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4WD DRIVE

*Canada's premier
off-road, sport truck
and SUV magazine*

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PROJECT ZUK IS ALIVE

8 OFF-ROAD CONCEPTS

ARE YOU IN THE RIGHT RIG?

12 QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU DECIDE



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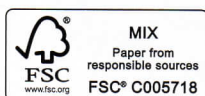
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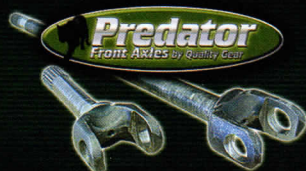
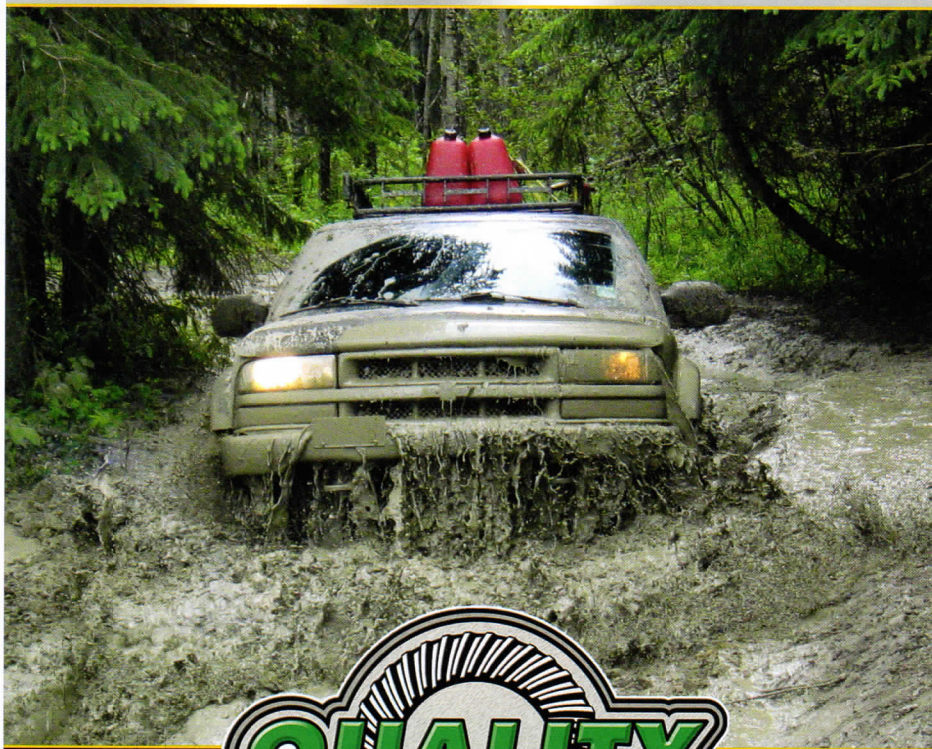
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WORDS AND PHOTOS BY TOM SEVERIN, ADDITIONAL PHOTOS BY BUDD STANLEY, LAND ROVER & MOPAR

Pick the **RIGHT** RIG

Determine the 4WD that's right for you by answering these 12 easy questions

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I often get asked, particularly by those new to 4WD, which vehicle to buy. Meaning, of course, which brand and model. I don't like to recommend particular brands and models. As you'll see, there are too many personal variables that affect the buying process. But I can help you with the decision making process by structuring and identifying the questions you need to answer.

An important question to ask yourself is, "What will I use it for?" For most 4WD owners, off-road use represents just a small percentage of their driving. Most is done on paved roads. Imbedded in this question is an issue that I will call the Four Wheeler's Conundrum: Because you're new, you don't know what you don't know. That is, you don't know at this stage what your long-term needs will be and what direction four wheeling will take you.

It takes time off-road to determine what types of driving you'll ultimately want to do. It may take a year or two for you to decide that. Your best estimation at the time of purchase is the best place to start.

Bottom line: assume that your vehicle will evolve over time. You may even trade up after getting some experience under your belt. This is a very fluid hobby.

Other Questions

Start by answering these additional questions. It will help you make that decision:

1. How much you want or can afford to spend?
2. Do you want new or used? I generally recommend used. First, a used vehicle is cheaper. It might come with some modifications already- Score! And a scratch now and then on the trail is not a big deal. The money you saved can be used to make changes.
3. How frequently will you drive it off-road vs. on paved roads? Will it be a daily driver? This will affect your decision on fuel economy, tire tread pattern, and other modifications.
4. How many passengers do you need to take? How much cargo space do you need, for camping, overlanding, etc.? Clearly, if you take the family you need a larger vehicle. But you also need to look at the Gross Vehicle Weight Rating (GVWR). This is the maximum weight capability including passengers and cargo. Subtract the curb weight of the vehicle from GVWR and you have the weight you can add for passengers, cargo, and armor (skid plates, etc.).
5. Do you want to sleep inside the vehicle?
6. Do you expect to make modifications? Some vehicles adapt better to modifications than others. Older vehicles may also have more aftermarket suppliers to choose from. No matter what type of four wheeling you plan, rock sliders are a worthwhile improvement right away to protect the investment in your

vehicle. So before you buy the vehicle, check for rock sliders suppliers. Custom work is expensive.

7. How much do you want to invest in modifications? This can be difficult to determine, but give it a good guess. For a used vehicle, figure you will invest the same amount as the purchase price in modifications. For a brand new vehicle, plan about 1/3 of the purchase price. Remember that this can be over time, making it easier on your budget.
8. Do you expect to trailer the vehicle or drive it to and from the trail? Motorhomes (RVs) have towing weight restrictions. Make sure you don't buy too heavy of a vehicle.
9. Conversely, will the 4WD vehicle need to tow a trailer? Perhaps you want to tow an adventure trailer or off-road teardrop trailer. A small utility trailer might solve the space issue for a large family outing.
10. If you plan to join a 4-wheel drive club, find out what most of the club members drive. Your vehicle should be at least in the middle of the "pack" on capability.
11. What security needs do you have? A pickup will have a high GVWR, which is attractive. But you may need to make accommodations to protect items in the open bed from theft, snow, rain, etc.
12. And you want the best approach, departure, and break over angles you can get. With all the other constraints to balance and compromise, this is one that can be improved after you buy it. It just requires money!

Modifications

OK, so you've settled on a particular vehicle. Now it's time to modify. That process can be maddening, too. If it's a new vehicle, the after-market guys may not be producing parts yet. Or, they don't make 'em for your vehicle. Keep in mind that those manufacturers focus on parts that will sell. If your vehicle (or model) isn't popular with four wheelers, you may find it difficult to get gear at a store near you. In that case, check out the forums for your vehicle. Others may have found a vendor.

An example might be a pickup truck. It can be tough to find rock rails for many standard pickups. That's why it's critical to buy the right kind of vehicle up front. You can still buy a pickup - they are useful - you may just not have as many choices.

Bear in mind that a change in one part of your vehicle may involve modifications elsewhere. For example, installing larger



For those with the means, a Unimog camper checks nearly every box.



Perhaps long distance and camping is not your thing, a rock buggy will allow you to conquer the most challenging terrain possible.



Ask yourself if you want independent suspension, or in this case, a solid front axle.

tires may require changing the ring and pinion in the differential. In addition to the cost of the parts, you're looking at additional labour (from you or someone else). But that's normal for 4WD vehicles. Incidentally, if in your deepest heart you want big tires (35-in or 37-in), don't compromise now. You will always want them! It is cheaper in the long run.

Every step entails some compromise. The biggest compromise is a financial one. As my Dad used to say, "If you can buy your way out, you don't have a problem." But very few of us are blessed with deep pockets. Not only do you compromise, but you adapt as time goes on. Your vehicle evolves as your needs and resources allow.



Mixing an overland camper with a capable 4WD is great for adventure, but not technical off-roading.

My Personal List

Here are some features that I look for in a 4WD vehicle:

1. Something I can afford without taking out a loan. This kind of rules out a new show room model!
2. Four-doors. I like the convenience of access with four-doors. I will likely take the back seats out.
3. Solid axles front and rear. It is getting more and more difficult to find a new vehicle with a solid front axle. An IFS

axle works fine but is weaker than a solid axle in the factory version, and a bit more expensive for the lift kit than solid axles.

These first three features really cut down the possible vehicles. But add in the next one and it really shrinks.

5. Body on a solid frame - Holds up better long-term than a unibody. I've had more maintenance issues with unibody frames.

6. Fuel-injected engine - Won't stall on a steep hill like a carbureted engine does. So I am not going to be looking for a classic!

7. Coil springs on all four corners for better articulation. However, the linkage on coil springs is more complex and is more prone to wear and tear.

8. Automatic transmission. This is mostly a personal preference. I feel it is easier to learn off-road in an automatic. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. You



No matter what you are looking for, there is likely a 4WD out there with your name on it. You just have to ask the right questions.

can get compression breaking with an automatic, but it will never be as effective as a manual. On the other hand, the auto will hold you part way up a hill without stalling.

As you can see, a lot of factors go into a buying decision. Start with a vehicle you like and one that includes most of the features you seek. Modify a bit to get you off-road,

then adapt later on as needed. The key is to get behind the wheel and enjoy the trails.

Tom Severin, 4x4 Coach, teaches 4WD owners how to confidently and safely use their vehicles to the fullest extent in difficult terrain and adverse driving conditions. Visit www.4x4training.com to develop or improve your driving skill.

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