



Worth the premium?

From cheap and cheerful runabouts to super-fast hot hatches, there's something for everyone in the medium car category. We show where the smart money goes

The cheapest medium cars, such as the Ford Focus and Kia Cee'd, start at around £11,000. But if you want something German with all the trimmings, you could be staring at a £30,000 sales invoice. That's a lot of cash for a small car.

In general, you pay more for upmarket badges and high performance. For example, the most basic Audi A3 costs

£15,542, which is £1,285 more than the top-of-the-range Kia Cee'd. The Ford Focus range starts at £11,522, but you can spend nearly twice that for the monstrously powerful ST3 version if you're desperate to cut your 0-60mph time in half.

There are few truly bad cars these days, but there are still noticeable

In general, you pay more for upmarket badges

differences between the best and worst. This is true in technical terms but also in the ownership experience. Reliability, feeling good enough about your car to recommend it, and being treated well by dealerships can't be underestimated. By combining our technical tests with survey results from our members we give you the whole picture.

What you should look for

POWER

The smallest engine options offered in these cars are often a bit weedy. If you do much motorway driving, make sure your intended choice remains relaxed at motorway speeds

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Pay for expensive satnav and you won't get much of this money back when you come to sell. Simpler options such as metallic paint are more worthwhile

REAR SPACE

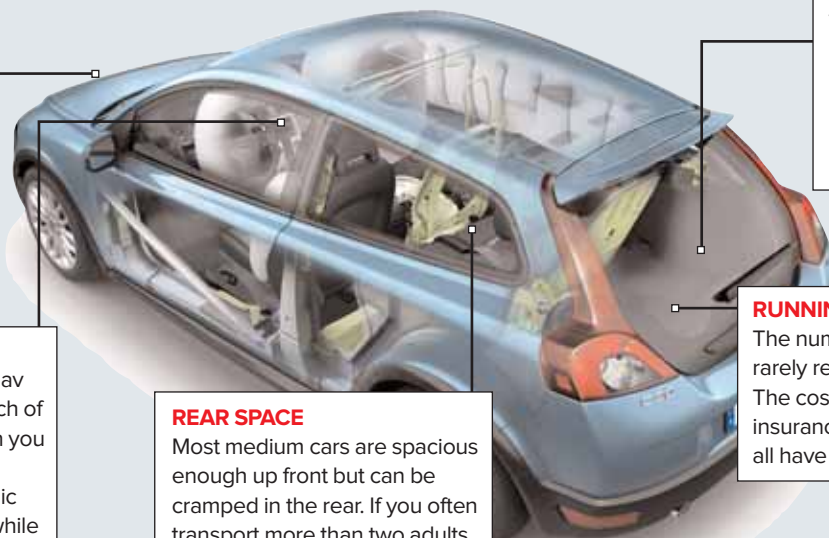
Most medium cars are spacious enough up front but can be cramped in the rear. If you often transport more than two adults over long distances, try sitting in the back before you buy

BOOT FLEXIBILITY

While most cars will let you fold down the rear seat backs to create more boot space, a few go further and let you flip up the seat bases or pull off other tricks

RUNNING COSTS

The number stuck on the windscreen rarely reflects the real price of a car. The cost of servicing, fuel, tax, insurance and especially resale value all have a part to play





71% Mazda 3

£11,427 to £19,597

The name may lack inspiration but the Mazda 3 is far better to look at than the 323 it replaced. The hatchback is more dramatic than the saloon but both have the same aggressive front end.

Enter the cabin and you'll find plenty of space, comfortable seats and an easy-on-the-eye sporty dashboard. Most of the major controls fall easily to hand, although tall drivers will struggle to reach the temperature controls if they have the seat all the way back. The rear is a bit cramped for adults and the short doors mean they'll have to contort themselves to get in and out.

The suspension keeps the car in shape through fast bends but also absorbs bumps well.

It's a little fidgety at low speeds around town but the balance feels right overall.

Give the 1.4 petrol engine a miss as it just isn't gutsy enough for a car of this size. We'd opt for spending the extra cash on a 1.6- or 2.0-litre model. If you really want to see what the 3's fine chassis is capable of, the 260bhp 2.3T MPS version is a riot.

WORTH KNOWING The Mazda 3 is well liked by owners – four out of five say they would definitely recommend one to a friend. Mazda dealers are good for sales and servicing, too.

Engines 1.4, 1.6, 2.0, 2.3 petrol; 1.6, 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- and 6-speed manual; 4-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 5-door hatchback; 4-door saloon **Insurance groups** 3 to 17 **Running costs** 34 to 51p (per mile) **Retained value** 45 to 49% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** Good **CO₂ emissions** 125-231g/km



68% Toyota Auris

£12,095 to £18,895

Toyota's dependable Corolla is no more and has been replaced by the more aspirational-sounding Auris. The car looks fairly ordinary (bland even) on the outside, but inside things are rather different. The gear stick is mounted high and near the dash and the hi-tech instruments have a space-age feel. Ergonomically, it all works well, although the handbrake is positioned too far back. Unusually for the class, rear leg- and headroom is good, but boot space is average at 315 litres.

The car's suspension strikes a good balance between the firmness required to stop excessive body roll in corners and the suppleness needed to remain comfortable on bad road surfaces. Our testers were also very impressed by the powerful brakes.

So far we've tried only the 2.0-litre diesel, which suffered from vibration at idle but was otherwise civilised. It was also a bit slow to react to prods of the throttle but was fine once it got going.

Toyota's construction quality and reliability are better than most of the competition's. As a result, resale values are likely to be strong for the class.

WORTH KNOWING The Auris is very impressive but it isn't a Best Buy just yet – it's too new for us to have any reliability and owner satisfaction data.

Engines 1.4 and 1.6 petrol; 1.4, 2.0 and 2.2 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- and 6-speed manual, 5-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 3- and 5-door hatchback **Insurance groups** 4 to 13 **Running costs** 32 to 44p (per mile) **Retained value** 49 to 51% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** n/a **CO₂ emissions** 131-166g/km



Under the skin it seems the 1 Series has gone green



66% BMW 1 Series

£16,390 to £28,420

With the exception of the new three-door version, the revised 1 Series looks little different from last year's model. But under the skin it seems BMW has gone green. The car's battery is recharged by regenerative braking (similar to that found on hybrid cars such as Toyota's Prius), reducing the strain the alternator places on the engine and improving economy. On manual models the engine cuts out when you're stuck in traffic (and shift the gearstick into neutral) but it fires up again when you depress the clutch. We found the system worked well when we tried it recently in the 118 diesel model.

On the road, the 1 Series' steering is very accurate and communicative, and the car keeps its composure brilliantly on all surfaces. All the engines – bar the 116i – are powerful and refined, and the diesels are particularly impressive.

Inside, it's not as spacious as some cars in this class, and the back seats are best for children or occasional use by adults. Boot space is also a little stingy at 290 litres.

WE LIKE BMW's build quality is excellent both inside and out. The 1 Series is good to drive and employs some clever technology, too.

Engines 1.6, 2.0, 3.0 petrol; 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 6-speed manual; 6-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 3- and 5-door hatch **Insurance groups** 10 to 17 **Running costs** 38 to 54p (per mile) **Retained value** 54 to 55% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** Good **CO₂ emissions** 123-198g/km





65% Audi A3

£15,542 to £28,722

Attracting admiring glances without screaming 'look at me' is a tightrope that the A3 walks with ease, even though it's really just a tarted-up VW Golf. But it's easy to be seduced by the A3's exceptional build quality, looks, assured handling and well-built interior.

The rear seats are rather cramped, there's not a great deal of boot space and the ride could be better, but wind and engine noise are thankfully low. Fuel economy is another strong point: diesels are good but the FSI petrol engines are surprisingly frugal, too.

The A3's option list is more tempting than that on most medium cars. You can specify the impressive 'DSG' semi-auto gearbox (which doesn't dent performance or fuel economy) and Audi's famous Quattro four-wheel-drive system on some models.

WORTH KNOWING The A3's charms are appealing but, as a premium Best Buy choice, the BMW 1 Series just shades it for reliability.

Engines 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, 3.2 petrol; 1.9, 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- and 6-speed manual; 6-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 3- and 5-door hatchback **Insurance groups** 9 to 18 **Running costs** 35 to 60p (per mile) **Retained value** 53 to 55% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** Good **CO₂ emissions** 125-250g/km



65% Volvo C30

£14,777 to £24,272

Historically famed for safety and dependability, nothing hammers home the Swedish firm's transition from boxy to foxy quite like the C30.

When you take the wheel you find it's quite sporty, too. The steering is light and direct and the car corners well, but the trade-off is a fairly firm ride.

The 1.8-litre petrol car we tried is OK but lacks pulling power lower in the rev range. The diesels and larger-capacity petrol cars are better and if you really want some poke, you have a choice of high performance petrol (T5) and diesel (D5) models. Economy on the latter is particularly impressive for a 180bhp car – our 42.8mpg test figure is better than the humble 1.6 petrol's 40.4 claim.

The C30 is very well built with comfy seats and great overall refinement. But the coupé-like rear limits boot space, while getting in and out could be easier.

WE FOUND The C30 isn't so practical but at least it's different. It could yet be a Best Buy if it proves reliable.

Engines 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, 2.4, 2.5 petrol; 1.6, 2.0, 2.4 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- and 6-speed manual, 5-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 3-door hatchback **Insurance groups** 7 to 16 **Running costs** 38 to 52p (per mile) **Retained value** 50 to 52% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** n/a **CO₂ emissions** 129-224g/km

Nothing hammers home Volvo's transition from boxy to foxy quite like the C30



63% Ford Focus

£11,522 to £20,622

Volkswagen may translate as 'people's car' but the Ford Focus is the true standard-issue motor for middle England. And there's no reason for it not to be: handling and ride are great, and it's safe, comfortable, spacious, reliable and reasonably priced. The only real problem is that with so many about, resale values aren't quite as good as for more exclusive brands.

The 1.4 and 1.6 petrol cars lack the necessary oomph to be truly enjoyable, but the 1.8- and 2.0-litre versions, and diesels, improve things considerably.

The ST models have firmer, racier suspension, while 225bhp will propel you to 60mph in less than seven seconds. You'll pay for this at the more pumps and in road tax but the more staid Focuses, particularly the diesels, have above-average fuel economy.

WORTH KNOWING We don't advise you to leave valuables in any car but lower-spec Focus models are too easy for thieves to break into.

Engines 1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, 2.5 petrol; 1.6, 1.8, 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- and 6-speed manual; 4-speed auto **Body styles** 3- and 5-door hatch, 4-door saloon, 5-door est, 2-door cabriolet **Insurance groups** 4 to 17 **Running costs** 36 to 52p (per mile) **Retained value** 40 to 52% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** Good **CO₂ emissions** 124-224g/km

How we test

Our independent tests have an excellent reputation throughout the world. Here's why...

Child seats

Why is something that is so essential for children's safety often so difficult to fit? We test whether car manufacturers have made it easy for you to install them – see our report on p70.

Visibility

One of the problems with modern cars is that, in order to make them suitably resistant to the forces involved in a crash, the pillars that frame the glass areas have become increasingly thick. This compromises

visibility for the driver, especially at junctions. Some cars are better than others in this regard and, to find out which, we create a 360-degree panoramic photo. By placing the camera where the driver's head normally is it's possible to produce an image



which – with a bit of computer analysis – gives us a rating for total visibility.



61% Kia Cee'd

£11,007 to £14,257

Designed in Korea and built in Slovakia, Kia's stylish new entrant to the market offers great value for money. The range starts at just £11,007 for the 1.4S, which comes with air conditioning and a steering-wheel-controlled CD player as standard, and tops out at £14,257 for the 1.6 CRDi diesel.

For this sort of money you wouldn't expect great driving manners, but the Cee'd isn't bad at all. The car absorbs bumps and minor road imperfections well and doesn't wallow too much in fast corners. Admittedly, the steering lacks feel but it's pleasantly light and accurate, and the car handles in a safe and predictable way.

The Cee'd is well constructed, spacious and comfortable. Engine noise is a bit intrusive at motorway speeds, though, and the 1.6 diesel we tried suffered from vibration at low revs. **WORTH KNOWING** From this month, the USB port on GS and LS Cee'ds will allow you to control a connected iPod using the steering-wheel's controls.

Engines 1.4 and 1.6 petrol; 1.6 diesel **Gearboxes** 5-speed manual, 4-speed auto **Body styles** 5-door hatchback **Insurance groups** 4 to 6 **Running costs** 37 to 44p (per mile) **Retained value** 36 to 37% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** n/a **CO₂ emissions** 125-165g/km

FREE NEXT MONTH

Which? Car 2007/08

Next month, every Which? member will receive a **FREE** copy of Which? Car – the no-nonsense guide to buying new and used cars.

It's bigger and better than ever, and features the results of our huge car reliability and satisfaction survey – plus our Best Buy cars for 2007.



Other options

CITROËN C4 FROM £11,947

Once we got over the disappointment of discovering that it wasn't capable of turning into a robot like it does on telly, we were quite impressed by the C4: it drives well, looks good, is safe and has a good selection of engines. However, the car is undermined by poor reliability, high depreciation, its bouncy high-speed ride, and cramped rear seats.

SCORE 52%



FIAT BRAVO FROM TBA

The replacement for the unpopular Stilo certainly looks the part from the photos we've seen, but we haven't had the chance to drive one yet. The new T-Jet turbo petrol engines sound promising and it scored five stars in Euro NCAP crash tests. The car's due here in July.

SCORE Not yet tested

HONDA CIVIC FROM £13,207

This three- and five-door hatchback wouldn't look out of place in a sci-fi movie. But it's not so futuristic in the way it drives – passengers may not enjoy the firm ride, although keen drivers will like its sharp handling. Surprisingly, owners have reported some teething problems, so it may be best to wait a while before buying.

SCORE 62%

MERCEDES-BENZ A-CLASS FROM £13,842

This 'car for the masses' might be the cheapest way to get the three-pointed star on your

bonnet but it still isn't cheap to buy or run. Solid build quality doesn't equate to great real-life reliability. It's good in town but not so able on the open road.

SCORE 61%

MERCEDES-BENZ B-CLASS FROM £17,417

The excellent B-class has been well received by our testers. It's well built, safe, secure, comfortable and nice to drive. The only things not to like are average brand reliability and the vagaries of Mercedes' customer-service quality.

SCORE: 63%



NISSAN QASHQAI FROM £13,511

A four-wheel-drive so dinky that it belongs more in the playground than on the school run, the Qashqai from Nissan offers a new take on the medium hatch. We liked how it drove when we tried it (see *Which?*, May 2007, p10) – our full road test is imminent.

SCORE Not yet tested

PEUGEOT 307 FROM £12,877

The 307 has been around since 2001 but its looks haven't aged too badly. While it's nice enough to drive, the ride isn't great and reliability is not a strong point. The all-new 308 model arrives soon so, if you want a 307, you should be able to get a big discount.

SCORE 46%

RENAULT MÉGANE FROM £11,957

The Mégane has been adding some French flair to our roads

since 2002. It handles well (in spite of slightly numb steering), is safe and makes life difficult for thieves. Space for rear passengers and luggage is lacking, though, and it isn't particularly reliable.

SCORE 47%

SEAT LEON FROM £11,722

The Leon is based on the Golf but tries to appeal to the young using the VW group's Seat brand. The thrusting 148bhp 2.0-litre petrol that we tested was certainly capable of serving up some thrills. Overall, it's good to drive, well made, safe and comfortable.

SCORE 59%

VAUXHALL ASTRA FROM £11,557

The big surprise when you get into an Astra is how well it drives: the taut suspension means the car hugs the road through corners and the steering is accurate with plenty of feel. It's cramped in the rear, though, and has a fussy centre console.

SCORE 58%



VW GOLF FROM £12,127

The grand-daddy of the medium car sector is also a Which? Best Buy, thanks to great road manners, comfort, safety, good owner satisfaction and decent resale values. But it's quite expensive and easy to steal from. Also, according to our survey, service from VW dealerships isn't great, although the Golf's reliability is average.

SCORE 64%

**WHICH?
BEST
BUY**

Which should you choose?

Overall Best Buys

BMW 1 SERIES, MAZDA 3, VW GOLF



This is a very competitive sector and some of the new entrants – notably the Toyota Auris and Volvo C30 – look very impressive so far. But while their reliability is still unproven, we think the smart money should go on the BMW 1 Series, Mazda 3 or VW Golf. The Mazda is reliable and clearly the best value, while the VW is better on the road and for safety. If you want a premium badge, the 1 Series just edges the Audi A3 for reliability.

118d. Despite having a much larger, more powerful 2.0-litre engine, this car manages just 123g/CO₂. With 143bhp on tap, caring for the environment shouldn't compromise driving enjoyment too much. That said, if you really want to be green, the way you drive is almost as important as what you drive.



Best used buy

MAZDA 3 If you're looking for a good used car it's hard to beat the Mazda 3. Reliability is good and depreciation is not drastic (most models should retain 40 per cent or more of their value after three years), but it's high enough to expect some reasonable second-hand deals, especially because it's not particularly expensive to begin with. It's a nice car to drive and own, and is supported by reportedly friendly and helpful dealerships.

up to BMW's old moniker of 'the ultimate driving machine'. You have to admire the Munich manufacturer's insistence on sticking to its rear-wheel-drive principles, even when making a car as small as this. As a result, space in the back and boot is slightly compromised, but not massively so.

Best for families

FORD FOCUS, VW GOLF When it comes to families, space is key. Ford offers an estate version of the Focus and VW will be launching a Golf estate this summer to give you more storage for family paraphernalia. Safety is also important and both of these cars get four stars (out of five) for child occupant crash protection from Euro NCAP, so they are among the best in the class in this respect.



Of course, families don't have to be about young kids. Elderly relatives and stropky teens might appreciate a bit of legroom on long journeys, so spacious rear seating could be desirable – in which case the Kia Cee'd and Toyota Auris fit the bill here.

Greenest choice

BMW 1 SERIES To keep greenhouse gases to a minimum you need to

look for the best fuel economy you can get – and that means small diesels. The 1.6-litre versions from Mazda, Ford and Kia all tread lightly on this earth with emissions of 125g of CO₂ per kilometre. The shock comes when you look at BMW's most frugal 1 Series, the



Most fun

BMW 1 SERIES With top marks for steering and handling, the 1 Series lives



USING THE TABLE

Price The lowest on-the-road price in the range (including registration, delivery and 12 months' road tax). For detailed new and used car prices, visit www.which.co.uk/cars

Test performance

Ratings are based on our rigorous independent road test and convenience assessments. The more stars the better.

Boot practicality How versatile the boot is,

including space, loading and unloading. **Euro NCAP crash test** This is the rating, out of five, based on the car's ability to protect adult occupants in the Euro NCAP front and side crash tests;

n/a means the car hasn't been tested yet. **Brand reliability** A manufacturer rating based on owner feedback from our *Which?* Car survey. Model-specific ratings will be published in *Which?* Car, next month.

Score

Ignores price and is based on:
Driving/practicality **45%**
Safety **15%**
Owner satisfaction **15%**
Brand reliability **15%**
Security **10%**

MODEL	PRICE	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE									SCORE %
	STARTING PRICE (£)	RIDE AND HANDLING	SUSPENSION AND COMFORT	BRAKES	VISIBILITY AND PARKING	SPACE IN REAR	BOOT SIZE	BOOT PRACTICALITY	EURO NCAP CRASH TEST	BRAND RELIABILITY	
MAZDA 3	11,427	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	71
TOYOTA Auris	12,095	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	68
BMW 1 Series	16,390	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	66
AUDI A3	15,542	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	65
VOLVO C30	14,777	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	65
FORD Focus	11,522	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	63
KIA Cee'd	11,007	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	n/a	★★★★★	61