

OF THE YEAR 2003

MERCEDES M-CLASS



A car that grows in stature year on year, continually surprising us with its ability to cope with quite serious off-road conditions with very little fuss, in spite of low ground clearance and very limited axle articulation.

In this luxurious sports utility's case the traction control is very effective as an off-roading aid as well as ensuring good high-speed on-road traction in wet and wintry conditions. The biggest problem the M-Class faces in this company is that it looks more like an MPV, a lacking that robs it of character though the three-pointed star appears to be enough to ensure high-street image.

The M-Class rides and drives exceptionally well on the road, where its crisp handling belies its tall styling, and the spacious interior is comfortable, well-equipped and very smartly trimmed, though refinements such as leather upholstery, electric seats and wood trim are extras so seek out examples with these fitted.

The best buy is unquestionably the 270 CDI, this refined turbodiesel delivering smooth and refined power with huge mid-range torque blending easy performance with penny-pinching economy. Unfortunately most agree with this, so there are no second-hand bargains here, you'll pay nearly £28,000 for a year old car, not £1000 below the new price. The 'bargains' lie in the petrol-engined range, the V8 ML430 having taken a little more of a depreciation hit so £28,000 ought to be enough to secure an X-plated example with tiptronic automatic transmission, while £25,000 will get you a Y-reg ML 320 with the free-revving V6 engine, again with tiptronic. The cheapest version is the base 320 non-tiptronic auto model at £16,000 on an R plate.

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£16,000-£33,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

LAND ROVER RANGE ROVER



Even more genuine than the Grand Cherokee, the Range Rover has exactly the right sort of country estate looks to match its off-roading pedigree. The first of the luxury 4x4s, the Range Rover has enough going for it still to claim to be the best, with lusty V8 power, excellent road manners, superb off-road agility and a quite magnificent hand-crafted look to the interior. The popularity of the car has resulted in a large second-hand choice, enhanced recently by the arrival of the stunning new model which has swelled the ranks of trade-ins crowding dealer forecourts.

The 4.6-litre, the ultimate development of the trusty Rover V8, at last delivered the kind of performance the Range Rover has always needed, an eager 225bhp to spur the top-specification HSE model into stirring action. More mundane versions make do with the 190-horse, 4.0-litre V8, while many sensibly concerned about economy will prefer to consider the BMW-engined 2.5-litre straight-six turbodiesel range. This engine is superbly smooth and refined, powerful when up and running, but woefully short of torque so getaway performance is far from exciting – the automatic is slow but desirable because it helps hide the engine's initial lack of performance.

The cheapest buy is a '95 4.0-litre manual, around £10,000 with average mileage; the best on-paper value is a £38,000 4.6 Vogue on an '02 51-plate – quite a drop from the £49,990 new price. The diesels remain the most desirable, though, with an early '95 DT commanding around £13,000, a '98 DSE around £20,000 and a 2000 X County about £25,000, with automatic transmission adding £500 to £1000 depending on age.

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£10,000-£40,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

TOYOTA AMAZON



To some people this huge Toyota is the world's best off-roader. The massive Amazon is a weighty beast, packed with luxury equipment, powered by lusty big-capacity engines, its only problem being a lack of image thanks to the overly conservative exterior styling and frankly bland interior.

The Amazon is expensive, but well-equipped, so much so that it makes an interesting comparison with the BMW X5, offering much more space, better equipment and similar levels of refinement, along with quite serious off-road ability. Perhaps it's simply the car's massive size that has prevented it from gaining more popularity, because it is a handful in busy city traffic, though the petrol V8 can deliver near-hot-hatch acceleration when it's needed.

Since the turbodiesel develops over 200-horsepower you're not sacrificing much performance to get the added economy of an oil-burner, so your best buy is a 4.2TD VX at around £30,000 for a 2000 model. The GX is cheaper – say £25,000 for a similar-age example – but lacks the comforts of climate control, electric sunroof and leather upholstery, that are so essential in a luxury car. Rather buy and older VX – as little as £22,000 for one of the first of the revised range from '98.

Active Height Control was an option on the turbodiesel VX – look for an example with this fitted if you like to show off. Best pose value of course is in the 4.7-litre V8 – variable ride height standard – also fine value since these took a bigger depreciation hit than the turbodiesels. Pay £20,000 for an early '98 model and up to around £35,000 for a clean example on an '02 51-plate.

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£15,000-£39,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●