



LUXURY CARS

BMW 5 SERIES

£26,152 to £47,847



JAGUAR S-TYPE

£25,797 to £49,797



MERCEDES-BENZ E-CLASS

£26,797 to £65,727



WORTH CONSIDERING

It's the 5 series' excellent show in our safety and security tests that marks it out from most luxury cars. Safety levels, like all the Best Buys here, are highly reassuring. And it's the most secure of the three – any thief would have a hard time stealing this car or anything from it.

It should retain its value well, and owners note pleasingly low servicing costs. They also highlight the changes from the old 5 series. For starters, the new model has lost those classic BMW lines – not a popular move. The space problems with the old 5 series are gone (there's a bit more space for rear passengers) but the instrument layout has also proved unpopular.

Overall, though, things have changed for the better. You don't get as much comfort as in the S-type and E-Class but it's just as fun to drive and a doddle to park.

OUR CHOICE	525d SE saloon (diesel) £29,652
USED CHOICE	525i SE saloon (2003) £21,025

The most remarkable thing about the S-type is how well it scores in our survey of owners' opinions. They're keen on how it looks and particularly appreciate the fantastically low noise level – but it also does well on everything from instrument layout to ride quality. The only blots on its record are a lack of storage space in both the boot and cabin, and some complaints about the cramped rear quarters. If space is a priority, then plump for the BMW 5 series instead.

The S-type is safe to drive and well secured against thieves. For a such a large car, it doesn't cost much in petrol; it does depreciate more quickly than the other two Best Buys, though, so you'll lose more money when you sell it on. That said, if you love it as much as the owners in our survey, you may never wish to part with it.

OUR CHOICE	2.5 V6 SE £30,122
USED CHOICE	3.0 V6 SE (2002) £18,175

The Mercedes-Benz E-Class, is a well-equipped and tasteful car – a real pleasure to drive. It's safe and secure; safety is just as good as the other Best Buys, though it is slightly easier to break into.

It's the most popular luxury car overall, even if it doesn't impress on as many individual points as the S-type. In fact, oddly for the most popular car, there are a few more specific grumbles. For example, it gets noisy out on the road. And it doesn't feel as roomy as other Best Buys up front (that said, there's more room for rear passengers to move around than in the Jag).

Owners criticise servicing costs – happily, though, low depreciation takes away some of the sting, and there are too many good things about the E-Class for the discerning lover of luxury to overlook it.

OUR CHOICE	E240 Classic Estate £31,892
USED CHOICE	E320 Elegance Saloon (2002) £24,925



VOLVO S80

£21,295 to £41,645

This is a superbly safe car – the third safest car we've tested, behind the Audi A8 and Lexus LS430. It's big, plush and comfortable, with plenty of legroom and headroom, both front and back. And it offers good protection from thieves.

Sadly, it's a pain to park and feels drab to drive. Fuel economy is a major benefit but crippling depreciation adds heavily to the cost of ownership.



LEXUS LS430

£56,972 to £59,072

The most secure car ever, thanks to laminated glass windows and tough locks. The LS430 is also outstandingly safe to drive, second only to the Audi A8 in our tests.

None of this comes cheap, though (prices begin at £56,972) and the LS430 is eye-wateringly expensive to run. But, reassuringly, the reliability of Lexus models is consistently top notch.

USED-ONLY BEST BUYS



BMW 5 SERIES

Apr 96 to Jun 03

Up to £29,000

Excellent security and good safety design make the older 5 series a great used buy. It's a real hit with owners, as well – a comfortable ride and excellent drive.

However, early models may let you down; owners report a few niggles, including issues with the air conditioning and airbags. And it's not as roomy as the new 5 series; there's an issue with space in the rear and in the boot, particularly on the saloon version.



JAGUAR XJ SERIES

Sep 94 to Dec 02

Up to £26,000

The old XJ drives like a dream and there's hardly a hint of engine or road noise as you glide along. Owners are won over by its stately looks and many are Jaguar devotees, happy to recommend it to a friend.

You'll need deep pockets to keep it on the road, though – the XJ gets through a lot of petrol, and replacement parts are pricey. And it's a mystery to us how a car more than five metres long can feel like a shoe box inside.



MERCEDES-BENZ E-CLASS

Oct 95 to Aug 02

Up to £31,500

The older version of the E-Class is well liked. For a luxury car, it's pretty economical; owners are particularly keen on the diesel's fuel economy. And, considering its age, safety and security are good.

People find it more spacious than the new version, though the boot in the saloon isn't too generous. The main worry is a number of troublespots, such as problems with engine electrics – get it checked by a professional.

DON'T BUYS

There aren't any Don't Buy luxury cars – as you'd hope at these kinds of price. All the luxury cars we've tested and analysed over recent years have been too good to be universally avoided. So, at present, there aren't any we'd specifically warn you off.