



## BUYING A USED CAR

*The links in these documents contain information to make your life in Hokkaido easier and more enjoyable. Access each link and add it to your favourites list.*

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Given the area of Hokkaido (think Austria or maybe, Tasmania), its relatively light population density of about 70 per sq. km (compared with Honshu's 330 per sq. km) and realising that only Sapporo has a public transportation system worthy of the title, chances are pretty high that you are going to be spending a lot of your non-working time travelling around by private means.

Now, even the most diehard mountain bikers, power walkers or just plain penny pinching ALT's inevitably change their minds about not getting a car once November's white weather arrives on this Great North Island. So, unless you are a hermit living beside a subway station in Sapporo, I suggest you read on.

### **What Not To Buy**

Looking at the price stickers on used cars and converting them into your home currency, you'll likely conclude that cars over here are really cheap. And they are.....well, yes and no. Or as a friend once said, "Yeah, cheap to buy, but (expletive deleted) expensive to own!" In this article I'll try to explain ALL the costs involved in car ownership (aka, the big picture) and how you can make some sensible choices on where and what to buy as your next set of wheels.

Want to really save money? Then, buy a yellow number plate Kei (lightweight) mini car! These little babies run on air and they'll even save your BOE money. Yep, that's right, they won't have to pay for your return airfare, just the international shipping charges for a small box!

*WARNING! These cars are dangerous.*

After 17 years of watching TV images of fatal accidents involving them, I'm convinced the savings in no way justify the risk. *Kei's*, which evolved from three-wheeler motorcycles, are not required to pass the normal crash testing, like real cars, simply because they can't! Incidentally, that's why you don't see any on the roads back home.

So, how about a Jeep-type off-road RV? You'd think these would be ideal for Hokkaido's winter roads. Err.....not exactly. Sure, they are great for ploughing through snowdrifts, but most of your winter driving will be on compacted snow and ice covered roads. What makes an RV good off-road; i.e. high ground clearance and heavy in the front, makes it unstable on-road, especially when it's slippery. Keep a count of the number of cars you see upside down beside the roads this winter. I guarantee 70% of them will be Pajeros, Landcruisers and the like. Also, the parts and maintenance costs for these truck-based vehicles are much more than for a normal car.

If your life just won't seem complete without one (+ gun rack?) in it, I suggest you consider one from the wannabe RV class of vehicles, known officially as crossover RV's. Toyota RAV4, Honda CRV, Mitsubishi Pajero iO, etc are actually car-based designs, which translates into better on-road handling, better economy and cheaper maintenance than their big brothers.

My final reason for not buying any type of RV is that when it comes time to sell you'll discover that finding a buyer is so much harder than if you'd settled for some more mainstream form of conveyance.

### **What You Need v's What You Want**

Unless you have special needs or are planning to ship a nice car home later I advise you to go for the smallest-engined (real) car you can comfortably live with - not just because you'll get great mileage with it, but because *Shaken* (explained later), *Jidosha Zei* (road tax) and *Hoken* (optional insurance) are all calculated on car & engine size. Typically, you will be paying 25% more for all of the above if you choose anything Hummer-like as your local chariot.

So, the cars you should be looking at will typically have white number plates with two or three digit numbers starting with a '5' or a '7' next to the locality name, at the top. If the car doesn't have plates on it, check its *Mashotorokushomesisho* (registration cancellation certificate), which will have the former plate numbers written on it.

Some popular makes and models used by ALTs and that I recommend, are listed below. Many are similar to models sold in your home country, so I have included their overseas names along with their engine size in brackets.

They come in automatic or 5-speed manual transmission versions and some have diesel engine versions, too. They all feature a *FF* (front engine, front-wheel drive) layout, i.e. the front wheels pull the car along. Most of them are available in a *4WD* (full-time all-wheel drive) configuration, too. This simply means that, as well as the front wheels pulling, the rear wheels push the car along. This extra traction is

obviously a desired quality on slippery, winter roads. The downside is that the extra weight of the all-wheel drive system means that fuel economy, braking and dry road handling is not as good as the *FF* version they're derived from.

Some makers have recently produced what are badged as *e-4WD* models. These are *FF* cars with two small electric motors driving the rear wheels. This gives them the grip of a *4WD* without the weight and handling disadvantages. However, the electric motors only work at speeds up to about 50kmh, so these *e-4WD* cars are not true full-time all-wheel drive machines.

### **SUPER ECONO 3/5 DOOR HATCHBACKS**

*Less than 5litres/100km*

- Toyota Duet / Daihatsu Storia (1.0 litre - aka Sirrion, Viva)
- Nissan March (1.0 - Micra)
- Toyota Vitz (1.0 - Yaris, Echo)

### **SMALL 3/5 DOOR HATCHBACKS / SEDANS**

- Toyota Duet / Daihatsu Storia (1.3 - Sirrion, Viva)
- Nissan March (1.3 - Micra)
- Toyota Starlet/Corsa/Corolla II (1.3, 1.5)
- Toyota Vitz/Platz (1.3, 1.5 - Yaris, Echo)
- Mitsubishi Mirage (1.3, 1.5)
- Suzuki Swift (1.3)

### **MEDIUM 4 DOOR SEDANS**

- Nissan Sunny/Pulsar (1.5, 1.8, 2.0D - Sentra)
- Mitsubishi Lancer/Mirage (1.5, 1.8D, 2.0D - Cedia)
- Toyota Corolla (1.6)
- Subaru Impreza (1.5, 1.6, 1.8)
- Mazda Familia / Ford Laser (1.3,1.5,1.6,1.7D,1.8 - '323')

### **MEDIUM WAGONS (ESTATES)**

- Subaru Impreza Sportswagon (1.5, 1.6, 1.8, 2.0)
- Nissan Pulsar (1.5, 1.8, 2.0D)

- Nissan Wingroad (1.5, 1.8)
- Toyota Carib (1.8)

Use this [\[link\]](#) to learn the full specifications of car models made here.

### **The Bottom Line**

Examples of all of the above can be bought for between 20 man and 40 man Yen with full 2 years *Shaken* included. The best buys for ALTs are usually cars around ten years old with mileage of less than 90,000kms on them. N.B. If a car has over 95,000kms on the odometer make sure that the camshaft timing belt has been changed (note: many Nissans don't have a belt), otherwise your first service bill will be about 5 man extra! Cars built after 1996 are more likely to feature SRS airbags, an ABS brake system and an *anzen bodii* (safety cell construction).

Probably more so than other countries, the car dealer sticker price here bears little resemblance to what you will pay before you're driving your dream machine. Don't be fooled by those respectable looking cars on lots with a 7 or 8 man prices on them. Those will have little or no *Shaken* left and if the salesman is doing his job effectively the car would be delivered to your house only after you parted with at least 25 big ones for it fully shakened, title transferred and delivered to your door.

*Always ask for the komikomi (all inclusive) price from the smiling person hovering around you when you're visiting car yards.*

Those of you living in *Inaka* may be advised by your supervisor to buy locally as 'big city' dealers won't stand by any warranty when things go wrong, etc, etc. This is actually not true. Certainly you will get better after sales service from your Kachoh's wife's third cousin's yard, but his prices and range of models won't compete with those in the bigger cities. Ultimately, you will have to decide whether to support the local economy when shelling out for what will be your largest single expense here.

### **Shaken**

This is an abbreviation for *jidousha kensa* (vehicle inspection) and refers to the two-yearly roadworthy check and accompanying fees, weight tax and compulsory insurance. Average cost of shaken for one of the above mentioned cars is around 12 man, though actual cost depends on what repairs are required for it to pass the inspection. Therefore the amount of shaken remaining largely determines the value of the cars you will be looking to buy.

You should always try to buy a car that has at least 18 months shaken left. That way at least you know it was roadworthy six months ago! This is also why you should BEWARE THE FREE CAR! These will always have little or no shaken left on them. And you, the recipient, will be the one doing the big favour as it would otherwise cost the kindly owner 3 man to scrap the heap she wants to off load on you. I know of only

one such case that didn't end in tears. The ALT concerned gave the car back when the shaken ran out!

### **Finally, The Paperwork**

This subject requires a separate article to explain properly. Suffice to say that it can take 13 pieces of paperwork and up to two weeks to transfer registration! If buying privately, always make sure the seller provides you with a current *Inkanshomeisho* (copy of his seal registration) and that the seal imprint and address on it match the ones on the *shakenshomeisho* (car registration paper) he provides you.

Most of your supervisors will be unfamiliar with the car transfer procedure as the average Japanese person only buys from a car yard and is happy to pay 1 man for the car dealer to do all the paperwork for them!

*Seifuty Doraibu!*

As always, the official [hajat/forum](#) is where you will find all the answers to any questions you may have regarding life in Hokkaido.

*HAJET kindly asks you to use paper wisely and only print this document if you really, really must. LOVE HOKKAIDO, LOVE THE ENVIRONMENT!*

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### USEFUL RESOURCES

JNTO  
Japan Visitor  
Amayama

[www.jnto.go.jp](http://www.jnto.go.jp)  
[www.japanvisitor.com](http://www.japanvisitor.com)  
[www.specs.amayama.com](http://www.specs.amayama.com)

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Hokkaido Association of Japan Exchange and Teaching  
[www.hajet.org](http://www.hajet.org)

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