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# Inspect That Used Car Before Buying!

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Putting a car on a lift reveals if there are any serious fluid leaks from the engine, transmission or cooling system. It also allows easy access to suspension parts. (Photo by Philip Reed)



An inspection by a local mechanic included an estimate of how much life was left in our brake pads. (Photo by Philip Reed)



AIM inspector Andy Gutierrez examined our Jetta in an office parking structure. He found evidence that there had been bodywork performed on the rear body panel of our car. (Photo by Philip Reed)



The AIM mobile inspection included photos and was handsomely packaged; the inspection by our local mechanic was very comprehensive. (Photo by Philip Reed)

## Where To Get a Used Car Inspected and What Is Covered

By Philip Reed, Senior Consumer Advice Editor



No piece of car buying advice is more often ignored than this: Have a mechanic inspect a used car before you buy it. Why do buyers plunk down thousands of dollars on a car with little more than an around-the-block test-drive and a glance under the hood? Three reasons deter car buyers from taking this vital step:

- Most consumers don't know that good used car inspections are readily available.
- Many car buyers don't want to pay the extra money for an inspection.
- Some people anticipate a hassle prying the car away from a dealer or private party.

With a little planning, the inspection process can be as fast and revealing as a Hollywood exposé. If the inspection report is clean, you can buy with confidence. If it unearths a checkered past, you can back away or negotiate a lower price in line with the cost of repairs.

Most sellers will let you take the car for an inspection or have a mobile inspection performed at their home. If the seller hesitates, you might want to consider the words of America's Car Show host Tom Torbjornsen: "You have to wonder what they're hiding."

### The Vital Pre-Purchase Inspection

Experts agree that used cars must be inspected before the final negotiation for purchase. The ordinary car buyer, even if mechanically savvy, really can't do it justice. Torbjornsen explained, "A stem-to-stern inspection, if it's been done right, can tell you if you're about to buy a great used car or step into a nasty set of problems."

Torbjornsen recommended having the inspection performed by a mechanic you've built a relationship with. The car should also be test-driven over a predetermined route that includes hills, bumps and potholes to pick up suspension problems and reveal engine performance issues.

Jim Yates, president and CEO of Alliance Inspection Management, said his company of 500 mobile inspectors, currently inspecting auction and off-lease vehicles, will soon be offering mobile inspections for private-party car buyers nationwide. He said using a third-party inspector will build what he called the "trust factor."

"There is so much information on the Web about every type of car," Yates said. "But what about that specific [Chevrolet] Malibu? Someone has to verify not just what's wrong with the car, but also what's right with it." He added that a seller can also proactively have a car inspected and volunteer to provide the results of a condition report. "If you are the seller, does it enhance the sale to attach a condition report?" he asked. "I think it does."

### eBay Motors — a Game-Changer

Remote car buying was pioneered by eBay Motors, which allowed a buyer in Boston to bid on a car in Los Angeles. But in that case, how could they know if the seller had truthfully described the vehicle?

The online giant teamed with SGS inspections which will go to practically any location and do a thorough examination of the car for \$99, said Danny Chang, senior manager for eBay Motors.

### What It Costs, What It Covers

Nearly all auto service facilities — from chain repair stores to dealerships to independent garages — offer some type of pre-purchase inspection. We found that the going price is about \$100, roughly the cost of an hour's labor for a mechanic. Most repair facilities will give a quick description of the number of points in the inspection and how it is conducted. In most cases, however, the findings of inspections are not guaranteed.

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"One of the biggest problems in private-party transactions is setting expectations," Yates said. "With a good inspection, you know what you are getting." Automotive experts agree that a good inspection serves several functions:

- Verifies the equipment, or options, on the car
- Confirms the condition level of the car
- Reveals hidden problems with the body, frame or engine
- Finds engine codes that can reveal engine problems
- Builds confidence in the value of the vehicle

Many major problems that can be spotted by a good inspector include:

**Frame damage** — If the frame shows damage it indicates the car has been in a serious accident. Unless it has been repaired correctly, the car's wheels might not track properly, causing the vehicle to pull to one side and eventually leading to tire damage.

Poor previous repair work — This could range from sloppy bodywork to improper installation of modifications.

**Smoker's car** — If a car is being purchased remotely, via eBay for example, the seller could disguise the fact that someone has smoked in the car. Smoke gets into the vehicle's headliner and upholstery, and it is impossible to remove the smell.

**Flood-damaged car** — A vehicle history report can red flag a flood-damaged car unless its title has been falsified. If that's the case, then it's important for an inspector to check for signs of water damage.

#### Mobile or Garage Inspection?

Many people will be faced with the choice of having a mobile inspector look at a car or taking the vehicle to a local mechanic. While it's most important to get a qualified inspection, each method offers its advantages and disadvantages.

A mobile inspection is fast and convenient. The inspector comes to your home or office and performs the inspection on-site. An inspection report is printed out on the spot and given to the buyer or seller. Inspectors also photograph any damage and take shots of the vehicle from different angles.

Inspections done by your local mechanic, or the service department of a dealership specializing in that brand of car, are performed with more specialized equipment. Primarily, the car can be put up on a lift and the underside of the car examined for fluid leaks.

#### Test-Driving the Inspection Process

We thought it would be interesting to have an Edmunds.com test car, a 2005 Volkswagen GLS TDI, inspected to see what was uncovered. We took the car to Long Beach Autohaus and paid \$108 for an inspection that lasted about an hour and a half. We watched as the mechanic, Mac, combed over the car and explained the points he was checking.

Mac's inspection found a minor oil leak but he chased it to its origin and determined it was not severe. He also said our car needed tires and a brake fluid flush and will soon be due for an expensive timing belt change. "It's a good, clean used car," Mac told us at the conclusion of the report. "But the price seems a little high given that you will need work on it soon."

Alliance Inspection Management (AIM) inspector Andy Gutierrez inspected our Jetta in a parking structure. Although he didn't have a lift, he conducted a six-point frame inspection to make sure the car hadn't been in a serious accident. His report included detailed photos of various scrapes and scratches which would be very useful if we were buying the car remotely. Additionally, he pointed out areas in the right rear-quarter panel that had been repaired by a paintless dent remover. Although AIM hasn't yet announced pricing, similar inspection services charge about \$100.

#### Final Thoughts

While no inspection is guaranteed to find every flaw in a used car, a trained eye can help you avoid serious problems. Given the fact that thousands of dollars are at stake, an hour of your time and a hundred dollars is good insurance against the unknown.