

5 BEST TRUCKS



Not even high gas prices can slow the truck juggernaut.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

Despite the continued carping of the global-warming Cassandras and the lofty gasoline prices that we suffered for much of last year, the shift toward truck-type vehicles continues unabated. More than 54 percent of the vehicles sold in America in 2004 were SUVs, pickups, and vans. That's up from 53.2 in 2003 and continues the steady trend that has been going on pretty much forever—or at least since 1960, which is as far back as our records

go and when truck sales were a mere 9.3 percent of the market.

Given buyers' seemingly insatiable interest in these machines that can haul plenty of people and stuff, it's no surprise manufacturers keep cranking out more new models every year. A largely American phenomenon at first, trucks have now become international, with the Asian makers competing in all segments and even the Europeans jumping heavily into SUVs.

In 2005, competition is strong across the truck landscape. We had plenty of nominees in every category—even in vans, where last year's reigning champ, the Toyota Sienna, only had to face two new entries, both of which were formidable. Perennial bestseller Chrysler has expanded the van state-of-the-packaging-art with its new Stow 'n Go seating. Meanwhile, Honda showed up with an all-new Odyssey, with several major improvements over its predecessor, which had won this

category in the first three years of 5Best.

Pickups were also strong, with several new, smaller-than-full-size—you can't really call them compact anymore—entries from Dodge, Nissan, and Toyota. In SUVs, we had a diverse mix of all-new machines, such as the Land Rover LR3, the Infiniti QX56, the Jeep Grand Cherokee, the Ford Freestyle, and the Chevrolet Equinox. We also had several established players with substantial upgrades, ranging from the Volvo XC90 with its new V-8 to the Ford Escape with its highly touted hybrid powertrain.

Our five categories remain largely the same as last year's. Anything with an open bed is a pickup. Vans have a two-box profile (small front box for the engine followed by a big box for people and cargo) with sliding rear side doors and the ability to fold or remove the rear passenger seats to produce one large volume.

SUVs, as usual, are a bit more complicated as they continue to morph and mutate in new and unanticipated directions. Our size distinctions carried over from last year, that is, any SUV not longer than 180 inches and less than 3900 pounds falls into our small category. Everything else is big.

That is until we get to price. As some of the expensive brands come up with more affordable models, such as the Porsche Cayenne V-6 (\$41,915 base price), and top-of-the-line Ford Expeditions run well into the 40s (\$46,155 for an Expedition King Ranch 4WD), it becomes increasingly hard to sift the diamonds from the zirconia. This year, we came up with an approach that should, with minor adjustments, work for a few more years. To qualify as luxury, a model had to have a base price of more than \$35,000 for the least-expensive version and offer at least

one model with a base price of more than \$45,000.

To be considered, a vehicle had to show up for our mid-October test session. We evaluated all the candidates on a variety of roads in the vicinity of our test site in western Washtenaw County, Michigan.

As usual, we rated the vehicles in three major areas: driver satisfaction, which includes fun to drive, styling, and coolness; utility and competence of the vehicle's intended task, which is particularly critical to trucks, which are still more for work than for pleasure; and finally, value, because we're convinced buyers are always interested in maximum bang for the buck.

After our panel of nine editors rated every vehicle from 1 to 100, the 2005 5Best winners revealed themselves. In the next few pages, we'll tell you all about them.



SMALL SPORT-UTILITY VEHICLE Subaru Forester 2.5XT

The problem with most sport-utility vehicles is that the sport part is something you've got stowed in the cargo bay or strapped onto the roof rack, to be utilized when you reach your destination. Mountain bikes. Kayaks. Camping gear.

But that's not the case with this little rascal. The Forester 2.5XT is one of those extremely rare utes that deliver sport—the fun-to-drive variety—and utility in equal measure, which makes getting there at least as enjoyable as whatever you're

going to do after you unload. Maybe more so.

The key here is the XT's turbocharged 2.5-liter flat-four, which churns up 210 horsepower and 235 pound-feet of torque, compared with the 165 horses and 166 pound-feet of the naturally aspirated edition. Paired with the standard five-speed manual gearbox (a four-speed automatic is optional), the turbo motor hustles this nifty five-door to 60 mph in 5.3 seconds, quicker than anything in its class. Quicker, in fact, than all but a handful of SUVs, class notwithstanding.

Introduced in 2002, the Forester is based on the compact Impreza sedan, with

SUV styling, a little extra ground clearance, and a taller roofline. In fact, that roofline—62.6 inches—defines the *Car and Driver* boundary between SUVs and station wagons.

Like all Subies, the Forester 2.5XT's list of standard features includes full-time all-wheel drive. With the rear seats folded flat, the cargo hold grows to 64 cubic feet. That's more than you get in an Impreza wagon, but we have to admit the Forester's max capacity runs at the bottom of its class, although it's within a couple cubes of the Honda CR-V and Ford Escape.

We also admit the XT is the only member of the Forester family that's really turned our heads. The standard Forester didn't quite make the 5Best cut two years ago. Of course, the XT's solo status could change if the rumored 300-hp Forester STI becomes a reality. Does power corrupt? Absolutely.



Vehicle type: front-engine, 4-wheel drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

Base price: \$26,270

Engine type: turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 16-valve 2.5-liter flat-4

Power (SAE net) 210 bhp @ 5620 rpm

Torque (SAE net) 235 lb-ft @ 3620 rpm

Transmissions 5-speed manual, 4-speed auto

Wheelbase 99.4 in

Length/width/height 175/265.3/62.6 in

Curb weight 3250-3350 lb

EPA fuel economy, city/dwrg 19-25 mpg