

Bargain Luxury Sedans

Seven top luxury buys for less than \$36,000

Here's a closer look at each and the deals that make them attractive

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The Euro Honda Accord, manufactured in Japan, is a leaner, hungrier-looking beast than its full-figured American-made counterpart, and here in Canada it is called the Acura TSX.

Looks aside, however, the \$32,900 starting price tag for the 2009 TSX is ultimately what makes it so attractive — that and the \$500 cash incentive Acura has out there to keep sales healthy.

We can say similar things about a big bunch of other premium sedans, too.

The 2008 BMW 323i, at a starting list price of \$35,900, is a sweet ride with essentially the same mechanical bones and almost identical looks of more expensive and also very handsome 3-Series cars.



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BMW Canada also has excellent interest rate and cash-back offers on this car — offers worth thousands — and that makes the 323i a real steal.

The 2008 Lexus IS250? Those of you who cross-border shop on pricing will note that the \$31,900 price tag here in Canada is virtually identical to what's listed in the United States.

That means you can have a very well equipped premium sports sedan at a price that's about the same as a loaded Honda Accord.

The sporty IS250, we'd argue, is a bargain — especially considering the Lexus brand's legendary quality and well-regarded dealership experience.

Lexus made the IS250 a standout buy in February by lowering the sticker on the base car by \$4,650 — one of 16 major price reductions at Lexus and Toyota Canada, followed by five more in mid-February.

But it's not the only bargain in the world of premium sedans for less than \$36,000.

"There are tons of deals on these [cars]," says Paul Timoteo, president of the online pricing service www.carcostcanada.com.

"Considering that over 60 per cent of cars in the \$35,000 to \$50,000 price range are leased, the people need to do their homework.

"As always, most of the really good deals tend to not be advertised, but of course you'll see them in our reports. The devil's in the details every time."

CarCostCanada provides pricing details and incentive information for a fee — five vehicle reports for \$39.95.

Consumer Reports also sells pricing information (www.consumerreports.org), as does the Automobile Protection Association (www.apa.ca).

One of the more attractive vehicles in this price range is the 2008 Cadillac CTS, all-new for this model year with a smartly detailed interior.

The new CTS has grown up for '08 and is now more a rival for the pricier BMW 5-Series, Lexus GS-Series and Mercedes-Benz E-Class.

In fact, Cadillac is planning to launch a smaller line of premium models in the next 12-18 months.

But that should not dissuade you from looking at this year's CTS.

In fact, while the least expensive list price on a CTS is \$38,900, savvy buyers can do better than that.

Cadillac has in place a number of cash incentives and cut-rate financing deals that lower the actual price.

The CTS is a fine deal. The 2008 Audi A4 is, too.

It begins at a list price of \$35,350, but Audi Canada has a little cash out there on this sedan, and decent lease and finance rates, too. That's on a car with a Top Safety Pick rating from the U.S. Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. No car in this class is safer.

Another sub-\$36,000 premium sedan in the sweet spot is the 2008 Infiniti G35. Yes, the base price is listed at \$39,990, but several thousand dollars in sweeteners turn a very good sports/luxury sedan into a fabulous one.

To round out this list, we also very much like the 2008 Mercedes-Benz C230. Like the CTS, it is all-new for 2008. What a brilliant deal it is, too.

At a listed starting price of \$35,800, the C230 is loaded with features and the styling is visually gripping. Not only that, the new C-Class is the most entertaining C to drive, ever.

These seven premium sedans collectively are a perfect example of what is going on in today's new car market.

"The OEMs [original equipment manufacturers] are providing spectacular value to the consumer, pure and simple," says Dennis DesRosiers of DesRosiers Automotive Consultants.

DesRosiers adds that, with the rise in value of the Canadian dollar relative to the U.S. greenback, "OEMs have responded and lowered prices and with all the lower MSRP [manufacturer's suggested retail price] prices announced this year already, and the heavy discounting in the market that has been in place for a number of years, the consumer is winning and winning big."

Winning big. That is the real story here. Today's vehicles, especially among entry-level premium models, are much better than anything sold five, 10 or 15 years ago.

The auto makers have made real and easily quantifiable strides in design, content, performance, build quality, emissions and safety.

Yet prices in real terms have dropped. Consider what Statistics Canada has to say about the average number of weeks of before-tax family income needed to purchase a new vehicle: it dropped to 18.9 last year.

"So, relative to before-tax income, Canadians paid almost the same for a new vehicle in 2007 as they did in 1991," says DesRosiers.

"Not a bad deal, especially since vehicles are vastly superior today from virtually all perspectives."

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