

DRIVE

CAR OF THE YEAR **2023**

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FORD'S BEAUT UTE

Why the Ford Ranger made history to win Car of the Year.
PAGE 3



19 categories, 19 winners

Australia's best on wheels: Two new electric vehicle categories join the fray



Testing times

Drive Car of the Year is the result of 12 months of exhaustive testing culminating in a week-long evaluation at a world-class testing facility, writes **Joshua Dowling**.

For the first time in the 18-year history of Drive Car of the Year awards, more than 50 category finalists were put through their paces inside a relatively unknown world-class testing facility.

In addition to thousands of kilometres testing hundreds of cars in the year leading up to Drive Car of the Year, judges conducted even more detailed analysis of the contenders inside the Future Mobility Testing and Research Centre in regional NSW.

The former airport runway in Cudal – near Orange in the state’s central-west – was resurfaced and repurposed by Transport for NSW in 2019 to create the only facility of its type in the southern hemisphere. The runway has painted lines to simulate lanes and intersections, and the surface itself has been designed to match the grip and texture of the pavement used by European test centres.

The secure facility with no neighbours in eyesight occupies 32 hectares of rural land and includes an office building – and three converted aircraft hangars for engineers to work on vehicles.

The site is primarily used by the Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) to test crash-avoidance technology – against robots designed to mimic cars, pedestrians and cyclists.

Transport for NSW also uses the centre to test other future technologies in a safe environment rather than on the road.

While Drive has previously used race tracks to test cars in a safe environment – and will continue to do so in the future, depending on the vehicle category – the Future Mobility Testing and Research Centre was ideal for our testing as it provided a large, blank canvas to assess a range of cars in identical conditions.

Testing inside the Cudal facility fast-tracked the judges’ understanding of the limits and abilities of each car’s safety systems such as stability control, anti-skid brakes and general tyre grip.

This meant that by the time we hit the road for our test loops, we could then focus on suspension comfort, overall refinement – and how each car handled pot holes, as well as the daily grind.



Photos: Mark Bean, Ted Airey

By the numbers

Testing 62 cars from 27 brands to cover 19 categories is just the start of the data we dealt with.

The field of finalists had a combined value of more than \$5 million, spanning multiple passenger car, SUV and light-commercial segments across 19 award categories.

Prices ranged between \$30,340 for the Ford Puma and \$328,400 for the Mercedes-Benz EQS AMG 53.

The finalists were made up of 27 brands representing 10 countries, and one third of the brands have previously won an overall Drive Car of the Year award.

Cars range in size from more than 4.1 metres long (Skoda Fabia) to almost 5.4 metres (BMW i7), and if lined up nose to tail would stretch about 310 metres, which if you stood them straight up, is the height of the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

For the first time in DCOTY history, not one car had a manual transmission, but in terms of new energy, 11 were fully-electric, two plug-in hybrids, six closed-loop hybrids and two mild-hybrids. That’s 34 per cent of the field, and we’re not counting the electric scooter!

Our fleet came in roughly 10 different colours with red, white and blue (in equal measure) accounting for more than 60 per cent of the field.

The testing utilised five separate locations and required the work of 12 judges, six production crew and four support staff.

And to come together, it needed 26 domestic flights, plenty of burgers and sandwiches, five terrabytes of storage for the many hours of video and close to 30,000 photos, countless coffees, jelly snakes and bottles of water, plus a few cold drinks at the end. James Ward

DRIVE

CAR OF THE YEAR 2023

BEST MEDIUM HYBRID SUV



The Mitsubishi Outlander Plug-in Hybrid EV is leading the charge with another outstanding performance. DRIVE’s Best Medium Hybrid SUV gives you class leading* electric range and true off-road capability. Having impressed some of the world’s toughest automotive critics, now’s the time to judge for yourself. Call your Mitsubishi Motors Dealer today.

OUTLANDER PLUG-IN HYBRID EV

*Based on sample vehicle tested in accordance with ADR 81/02. Actual results will vary depending on traffic conditions, vehicle condition and driving style. Lithium-ion cells degrade over time, and any decrease in battery capacity will reduce electric range.

DRIVE CAR OF THE YEAR 2023

Ford Ranger makes history

You read it here first folks, the humble ute has officially gone mainstream, writes James Ward.

The Ford Ranger 4x4 dual-cab ute has won the overall 2023 Drive Car of the Year, a first for any light-commercial vehicle. Ranger topped the voting among 13 DCOTY category winners eligible for the award.

In nominating their choice for car of the year, Drive's judges look for the vehicle that has moved the game forward the most for Australian new car buyers, and Ranger's cohesive product approach from tip to tail, paired with its technology advancements and SUV-like driving behaviour, earned it strong praise from the team.

It was only going to be a matter of time before the humble ute was anointed Australia's best. Last year dual-cab utes (or pick-ups) made up 18 per cent of the total new car market, and nearly 13 per cent of all private sales. Their popularity has boomed in the past decade, with the volume and market share of these go-anywhere machines doubling.

No longer just a tool of trade, the double-cab has become synonymous with family adventure and you'll see them working just as hard on the school run during the week as you will towing a boat on weekends.

These are vehicles that have become progressively smarter and more capable over time and the new Ranger is the best of them.

Designed and developed extensively by Ford Australia, the new Ford Ranger has redefined the market by evolving into a cohesive



What we like

- High levels of technology and safety, even in the lower grades
- Lots of smart attention to detail, inside and out
- Steering, handling and ride quality are good for the segment

What we don't

- All-terrain tyres hamper dynamic ability
- At the pointy end of the segment, price-wise
- Big wheelbase equals big turning circle

The Ford Ranger beat a quality field to take out its category and Car of the Year; (inset) the interior redefines the ute segment. Photos: Mark Bean, Ted Airey



lifestyle machine. Simply, it's the SUV of utes.

The exterior design promotes a modern but rugged appeal and includes a number of clever inclusions like intelligent lighting on high-specification models and integrated steps on the back of the tub. From front to back, it's a great looking machine, regardless of the variant.

With either a 2.0-litre biturbo diesel or 3.0-litre turbo diesel V6 buyers have a choice between a proven, efficient powerplant or more power. While the four-cylinder is good, the V6 provides

smooth and effortless performance around town, with enough oomph for towing or carrying a load on the open highway.

Both engines are paired to a 10-speed automatic transmission and should the going get rough, you've got the ability to lock your rear differential, use low range gearing, hill descent control and a tremendously capable suspension configuration that can articulate well off-road but, perhaps more importantly, provide comfort and compliance around town.

But solid underpinnings aren't the only skillset of the new Ranger,

it's when you step inside that the big Ford really shines.

A rugged but thoughtfully configured interior reinforces the modern design approach, but it's the integration of technology that's a true standout.

The portrait-oriented central screen and digital instrument cluster feel seamlessly integrated into the DNA of the car. But the technology hasn't been implemented to the detriment of usability, as key elements like heating and cooling can be controlled through the touch screen or by physical dials.

We'll claim this winner as ours

While we no longer build cars in Australia, the Ranger is proof we are capable at handling near everything else.

Ford Australia designed and engineered the global Ranger (and its SUV partner, Everest), which is now offered in around 180 markets.

The car, developed with our local roads, climate and driving conditions in mind, was the result of work conducted by Ford's design and engineering teams in Melbourne and Geelong, and it was significantly tested at the Ford Proving Grounds just outside of Melbourne, as well as in the Victorian High Country and South Australian desert.

It's not just the Ranger and Everest either, as Australia remains a global development hub for Ford. The local team sees more than 2300 personnel working on cars predominantly for China, India, and South American markets.

So while Australian market Rangers may be built in Thailand, in nearly every other way, this is an Australian car.

Safety and assistance technologies also benefit from a holistic approach, with these elements feeling like part of the car rather than tacked-on additions.

There has been considerable thought placed on the Ranger's development for how it will be used not only as an off-roading work truck, but as the de facto Australian family car.

This considered approach has taken what was once a basic, bouncy utilitarian tool and created a refined and modern vehicle that is in tune with today's Australian family needs.

Ford Ranger Raptor: for those who seek adventure

If you are thinking about a double-cab but crave a little more adventure in your life, there's a whole new sub-breed of ute, that's bigger and badder.

Showroom off-roaders have become the latest in a line-up of evolving lifestyle machines, capable of going places you've barely imagined, all while being supported by big-brand engineering and a factory warranty.

Finalists in this category are the Ford Ranger Raptor, Nissan Navara SL Warrior and Toyota HiLux Rogue.

This year's winner of the Best Off-Road Ute category is the Ford



Ranger Raptor, a no-holds-barred Tonka truck that has mastered the all-in approach to off-roading.

New bodywork, a unique twin-turbo V6 petrol engine, specialised off-road suspension, new wheels and tyres and even an upgraded

interior gives the ultimate Ranger the edge. This is a car that looks and sounds like it can go anywhere, and then answers the brief with such a hugely likeable character you just want to go and find some rocks to climb or hills to jump.

Ford's ute on steroids, the Ranger Raptor, won Best Off-Road Dual-Cab Ute of the Year. Photo: Sal Aloisio

Best Dual Cab Ute just the start

To qualify for the outright Drive Car of the Year honours, the Ford Ranger had to win its category, beating the Isuzu D-Max, Mazda BT-50 and Toyota HiLux.

Drive Car of the Year has included a four-wheel-drive dual-cab category since 2011, with the previous-generation Ranger winning in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2020.

For 2023, judges were looking for broad capability in terms of cabin functionality, on road driving, the performance of safety technology, interior fit and finish and overall practicality.

While last year's joint winners of the category, the Isuzu D-Max and Mazda BT-50, still represent a significant step forward for the segment, the Ranger's more comprehensive approach to both technology and implementation saw it come out on top.

Against the HiLux too, it was the Ranger's on-road manners and well-rounded capability that saw it beat the venerable Toyota.

And yes, we concede the HiLux is a brilliantly capable machine off-road, but if you really want to find some rough stuff, there's an even tougher Ranger waiting for you ...

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Our changing taste in vehicles

That a ute has been crowned Drive Car of the Year should come as little surprise, if new car sales data is anything to go by, writes **Joshua Dowling**.

Marketing experts blame divorced dads, the car industry says it's because the vehicles are better, and buyers say they have a sense of adventure.

Whatever the reason, sales of utes are off the charts in Australia. The surge in SUVs remains strong – and they continue to dominate new-car sales – but if you believe the marketing hype, those vehicles aren't tough enough anymore.

If you want real street cred on the school pick-up or at weekend sports, you need a ute.

So say marketing analysts who have been monitoring Australia's changing tastes in cars for almost three decades.

"We've been through the Holden versus Ford era, then we had the rise of the SUV, now we're seeing unprecedented demand for utes," an analyst and consultant to the car industry told Drive on condition of anonymity.

"The rise in popularity of utes can be attributed somewhat to the fact they are safer and better



Sales of new utes have exploded, accounting for more than one in five of the new car market. Photo: Ted Airey

equipped than before, but it's also a macho image thing.

"Even mums on the school run want to look like they can escape this mess if they want to, even though they're stuck in the same traffic jam as everyone else."

So what about divorced dads? "That line came about because a lot of families – in particular dads – were sick and tired of having kids bikes and surfboards dirtying the interior of the new SUV.

"So they switched to a ute and now all the kids toys are in the tray."

Do workers still buy utes? "Absolutely, but the 'work and play' message in advertising has never been more genuine. These cars are used as work vehicles during the week and of course you can go camping on the weekend."

The sales figures show a stark

shift in our changing taste in cars over the past decade.

In 2012, passenger cars accounted for more than half of all new motor vehicles sold in Australia (52 per cent), SUVs comprised 27.5 per cent of the mix and utes represented 15.6 per cent of overall demand.

Last year, passenger cars accounted for fewer than one-in-five new motor vehicles sold in Australia (18.7 per cent) and they were outsold by utes for the second year in a row, representing 21.2 per cent of overall demand in 2022.

SUVs, which last year accounted for 53.1 per cent of new motor vehicle sales in Australia, continue to dominate the market.

This change, however, has seen new-car buyers pay record highs for new motor vehicles.

Exclusive research earlier this

year by Drive found the average price of a new motor vehicle in 2012 was \$35,200. Last year the national average price paid for a new motor vehicle was \$50,161.

The record high prices were driven by several factors, beyond simply buying more expensive types of cars such as SUVs and utes.

Transaction prices rose amid stock shortages over the past two years as dealer discounts evaporated, and so-called "dealer delivery fees" (which had almost become extinct prior to the pandemic) were re-introduced as an extra layer of profit.

Industry analysts predict new-car prices could fall in the next year or two – once current demand is met. Most car companies have wait times of three months to two years on popular models.

Average new-car transaction prices

2022	\$50,161
2021	\$46,988
2020	\$43,754
2019	\$40,808
2018	\$39,790

SOURCE: DRIVE.COM.AU

Ute sales in fast lane

2012

Passenger	51.8%
SUV	27.5%
Ute	15.6%
Van	2.3%
Truck	2.8%

2022

SUV	53.1%
Ute	21.1%
Passenger	18.7%
Van	2.7%
Truck	4.4%

SOURCE: FEDERAL CHAMBER OF AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRIES

"Once those wait times come down and production of new motor vehicles improves, prices will start to settle," says the industry analyst. "But right now the car companies and the car dealers are holding all the cards."




DRIVE

CAR OF THE YEAR 2023

From \$48,610 drive away

BEST EV UNDER \$70K

bydautomotive.com.au

BEST MEDIUM HYBRID SUV

Outlander outlasts the competition

Justin Narayan

The medium SUV category is one of the most popular in Australia. And with more and more carmakers offering some type of electrification within their medium SUV range, the time is right to recognise the impact of hybrid vehicles on our roads.

After extensive testing, the Mitsubishi Outlander was named as the inaugural Best Medium Hybrid SUV, edging out the best-selling Toyota RAV4 Hybrid, Ford Escape Plug-in Hybrid (PHEV) and Haval H6 Hybrid.

The first sense you get behind the wheel of the Mitsubishi Outlander plug-in hybrid is quality.

The interior is neatly presented, minimal and above expectations. Even our mid-tier Mitsubishi Outlander Aspire PHEV impressed the judges as we poked about the cabin, and it's fantastic to see a brand offer four different trim levels of plug-in models across one Outlander range (ES, Aspire, Exceed and Exceed Tourer).

Once you start driving, that quality experience continues. The ride errs on the side of softness, but even over our fast country road loops the Outlander felt planted and secure. The cabin is quiet thanks to good levels of sound suppression, and our mid-tier

THE FINALISTS

Toyota RAV4

What we like

- Great ride and handling
- No need to plug in
- Spacious and comfortable

What we don't

- Noisy engine
- Interior presentation
- Last year's tech

Ford Escape

What we like

- ST-Line styling treatment
- Feels sporty
- Cabin amenity

What we don't

- Too bumpy
- Interior quality and plastics
- Second row could be bigger

Haval H6

What we like

- Second-row space
- Affordability and value
- Looks great

What we don't

- Handling not as confident as rest
- Not as refined as the competitors
- Poor tyre quality and traction

Aspire model rode well on its 20-inch alloy wheels.

The steering is a little bit uncertain off centre, but that's honestly as bad as it gets.

On top of driving well, the Outlander's real party trick is fuel consumption.

Our exhaustive testing showed the Mitsubishi used only 3.4 litres of fuel per 100km. That compares favourably to regular hybrids which use around 5.0 litres per 100km. That's down to the Outlander's (and any plug-in hybrid's) ability to be driven on

pure electric power for extended periods of time. You do have to commit to keeping it charged, but it's possible to run most of your day-to-day trips without needing the petrol engine at all.

The second row is decent, too, and the compact third row could be the ideal get-out-of-jail-free card you need in a school-run emergency. It offers flexibility at the right price and feels like the most complete mainstream PHEV we've driven yet.

The winner

What we like

- Flexibility of an EV-only range and low fuel consumption
- Comfortable and secure handling
- Interior quality and spaciousness (seven seats)

What we don't

- Steering doesn't react quickly enough off centre
- It's expensive
- Third-row access could be better



BEST EV UNDER \$70,000

A platform to Build Your Dreams upon

Joshua Dowling

The BYD Atto 3 is the 2023 Drive Car of the Year Best Electric Vehicle Under \$70,000, proving that an entry-level electric car can offer as much technology as it does personality.

While electric cars represent less than 3 per cent of the entire new-car market today, the appetite for them is growing. The biggest challenge facing electric cars – outside infrastructure, driving range and charging points – is affordability.

The cheapest electric cars in Australia aren't exactly cheap, in the \$49,000 to \$55,000 price bracket, whereas the most affordable petrol cars are in the \$20,000 to \$30,000 range.

Nevertheless, price has not dented their popularity.

This year, we have included Best Electric Vehicle Under \$70,000 as a standalone award in the 2023 Drive Car of the Year – one of three categories catering for the diverse range of battery-powered vehicles.

BYD (short for Build Your Dreams) is new to Australia. The Chinese-owned brand arrives via a distributor still finding its feet in the Australian market. However, the car itself is a worthy winner.

As the newest electric car in the



Photo: Ted Airey

The winner

What we like

- Zippy performance
- Roomy cabin
- Sleek, futuristic design

What we don't

- Tyre grip and lane-keep assist need work
- Quirky cabin design not to everyone's taste
- Small instrument cluster with patchy illumination

sub-\$70,000 segment – based on an all-new, dedicated platform – it should top the class. The MG ZS EV (also from China) and the Nissan Leaf from Japan (although built in the UK) are starting to show their age and feel old in the company of the BYD Atto 3.

It is smooth and easy to drive, has a roomy and comfortable cabin, and when this test was conducted it was priced about \$50,000 drive-away, making it one of the most affordable electric vehicles at the time.

Although the exterior styling is

THE FINALISTS

MG ZS EV

What we like

- National drive-away pricing
- Seven-year warranty
- Strong braking performance

What we don't

- Starting to feel its age
- Limited driving range
- Heavy steering feel

Nissan Leaf e+

What we like

- Zippy
- Class-leading handling
- More range than before

What we don't

- Starting to feel its age
- Modest driving range
- No electric park brake

futuristic yet inoffensive, the interior design is daring. Judges were divided on cabin appearance but, on balance, it was praised for several reasons.

Good design is also about practicality, and the BYD Atto 3 interior is roomier and more user-friendly than its rivals.

Of course, no car is perfect. The judges noted the BYD Atto 3 would benefit from having an easier-to-access 'P' for park button (it's hidden under the top part of the gear selector). Without a full customer handover, some buyers or family members may not easily locate it. Cruise control, annoyingly, only works in 5km/h increments.

The BYD's lane-keeping assistance system needs better

calibration, its tyres performed poorly in our emergency swerve and braking tests, and the driver's instrument cluster has a couple of small operational issues.

The digital speed display is small, and the instrument screen needs a light sensor so it does not dim when driving with headlights on during the day.

If BYD can address some of the above feedback, it would make it an even more compelling proposition in the future. It has all the ingredients to continue to be a good electric car for the money for the next five years, provided BYD keeps updating it.

It is a worthy winner of this category given its price, comfort, roominess and performance – and it shone against the competition.

Winners through the years



2006
Audi TT



2007
BMW M3



2008
Honda Accord



2009
Volkswagen Golf



2010
Volkswagen Polo



2011
Mercedes-Benz C-Class



2012
Toyota 86



2013
Mazda 6

BEST LARGE SUV

King Kluger does it again

Sam Purcell

It's no small thing for any car to successfully defend its Drive Car of the Year title, especially in the face of some new and updated competition. But that's exactly what the Toyota Kluger has done. Toyota's large SUV is one of the cheapest to run and maintain; incredibly important these days as our eyes water at the fuel bowser. That frugal nature is combined with a comfortable and practical package that ticks a lot of boxes for everyday use.

The Kluger – nearly five metres long overall – offers lots of space and amenity for those in the first two rows, while the third row scores a solid pass mark. In other words, adults will fit but keep the trip short.

Toyota's range of powertrains – soon to be updated with a 2.4-litre turbocharged four replacing the long-serving V6 – is dominated by the hybrid option, which combines a 2.5-litre, four-cylinder petrol engine with two electric motors and a small battery pack. It's

The winner

What we like

- Hybrid is impressive on fuel and cheap to service
- Lots of up-front storage spots
- Comfortable and easy to pilot

What we don't

- Infotainment technology needs an update
- Grande specification feels expensive
- Potentially long wait times

smooth and seamless to drive through the CVT automatic gearbox, and our recent garage review saw real-world fuel consumption of just 6.6 litres per 100 kilometres.

Another good point regarding the Kluger is this fuel-saving hybrid powertrain is available across the range.

Where the Kluger didn't do so well was a third row that wasn't as spacious as other options (Pathfinder, especially),

and an infotainment system that is in need of an update. Toyota has obviously been paying attention to feedback, with a larger display and new infotainment software coming soon to Australia, but that will also come with a small bump in price.

There might be some cheaper entry points into seven-seat car ownership (especially when you look at the top-spec Kluger Grande), but back-to-back wins for the Kluger prove its effectiveness and fit-for-purpose nature, with that hybrid powertrain acting like an ace up the sleeve.



Photo: Mark Bean

THE FINALISTS

Ford Everest

What we like

- High levels of refinement and polish for an off-roader
- Spacious and comfortable across three rows of seating
- Only one here with proper off-road and towing credentials

What we don't

- Lacking the car-like comfort of the competition
- 10-speed automatic gearbox sometimes feels busy
- Dynamics unable to match more car-like competitors

Hyundai Santa Fe

What we like

- New efficient hybrid powertrain option
- The most car-like driving experience
- Feels relatively compact to drive

What we don't

- Third row missing airbags
- Third row also fairly tight for space
- Hybrid powertrain not available on lower spec levels

Nissan Pathfinder

What we like

- It's huge inside, with loads of space
- New model brings much-needed updates to safety and technology
- Third row is the best this side of a people mover

What we don't

- Thirsty petrol powertrain is the only choice
- Can feel big around town
- High-set second-row seats

BEST SMALL CAR

Small car, full package

Rob Margeit

With small car size and large car polish, the new Volkswagen Golf is the full package.

Last year's champion has again come out on top, despite not undergoing any significant changes, albeit with some improvements to safety inclusions. But, as Drive Car of the Year rules dictate, any segment champion is invited back the following year to defend its crown. And the Volkswagen Golf mounted a compelling defence.

From its minimalist and elegant cabin to its excellent engine and transmission combinations, the Volkswagen Golf again demonstrated just why it's one of the world's best-selling cars.

Volkswagen submitted the entry-level 110TSI for this year's Drive Car of the Year judging. And yet, despite wearing the 'entry-level' tag, the Golf continued to shine in a competitive field.

Last year, the judges praised VVW for ditching the sometimes laggy dual-clutch 'DSG' transmission in the Golf for a conventional eight-speed automatic. And that change held up again this year, the automatic at

Volkswagen Golf

What we like

- Punchy performance
- Classy interior
- Slick eight-speed auto

What we don't

- Second-row comfort could be better
- A lack of physical buttons and dials
- Price increases take some of the gloss

The finalists

- Peugeot 308
- Toyota Corolla
- Honda Civic
- Skoda Fabia

once slick and intuitive, no matter the driving style.

The Golf still feels quick enough for most needs. A tested 0-100km/h time of 8.9 seconds places it midfield in terms of pure acceleration. Similarly, its braking performance from 100km/h to standstill stopped the tape at 37.4 metres, again mid-pack.

But raw numbers don't tell the whole story. The Golf is the most composed on the road, with agile handling and a drivability that stands taller than the rest.

But the Golf isn't perfect. Its second row is a touch on the cramped side, and that minimalist interior is starting to look a little underdone compared with Peugeot and Honda.

Ultimately, these minor gripes weren't enough to topple the reigning champ. Easy to drive and fun to hustle, the Golf continues to set the benchmark for small cars.



Photo: Sal Aloisio

BEST LARGE CAR FOR FAMILIES

Carnival cruises to victory

Kez Casey

Loads of space, easy to drive, and packed with thoughtful touches; the Kia Carnival is the ideal car for large families.

There are no two ways about it, the Kia Carnival is an undeniably large car, and that sheer interior volume already sets it up for success in the category. More than that, though, it's thoughtful design touches and inclusions that helped the Kia Carnival secure its win as the Best Large Car for Families.

The Carnival is clearly focused on the task of moving people. Find yourself in a crowded carpark and the sensible sliding doors, which need only minimal space to open and offer clear access to the seats, really shine. Then there's the access from the front row back, clear and unencumbered for walk-in access to the middle row and quick and simple access into the third row.

The rear-most seats themselves are adult-sized and open up the flexibility of carrying everyone from the youngest members of the family, in one of the two ISOFIX-equipped seats, to being able to comfortably accommodate adults with room to spare – something its SUV counterparts can't accomplish quite so effortlessly.

For those who need them, a total of five ISOFIX mounts, plus the ability to offset middle-row seats to keep little hands clear of each other, adds another advantage.

The Carnival also scoops the pool in terms of cargo space, and while it misses out on features like cargo blinds or hidden under-floor



Photo: Ted Airey

The winner

What we like

- Huge interior space
- Comfortable ride when fully loaded
- 5x ISOFIX-compatible seats

What we don't

- \$52-\$72,000 price range isn't always family budget friendly
- Refinement gives way to functionality slightly
- Can't match the emotional appeal of SUVs

The finalists

- Hyundai Palisade
- Nissan Pathfinder

storage, the deep boot balances the ledger with a genuine ability to deal with the carry-on luggage for a full-house interior.

On the road, the Carnival copes even better with a full complement of passengers than it does with just one or two occupants and remains

composed and comfortable with a full load.

Judges agreed that while people movers may not hold the emotional appeal of more popular SUVs, the handsome Carnival carries itself well, and the rational points, sheer space, and interior flexibility set the Carnival apart from other vehicles in this field.

In back-to-back testing, we discovered that the Carnival's open interior and space-first philosophy means that refinement and noise suppression isn't as good as something like the Palisade. Rough roads and corrugations revealed that the clever sliding, split-folding, multi-function interior means that not everything is as damped and silent as rivals, though it's not a stark difference, just a subtle step.

The Kia Carnival continues to surprise at just how good it is at dealing with the needs of Australian families. If you need space, this must be on your shopping list.



2014 Mercedes-Benz C-Class **2015** Ford Everest **2016** Volkswagen Tiguan **2017** Hyundai i30 **2018** Toyota Camry **2019** Toyota RAV4 **2021** Kia Sorento **2022** Kia Sportage **2023** Ford Ranger

BEST MEDIUM SUV

Nissan's X-Trail-blazer

Rob Margeit

It's fair to say Nissan needed the X-Trail to be good. The old X-Trail was on sale, arguably, long past its expiry date. The wait, it seems, has been worth it, the all-new Nissan X-Trail a standout in almost all key areas against rivals that can more than hold their own in the Medium SUV class.

It's no mean feat to topple last year's overall Drive Car of the Year, the Kia Sportage, but that's exactly what the X-Trail achieved this year in taking out this, the most popular category in terms of new car sales in Australia.

Standard features on the well-equipped entry-level model include 17-inch alloy wheels, LED headlights, an 8.0-inch touchscreen with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, 7.0-inch driver's display, keyless entry and start, cloth seats, a plastic/rubber steering wheel, and rear parking sensors.

Also standard is an airbag between the front seats – a key feature among cars that have scored five stars under the latest ANCAP crash-safety testing criteria, including the new X-Trail's rivals from Hyundai, Kia and Haval.

Judges praised the X-Trail for a thoughtful and practical cabin that offered plenty of space.

Its dynamism impressed, the Nissan handling our decidedly



Photo: Sal Aloisio

ALL THE WINNERS

Passenger Cars

- Best Small Car
- Best Medium-to-Large Car
- Best Medium Luxury Car
- Best Large Car For Families
- Best Hot Hatch
- Best Sports Coupe

- Volkswagen Golf
- Skoda Octavia
- Mercedes-Benz C-Class
- Kia Carnival
- Volkswagen Golf R
- Nissan Z

SUVs and Dual Cabs

- Best Light SUV
- Best Small SUV
- Best Small Luxury SUV
- Best Medium SUV
- Best Medium Luxury SUV
- Best Large SUV
- Best Large Off-road SUV
- Best Dual-Cab Ute
- Best Off-Road Dual-Cab Ute
- Ford Puma
- Nissan Qashqai
- Volvo XC40
- Nissan X-Trail
- Jaguar F-Pace
- Toyota Kluger
- Land Rover Defender
- Ford Ranger
- Ford Ranger Raptor

Electric Cars

- Best EV Under \$70,000
- Best EV \$70,000-\$120,000
- Best EV Over \$120,000
- Best Medium Hybrid SUV
- BYD Atto 3
- Kia EV6
- BMW i7
- Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV

The winner

What we like

- Excellent engine and transmission
- Thoughtful and stylish cabin
- Decent fuel economy

What we don't

- 10,000km service intervals
- Hybrid variants on the pricey side
- Small 8.0-inch touchscreen in the base model

patchy test route with poise, the mid-sizer simply swallowing up the rough stuff with barely a ripple inside the cabin. It's arguably not as good as the locally-tuned suspension found in the Kia Sportage, but we're splitting hairs here.

The X-Trail's 2.5-litre petrol engine matched to a continuously variable transmission (CVT) also outshone the opposition, especially the CVT that proved quiet, intuitive and refined.

It also proved the most economical on fuel, and by some margin, posting an impressive 8.5L per 100km. And with a hybrid variant added to the line-up earlier this year, the X-Trail range looks even more compelling.

Prices range from well under \$40,000 for the two-wheel-drive petrol to a touch over \$57,000 for the top-of-the-line hybrid (both before on-road costs), there's an X-Trail to suit most budgets.

THE FINALISTS

Kia Sportage

What we like

- Excellent ride on locally tuned suspension
- Extensive standard safety kit
- Nice design inside and out

What we don't

- Base 2.0-litre petrol feels underwhelming
- Petrol models are thirsty on fuel
- Some variants miss out on sat-nav and digital radio

Judges praised the X-Trail's cabin storage, including the cleverly designed floating centre console that allows for extra storage underneath.

The sum of the X-Trail's parts

VW Tiguan Allspace

What we like

- Seven-seat flexibility
- Massive boot
- Punchy engine

What we don't

- Hesitant dual-clutch auto
- Expensive for the segment
- Firm and harsh ride

added up to a cohesive whole. A modern medium SUV with plenty of space for families, decent fuel economy, excellent safety credentials and a simple drivability along with impressive comfort.

BEST EV \$70,000-\$120,000

Kia has the right stuff

Justin Narayan

The Kia EV6 is the right electric car for 2023.

Twinned under the skin with Hyundai Ioniq 5, the EV6 range opens with the entry-level, rear-wheel-drive Air (\$72,590), and progresses to the higher-spec GT-Line, in rear- or all-wheel-drive guises from \$79,590 before on-road costs.

Shortly after Drive Car of the Year judging concluded, Kia added the EV6 GT performance flagship to the range. With 430kW and 740Nm, the EV6 GT has a claimed 0-100km/h time of a supercar-like 3.5 seconds, although this performance does reduce its driving range to 424km.

All EV6 models in Australia are powered by the larger of two battery packs available overseas, a



The winner

What we like

- Performance and range
- Spacious cabin
- Suitable for a wide range of people

What we don't

- Interior looks bland
- The one you want costs six figures
- No spare wheel

77.4kWh unit, mated to a single-motor, rear-wheel-drive configuration in the Air and GT-Line, with the option of dual-motor, all-wheel drive in the EV6 GT-Line. The EV6 GT comes standard with dual front and rear motors.

Single-motor variants are powered by a 168kW/350Nm motor on the rear axle, good for a 7.3-second 0-100km/h time, and 504km or 528km of range depending on the model.

The all-wheel-drive GT-Line adds a second motor on the front axle, upping outputs to 239kW and 605Nm combined, slashing the 0-100km/h time to 5.2 seconds, but cutting the driving range claim to 484km. All three models offer 800-volt electrical systems with 350kW DC fast charging capable of a 10 to 80 per cent recharge in just 18 minutes.

A full suite of active and passive safety technology is standard, making the EV6 a prudent

THE FINALISTS

Tesla Model Y

What we like

- Interior presentation
- Price
- Standard features and equipment

What we don't

- Second-row space
- Cabin is noisier than rivals
- No central driver's speedo

Volvo C40

What we like

- Styling and presentation
- Powertrain
- Interior ergonomics and features

What we don't

- No spare wheel
- Sloping roof impedes 2nd row
- Can feel bulky behind the wheel

purchase as well as an environmental one.

The interior is lovely but minimal in its decoration. One judge thought it looked boring compared to the Ioniq 5 and Genesis GV60 pair, and they have a point. Although it doesn't look as flash, there's plenty of space in both the first and second rows, and

Hyundai Ioniq 5

What we like

- Exterior and interior design
- Comfortable
- Good range on entry-level model

What we don't

- Some low-speed driveline hesitation
- Long wait to buy
- Second row could be bigger

Genesis GV60

What we like

- Interior will impress
- Sporty handling
- Looks great

What we don't

- Feels expensive next to others
- Busy ride quality
- Design of 2nd row and boot

its 490-litre boot is plenty big for life's extracurricular activities.

Your family and pets will fit, meaning you could genuinely pivot toward a single electric car household with the Kia EV6.

The Kia EV6 is one of the best electric cars available at any price point, cementing the South Korean as a true force in the EV space.

BEST MEDIUM LUXURY CAR

Mercedes-Benz stays at top of the class

Kez Casey

Despite the swell of popularity in SUV segments, traditional sedans (and in some cases wagons) are still common on Australian roads.

Medium luxury cars still sell well here and strike the right balance of size, style and, no doubt, flashes of envy from onlookers.

Technology, dynamic ability, plushness and luxury come under the microscope in the search for the best medium luxury car available in 2023.

Even a quick look at the new-generation Mercedes-Benz C-Class frames it as a formidable rival to other cars in the segment.

New looks, new interior, new safety features and some cool user technology go a long way to justifying a stiff price increase for Mercedes-Benz's latest generation medium luxury sedan. At the time

of testing there are two C-Class variants, the C200 priced from \$78,900 and the C300 from \$90,400, both before on-road costs.

The new C-Class is an evolution of the W205 (2014-21), which in turn was a huge leap forward over its predecessor, the W204

(2008-14). It retains the same basic building blocks but has been refined and improved in almost every way.

Its powertrains are exclusively mild-hybrids, which means less fuel is consumed, and the interior has



Photo: Ted Airey

THE WINNER Mercedes-Benz C-Class

What we like

- Impressively premium equipment list
- Comfortable ride
- High-tech, user-friendly infotainment

What we don't

- Brake pedal feel takes some getting used to
- Rear seat can't match the fronts for trinketry
- Compact driver's footwell

been overhauled to incorporate the Mercedes-Benz User eXperience (MBUX) operating system.

C200 and C300 sedans come standard with the AMG-Line dress-up kit, which includes a sports body, bonnet with "power

bulges" and AMG-style alloy wheels. This makes the new C-Class 4793mm tip to toe, which is 107mm longer than the model it replaces, and quite a body stretch considering the wheelbase has only grown 25mm to 2865mm.

THE FINALISTS

BMW 3 Series

What we like

- Maintains appeal for driving enthusiasts
- Vastly improved infotainment
- Quiet and refined on-road

What we don't

- Physical climate controls have been removed
- Ride quality on rough surfaces
- Tepid performance from entry-level engine

Volkswagen Arteon

What we like

- Roomy cabin space, even with swept roofline
- Punchy engine response
- Wafting comfortable ride

What we don't

- Infotainment and head-up display behind the pace
- Interior feels less special
- Less dynamically poised

With bigger dimensions than its predecessor, the new C-Class works much more effectively as transport for shuttling the whole family or important clients.

Space front and rear feels generous for the segment. The front seats in particular offer a

range of adjustability and touring comfort that is hard to fault.

The interior imparts a premium and modern ambience, with flowing wood panels, detailed brightwork and subtle LED lighting bleeding out from behind stacked surfaces.

The screen real estate in the cabin, with a bright 30cm infotainment display and a 31cm digital instrument cluster, has an unmatched degree of configurability. The user experience has been carefully honed, too, with ease of use at the fore and plenty of processor power.

Safety equipment includes 10 airbags and assistance aids such as a 360-degree camera, adaptive LED high-beam headlamps, adaptive cruise control and a lane-departure warning system which also held the C-Class in good stead.

Picking gripes with the C-Class was a harder task, but impressive as it may be, the compact driver's footwell and some sensitivity from the brake pedal were blots on the ledger for Mercedes-Benz. And while it's hardly a deal-breaker, the relatively unadorned rear seats, compared to the amount of equipment up front, felt a little disappointing.

The new C-class has been refined and improved in almost every way. It delivers a truly modern luxury experience in a stylish executive sedan.



THE FIRST-EVER
FULLY ELECTRIC

i7

THE FUTURE OF LUXURY.

Contact your local BMW Dealership to experience the future of luxury today.
Overseas model shown.

DRIVE
CAR OF THE YEAR 2023

BEST EV OVER \$120K

BEST LUXURY EV

An electric masterclass

Susannah Guthrie

Although a niche category for most buyers, electric cars priced over \$120,000 tend to be where manufacturers have the most fun.

In determining our winner, we looked for a premium interior with impressive attention to detail, an on-road feel that combines exhilarating performance with stunning refinement, an efficient and effective electric drive experience, and ground-breaking infotainment and technology features.

A masterclass in design and technology, the BMW i7 exhibits the fruits of BMW's partnership with Rolls-Royce to breathtaking effect.

From the automatic closing doors to the Swarovski crystal headlights, the BMW i7 possesses all the elegant execution you'd expect from the Spirit of Ecstasy at half the price.

Wool-cashmere seats, crystal switchgear, and an open-pore wood trim accent – a veritable feast in an interior that marries practicality with luxury and caters just as generously to its rear seat occupants as it does to its driver.

Cabin accoutrements aside, the i7 is quite simply a joy to drive.

The BMW's ride is not just the best in its class; it is quite possibly the best of any car we've driven. Somehow BMW has managed to pair this air-cushion ride comfort with graceful handling and savage performance when pushed.

This is particularly evident in breakneck Boost mode, which transforms the 2.7-tonne behemoth into a powerhouse of performance possessing the explosive agility of an Olympic sprinter.

The cabin is a veritable feast that opulently marries practicality with luxury.

Enhancing the driver's

BMW i7

What we like

- Cabin shows impressive attention to detail
- A sumptuous, refined ride with savage performance
- Excellent rear passenger experience

What we don't

- Large footprint could prove limiting in urban settings
- Energy consumption errs on the high side
- Lacks ultra-rapid 350kW charging capabilities



Photos: Ted Airey



experience are infotainment and driver assistance features that showcase BMW's technical prowess.

A 36-speaker Bowers and Wilkins sound system encases the driver in crystalline music, while

the rear seat entertainment suite provides passengers with a wide-screen worthy of the local cinema, minus the armrest wrestle with the person next to them.

Driver assistance features go above and beyond, like the

adaptive regenerative braking system, which monitors surrounding traffic conditions and slows the vehicle accordingly, or the manoeuvre assistant that can get you in and out of tight parking spaces.

If we sound borderline sycophantic, it's because this is a car that deserves these many accolades.

When struggling to identify downsides, we decided the i7's imposing footprint could be challenging to manoeuvre in city streets and the automatic door gimmick is somewhat inconsistent in its execution – often requiring multiple button pushes or occasional manual intervention.

While the i7's body glides around in a manner that belies its size, shifting that heft comes at the

THE FINALISTS

Porsche Taycan

What we like

- Exhilarating acceleration and handling
- Solid efficiency, even on demanding drive loops
- Elegant, understated interior design

What we don't

- Limited boot and back seat space
- Infotainment lacks Porsche personality
- Standard equipment has some notable omissions

Mercedes-AMG EQS53

What we like

- Infotainment is advanced yet still user-friendly
- Safety and driver assist features are comprehensive
- Boot is enormous

What we don't

- Back seat is cramped
- Ride lacks composure
- Some hard plastics rob interior of ultra-luxe feel

cost to energy consumption, which hovered between 25-28kWh/100km during our testing period. Still, that's less of an issue when you have 625km of claimed range to play with.

The i7's charging speed is also capped at 195kW, meaning owners can't take full advantage of ultra-rapid and 350kW chargers and is behind the charge rate of other, cheaper, electric vehicles.

Otherwise, the BMW i7 is a masterpiece of technology and luxury and a deserving winner of Drive's Best Electric Vehicle over \$120,000 for 2023.

BEST SMALL LUXURY SUV

Volvo's triple threat offers unrivalled experience

Tom Fraser

The best car in its segment just keeps getting better. Volvo has won the small luxury SUV category for the third year running.

Though they may be small, running updates to the Volvo XC40 impressed judges with its revised styling, simplistic infotainment system, and subtle year-on-year tweaks that combine to make an already great vehicle even better.

Above all, the Volvo XC40's value equation stood out. Consider the fact the 2023 Volvo XC40 range kicks off from just over \$50,000, then look at the powerful engine under the bonnet, feature inclusions, and premium materials – it's a wonder how Volvo is able to offer so much for so little.

Judges were wowed by the XC40's drive character that provided ample power for varying situations, as well as a suitably premium and plush ride quality. The transmission is slick and

Volvo XC40

What we like

- Excellent roadholding and ride control
- Impressive value for money
- Strong and smooth powertrain

What we don't

- Interior doesn't wow you
- Second row lacks space
- Thirsty turbocharged powertrain

responds well to changing speeds. Plus, it works well with the engine to make the XC40 relatively frugal on fuel.

The praise didn't end with how well it drove.

The judges remained enamoured of the Volvo XC40's minimalist interior presentation that focuses on high-quality materials and impeccable build quality. The second row might not offer the ultimate in terms of available space – which we'd like to see improved for

the car's next generation – but the boot is capacious for its size class, which will swell to absorb a small family's stuff.

A true benchmark of compact luxury, the Volvo XC40 continues to offer an unrivalled quality experience for SUV buyers.



Photo: Mark Bean

THE FINALISTS

BMW X1

What we like

- Impressive cabin presentation
- Second-row comfort
- Brilliant handling

What we don't

- Confusing infotainment user experience
- Base-variant engine lacks power
- Ridiculous options pricing scheme

Cupra Ateca

What we like

- Extremely spacious
- Sharp driving experience
- Well-equipped for the price

What we don't

- Infotainment is fiddly and laggy
- Thirsty around town
- Cabin feels a generation old and borrows from VW

V O L V O

Hat trick hero

Hats off to the Volvo XC40 2021, 22 and 23 Drive Car of the Year, Best Small Luxury SUV. Winning its 3rd straight title. Find out what makes it so special. Visit your local Volvo retailer today. Available in pure electric and mild hybrid model variants.



DRIVE
CAR OF THE YEAR **2023**

BEST SMALL
LUXURY SUV 2021,
2022 & 2023

Charging equipment sold separately.

BEST HOT HATCH

Volkswagen dials up the Rrrrrrr

Tom Fraser

The venerable Volkswagen Golf R is the 2023 Drive Car of the Year Best Hot Hatch.

A savagely fast hot hatch in all weather conditions, this new Mk8 Golf R is two cars for the price of one: it's a riot when you want and refined when you need.

Though it comes at a considerably higher price point than the other contenders (it's \$66,990 before on-road costs), the Golf R is worth its substantial asking price due to its jack-of-all-trades character.

Sitting above the Golf GTI, and as the flagship of the range, the Golf R is the most hardcore performance variant of the small hatch line-up. Many Golf variants are fitted with turbocharged 2.0-litre engines, but the Golf R's is turned up to 11 with outputs totalling 225kW/400Nm.

This power is routed through all four wheels, and through a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission.

Also joining the party is a host of sporty upgrades such as a sports body kit, sports seats, performance brakes, 19-inch wheels, adaptive dampers, and a series of drive modes (including a Drift mode!).

It's far more entertaining than its forebears and welcomes a fun-loving character that is so crucial to the hot hatch formula. You need only look as far as its outlandish body kit to see signs of VW injecting a laugh into its flagship hot hatch.

It remains the all-weather weapon we know and love, with



Volkswagen's Golf R continues to set the standard for hot hatches. Photo: Sal Aloisio

judges likening it to the Porsche 911 Turbo in its unfathomable ability to demolish a set of twisty roads, no matter the conditions.

But the key to the Golf R's success is its ability to calm down for everyday duties. The interior is spacious and comfortable, contains all manner of tech and features to keep owners occupied, and its ability to dispatch rough roads is commendable.

Simply, this is the hot hatch you'll want to drive every single day.

The winner

What we like

- Carries an immense amount of speed through bends
- Excellent technology array
- Super-sharp dual-clutch gearbox

What we don't

- Seats could use some more bolstering
- Silly touch panels to control air-conditioning
- Lack of steering directness

THE FINALISTS

Hyundai i30 N

What we like

- Exhaust note is a proper hoot
- Steering is incredibly sharp
- Single-minded focus on going fast

What we don't

- Interior is full of drab plastics
- Rough ride comfort
- Cabin is tight for taller passengers

Cupra Leon

What we like

- Interesting trim design highlights
- Enthusiastic exhaust note
- Slick transmission

What we don't

- Tech user experience
- Steering lacks outright feel
- High driving position

BEST SPORTS CAR

Who said fun is dead?

Joshua Dowling

As fashion statements on four wheels, sports coupes come in and out of vogue quickly. In addition to looking the part, they need to be athletic and deliver fun-to-drive dynamics.

The new Nissan Z Coupe delivered on those criteria to take out the Best Sport Coupe category for 2023.

Now with a twin-turbo V6, it is the most powerful Nissan 'Zed' car to date - and a fitting send-off for what will likely be the last petrol version before a switch to an electric model next decade.

Although the new Nissan Z shares the same platform as its predecessor - but with a new body and interior - the designers and engineers sweated the details on making seemingly minor but worthwhile improvements.

The cabin is more user-friendly and now has most mod-cons. The revised styling - with a nod to Zeds of the past - has the makings of a future classic.

The big news, though, is under the bonnet. The twin-turbo



Photo: Mark Bean

THE FINALISTS

Toyota GR86

What we like

- Finally has enough power to warrant the sports-car tag
- Razor-sharp handling, superb brake pedal feel
- More practical cabin than before

What we don't

- Engine lacks character
- Base variants more expensive than Subaru twin
- Tyre noise

Subaru BRZ

What we like

- Finally has enough power to warrant the sports-car tag
- Razor-sharp handling, superb brake pedal feel
- More practical cabin than before

What we don't

- Engine lacks character
- Busier over bumps than the Toyota GR86. Noisy tyres
- Test car was, oddly, slower than the Toyota GR86

3.0-litre V6 petrol engine paired with a nine-speed automatic transmission transforms the Nissan Z into a missile. The powerful combination has presented a new challenge: grip.

In normal mode, the Nissan Z did the 0 to 100km/h dash in 5.1 seconds. After mastering the rather complicated launch control setting, we dipped to a run of repeatable 4.9-second times after leaving some subtle tyre marks and developing a bit of a wriggle on take-off.

The brakes are the largest among this year's contenders, though oddly the Nissan Z took

Nissan Z Coupe

What we like

- Epic acceleration
- Sharp styling
- More usable cabin

What we don't

- On-the-limit handling requires attention. Noisy tyres
- Exhaust sounds is muted given the performance
- Lacks embedded navigation and wireless charging

longer to stop in our emergency braking test from 100km/h than did the Toyota and Subaru twins (38.3 metres for the Nissan and an impressive 35.9-metre stop for the Toyota GR86).

We repeated the brake test on the Nissan Z days apart to make sure there wasn't an error with our technical equipment.

The Nissan Z delights the senses with its sharp reflexes in corners, though it must be said it feels twitchy after the Toyota and Subaru twins which, in this company, felt more secure.

And that's why this was one of the toughest categories this year. It came down to a choice of handling prowess versus power. In the end, the Nissan Z won by a whisker.

Who said fun is dead? The new Nissan Z celebrates an exhilarating era of pure driving through a steadfastly modern experience.



Best Small SUV

DRIVE

CAR OF THE YEAR **2023**

BEST SMALL SUV



Prepare to be moved

