

# OF THE YEAR 2003

## MERCEDES G-WAGEN

The fact that this muscular Merc never sold particularly well in Britain has more to do with price than competence. Originally touted as a luxurious competitor to the Range Rover, the Mercedes was simply too boxy and basic to convince, on top of which the engines were not particularly pokey or, in the case of the quite lively 2.8-litre petrol model, they were downright thirsty.

The truth is the G-Wagen was designed and built as a military vehicle, and that military character could not be hidden under a veneer of leather and air-conditioned luxury. However, the beauty of the G-Wagen is that it is seriously strong, uses superbly-engineered heavy-duty components and standard features include locking axle differentials front and rear, making it one of the most competent off-the-shelf off-roaders available and therefore a very good second-hand purchase if you're looking for a tough funster of workhorse.

Though almost stupidly expensive new, older examples have lost any fashion following they might once have had and are now more accessibly priced, £5000 being enough to secure a reasonably well-cared-for 10-year-old short wheelbase 300 GD with a 113bhp diesel engine, as little as £1000 for a



higher-mileage, well-used petrol model. Older models might already have been converted to off-road use, so check for signs of abuse. Even cars used as family limousines have been known to suffer excessive wear to the CV joints and engine mountings have been known to crack, so check for these along with noisy diffs and transmission or power-steering fluid leaks. Since repairs are costly ensure the car has a full service history.

### RATING

PRICE RANGE £1000-£15,000

ON-ROAD ●●●●●

OFF-ROAD ●●●●●

PRACTICALITY ●●●●●

AVAILABILITY ●●●●●

VALUE FOR MONEY ●●●●●

## SUZUKI SAMURAI

For simple mud-plugging fun you can't do better than this, because with its short wheelbase, low gearing and diminutive size the Suzuki is probably the most capable off-roader you could buy for the money.

Though far from comfortable, with its very basic interior and choppy ride, the Samurai has always been popular with youngsters as a chic and cheerful urban runabout, and such a car that's been well looked after and never taken off-road would be an ideal second-hand purchase. Note, however, that many a Samurai has been converted to serious trialling use – buy one of these certainly if you intend to use it in a similar role, but don't pay over the odds. Check for excessive off-road damage and understand any conversions that have been carried out – many tool-handy owners have performed engine transplants, for instance, in an effort to overcome the lack of torque from the little 1300cc engine and you'll need to be sure the car is still street-legal.

LWB versions, although more practical, have a ridiculously wide turning circle. These tend to be a bit cheaper, mainly because they've almost certainly been worked hard in a commercial role. The Samurai is well thought of and so has tended to keep its



value reasonably well, so although early examples of the 1.0-litre SJ change hands for a matter of a few hundred pounds, expect to pay as much as £1000 for a '91 Samurai soft-top in good shape, or around £3000 for one of the last examples dating from 1997.

Though mechanically reliable the Samurai isn't immune to rust, so it's worth checking for bubbling paintwork or patches of filler hidden under glossy new paint.

### RATING

PRICE RANGE £500-£3000

ON-ROAD ●●●●●

OFF-ROAD ●●●●●

PRACTICALITY ●●●●●

AVAILABILITY ●●●●●

VALUE FOR MONEY ●●●●●