

BMW X5



BMW refers to their X5 as a "sport-activity vehicle," which means that even they concede that there's not a lot of utility in it. But, then, this is a car that is aimed at drivers that frequent the Galleria area more than they do Home Depot. Built in Greer, South Carolina, the X5 is definitely a sporty little thing to drive that was never intended to feel mud under its tires. The base model is the 3.0i, which comes with a 225 hp, 3.0-liter inline six engine that is matched to a six-speed manual transmission with a five-speed automatic offered as an option. The 4.4i brings you a 315 hp, 4.4-liter V-8 that should give you a whole lot more passing power. And if that isn't enough power, then check out the 4.8is and its 355 hp, 4.8-liter V8. All the X5s come standard with X-drive, BMW's all-wheel drive system that delivers variable power to individual wheels for optimal traction. Although you can expect all the standard luxury amenities that BMW is famous for, **plan on shelling out a lot more for the desirable option packages**, a marketing issue that exists with most European luxury cars.

MSRP starts at \$42,395

LEXUS LX470



The Lexus LX470 may be one of the older, fully capable luxury SUVs on the market but it continues to impress. Although it is scheduled for a complete redesign sometime soon (probably next year), the **present model doesn't give away much to its younger competitors**. Its outward appearance may not be as flashy as the new boys on the block, but the interior and the engineering under the metal is still top notch. It's a class act that's hard to beat. The LX470 is based on the Toyota Land Cruiser, a model that can trace its origins back to 1951. The first LX was introduced in January 1996 and it immediately became the best-selling luxury SUV. Today's version is available with only one powerplant, a 235 hp, 4.7-liter V8 that produces 320 pound-feet of torque. Matched to a five-speed automatic transmission, expect to get about 13mpg in the city and 17mpg on the highway. If you plan to travel on loads of back roads, check out the Lexus Night View heads-up display option. This is an enhanced nighttime vision system that uses a Charged Coupled Device Camera and near-infrared lights to flood the area in front of the vehicle that allows you to see on any pitch-black night.

MSRP starts at \$67,645

MERCEDEZ-BENZ M-CLASS



The new Mercedes-Benz M-Class has moved into its second generation. First introduced in 1997, it was a raging success from the start. Built about 600 miles away in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (**that's right, even the Germans drive an M-Class that's been built in the United States**), this new model is far more road friendly and far less trail adept. The folks from Mercedes did a great deal of research and found that the typical M-Class buyer is not planning to go off-road with their vehicle. As a result, the new model has been designed to look like an SUV but handle like a sedan. The new M-Class shows up in two models. The ML350 is powered by a 268 hp, 3.5-liter V6 that can get you from 0-60 in 8.4 seconds. The ML500 gets a 302 hp, 5.0-liter V8 that rockets you from 0-60 in 6.9 seconds. Both models get a permanent four-wheel-drive system and a seven-speed automatic transmission. An electronic shifter mounted to the steering column has replaced the console-mounted shifter. And if you really need to get muddy, opt for the Airmatic suspension with adjustable ride height that adds a low-range gearbox and locking center and rear differentials.

MSRP starts at \$40,525

BEFORE I DRIVE OFF: Factory-installed car audio is starting to eclipse the gray market stuff. Manufacturers now team up with high-end audio vendors to design systems perfectly matched to the individual model's interior space. Look for Discrete 5.1 Surround Sound systems that play Dolby Digital 5.1 discs and DVD Audio discs. Expect one of these systems to add a few thousand to the car's MSRP.

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