'86-'95 SUZUKI SAMURAI

Amid chuckles and snide remarks, the Samurai became plentiful enough in the early '90s to start getting noticed. By the mid-'90s, the chucklers were beginning to nod in appreciation and the remarks changed from snide to admiring. The little Sammi gets in and out of places small dogs and mountain goats can't go. The Samurai's strongest points are its modification potential and toughness. While this pint-sized warrior isn't for everyone, it's a contender as a Spartan trail rig. A good array of aftermarket improvements is available.

Downside: Lacks room, big-time. The tiny, low-power engine requires a swap or ultra-low gearing. The latter restricts street driveability somewhat. In general, street driving is not the Sammi's best element, but if you aren't too picky, it can serve.

Look For: The '90-and-up fuel-injected rigs are less trouble and more powerful.

Stay Away From: Hardtop models. Though rare and offered only from '86 to '89, the hardtop is reputed to be top-heavy and therefore ill suited to lifts.

'83-'97 FORD RANGER

The Ranger may well be the unsung hero of this 10-best list. It's here because of its stout structure and modification-friendly design and very reasonable buy-in. It's available in many trim levels over the years listed, which includes only the Twin Traction Beam (TTB) models built through 1998. TTB could be called a semi-independent or swing-arm suspension that shares the qualities of an IFS and a solid axle. Though more quirky than a solid axle, TTB is a lot more mod-friendly and stronger than IFS, and it's easier to replace with a solid axle. Plenty of buildup parts are available for the Ranger.

Downside: TTB is somewhat tricky and more expensive to lift than a solid axle, but performance does improve with a lift, unlike true IFS.

Look For: The '90-and-up 4.0L units. Any truck with the rear 8.8-inch axle, which is was always combined with the 4.0L. The '90-and-up rigs also got the beefier Dana 35 TTB, reverse-cut front axle, which used Dana 44-sized axle U-joints. Look for the '87-and-up STX models, which had a factory lift for larger tires.

Stay Away From: Four-cylinder rigs, which lack power. The '84-'86 2.8L V-6 rigs are also barely adequate in terms of performance. In general, the '90-and-up rigs provide a better buildup baseline.

'73-'87 CHEVY ½-TON PICKUP

In general, ½-ton pickups make better trail machines than ¾-ton trucks do because of their smaller dimensions, lighter weight and softer springs. As the basis for a trail truck, few can equal the Chevy for adaptability combined with low buy-in cost and budget buildup opportunities. The solid-axle rigs offer the best performance and the most improvement potential. Except for the front suspension, the IFS trucks are very similar to the trucks with solid front axles, but lifting IFS is much more expensive and does not result in much performance improvement beyond what the larger tires offer. The solid-axle Chevy has vast aftermarket modification support. Typical of all Chevrolets, they are a parts-swapper's dream, with many years' worth of good stuff from which to choose.

Downside: ½-ton longbeds have—well, flexible chassis. GM steering geometry can be tricky when lifted. The 10- and 12-bolt rear axles commonly fitted are inadequate for really big tires. With a 28-spline 10-bolt, use no tire bigger than 33s. For 30-spline 10-bolts or 12-bolts, 35s are the limit. Fortunately these axles are easily swapped with ¾-ton running gear.

Look For: Stepsides. Why? Because they are cool and rare. Any rig with a 350. Any rig with an NP205, which are relatively common to about '80 on trucks with manual trannies or six cylinders.

Stay Away From: There's very little in this category besides—we hate to say it, and no hate mail, please—six-cylinder rigs. Despite the Chevy six's legendary status, it isn't suited to heavy trucks with big tires.