

softened the throttle to smoothly scale massive boulders on our favorite off-road track.

Even if you have no plans to explore the Kalahari, the Rover shines in its other habitats—old-money suburbs and the urban wilds. Flat cornering and perfectly weighted steering recall smaller performance utes like the BMW X5.

The likely caveat is Rover's often suspect quality. Rover and its Ford parent hope the LR3's \$1.3 billion investment in design, engineering and modern manufacturing, along with 4 million miles of around-the-world testing in extreme climates, makes this SUV worthy of long-term trust. Buying one may still strike some as a leap of faith, yet the quantum leap over its predecessor is inarguable.

The LR3's all-around talent is wildly impressive. It's the rare luxury SUV that nails both sport and true utility, then adds Rover's industrial styling and British flair. Its strong bid for the luxury throne makes the LR3 easily the year's best new truck.

### **BEST PICKUP** **Toyota Tacoma**

#### **BASE PRICE:**

\$13,415 to \$25,250

**PROS:** Roomier dimensions; most refined; mighty V-6; new model choices

**CONS:** Top-shelf models get Toyota-pricey

**BOTTOM LINE:** The best of a new breed of mid-size pickups

**T**raditional compact pickups are growing into mid-size models—and they're also growing up, mimicking the comfy cabs and plush feel of the latest

full-size trucks. With refinement at a premium, it's no surprise to find that Toyota has a near-genetic advantage, even against a tough slate of entries from Dodge, Nissan and GM.

Like the others, the Toyota has bulked up, adding a roomier Double Cab version with five seats and full-size rear doors. Its edge is its elusive Toyota-truck feel: The Tacoma remains the most carlike and the best built.

Unlike some rivals, Toyota has kept a base four-cylinder, 164-horsepower model for budget- and fuel-conscious buyers. And the optional 245-horsepower, 4.0-liter V-6 borrowed from the Toyota 4Runner is a killer, overpowering even the fine Dodge Dakota's base V-8.

The cabin holds another class edge with upscale materials and impeccable fit and finish. Safety is addressed with standard anti-lock brakes with brake assist and electronic brake-force distribution, stopping aids typically found on luxury vehicles.

Available hill-start and hill-descent controls keep the truck from rolling backward on inclines and, as with the Land Rover, let you safely descend steep hills without touching the gas or brakes.

Other thoughtful touches: A cargo bed made from a no-scratch composite replaces the usual cheap plastic liner, and cargo tie-downs slide along tracks in the bed for easy repositioning.

Toyota may have struggled to crack the big pickup market. But when it comes to small-scale pickups, the Tacoma finds the top spot with no struggle at all. **S**

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## So You Want It Now?

**Buying the latest and greatest doesn't have to mean paying an extortionate price**

Consumers flock to the hottest, highest-rated cars and trucks—and dealers know it. You'll have a lot less leverage in negotiating for a gotta-have car. Still, a few strategies can level the showroom floor and keep the price within reach.

**CALL THEIR BLUFF.** Dealers often dangle precious models and assure you the price is take it or leave it. That's no reason to stop shopping—or to be talked into a car that's already on the lot. Say "Thanks, but I'll keep looking." When a dealer won't budge, ask to negotiate on his next shipment.

**PAY NOW.** "You gain an advantage with cash in hand," says Mary Butler, managing editor of Cars.com. Paying all at once can knock down the price or beat another customer's offer. (Plus, no interest!) Some dealers prefer a liquid, no-hassle transaction, even if it means forgoing financing profit.

**FIND AN IN.** Many dealers maintain lists of preferred customers to whom they give first dibs on hot models. Know anyone who is a steady customer at a single dealership? If so, ask your friend to take you in for an introduction.

**CAST A WIDE NET.** Use the Internet to search dealers in other areas or states. Ask your local dealer to do some legwork himself. If he resists researching on your behalf, Butler says, "be ready to walk." If you end up buying from outside your area, you'll likely pay an extra destination charge (or buy a one-way plane ticket), but a better deal can mitigate those costs.

**BE PATIENT.** The ego boost of being first on your block with a hot new model fades fast. Waiting until supply rises and any hype surrounding a release cools is the best way to avoid paying a premium. It's happened with Chrysler's PT Cruiser, the VW New Beetle and others. These days, used versions start showing up on buying sites like [autotrader.com](http://autotrader.com) and [cars.com](http://cars.com) or on eBay within six months to a year, for far below sticker prices.