

OF THE YEAR 2003

SUZUKI GV2000



We've always felt the styling of the Grand Vitara was too conservative to excite anyone with a feel for outdoors action, though it found a strong following as a neat and compact suburban family off-road estate.

The GV derivatives, with either 1600cc or 2.0-litre petrol power, were an attempt to inject youthful appeal and real off-road image back into the marque. And although the ploy didn't really work since the result is too pretty on the outside and too cheap on the inside, the GV is still quite a competent and practical four-seater capable of providing an enjoyable off-roading experience with its short wheelbase, good approach and departure angles and low-range gearing. Standard equipment on all models is good with electric windows, CD player, alloy wheels, central locking and dual airbags included.

Many may have been treated to cosmetic enhancements such as side steps and bull bars, but don't be tempted to pay over the odds for these unless you really do want them, remembering that if you are intending to use the car off road side steps might get in the way, but will offer some protection to the sill area if they've been properly affixed.

An early T-plated GV 2000 soft-top which, like the Freelander, opens the rear passenger compartment to the elements but also boasts a big cloth sunroof over the driver, shouldn't cost much more than £6000, while £8000 should be enough for a cleaner X-plated example. From Y-reg onwards the range included the 1600, but this smaller engine is strained and noisy, the 126-horse 2.0-litre version isn't particularly quick anyway but has better torque for coping with those tricky off-road situations.

SUZUKI JIMNY



How we laughed when the Jimny first appeared, a dumpy little minicar with huge off-roading pretensions, and how we stared in amazement as the mud-plugging wonder stunned us with its cheeky off-road ability.

The Jimny is far too small to be anything more than an impractical runabout, but for a singleton or young couple needing a tiny city car that's ideal for nipping through traffic and pinching tight parking spots, the Jimny has enormous appeal. The front-end styling is funky enough to please, but the estate's rear end is just plain ugly. Choose a cabriolet version, however, and you've got yourself a stunning looker that will amuse all who see it opened up on a sunny day.

Don't expect much refinement, the short wheelbase and stiffish suspension result in a quite bumpy ride quality, while the 1300cc engine, in spite of being a modern efficient multivalve unit, needs to be revved hard to give the Jimny anything like lively performance; taken to the red line with foot-to-the-floor acceleration it will still take a leisurely 16.8 seconds to get to 60mph, and it'll struggle to hit 90mph on the motorway.

With not much torque to play with don't expect the Jimny to follow Defenders through seriously rough stuff, it does have limitations on axle travel and ground clearance, but keep it sensible and the selectable four-wheel drive system with low-range gearing will provide hours of off-roading excitement. Launched at the end of 1999 they're not yet common second-hand but shop around to find a tidy W-plated JLX Soft Top for £5000, with central locking, electric front windows and twin front airbags. Look out for examples with the optional alloy wheels and fog lamps.

SUZUKI VITARA SOFTTOP



This has to be considered the chic topless funster of the '90s, by no means classic enough to become an off-road icon but oozing exactly the sort of chunky chic that appeals to youthful seekers of motorised pleasure. Hence the Vitara found much favour purely as a pavement poseur, many being subjected to lowered suspension and wide wheels for enhanced street cred, a theme taken up by the suppliers with the arrival of the frankly garish Verdi and Rossini specials of 1994; find one of these eye-catching editions on a used car forecourt and you'll pay around 10 per cent more than for the basic Sport model it's based on – but go on, buy it, the extra money is well worth it... if you like that sort of thing – since these could become minor classics in the future.

Many Vitaras have been used off road, because they're almost surprisingly good, the wheel-at-each-corner design helping to overcome a lack of ground clearance, so check for attempts to hide damage to sills. As on any cabriolet check the interior for signs that the roof's been left open in the rain, with consequent rust on the floorpan.

The best bet if you are going to rough-road the car is an early Utility Soft Top, a base specification model intended for off-road use – pay around £1500 for a 1990 example in reasonable condition. If your requirement is a more general road car £2500 should get you a better-equipped JLX SE of around '92 vintage with the punchier 80-horse injected engine. Milestone models to look out for are the Sport 2 two-seaters of '95 and '96, prices ranging from £1200 to £3000, and the 4U2 from 1999, priced from £4500 for something in good shape.

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£4000-£10,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£3500-£8200
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£2000-£6000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●