind the plan – because if you don't risk anything, you risk even more.

The Cullinan's 6.75-litre twin-turbo petrol V12 powertrain echoes that of the new Phantom. It's famous for smoothness and should achieve 0-100km/h in five seconds effortlessly – a perplexing achievement for such a huge car. Deliveries should begin just in time for a well-heeled Christmas. ■