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Cars.com 2004 Luxury Buying Guide

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— The editors
of ***cars.com***

SECTION CREDITS

Defining Luxury and Best Bets

There are now more luxury vehicle choices available than ever before. And while many of us know what luxury is, we may find it difficult to isolate the attributes that make one \$30,000 car a near-luxury model and another just plain expensive. The editors of **cars.com** faced the same quandary as we put together this first-ever luxury Buying Guide.

While all luxury vehicles are expensive, are all expensive models luxury vehicles? For us, a luxury vehicle is not determined by price alone. The Hummer H1 has a six-figure price tag, but it doesn't offer the refined ride that one associates with the luxury class. In addition to ride quality and amenities, we also weighed consumer perceptions. While most shoppers consider Mercedes-Benz to be a luxury nameplate, the entry-level C-Class starts below \$25,000 or less than the average new-car selling price, which is almost \$26,000. For that reason, we grouped these aspirational models into the Premium category on our [Search by Price](#) page.



The Cadillac Escalade and other high-end SUVs have stretched the luxury segment beyond the traditional passenger car category.

Not only has the number of luxury vehicle entries grown, but their shapes have changed as well. A decade ago, you wouldn't have considered a vehicle capable of hauling loads to be a luxury model. The introduction of the Cadillac Escalade, Lincoln Navigator and other luxury sport utility vehicles changed all that. That's why our [Search by Class](#) page groups vehicles by size and body style. We also tussled with whether we should include upscale sports cars, such as the Ferrari Enzo and Porsche 911. In the end, they were excluded because the defining characteristic of these vehicles is performance, not luxury. However, we'd like to hear [your thoughts](#).

As we do for each Buying Guide, we asked two experts to select the best luxury vehicles for specific purposes or needs. First up is our in-house expert and **cars.com**'s in-depth Vehicle Profiler, Joe Wiesenfelder, who test-drives new vehicles each week, puts each one through hours of city and highway trials, and checks to make sure that everything else — luxury, comfort and safety — is up to snuff for your dollar. Rather than pick clear winners, Joe characterizes some of the leading vehicles and names a few notables and personal favorites. He excluded new models that were not yet available for testing, including the Volkswagen Touareg. Joe's picks are ordered by compact, midsize and full-size passenger-car segments, followed by SUVs. The manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP) that is listed for each vehicle does not include the destination charge.

Joining Joe is Jerry Edgerton, a former senior automotive writer for *Money Magazine* and a regular contributor to **cars.com**. In categories such as style, comfort and performance, Jerry relied on a combination of personal experience with the cars and consensus among reviewers in the automotive press. For reliability, he looked at the J.D. Power and Associates and *Consumer Reports* ratings. In Value for Money, Safety and Buying to Impress categories, he compared the features you were getting with

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various cars to the price you would pay.

Joe and Jerry's complete lists of recommended luxury vehicles follow. To find out which vehicles Joe and Jerry both agree are topnotch, our cars.com Luxury Best Bets are checked off on the [Main](#) page of this Buying Guide.

— *Mary S. Butler*
Senior Editor, *cars.com*

Joe's Picks for 2004 Luxury Vehicles

As *cars.com*'s Vehicle Profiler, picking Best Bets is a task I find challenging under the best of circumstances, even after putting vehicles through hours of city and highway trials. Ultimately, personal preference is what weighs heavily in vehicle purchases.

Rather than pick clear winners, I'll characterize some of the leading vehicles and name a few notables and personal favorites. Excluded from consideration were some new models that were not yet available for testing, including the Audi RS6 and Volkswagen Touareg. (Manufacturer's suggested retail pricing listed for each vehicle does not include destination charge.)

Compact Cars/MSRP

Acura TSX \$26,490



The non-Acura: Acura vehicles are often criticized for lacking style and soul — assessments that aren't unfounded. That's why the front-wheel-drive TSX took me by surprise. Slotted between the youth-oriented RSX coupe and TL sedan in terms of price, size and torque, the TSX is clearly an Acura. But it also looks sharp and athletic, from its aggressive front fascia to its squared-off rear end. With a sweet six-speed-manual transmission, the 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine has surprising oomph, and I found myself throwing it into every tight corner I could find. Forget the specs. Drive the car.

Audi A4 \$25,250 – \$43,550



Sport meets practicality: Available in sedan, Avant wagon and Cabriolet convertible forms, and with front- and all-wheel drive, the A4 is the most successful model to buck the BMW 3 Series formula. Audi takes partial credit for breaking me of my slavish commitment to rear-wheel drive. Quattro all-wheel drive is a different but undeniably sporty experience, and even the front-drive models command respect. Interiors that are the industrywide benchmark for quality certainly make a difference in this vehicle class.

BMW 3 Series \$30,100 – \$43,600



As good as they say: Competing automakers have been trying to catch up with the 3 Series for as long as I can remember. They've failed, in my opinion, because they ignored the thing that makes it a success: It's the driving, stupid. Consumer opinions of the various brands are all over the map, but the masses seem to agree that the 3 Series is simply a joy to drive. Only now that contenders have emulated the 3's design principles are they taken seriously.

Infiniti G35 sedan and Sport Coupe \$27,800 – \$32,200*



3 Series on a budget: For an example of how important the driving experience is in entry-level luxury cars, look no further than the Infiniti G35, one of the first models to land in the 3 Series' ballpark. The interior isn't ultraluxurious, but that hasn't hurt the G's sales, which have blasted past the Audi A4's. The 3 Series formula — rear-wheel drive, a gutsy six-cylinder engine and an exquisite six-speed-manual transmission — is the impetus behind the G35's success.

Midsize Cars/MSRP

Cadillac CTS \$30,140



Best sign of domestic hope: Trailing the G35 but still selling briskly is — what? A Cadillac? I have issues with the CTS's exterior styling, and I loathe the interior, which is about as far from luxury as I can imagine. But once again, the driving experience is what really matters. Following the 3 Series formula, the CTS has dynamics worthy of Germany's famed Nürburgring, the racetrack at which its chassis was tuned. I think the larger CTS feels quite a bit heavier than the 3 Series and G35. The new 3.6-liter V-6 engine mitigates the heft, but it comes only with the automatic transmission. Still, there's clearly hope for the domestic automakers.

Volvo S60 \$26,960 – \$36,875



Sweden rising: Volvo has incrementally been taking the steps necessary to make it a true player in the American premium/luxury market. The more organic styling was one of the most important, arguably best executed on the S60. The car's interior is a bit tight, especially in the backseat, but it's otherwise luxurious enough for the company it runs with. The S60 is reasonably sporty, but the T5 is the wrong approach — too much power to the front wheels alone. Only now that the 2004 S60 R is available — with 300 horsepower and all-wheel drive — is it clear that Volvo "gets it." The S60 line is now complete and very worthy of your consideration. Oh yeah, it's safe, too.

Full-Size Cars/MSRP

Audi A8 L \$68,500



A step to the East: The A8 L is a handsome sedan with a beautifully appointed interior that also happens to be cavernous. The new Multi Media Interface is easier to use than BMW's iDrive, though the actual need for either remains questionable. On the comfort/sport continuum, the redesigned 2004 takes a step to the East, in the direction of Lexus' LS 430. The A8 L does what its competitors can do, but the feeling of driving involvement is lessened, forsaking the German tradition. With a U.S. sales projection of just 6,000 cars, the A8 L is a good choice for buyers who crave distinction.

BMW 745i \$68,500*



The driver's choice: BMW's iDrive system — the driver's interface for things like the stereo and climate control — is not the spawn of Satan. Unlike some people, I don't think it's *that* bad. But I can't say I've found the benefit of it either. If you can ignore iDrive and don't mind the controversial exterior styling, the 7 Series is the best car in its class for people who love sporty driving. The technology that really matters is behind the scenes, transparently improving the driving experience. The interior offers luxury on a par with the Audi A8 L.

Jaguar XJ Series \$59,330 – \$74,330



Personal favorite: The best and the worst thing you can say about the redesigned 2004 XJ Series, Jaguar's flagship sedan, is that it looks a lot like the previous generation. It's a beautiful car whose athleticism and poise took me by surprise. Cutting-edge all-aluminum construction makes the car light and surprisingly quick, even in the XJ8 and Vanden Plas trim levels. The XJR's supercharger shaves roughly a second from the 0-to-60-mph sprint, but it's best appreciated in the effortless passing at any speed. From the umbrella tacked under the trunk lid to the too-small cupholders, the XJ is British indeed. The interior is smaller than the German cars', and behind the times — in design and the glorious lack of a computerized interface. I find the XJ Series elegant in appearance, handling and overall style.

Lexus LS 430 \$55,125*



Comfort king: While its size compares to the imported "prestige" flagship sedans such as Audi's A8 L, BMW's 745i, Jaguar's XJ Series and the Mercedes-Benz S-Class, its base price is closer to Mercedes' smaller E-Class — at least until you add the optional doo-dads. Upgrades for 2004 have made the LS 430 a bit quicker and sportier, but what it does best — and better than the other cars — is comfort. It isolates occupants from the road and environment like no other, and it has the quietest cabin on the market. If you can find a better car for a cross-country drive, buy it.

Mercedes-Benz S-Class \$72,600 – \$120,540*



Get it while it's cool: The S-Class lags the competition in that it hasn't been redesigned since 2000 — and that might actually be a good thing. The COMAND system was never a paragon of usability, but at least it only controls the navigation system. Now, an interface similar to BMW's complicated iDrive is on the drawing board at Mercedes-Benz. Also, Mercedes has loaded recently redesigned models with high tech, including a well-intentioned brake-by-wire system that, in my opinion, is not ready for prime time. The current S-Class has a nice balance of comfort, drivability and prestige — without the technology overkill that's engulfed Germany.

SUVs/MSRP

Land Rover Range Rover \$71,585



The ultimate luxury SUV: One could argue that luxury and off-roading don't go together. But if you're of the school that believes luxury SUVs should handle the luxury and SUV roles well, the Range Rover is unmatched. Re-engineered by BMW when it briefly owned the Rover Group at the end of the 20th century, the Range Rover is every bit as technologically advanced and capable of off-roading as anything from Hummer or Mercedes-Benz, and it is far more luxurious, refined and comfortable. It's a lot of the things for which people hate SUVs, but the Range Rover makes it very difficult to care.

Lexus RX 330 \$35,025 – \$36,425



Comfort above sport: In our SUV Buying Guide, I deem the Acura MDX the best overall SUV in the entry-level luxury category because it rates average or above in almost every category, and it seats seven people. The Lexus RX 330 compares in terms of reliability, residual value, fuel economy and many other intangibles (crash tests are not yet available). It gives up some handling prowess in favor of ride comfort, and it seats a maximum of five. If five seats are all you need, the RX 330 is the most luxurious and comfortable in this class.

Lincoln Navigator \$48,485 – \$55,660



Best overall full-size luxury SUV: The Cadillac Escalade is the only real competitor for this slot: full-size SUVs with three rows of seats. The Caddy's main advantage is more power, but the Navigator's superior crash-test ratings, lower center of gravity and roomy cabin give it the edge. Its third row is more accommodating than many vehicles' second-row seats, and it folds into the floor, while the Escalade's must be removed for full cargo capacity. The Navigator was the first model to reflect Ford Motor Co.'s newfound emphasis on interior quality, and it shows.

Jerry's Best Bets for 2004 Luxury Vehicles

Nearly all luxury vehicles have lush interiors, powerful engines and many high-tech features, including safety equipment. But even among these upper-class automotive ranks, some models are just better than others in specific areas. Listed below are my Best Bets in seven categories.

Interior styling: Sit in front of the well-placed dashboard screen and the cluster of instruments in the cockpit of the Cadillac CTS and you immediately feel in command of a high-tech road machine. Though it is an entry-level model at \$30,140, the CTS won an online poll of auto manufacturers and suppliers for the best interior. We agree. For sheer luxury and the light and cheerful colors of the interior's wood and leather, we also mention the \$320,000 Rolls-Royce Phantom.



Up to 16 hides are needed to fabricate the Rolls-Royce Phantom's leather upholstery, which is matched to fine wood veneers.

Comfort and convenience: The already-comfortable Mercedes-Benz E-Class got even more cozy and enjoyable with its 2003 redesign. Brighten this interior with the optional full-length moonroof. The Drive Dynamic seats that inflate bolsters for better lateral support make sure you stay comfortable through hard corners. For a super-comfortable ride, the air suspension in the new Audi A8 L deserves a mention.

Driving and performance: Power and performance really attract BMW buyers, and the new 5 Series has plenty of both. Two different six-cylinder engines and a 4.4-liter V-8 provide the punch. The new Active Roll Stabilization system should make it easier than ever to take those hard corners. Speaking of punch, you also get plenty from the 215-horsepower, 3.2-liter V-6 engine in the Mercedes-Benz C320. However, don't expect such performance from the power plant in the less-expensive C240.

Safety: When it comes to safety, a Volvo model is always a safe pick. With its reputation and marketing aimed at safety, the Swedish automaker ensures that it will offer the latest and best safety equipment available. Its \$37,730 S80 offers standard traction and stability control and side curtain-type airbags for front and rear passengers. The results: the best possible ratings — five stars — in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's front and side-impact crash tests and a Best Pick in crash tests conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Of course, it's easy to find a safe luxury car. You can get similar equipment and ratings on the BMW 5 Series, Infiniti Q45 and Lexus LS 430.

Reliability: Not only is the I35 one of several Infiniti models recommended by *Consumer Reports* for expected reliability, but it also comes with the highly rated dealer service of Infiniti — which lowers your hassle factor if anything does go wrong. Infiniti almost always scores in the top three in dealer service rankings by J.D. Power and Associates; this year, the Japanese automaker ranked No. 2. The same case could be made for most Lexus models and Lexus dealer service, which competes closely with Infiniti in these rankings.



You can feel good about getting behind the wheel of an Infiniti I35, judging from its reputation as a reliable, hassle-free car.

Value for money: The \$55,125 Lexus LS 430 is some \$20,000 less than the Mercedes-Benz S430 and about \$15,000 less than the BMW 745i, yet it's as comfortable,

smooth and quiet as any of its competition. As noted above, Lexus' reliability and dealer service are also top-notch. On the entry-level luxury scene, Acura just introduced its 2004 TSX. This car is prompting a lot of talk among reviewers about good value. The sporty, nimble TSX comes fully loaded with luxury equipment for just under \$27,000.

Buying to impress: You want that luxury brand but can't afford the new-car sticker. You still get the luxury symbol on a used car, and luxury dealers are especially strong on certified used cars that carry their own warranty. You could get a 2001 BMW 325i for approximately \$24,700. For even less money, how about a turbocharged 2001 Audi A4 1.8 T for about \$17,100?

Reported by [Jerry Edgerton](#) for [cars.com](#)

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Posted on 9/26/03

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