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BEST BUYS IN 4x4s

FULLSIZE PICKUPS

It just wouldn't be America without fullsize four-wheel-drive pickups. Everybody in our country depends on them one way or another. They're typically king of the mud bog, stallions in the desert, and required equipment for the job site.

1st Place: '91-'98 Chevy K-3500 pickup

Price range: \$1,500 to \$5,000

The Skinny: For the money, you can't beat a 1-ton Chevrolet K-series built between 1991 and 1998. They were available with a 5.7L small-block or a 7.4L fuel-injected big-block V-8, a 14-bolt rear axle, and a Dana 60 front end.

The Hot Setup: In particular we'd suggest looking for a

'91 as it would likely be the least expensive of the group while still possessing all the assets necessary for serious wheeling. Look for one with the four-speed manual transmission, otherwise the four-speed 4L80-E automatic will probably require a rebuild to run reliably in the dirt. Stay away from Midwest rustbuckets. Instead, search the Internet for trucks originating from the desert Southwest. It's worth a road trip to get one that is rust-free.

Runner-up: '94-'02 Dodge Ram 2500/3500 diesel

Price range: \$2,500 to \$12,000

The Skinny: Much of what we look for in a used pickup comes down to power gains per dollar spent in the aftermarket. In the case of Dodge Rams equipped with the

12-valve—or better yet, the 24-valve—Cummins turbodiesel I-6 engine, you won't find a better motor to hop up. On the '94-'98 12-valves, you can perform a simple \$200 fueling-plate modification that will net upwards of 100 hp and 200-plus lb-ft of torque. The wimpy A618 and 47RE automatic transmissions will likely grenade quickly if left unmodified, but nowadays there are tons of upgrades to



COMPACT SUV

This segment is probably the most bang for your buck when it comes to purchasing a used 4x4. Compact SUVs are typically inexpensive because they are lighter and therefore have less beefy components requiring fewer raw materials to manufacture in the first place. We like them because as dedicated trail rigs, they are towable, cheap to maintain, and super-easy to modify. We're always impressed with how well lightweight rigs do on the trail. They always seem to make impassable lines look easy.

1st Place: '85-'95 Suzuki Samurai

Price range: \$200 to \$1,600

The Skinny: In the world of four-wheeling, Samurais are often the butt of many jokes: "How many squirrels do you have under the hood?" It's a question we frequently overhear while watching a little Suzuki on the trail. All jokes aside, these micro-sized quasi-Jeeps really hold their own despite the absence of big power and flexy suspensions. We like them because they're small and simple. The Samurai had a 1.3L, 63hp four-cylinder engine and was available as a convertible or a hardtop. In '88½, the Samurai was improved with a softer riding suspension, a larger antisway bar to help reduce body roll, and a lower Fifth gear, which increased engine rpm and power at highway speeds. Further improvements came in the form of interior upgrades.

The Hot Setup: The trick arrangement for any Sammy is to swap in a fuel-injected 1.6L Geo Tracker ('89-'98) motor and drivetrain. We've seen Toyota pickup axles used under these rigs with great success. However, most



owners leave the drivetrain stock and simply modify the rest of the rig to work better for extreme trail use. Lots of surprises exist in the aftermarket for Samurai owners.

Runner-up: '97-'06 Jeep Wrangler TJ

Price range: \$2,500 to \$12,500

The Skinny: Jeep TJs have earned more respect in the last 10 years than any new 4x4 we've witnessed. Ever since the release of the new JK, TJ sales have plummeted, resulting in a surplus of clean, buildable Wranglers perfect for aftermarket perfectionists.

There really is no limit to what you can do when it comes to modifying a TJ. The better of the two motor options is the multipoint-injected 4.0L I-6, which did a decent job of