

Used EVs are now the most affordable cars. Here's how to buy a good one.

Story by Christopher Mims

The [hot Wall Street trade](#)—a bet that the Strait of Hormuz isn't reopening soon—is a wager you can make at home. All you have to do is buy a used electric vehicle.

For millions of Americans, EVs are now the most affordable type of [personal transportation](#) around.

Until recently, this wasn't true. Even used EVs were too expensive and scarce. And while EV "fuel ups" are typically cheaper than the cheapest gasoline, the cost difference between charging and pumping wasn't big enough.

With rising oil prices and more used EVs coming off leases every month, the [total cost of ownership equation](#) has flipped. A [recent analysis](#) by researchers at the University of Michigan found this holds true across a variety of vehicle types, U.S. cities and charging patterns.

"The reason why we're seeing sales of used EVs grow so much is that they hit the right price points," says Kevin Roberts, director of economic and market intelligence at the car-search site CarGurus.

My own family recently discovered this firsthand when our beleaguered second car, a gas-powered Honda Fit, finally bit the dust. We had already experienced the [upsides and challenges](#) of switching our primary vehicle to electric. I wondered: [Would our family budget, stretched by the appetites and extracurriculars of growing teenagers, allow us to go all-in on electric cars?](#)

[Nearly 100 readers](#) had already told me it was possible, as long as we took advantage of the [now-plentiful used-EV deals](#) in the U.S.

"In an expensive, affordability-constrained environment, used EVs represent the best value for consumers now," says Roberts.

Here are the lessons I learned in my latest EV journey—used-car sales.

Be honest about your needs

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: the anxiety of Americans about electric cars running out of juice is often based on a misapprehension of how much driving they typically do. If you have an average commute and can [charge your car](#) at home overnight, the overwhelming majority of EVs can meet your needs.

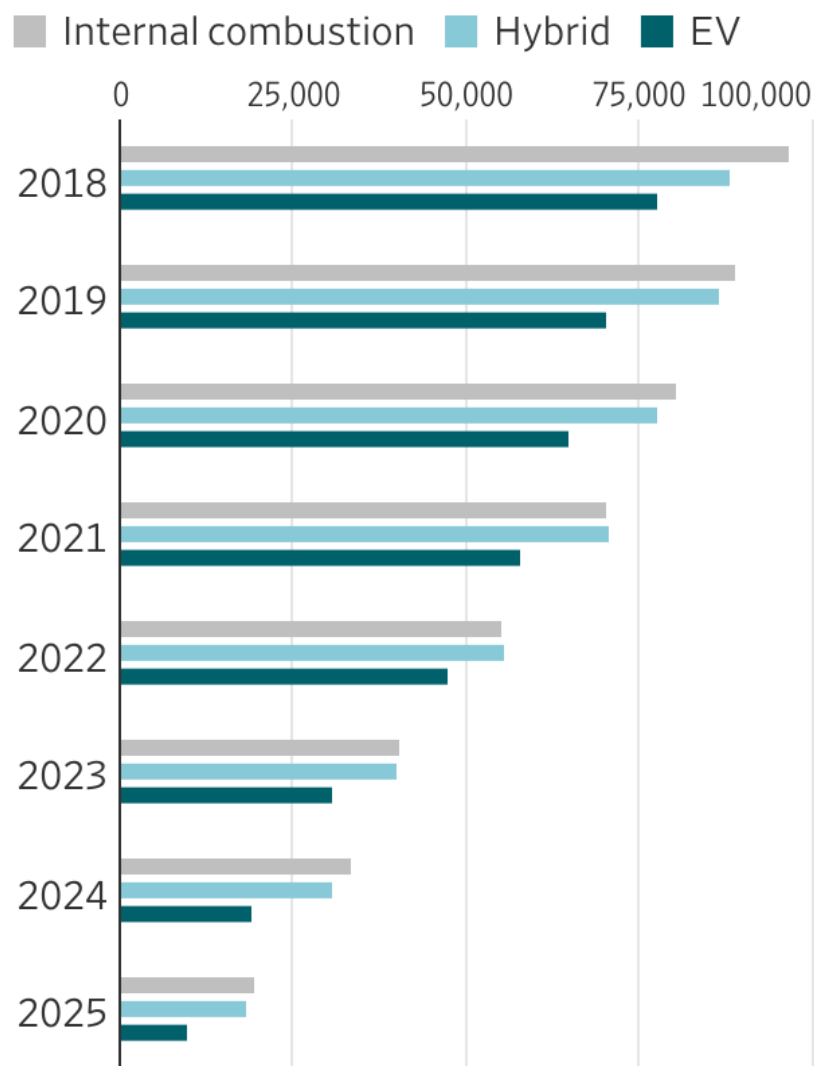
Christopher reviewed his options and decided a \$19,000 2025 Nissan Leaf was the cheapest and most convenient way to get around town. © Christopher Mims/WSJ

That said, if this is to be your sole vehicle, and you're frequently taking long road trips or towing heavy loads—or you can't charge at home—you might have to go with a newer, costlier EV, a hybrid, or a conventional gas vehicle.

Hunt for deals

America's dealers are a bit hapless when it comes to EVs. You, a savvy consumer, can take advantage of that fact. Many don't like selling them in the first place because conventional gas vehicles mean much higher maintenance fees. (EV yearly maintenance is a fraction of the cost—remember, no oil changes—though you typically have to replace tires sooner.)

Average mileage of used cars for sale on CarGurus, by powertrain and model year*



*As of April 2026

Source: CarGurus

Average mileage of used cars for sale on CarGurus, by powertrain and model year*

Many dealers have at least a few used EVs sitting on their lots. [Car-sales sites that search local listings—services including Autotrader, Cars.com, Edmunds, CarGurus and AutoTempest—are your friends.](#)

Avoid the lemons

By now, most automakers have figured out how to make reliable EVs, and their mechanical simplicity means fewer things can go wrong. That said, when something does go wrong with an EV, it can be a big and expensive headache.

The first thing to check on any vehicle you're eyeballing is its unaddressed recalls, especially if they're related to the vehicle's battery or electronics. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has a [free recall-lookup site](#). Assuming you have the vehicle's vehicle identification number, you can also spend some money to get its complete history—owners, crashes, etc.—from such providers as Carfax, AutoCheck or VinAudit.

Check the battery health

Battery health for used EVs in the U.S. is good overall, says Stephanie Valdez Streaty, director of industry insights at Cox Automotive. Her company's wholesale division has found that the average battery capacity of its EVs is 92%. Today's batteries hold their capacity consistently for years, she adds.

Most sellers probably won't let you borrow their car, top up the battery and then see how far you can get. A shortcut: [Check the dashboard menus to see their real-world miles per kilowatt-hour reading.](#) You can find it in the owner's manual, or just ask your favorite AI to point you to it. Also, find out if the reading is typical for this make and model.

If you want to get fancy (or maybe just nerdy), buy an OBD2 dongle, plug it into the car's onboard diagnostics port and connect it to a smartphone app via Bluetooth. There are many dongles out there; I used the LELink.

Since I was checking out a Nissan Leaf, I used an app called LeafSpy Pro. It told me what few dealers would or could, including the health of all of the battery cells (excellent) and the number of times the vehicle had been fast-charged (14). Fast-charging an older Leaf [can degrade the battery](#).

Know the costs

Used EVs can save you a ton on fuel and maintenance, but they carry hidden costs. Before taking the plunge, find out if your utility company gives discounted rates for charging at off-peak hours—this can make a huge difference.

You'll also want to decide whether your next set of tires needs to be the more-expensive, low rolling resistance kind that maximizes EV range, or cheaper, conventional tires that might reduce range by 10%. (Any EV tires have to be capable of handling the added weight.)

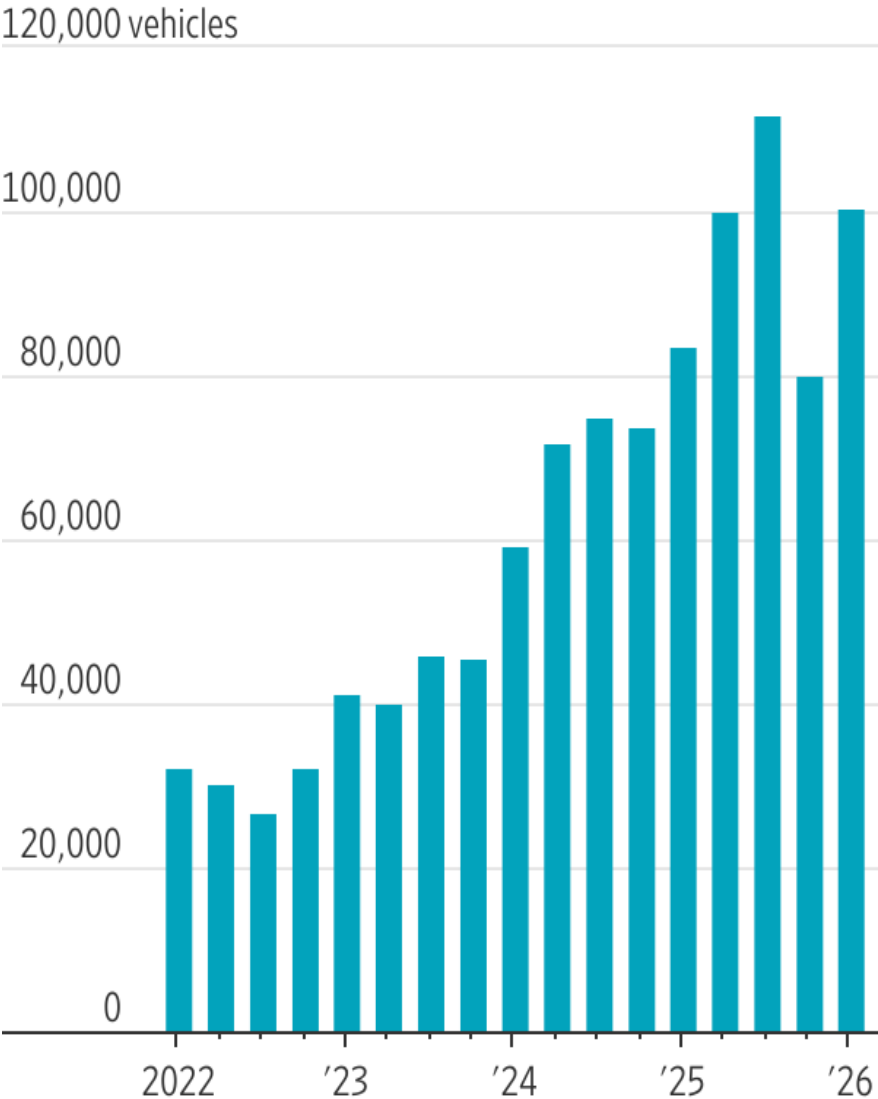
The big one is insurance. Before you sign, find out what it will cost. I was surprised to discover there was no real difference for me between insuring a budget EV and a similarly priced hybrid. But if you are used to paying low premiums for an older gas guzzler, you might get sticker shock.

Finally, there's the [extra vehicle-registration fee](#) you'll pay for an EV in most states.

Forget brand loyalty

Now that EVs from most of the major automakers have been on the market for a few years, cars that fit your needs and budget might be from brands you've never considered before.

Used-EV retail sales, quarterly



Source: Cox Automotive

Used-EV retail sales, quarterly

In the under-\$25,000 range, you can find low-mileage models from Volkswagen, Kia, Hyundai, Nissan, Chevrolet, Polestar, Tesla, Audi, Honda, Mini, Toyota, Subaru, Ford and others. You might even spot a BMW.

Be picky

As of March, used-EV sales were up about 28% from a year earlier, according to Cox, and their [wholesale prices](#) rose 6.2% in April. Given that demand, and the likelihood that gas will stay expensive for some time, it might seem as though the affordability window might be closing.

But a deluge of used EVs will hit the market starting this month, with [more in the coming years](#). All the models leased three years ago—during the first EV peak and the heyday of the [\\$7,500 tax break](#)—are returning to dealer lots. This year alone, close to 300,000 used EVs will be coming off their leases and returning to dealer lots, says Cox's Valdez Streaty.

That means the deals are likely here to stay, and you have time to educate yourself, take some test drives, and haggle harder for the car you want at a price you can afford.

Write to Christopher Mims at christopher.mims@wsj.com

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