

## Hear them roar in 2004

This is the model year for fun. Automakers have introduced cars that are more thrilling to drive and more exciting to look at. Besides a large crop of ultraexpensive cars, here are 10 that stood out for their performance, fun, and value. They range from likely blockbusters at the showroom, such as the Nissan Titan, to razor-sharp niche vehicles like the Mazda RX-8 and the more practical and comfortable Prius hybrid from Toyota.



FORD F-150

Ford redesigns the world's bestselling vehicle with looks based on its "big brute" Tonka concept pickup. A V8 engine gains power to match the competition, and the interior is better laid out, with better materials and a classier look. Even base "single cab" models have four doors for easy access to cargo behind the seat. Fuel economy loses 1 mile per gallon compared with the old F-150, and prices are up about \$1,000. With 26 variations, prices range from \$21,000 to \$35,500.

BEST OF SHOW  
MITSUBISHI EVOLUTION VIII

Nicknamed the Evo, this car has taken the rest of the world by storm. First made famous in World Rally Cup racing, Evos filled TV screens with gravel-spraying images as they hurtled down forest roads at triple-digit speeds. With a turbocharged 271-horsepower four-cylinder engine, all-wheel-drive, and a four-door body, it rockets. Handling is scalpel-precise. On the minus side, this \$29,000 subcompact is cramped, loud, and stiff, and only gets 18 miles per gallon. But to get your heart pumping, there's nothing like it.



CADILLAC XLR

This two-seat convertible based on the Corvette marks the American icon's first real attempt to win back Mercedes and Lexus buyers. The XLR goes head-to-head with the Mercedes-Benz SL and the Lexus SC coupe, but with an American flavor. Like its competitors, this roadster offers a folding, retractable hard top, for excellent weather protection when the sun's not shining. At \$77,000, it costs less than the Mercedes and much more than the Lexus, but with more zip than either.



CHEVROLET SSR

This reincarnation of the hot-rod pickup comes straight from the factory and needs no aftermarket enhancements. With a folding hard-top that looks good even when it's up, a big V8, and beefy tires, the SSR makes for a perfect perch on cruise nights.

It follows the classic hot-rod formula, with a chassis based on the new small Chevy Colorado pickup and a powertrain from the bigger Silverado. Even the snug, two-seat interior looks the part. The small pickup bed is big enough to carry a few things, maybe even a small motorcycle. The truck can also tow a jet-ski to the lake.

Priced at \$42,000, this vehicle is more practical and authentic than the last factory-built-hot rod – the recently departed Plymouth Prowler.



SCION xB

This four-door matchbox is Toyota's new entry in the contest for teeny-boppers' hearts. It combines Toyota reliability, BMW quality, funky styling, customizability, and practicality for \$14,000. Like most products designed for this crowd, this van aims for industrial chic, but may just be warehouse-ugly. And how many college kids buy new cars anyway? But plenty of other folks may spring for a practical, efficient (31 miles-per-gallon) car at that price.



CADILLAC SRX

As profits sag for US automakers, Cadillac is Detroit's comeback kid, with rising market share and almost no rebates. Its XLR sports car and the CTS Spec V small sedan are getting the attention, but the SRX holds the most promise for winning large numbers of buyers. With either a V6 or Cadillac's signature V8, it drives as well as the competition from BMW and offers a whole lot more room. Even at \$38,000 to \$48,000, this should win Cadillac recognition.

A redesign of Toyota's bestselling hybrid has made the Prius larger, more practical, and even more fuel efficient. The new Prius is rated at 55 miles per gallon in town and 50 on the highway. Reason: New air-conditioning and power steering systems allow the earth-friendly vehicle to spend even more time running as a pure electric vehicle in the city, saving on gasoline.

The Prius is now classified by the EPA as a mid-size car, rather than a compact. With one of the largest hatchbacks on the market, it carries more cargo than its predecessor.

The new Prius does all this for the same price as before: \$20,510.

BEST FOR THE PLANET  
TOYOTA PRIUS

NISSAN TITAN

The Titan marks the second prong in Japan's push to sell full-size trucks in the US. Toyota's Tundra pickup has had moderate success since 1998. But the Titan has Detroit quaking. It matches US trucks in power and size, and offers more standard features. Nissan sells four-door and extended-cab models. The rear-opening back doors on the extended cab open a full 180 degrees so passengers won't get trapped in narrow parking spots. Expect Titan to cost a little more than Ford or GM trucks, with comparable fuel economy, when it arrives in showrooms in December.



SUBARU WRX STi

Featured on Xbox and Playstation 2 rally-car video games, this baby has won worlds of fans. The STi is a racing version of Subaru's Impreza WRX, with powerful brakes, tires almost as impractical as racing slicks, and a six-speed stick. It also boasts more horsepower than the rival Mitsubishi Evolution. The turbocharged engine has a fantastic growl, but the car's handling and civility fall short of the Evo's. At almost \$32,000, the STi is an awfully expensive economy car. Still, it's a cheap way to pass a Porsche 911.

Here's something different: A four-door sports car that really rocks.

The RX-8 breathes new life into Mazda's groundbreaking rotary engine. Mazda last sold a rotary-engine rocket, the RX-7, in 1995. The engine's appeal stems from its simplicity – the internal mechanics consist of only three major parts. The RX-8's rotary puts out 238 horsepower without the aid of expensive turbos.

Despite the smallish rear doors, this sports car has a back seat that is big enough for adults. Call it a sports car for the family man. Its sparkling interior, with a vertical CD player, plays up a funky triangular theme inspired by the engine's rotors.

The RX-8 starts at \$27,000 and is rated at 18 miles per gallon in the city and 24 on the highway.

MOST INNOVATIVE  
MAZDA RX-8