

BMW X5



One of the first of the new breed of sports utility off-roaders in which the words 'utility' and 'off-road' are basically meaningless, and no matter because no one spending over £30,000 on a car – other than a Range Rover, that is – is even going to think about purposely leaving the tarmac.

The X5 is an oddball, then, because despite being a thinly disguised luxury sports car the steering is strangely vague and the suspension overly harsh, both aspects that rob the car of ultimate driving enjoyment. You'll buy one because you're a BMW enthusiast, you'll love the leather interior even though it has a slightly synthetic look about it and you won't mind the fact that the build quality doesn't feel quite right – it's made by good 'ol boys in the US rather than quality-freak Bavarians. But it is smart inside with its touches of polished wood, and practical, particularly in examples fitted with the slide-out boot tray to aid the loading of large objects.

You won't be disappointed by the X5's performance, even with the 3.0-litre turbodiesel engine because it's one of the best available, while the 4.4-litre V8 is a free-revving soul-stirring powerhouse.

No bargains here, to the extent that year-old 4.4i V8 and 3.0d Sports models are likely to change hands at £1000 or more than the new list price, such is the demand and backlog for new models. Early examples are a little more accessible, say £30,000 for a 3.0i or £32,000 for a 3.0i Sport on a Y, £36,000 for a V8 on a W, but such is the continuing interest in the turbodiesel that even Y-reg models are going for less than £1000 under the new asking price.

RATING	
PRICE RANGE	£30,000-£45,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

JEEP GRAND CHEROKEE



There's something a little more genuine about the big Jeep, basically because there's no disguising its true off-roading character even when the climate-controlled interior is lined in leather and occupants surrounded by concert-quality playback from a seriously crisp and clear stereo system.

That's not to suggest there's a lack of refinement, particularly in the petrol versions, it's more that the pricing's better matched to equipment levels than in some pretentious rivals. The Grand Cherokee has a relaxed American feel, though the styling is quite European and there's nothing wallowy about the ride or tank-like about the handling.

Well-maintained '95 examples of the 4.0-litre Limited are going now for £7000, though best buys are the last examples of the next generation, £13,000 for a V-reg Limited, £11,000 for a T-reg Laredo – not quite as posh inside but just as nice to drive. Orvis spells smart leather and exterior styling enhancements, so pay £14,000 for a pristine, low-mileage run-out model of '99 vintage.

The 2.5 turbodiesel hasn't the power or refinement the Grand deserves, but with economy so important to many these have held value well, so a low-mileage T-reg Limited will set you back £15,000. The 3.1-litre turbodiesel of the latest generation Grand from 1999 is a nicer engine, not many of are yet available second-hand but expect to pay £17,000 for an early example. More common are the lusty but thirsty 4.7-litre V8s, £18,600 for a 2000 model makes it a luxury bargain, with T-plated examples from £16,000. Post-2000 models had a more desirable five-speed auto, better for cruising economy. Pay £24,000 for one a-year-old.

RATING	
PRICE RANGE	£8000-£25,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

LEXUS RX300



This is such a good road car that you almost wonder why it has four-wheel drive, but it is of course the Lexus entry in the high-image pseudo-off-road parade challenging the BMW X5 with sleek styling, beautiful build quality and zippy 3.0-litre V6 performance.

It doesn't really succeed because there's nothing in its styling to indicate that it's a four-wheel drive – it just looks like a smart city estate, and as so often happens with Japanese cars the interior styling focuses on the dash and cockpit area, where interesting shapes and textures excite the senses, while everything else is bland.

The seats are quite comfortable, the cabin spacious enough to take five in comfort and there's good luggage space as well, so the RX300 will make a perfectly practical family estate offering superb cruising refinement, excellent ride comfort and sharp handling.

Traction control appears as a sop to off-road pretension, but it's there, along with anti-skid control, to enhance the car's high-speed behaviour on tarmac when it's wet or icy. The engine is refined but performance unexciting, so again this car will be bought because the Lexus name spells quality, even though there's very little character to enjoy.

There are two versions, the 'base' model including air conditioning, central locking, electric windows and a CD autochanger, priced from £22,000 for a low-mileage example on an X-plate to £26,000 for a smart year-old example. The SE includes an electric sunroof and wood inserts among several other trim and equipment enhancements, good value at £24,000 to £28,000 depending on age.

RATING	
PRICE RANGE	£22,000-£28,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●