

## 18 Audi S4

Audi has always had some dynamic issues by virtue of being stuck with hand-me-down VW platforms. Normally, a chassis designed for front wheel drive, with a V-8 slung too far ahead of the front axle would lead to chronic understeer and anesthetized steering. You wouldn't expect the S4 to be any different, but Audi seems to have learned something from a fellow German firm with experience in engines on the wrong side of axles. The S4's handling somehow works, despite the fact that the funny weight distribution is obvious. Limited understeer and a short wheelbase make for decidedly agile handling. But while the result doesn't always inspire confidence, especially when compared with an M3 (the design of which feels a bit too stable), it's still a hoot to drive with a torque-rich V-8 and a smattering of character not usually seen from Germany.



**PROS:** V-8 muscle; room for four; driving experience has character

**CONS:** Far from textbook dynamics; slightly dead steering feel

**Best of the Bunch:** Avant

**Power:** 340 hp

**Engine:** 4.2-liter V-8

**Torque:** 302 lb-ft

**Price:** \$46,820

**0-60:** 5.5 sec

## 17 Mazda 3

The platform that Ford uses for the Volvo S40 and the European Focus (soon to be the new U.S. Focus) reflects the benefits of leveraging a big corporate engineering budget on a world platform. The R&D money spent on this platform probably exceeds the sales revenue for most sports cars. None of that would matter if it weren't for the fact that Ford has had a magic touch with this platform, as it did with the prior iteration. You want balanced, nimble handling? No problem. You want unruffled handling at the limit, in S-turns with bumps? Done. With the Mazda 3, you can have this for the ridiculously low price of \$17K. And for that price, Mazda gives you an interior competitive with many high-snoot Euro brands. The four-cylinder, 160-hp Mazda engine is an earnest partner, though you have to rev it to really get going.



**PROS:** Nimble, attractive, lively; five-door option

**CONS:** A little too refined?

**Best of the Bunch:** S trim level manual

**Power:** 160 hp

**Engine:** 2.3-liter I-4

**Torque:** 150 lb-ft

**Price:** \$17,175

**0-60:** 7.5 sec

## 16 Nissan 350Z

With a strong engine, balanced handling, and clean but hardly clinical styling, the 350Z once again warms our hearts. At the price, it practically goes in the dictionary next to the word "value." Let's be clear, though: The big thing here is handling balance. The 350Z, unlike so many cars, doesn't seem to crave understeer. And dynamically, the Z is happy to change direction and takes bumpy turns in stride. The car feels solidly planted, which is a joy. The engine is a willing partner, though the horsepower spec may lead you to expect more. If there is a fly in the ointment, it is in the overall feel of the car. While improved over the G35 sedan, the Z still has some rubber in the chassis and as a result seems slightly isolated. The shifter and the steering are nice, but could be more refined. But to get a better all-around package you would have to spend about \$20K more.



**PROS:** Capable chassis; sweet body; willing engine

**CONS:** Isolated feel; notchy shifter; a bit more torque would be nice

**Best of the Bunch:** Performance Coupe

**Power:** 287 hp

**Engine:** 3.5-liter V-6

**Torque:** 274 lb-ft

**Price:** \$26,700

**0-60:** 5.9 sec

## 15 BMW 5 Series

Yeah, yeah. We know it's an acquired taste. And we know there's a big controversy about all the electronic gizmos—not only iDrive, but also active suspension and steering. We say, "Just drive it." The previously world-class 5 Series has been improved. In six-cylinder Sport guise, the new 5 feels lighter, with sharp reflexes and stunningly flat cornering. The V-8 Sport retains the magic, but exchanges imperturbability for lightness and thrust for eagerness. The steering is a blast too; different, but a pleasure to use, and with decent feel. And while most manufacturers force you to take an automatic transmission, BMW gives you a choice of auto, manual, and sequential manual! Inside, the accommodations are freshly designed, and the back seat is plenty roomy for anyone below diplomatic status. The iDrive system is usable, even if it is in some ways an answer to a question nobody asked. Even the styling has its merits, though we can't wait until the current design staff at BMW is gone. You'll forget all that once you're in the driver's seat.



**PROS:** State-of-the-art handling; ample power; feels right

**CONS:** Odd, if engaging looks; too many electronic thingies; ubiquity

**Best of the Bunch:** 545i Sport SMG

**Power:** 325 hp

**Engine:** 4.4-liter V-8

**Torque:** 330 lb-ft

**Price:** \$55,800

**0-60:** 5.6 sec