



MEDIUM CARS

HONDA CIVIC

£9,857 to £17,217



MAZDA 3

£10,467 to £15,447



TOYOTA COROLLA

£10,822 to £15,787



The Civic accounts for 30 per cent of Honda's global sales, which makes it crucial to the company's image as a dependable brand. Happily, it really is an outstandingly reliable car – the main reason it's been a Best Buy so many times over its 30-odd-year history.

Granted, its looks are unlikely to bring on any dizzy spells, but it's a practical car for both driver and passengers. It's easy to climb in and out, and there's lots of space in the cabin, especially in the back seats.

Unsurprisingly for a Honda, ride quality is a bit stiff. And owners sometimes grumble about the lack of boot space (though the rear seats are particularly easy to fold).

An all-new eighth-generation Civic is due early in 2006. It will be lower-slung and sportier than the current model, and looks set to be another winner.

OUR CHOICE	1.6i VTEC SE £12,937
USED CHOICE	1.7 CTDi SE (2002) £8,400

A new Best Buy for this year, the Mazda 3 is a big hit with owners. Over three quarters of those we surveyed would recommend their car to a friend.

Behind the wheel, they're impressed by the way the car drives, and praise the comfortable driving position. It looks good and there's plenty of storage space in the cabin and boot. Along with the superb reliability, all this explains why you can sell the Mazda 3 on for such a good price – depreciation is impressively low.

However, the most notable point here is the superb level of security – it's the most secure car in the medium class, difficult to steal and incredibly tricky to break into.

The instrument layout isn't to everyone's taste. And, as with the Civic, it's worth checking you can live with the bumpy ride. If you can, the Mazda 3 is a great choice.

OUR CHOICE	1.6 TS 5-door £12,617
USED CHOICE	1.6 TS2 4-door (2004) £9,800

The Corolla offers a smoother ride than the Honda Civic and the Mazda 3. Owners of the diesel model are particularly bowled over by how little it throws you around. And those with the petrol model report that it's quieter than the other Best Buys in the medium class.

The driving position is comfortable but make sure the interior is roomy enough for you. There's lots of legroom in the rear, and it's not exactly cramped in the front, but the Civic and Mazda 3 offer roomier cabins. And, though there are plenty of places in the cabin to store your nick-nacks, the Corolla's boot space is far from generous.

Still, the Corolla remains a hit with drivers. A big reason for that is undoubtedly the fantastic reliability we've come to expect from the Japanese marques, which is as evident in the Corolla as it is in our other Best Buys.

OUR CHOICE	2.0D-4D T3 5-door £14,712
USED CHOICE	1.6 VTI-i T3 5-door (2002) £8,100

WORTH CONSIDERING



AUDI A3
£14,877 to £26,827
Owners love the stylish Audi A3. It's the most liked new car in its class, and there's much enthusiasm for its driving comfort.

Reliability isn't a strong point, particularly compared with our Best Buys, and you don't get a lot of room in the back or boot. But safety and security scores are good.



BMW 1 SERIES
£15,807 to £21,897
Like the Audi A3, the pricey new BMW 1 series is more of a premium alternative to medium cars than a direct rival.

It's a joy to drive, with good handling and cornering. But protection for children isn't as good as on our other recommended cars. And protection for pedestrians is appalling.



RENAULT MEGANE
£10,727 to £20,652

The new Mégane is one of the safest, most secure cars in its class and is well liked by owners. It offers a smooth, quiet ride and there's plenty of load space (although it's a bit short on space for people).

Renaults tend to be quite unreliable, but so far the Mégane is an exception.

USED-ONLY BEST BUYS



FORD FOCUS
Oct 98 to Dec 04
£3,800 to £12,300

The latest Focus is too new to be included in this year's survey, but if it matches up to its predecessor, it will be a big success.

This older version was a regular Best Buy in recent years. It offers plenty of space and impressive road manners, and boasts a good reliability record.



HONDA CIVIC
Mar 95 to Sep 01
£2,700 to £5,775

The old Civic is still popular. In fact, drivers rate the ride quality as better than the latest version of the Civic.

Safety could be better but depreciation is low and, apart from a few problems with the exhaust, reliability is good. Do look out for that exhaust, though – Honda spares aren't cheap.



TOYOTA COROLLA
Jun 97 to Dec 01
£2,200 to £5,700

What the old version of the Corolla lacks in comfort, it makes up for in reliability.

Its safety levels are OK, too, and although the ride isn't particularly smooth, it is quiet. Cabin space is limited, especially in the back – but the old Corolla has more boot space than the latest model.

DON'T BUYS



FIAT STILO
£9,932 to £15,997

A replacement for the unloved Fiat Bravo and Brava, the Stilo has little to offer other than a roomy interior. Distinctly dull, with an unresponsive engine, it has its fair share of troublesome rattles and squeaks, as well as tatty trims and fittings.



MAZDA 323
Oct 98 to Aug 03
Around £3,000 to £8,500

On the face of it, the 323 isn't a bad car, and it has a great reliability record. But whether you buy one depends on how much you value your life. Safety on the 323 is dismal – one of the worst cars in its class.



RENAULT MEGANE
Apr 96 to Aug 02
Up to £10,000

The old Mégane isn't a patch on the new one. The driving experience is depressing and reliability patchy. Owners struggle to find anything nice to say – in fact, none of the verdicts scrapes above average.