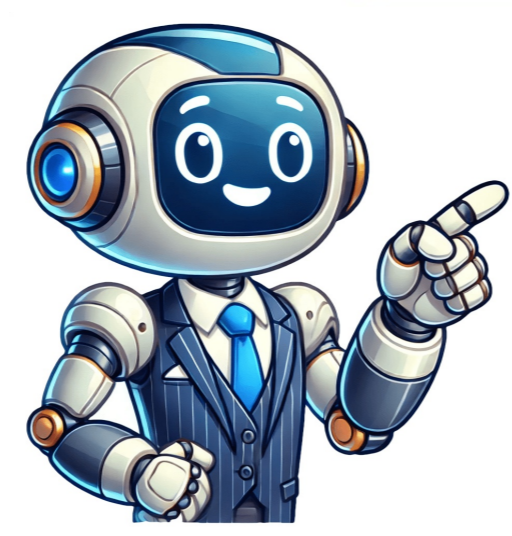


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The downside is that you may might not have a chance to thoroughly inspect the car before bidding, so there's always a bit of a gamble involved. Nonetheless, if you're prepared to take a risk, car auctions can yield fantastic project opportunities. Police Auctions: Many municipalities auction off seized or abandoned vehicles, and prices are typically very low. However, these vehicles are often in poor condition, such as rusted-out hulks, or are often stolen vehicles. Car Meet: Car meets are held all over the country, and are a great place to find project cars. These communities are often great for finding specific makes and models, and are often held on forums tend to provide honest descriptions since they are often well-informed about the cars they are selling. Some popular forums for specific makes include: Never underestimate the power of word of mouth. Tell your friends, family, and coworkers know you're on the hunt for a project car. You might be surprised by how many people know someone looking to sell an old car sitting in their garage or driveway. These word-of-mouth deals often lead to the best bargains since there's no advertising cost or dealer markup involved. Once you've selected your project car, it's time to plan out your modifications. One of the best parts of working on a project car is the ability to customize it to your exact vision. Below are some of the most common modifications that people make to budget project cars. One of the most exciting aspects of a project car is improving its performance. Many budget project cars, especially older models, can benefit from engine swaps or other performance upgrades. For example, a popular modification for Honda Civic owners is swapping the stock engine with a more powerful B-series or K-series engine. Similarly, BMW E30 enthusiasts often swap in a larger inline-six engine for more horsepower. Other performance upgrades might include turbocharging or supercharging the engine, installing a cold air intake, or upgrading the exhaust system. Performance modifications can transform a budget project car into a serious performer, but they also require mechanical knowledge and careful planning to avoid damaging the car. Upgrading your car's suspension is one of the most noticeable improvements you can make, especially for cars intended for track use or spirited driving. Installing coilovers, sway bars, or stiffer shocks can drastically improve the handling and cornering ability of your car. For off-road builds, such as the Jeep Cherokee XJ, lifting the suspension and installing larger tires are also common upgrades. Improving the handling and cornering ability of your car is a key goal for many project car enthusiasts, and it's a modification that can greatly enhance the driving experience. Exterior modifications can range from subtle changes like a new set of wheels or a custom paint job to more dramatic upgrades like body kits or widebody fenders. For cars like the Nissan 240SX or Toyota MR2, aero kits and spoilers are popular additions that give the car a more aggressive look. Interior modifications can include new racing seats, a custom steering wheel, or a roll cage for added safety in track-focused builds. Restoring the interior of a classic car, such as the BMW E30, can also significantly increase the car's value and your enjoyment of the project. Upgrading the brakes is a critical modification for project cars, especially those being tuned for performance. High-performance brake pads, rotors, and calipers ensure that your car can stop as quickly as it accelerates. Additionally, ensuring that the car has up-to-date safety equipment like seat belts or airbags (if applicable) is essential, particularly for older cars that might lack modern safety features. Model Year: 1990-1997 Price: \$3,000-\$5,000 The Mazda MX-5 Miata is a beloved roadster known for its lightweight design and excellent handling. This car makes a perfect project vehicle due to its simplicity, availability of parts, and vast aftermarket support. Miatas from the early 1990s are still affordable and offer a fun, driver-focused experience. You can find plenty of used models, though you might need to invest in a new suspension, bodywork, or engine upgrades depending on the condition. The NA (first-generation) Miata is a favorite because of its pop-up headlights and classic design. It's a great choice for those wanting a sports car to upgrade or restore. Its reliability and ease of modification make it popular among car enthusiasts, ensuring that parts are relatively easy to find and affordable. Model Year: 1984-1999 Price: \$4,000-\$5,000 The BMW E30 3 Series is a timeless model that's gained cult status over the years. It's not just a classic car; it's also a great platform for a project build. While the E30 might have a reputation for being a bit of a headache, it's also incredibly rewarding to work on. The E30 has a large community of enthusiasts, and there are plenty of parts and upgrades available. Many enthusiasts have built track-ready or performance versions of the E30, making it a versatile choice for anyone looking for a project car. Model Year: 1989-1998 Price: \$2,000-\$4,500 The Honda Civic from the 1990s is one of the most popular choices for a project car, especially among those who want a tuner-friendly vehicle. The Civic is known for its reliability, lightweight chassis, and excellent aftermarket support. Models from 1992-2000 are still relatively cheap and provide a solid foundation for performance upgrades, body modifications, and engine swaps. Civics are easy to work on, and their engines are highly receptive to tuning, making them a favorite in the car community. Whether you're planning a track car, street racer, or custom build, the Honda Civic is a fantastic option. Model Year: 1994-1998 Price: \$3,500-\$5,000 For American muscle car fans, the mid-1990s Ford Mustang is an affordable option for a project car. These Mustangs, especially the GT models, come with V8 engines that are perfect for tuning. While newer Mustangs can be expensive, models from 1994 to 1998 can still be found within the \$5,000 range. Whether you're interested in restoring a classic muscle car or building a drag racer, the Mustang offers plenty of power and aftermarket support. It's also a relatively easy car to work on, and there are countless resources and parts available for modifications. The sleek design of the SN95 model and its powerful engine make it an excellent starting point for muscle car enthusiasts. Model Year: 1989-1998 Price: \$3,000-\$5,000 The Nissan 240SX is an iconic Japanese sports car that's popular in the drift community. Known for its rear-wheel-drive layout and balanced handling, the 240SX is a great project car for those interested in building a performance or drift vehicle. The 240SX has a large following, and there are plenty of parts and upgrades available. Many enthusiasts have built track-ready or performance versions of the E30, making it a versatile choice for anyone looking for a project car. Model Year: 1989-1998 Price: \$2,000-\$4,500 The Honda Civic from the 1990s is one of the most popular choices for a project car, especially among those who want a tuner-friendly vehicle. The Civic is known for its reliability, lightweight chassis, and excellent aftermarket support. Models from 1992-2000 are still relatively cheap and provide a solid foundation for performance upgrades, body modifications, and engine swaps. Civics are easy to work on, and their engines are highly receptive to tuning, making them a favorite in the car community. 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just how the VW wrencher community is. Engine: 1.7L Inline-Four Power: 112HP Average Used Pricing: \$15,300 Photo: Volvo Cars Global Why It Made The Cut A boxy & beloved classic Volvo kicked along by a bulletproof-reliable four-banger. Older Volkswos have tons of qualities that make them ideal platforms for getting your hands dirty. For instance, their spacious engine bays allow for easy access to components come time for maintenance. And when it comes to the ride, they're built like tanks and are generally pretty reliable. Buyer beware — depending on the fix, some parts can be hard to find (as is the case with most Swedish imports). Engine: 2.1L Inline-Four Power: 98HP Average Used Price: \$5,100 Photo: Shutterstock Interested in investing your hard-earned money into classic cars rather than the stock market or CD? Then be sure to head over to our guide to the best investment cars for a curated list of retro rides with steadily-rising valuations that show no signs of slowing. For gearheads, ownership is only a small step on the path towards the acquisition of a dream car. Far more of the process comes down to knowing a vehicle inside and out, replacing parts as needed, and making upgrades as they arise. Sure, buying a car off the lot makes for immediate gratification, but the reality is that it's a fleeting enjoyment at best. However, not everyone is born with a mechanic's intuition, and intentionally buying a project car can be an intimidating prospect for the uninitiated. In concept, it sounds like a fun, educational experience; in practice, it can make for an overwhelming commitment. For no matter how confident anyone is of their ability, all it takes is one pop of the hood to test their chops. The good news is that project cars don't have to break the bank. With so many options available on the classifieds, it's not hard to find a buy befitting your budget. But having so much choice can make it difficult to tell an ambitious project from all-out money pit. Moreover, not all cars are intuitive to work on, and you can quickly find yourself in over your head. Rather than whiling away the day, wondering when you'll get around to tackling a build, have a read and see what we've picked for the best budget project cars. Key Characteristics To Consider Parts: First and foremost, you should consider the availability of aftermarket and replacement parts for your project. There's no feeling worse than successfully diagnosing a fix only to discover that the part is out of your price range or no longer produced. Because the longer a problem persists, the more likely it is to go unfixed. Before you know it, you'll be looking to offload your build in order to hop to another project. Even if you can't buy new OEM parts, a transplant from a donor car could be just what you need to get your ride back on the road. Forum Support: Although insider knowledge was once something exclusive to owner's clubs, the internet has allowed for a thriving online enthusiast community. If you find yourself stumped on how to go about repairing your project, have a look at the forums — chances are good that someone has asked the same questions you're thinking. And should your particular car present a problem unique unto itself, you'll at least have the backing of fellow wrenchers to advise a plan of attack. Availability: Everyone envisions rolling up to a car meet with a unicorn in tow. While it can be tempting to seek out rare and unlved models in order to distinguish yourself, it doesn't make for the best budget build. Cars that are more readily available are cheaper up front. What's more, donor cars make for inexpensive fixes — assuming they're in serviceable condition. And in the event you need to do a significant body repair, you'll be far better off dropping in a new panel than you would trying to fab it on your own. Where There's A Will, There's A Way Tools: Get yourself a solid set of tools. Sure, budget sets will save you money in the short term, but with the potential for improper clearances and poor build quality, they could result in a much bigger problem down the road. Consider your car's need for any specialty tools. Are they easily available? If not, do you have the mechanical ability to make your own? Knowhow: There's no prerequisite to buying a project car, but it helps to have a solid base to get you going. Whether that's understanding how to turn a wrench or familiarizing yourself with the principles of a powertrain, knowledge is power in any project. Support: Bad days are inevitable throughout the ownership of a project car, so it helps to have the support of those around you to keep you going. If you're fighting to justify your build while you're also fighting to fix it, you'll soon find yourself forced to make a decision — with potentially unwanted consequences. Will: Drive is one thing you can't buy or learn. If all else fails, perseverance will serve you well in your efforts to get your project running again. Remember why you bought such a car in the first place — to work on it. Editor's Note: All average used pricing based on Hagerty's Valuation Tool in "Good" condition. Japanese imports are ideal project cars because of their unrivaled build quality, intuitive engineering, and abundance of aftermarket parts. Whether you're a die-hard drift fan or a would-be street racer, you can't go wrong with any of these options. Photo: Honda Why It Made The Cut An affordable Japanese sports car with an amazing foundation for tuning. Although a lot of once cheap project cars have seen a considerable rise in their asking prices, the Acura Integra is still very much affordable. The price of millennium-era Integras has recently been rising, especially with the GS-R and R Type variants, though this also makes these gray investment cars — even more so if you plan on fixing one up. Couple that with lots of aftermarket parts support and plenty of owner's forums, and you have a bonafide budget project great for beginners and experienced enthusiasts alike. Engine: 1.8L Inline-Four Power: 170HP Average Used Pricing: \$21,400 Photo: Wikipedia Why It Made The Cut An affordable high-performance 2-door that's often referred to as a poor man's 911. While its predecessors — the 240z and 260z — can fetch a pretty penny at auction, the Datsun 280Z is comparatively reasonable. In recent years, the market has caught onto their appeal, but with some diligent searching you can easily find one ready to be your next project. If considering a classic Z car, do yourself a favor and check the body panels for rust — anything that's likely to affect the structural integrity should signal a red flag. Engine: 2.8L Straight-Six Power: 149HP Average Used Pricing: \$18,300 Photo: Honda Why It Made The Cut A legendary tuner-car platform with an absolutely massive selection of available aftermarket upgrades. First entering production in 1972, the venerable Honda Civic has seen all sorts of variants, from spritely hot hatches to stately shuttle wagons. With so many options out there, you can have your pick of the lot when it comes to body style, engine capacity, and interior furnishings. Like any Honda, it's resilient, easy to work on, and can be tuned to your heart's content. Throw on some suspension upgrades and a set of decent tires, and you have yourself a capable performer. Engine: 1.6L Inline-Four Power: 108HP Average Used Pricing: \$9,500 Photo: Wikipedia Why It Made The Cut A minimalist, lightweight, pure driver's car with stellar handling, performance, value, & aftermarket part availability. Granted, Matias have experienced a bit of appreciation in the last decade, but most model years still make for very affordable project cars. Not only are they incredibly reliable and approachable learner-maintenance cars, but they're also enjoyable to drive and ideal for upgrading. So while you may initially buy it a budget fix, you'll soon come to find that you won't be able to part ways with this little roadster. Engine: 1.6L Inline-Four Power: 116HP Average Used Pricing: \$8,700 Photo: Wikipedia Why It Made The Cut An iconic Japanese tuner car that's highly conducive to tuning & upgrading. These days, unmolesed 240SX's are a bit of a tough find; most of them are half-baked drift car projects that have seen better days. That being said, when stock-spec 240SX's crop up now and again, they can be had for as little as \$3-4k. While you can spring for one that's been modded to the moon, you'll save yourself time and money if you don't have to undo all that hard (but questionably executed) work. Engine: 2.4L Inline-Four Power: 140HP Average Used Pricing: \$15,600 There's no denying the appeal of domestic classics — they're as American as apple pie and baseball. Simple in build yet powerful in performance, all of these are good budget buys. Photo: Shutterstock Why It Made The Cut A bonafide American classic that's highly sought-after across several generations. Later Camaro coupes are a dime-a-dozen, so they make excellent beginner muscle car projects. But if that's not your jam, you can even find some earlier examples on the low, provided you're willing to put in the work to get it up to shape. With ample aftermarket parts support and a crop of readily available crate engines, there's no shortage of ways in which you can turn a Camaro into the car of your dreams. Engine: 5.0L V8 Power: 155HP Average Used Pricing: \$7,800 Photo: Wikimedia Why It Made The Cut A divisive pickup bed-equipped car that's become increasingly sought-after in recent years. Part of the A-body line, the El Camino features parts compatibility with several other popular models including the Chevrolet Chevelle, Buick Special, Oldsmobile Cutlass, and Pontiac Tempest. As such, it's quite easy to get your hands on replacements for any problem areas that need addressing. What's more, they're incredibly simple cars, making them approachable options for beginners looking to get their feet wet. Engine: 5.0L V8 Power: 145HP Average Used Pricing: \$8,600 Photo: Wikipedia Why It Made The Cut A boxy mid-century Dodge with great value and a steadily-increasing price. As the oft-quoted aphorism goes — rising tides raise all ships. In practice, this means that many look-a-likes from the golden age of American muscle have also increased in value, such as the Chevy Vega. However, there are some standouts that can be had for an acceptable sum. The Dodge Dart is a case in point, for though it's not quite as common as some of the other options featured here, it seems to have staved off its appreciation for just a bit longer. Whether you're going for a full-size first-gen or a mid-size fourth-gen, each makes for a good budget buy. Engine: 4.5L V8 Power: 180HP Average Used Pricing: \$9,200 Photo: Ford Why It Made The Cut A legendary American pony car offered across half-a-dozen different generations. When properly restored, first- and second-generation Mustangs command a pretty hefty sum. And while you can find them pretty reasonably depending on the condition, their iconic status makes them a hard sell as a budget project. Instead, go for a Fox-body or an SN95. Seen as a flop upon their debut, they haven't held their value over the years nearly as well. What this means for you is that they're both cheap and readily had — you should have no trouble sourcing a car suitable to your tastes. Engine: 5.0L V8 Power: 215HP Average Used Pricing: \$9,600 Photo: Shutterstock Why It Made The Cut An unapologetically '70s/80s era muscle car with a quintessential American design. As with most popular muscle cars, later-gen Firebirds are considerably cheaper than their iconic fore-bearers. Sure, they don't offer the same high-octane nostalgia, but they're a great budget gateway to muscle car performance. If possible, shoot for a third or fourth generation model year — the low overhead cost will give you room in your budget for future upgrades and unanticipated repairs. Engine: 4.9L V8 Power: 150HP Average Used Pricing: \$22,200 If your travels take you off the beaten path, it's in your best interest to get a vehicle that's up to the task. Each of these off-road icons makes for an approachable option with upgrade potential aplenty. Photo: Wikipedia Why It Made The Cut A well-built American classic offering fantastic bang for your buck. Cheap and robust, Chevy C10 trucks make for great project cars. They're simple to work on and also popular amongst enthusiasts, so there's a lot of parts and support available in the event you run into trouble. It's worth noting that the older you go, the harder parts will be to find. If possible, stick to second-gen model years — you'll save yourself a lot of headaches in the long run, and it'll be much easier to work on. Engine: 4.0L Six-Cylinder Power: 155HP Average Used Pricing: \$14,300 Photo: Wikipedia Why It Made The Cut An early F Series pickup absolutely brimming with character and old-school flavor. F-100's are extremely popular buys for classic project trucks. And it's for good reason. There's an abundance of project-ready examples, they're easy to source parts for, and they're relatively inexpensive to come by. What's more, there are plenty of directions you can go with your build. So whether you prefer to perfectly restore your pickup or want to resto-mod it with modern tech, there's ample opportunity to make it your own. We also recommend looking out for Flareside models, as they tend to come a bit cheaper than their Styleside counterparts. Engine: 3.6L Six-Cylinder Power: 126HP Average Used Pricing: \$15,900 Photo: Shutterstock Why It Made The Cut A big and boxy GMC truck that stands as a poor-man's alternative to a vintage Ford Bronco or International Harvester Scout. While Chevy Blazers have long left the realm of the budget project car, their GMC-badged brethren are still easily had for a cool \$10,000 and under — even cheaper if you're willing to start with a basket case of a donor. They're not the most powerful SUVs or especially fuel-efficient, but they'll promise you years of dependable performance if properly taken care of. Just be wary of driving them on the highway: it's a surefire way to discover any problems that might be lurking. There are also Jimmy models that come with larger V8 powertrains. Engine: 4.0L Six-Cylinder Power: 130HP Average Used Pricing: \$9,300 Photo: Jeep Why It Made The Cut An American-made, turn-of-the-millennium-era SUV with exceptional durability and dependability. Popular amongst beginners and seasoned trail experts alike, XJ Cherokees are nearly-indestructible when properly maintained. Sure, they have their characteristically American quirks, but they'll go a long way toward teaching you how to perform upkeep on your own car. And while they're quite the rock-bottom affordable offering that they once were, the immense online support and parts availability remain. Engine: 4.0L Straight-Six Power: 190HP Average Used Pricing: \$10,100 Photo: Wikimedia Why It Made The Cut A compact yet capable 4x4 offering a markedly more affordable alternative to Toyota's FJ40. With collectors having sufficiently inflated the value of other boxy off-road classics — such as the Toyota FJ40, International Harvester Scout, and Ford Bronco — the Suzuki Samurai stands out as one of the last of such cars yet to be snatched up. It's worth noting that these pocket-sized SUVs aren't known for their power (quite the opposite in fact). With a top speed of just 65mph, it's advisable to spring for an engine swap. Count on these becoming harder and harder to find. Engine: 1.3L Inline-Four Power: 60HP Average Used Pricing: \$9,300 By their very nature, European imports require an owner that'll keep up with maintenance. While this can lead to some sad and neglected examples, others can prove quite a find when it comes to budget project potential. Photo: Shutterstock Why It Made The Cut A sporty Bavarian-built model that served as the basis for the legendary E30 M3. These days, E30 M3's fetch astronomical prices at auction. But with a bit of patient searching (and some luck), you can easily snag a 325i. With a bulletproof straight-six under the hood, it's a great car for beginners just getting into things or experienced wrenchers looking for a ready-to-tune ride. While 316's and 318i's are all over the classifieds, you should consider the direction of your build before buying one; if you're looking for performance, you'll quickly outgrow their meager four-cylinders. Engine: 2.5L Straight-Six Power: 168HP Average Used Pricing: \$19,600 Photo: Wikimedia Why It Made The Cut A British-built true drivers car with an obtainable price & devoted cult following. If you're a fan of small British sports cars, it doesn't get much better than the MGB. Available as a roadster and as a GT (pictured here) these cars are extremely popular amongst automotive enthusiasts. As such, there's a wellspring of available knowledge for you to tap into come time to fix up your own. When considering a potential MGB project, be sure to check for rust — British cars are notorious for the stuff. Engine: 1.8L Inline-Four Power: 92HP Average Used Pricing: \$9,300 Photo: Porsche Why It Made The Cut An affordable — and unconventional — front-engined Porsche that's quickly rising in value. For all of its flaws, the 928 has managed to leave the world of budget project cars behind. However, the 944 is still regularly affordable with reasonably low miles. Obviously, Porsche parts come at a premium, so it's up to the buyer to determine the budget status of this pick. If you have your eye on a 944, get your hands on as complete a record of maintenance as you can. They run like a top when they're properly kept up with, but neglected examples can become a true can of worms. And, while the S and Turbo models are obviously more sought after, the final-year (1989) 944 is almost certainly the one you want, as it gained a bit of extra displacement and power. Engine: 2.7L Inline Four Power: 160HP Average Used Pricing: \$12,000 Photo: Volkswagen Why It Made The Cut A vintage European hot hatch with loads of potential for upgrading & tuning. Second to the Beetle, the Volkswagen Golf is one of the most prevalent models the German marque produces. So no matter what body style you're considering, they're incredibly affordable project platforms. In GTI form, they make for lightweight little hatchbacks that offer tons of driving fun. Bag it, boost it, or bring it back to factory condition — the world is your oyster when it comes to the end result. Even a cursory search will show you just how thriving the VW wrencher community is. Engine: 1.7L Inline-Four Power: 112HP Average Used Pricing: \$15,300 Photo: Volvo Cars Global Why It Made The Cut A boxy & beloved classic Volvo kicked along by a bulletproof-reliable four-banger. Older Volkswos have tons of qualities that make them ideal platforms for getting your hands dirty. For instance, their spacious engine bays allow for easy access to components come time for maintenance. And when it comes to the ride, they're built like tanks and are generally pretty reliable. Buyer beware — depending on the fix, some parts can be hard to find (as is the case with most Swedish imports). Engine: 2.1L Inline-Four Power: 98HP Average Used Price: \$5,100 Photo: Shutterstock Interested in investing your hard-earned money into classic cars rather than the stock market or CD? Then be sure to head over to our guide to the best investment cars for a curated list of retro rides with steadily-rising valuations that show no signs of slowing. It's no secret that the used car market has been on a one-way trend upward over the past couple years, in part because of increased demand stemming from the semiconductor shortage. Add in the record levels of nostalgia for certain '80s and '90s cars, and the result is that a lot of once-affordable project cars are now out of reach for more cash-strapped enthusiasts. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of great cheap cars out there that won't break the bank and are versatile enough for all sorts of projects. It's easy to say that you can buy what you want, but most any old enthusiasts' car if you're willing to fish it out of a barn or take a chance on a sketchy-looking Craigslist ad, but for the purposes of this list, we're only concentrating on models that can be bought in decent running condition for a four-figure price tag. After plenty of digging around on Bring a Trailer, we've put together a selection of 10 of the best cars that will suit almost any type of project, whether that's restoration, modification, or even just stripping the car out and tearing 'round the track in it. Although plenty of other Japanese sports cars from the '90s have skyrocketed in value over the past few years, the value of the Z32 Nissan 300ZX has remained relatively affordable. The car debuted for the 1990 model year and immediately impressed critics, with Car and Driver declaring, "We can think of no other car that offers more style and sculptured, buttoned-down beauty for the money." The twin-turbo version is the fastest, but even the cheaper naturally-aspirated cars packed plenty of grunt straight from the factory. There are plenty of issues to watch out for when buying a cheap 300ZX, but get one in good condition and they're arguably still one of the best performance bargains on the market. Project car builders will also benefit from the large aftermarket surrounding the car, with plenty of off-the-shelf options for both performance and cosmetic improvements available. Anyone looking to buy the cheapest examples will likely find themselves with plenty of work to do straight away, as cheap 300ZXs tend to be poorly maintained. Scruffy but mechanically-sound examples can still be found within budget, though, with a manual '96 300ZX selling for just \$8,100 on Bring a Trailer in January 2023. The E30 3 Series is perhaps most famous for being the first generation of the car to receive a proper M variant, and although the M3 is now well out of reach for the average enthusiast, lower-spec cars remain under budget. Plenty of aftermarket parts are available for project car builders, with the E30's balanced handling making it perfect for everything from drift car builds to rally car conversions. If you want, you can always dress your cheap E30 up to look more like an M3, too. It's a controversial idea, but plenty of people do, especially since a real M3 can now cost over six figures. Widebody kits are also easily sourced, in case it's the static look that you're going for. To build any of these projects though, you'll need a car that's in fairly good shape to begin with. Luckily, they're easy to find, with a January 2023 listing on Bring a Trailer showing a '90 325i selling for \$8,600. While a Corvette is hardly the most exotic of project cars, it's hard to argue with its value for money. The C4 is a particular bargain right now, as it's readily available on the used market for just a few thousand dollars, yet it's ripe for restoration and easy to modify should you want to give it some more poke under the hood. It's not unusual to see project C4s packing over 500 horsepower if they've been engine swapped, even if they don't look that different on the outside. Even without turning the car into a tire-shredding sleeper, the C4 can leave plenty of its peers from the era in the rearview, at least in a straight line. A side-by-side test saw the C4 easily beat a Porsche 911 Carrera 3.2 over a quarter mile, although its 17.06-second time is dwarfed by the capabilities of a modern 'Vette. For less than \$10K, though, a C4 might just be all the project car you need, and then some. An '88 example recently sold on Bring a Trailer for \$9,000, and it only showed 64,000 miles on the odometer. Another car that's neither exotic nor particularly original, the NA Miata is a long-standing enthusiast's favorite for good reason. The pint-sized roadster might not be fast by any stretch of the imagination, but it's great fun to drive. Its light curb weight means that it's easy to throw around, and even relatively modest power increases can make it significantly faster. It's also one of the most versatile project cars around, and no matter what direction you take your build, there will be plenty of inspiration out there. This is, of course, one of the world's best-selling sports cars of all time (via MotorTrend). Early Matias are prone to rust, and as a result, it's not as easy to find a cheap, solid one as it once was. A lot of decent examples will now command prices well out of budget, but there are still some affordable cars about if you wait for the right listing. A one-owner '93 Miata sold for \$9,850 on Bring a Trailer in November 2022, and it came with a set of BBS wheels thrown in. There have been very few cars in history that have become quite as iconic as the classic VW Beetle. For decades after series production first started in 1945, the car became the affordable transportation of choice for drivers across the globe, with 21.5 million examples of the first-generation car sold. That makes it the most popular single-platform passenger car of all time. The car's enduring popularity ensured that there are thousands upon thousands of innovative Beetle-based project cars out there, from Baja desert runners to slammed rat rod statics. VW's reinvention of the Beetle in 1999 saw most of its enthusiast appeal lost in the process, and by 2019, the car had been killed off altogether. However, its sales success in its heyday has meant that there are still plenty of classic examples ready to be snapped up for bargain prices. A lightly-restored '66 example of the car crossed the auction block on Bring a Trailer in January 2023 for \$9,000, and historical listing data shows that there are plenty more examples selling for similar prices. The Civic-based CRX is a typical Honda in that it's practical, affordable, and supremely economical. It was, in fact, the first car to ever break the 50 mpg barrier in the EPA's testing cycle (via Road and Track). However, unlike plenty of other economical Hondas, the CRX was also a blast to drive, with its lightweight and stiffened suspension making it as great for the backroads as it was for the morning commute. Its Civic underpinnings also meant that modifications were easy for anyone who wanted to spice up their CRX a bit, and rally and hillclimb builds are also popular alongside the usual street-racing builds. Like many Japanese cars of its age, prices for the CRX are rising, but they're still available within budget for now. A manual California-registered example with 108,000 miles on the clock sold on Bring a Trailer for \$8,250 at the end of January 2023. The Mercedes-Benz W123 has built up a rock-solid reputation for reliability in the decades since it was launched, with many examples still running with mostly original components despite having several hundred thousand miles on the odometer. This was German luxury at its most bulletproof, although years of daily use has meant that there are plenty of examples out there that could do with some TLC. They make the perfect restoration project for someone looking for a daily drivable classic, especially with the car's range of roomy body styles. Coupes, sedans, and wagons are all easy to find for sale, and many sell for surprisingly low prices. A 280CE coupe with a four-speed manual transmission sold in mid-January 2023 on Bring a Trailer for \$6,000, and a 240D sold for \$9,100 a few weeks before. Like many of the cars here, good, cheap examples are getting harder to find. As a result, you may well make good money if you're buying one to restore with a plan to sell it later down the line. Porsche might not be the first manufacturer that comes to mind when thinking of cheap cars, but the 944 can in fact be found relatively easily for under budget. It's also a lot more versatile as a project car than many might assume — owners have kitted their 944s out as safari-style off-roaders, GT-inspired widebody racers, and even LS-swapped drift machines. Of course, there's also always the option of restoring your car back to factory spec, and enjoying one of Porsche's more underrated sports cars. It might not be that fast in stock form, and it's not as iconic in design as, say, a 911, but the 944 still ticks all the right boxes for a cheap enthusiasts' car. Manual transmissions are common, examples often appear for sale in good condition, and those pop-up headlights give it a retro appeal that not even a 911 could match. A manual '86 944 went under the hammer in early January 2023 for \$8,420, and there are plenty more like it in Bring a Trailer's historical listings data. Finding a mid-engined car for a four-figure price tag is not an easy task. Arguably the best way of doing it is by opting for a Toyota MR2, the Japanese brand's entry-level sports car that ran across three generations between 1985 and 2005 (via MotorTrend). Any of the three generations make for a great affordable project, but we've picked the second-gen SW20 MR2 as an example here. Prices for this generation are on the rise, so finding a car under \$10,000 will mean heading straight for the "Price: Low - High" filter on most auction sites. That's exactly what makes it a great project car though: Anyone who buys one and restores it should see the value of the car rise along with their work. A '91 MR2 with 171,000 miles fetched \$7,300 on Bring a Trailer in mid-2022, and an example with a whopping 421,000 miles sold for \$6,521 later in the year. Similarly high mileage cars can be found for cheaper on other auction sites, but be wary of poorly-maintained examples, and as with all old cars, keep an eye out for hidden rust. The Mitsubishi Delica is a bit of a wildcard entry, as it looks like a minivan — albeit one that's weirdly capable off-road. These odd 4x4s have gained a cult following as great all-terrain campervans, with many owners fitting their Delicas out with beefier tires and lifted suspensions. They were never officially sold in America, but since many of them are now over 25 years old, the first wave of Delica imports has already hit U.S. shores. Driving one is an unusual experience, as you're sat right over the engine, giving you excellent all-around visibility even if the driving position might take some getting used to. They're not fast, either, since most examples have sluggish-but-reliable engines making either 86 or 140 horsepower. Even so, the Delica is arguably one of the coolest hidden JDM gems on the market, so it's best to get one quickly before too many other people discover them and the prices go up. Delicas are still relatively rare to come across thanks to their import-only status, but an example sold on Bring a Trailer in December 2022 for \$8,400, and it only had 107,000 miles on the odometer.