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Smart Charity Choices

THE GREAT

# GIFT GUIDE

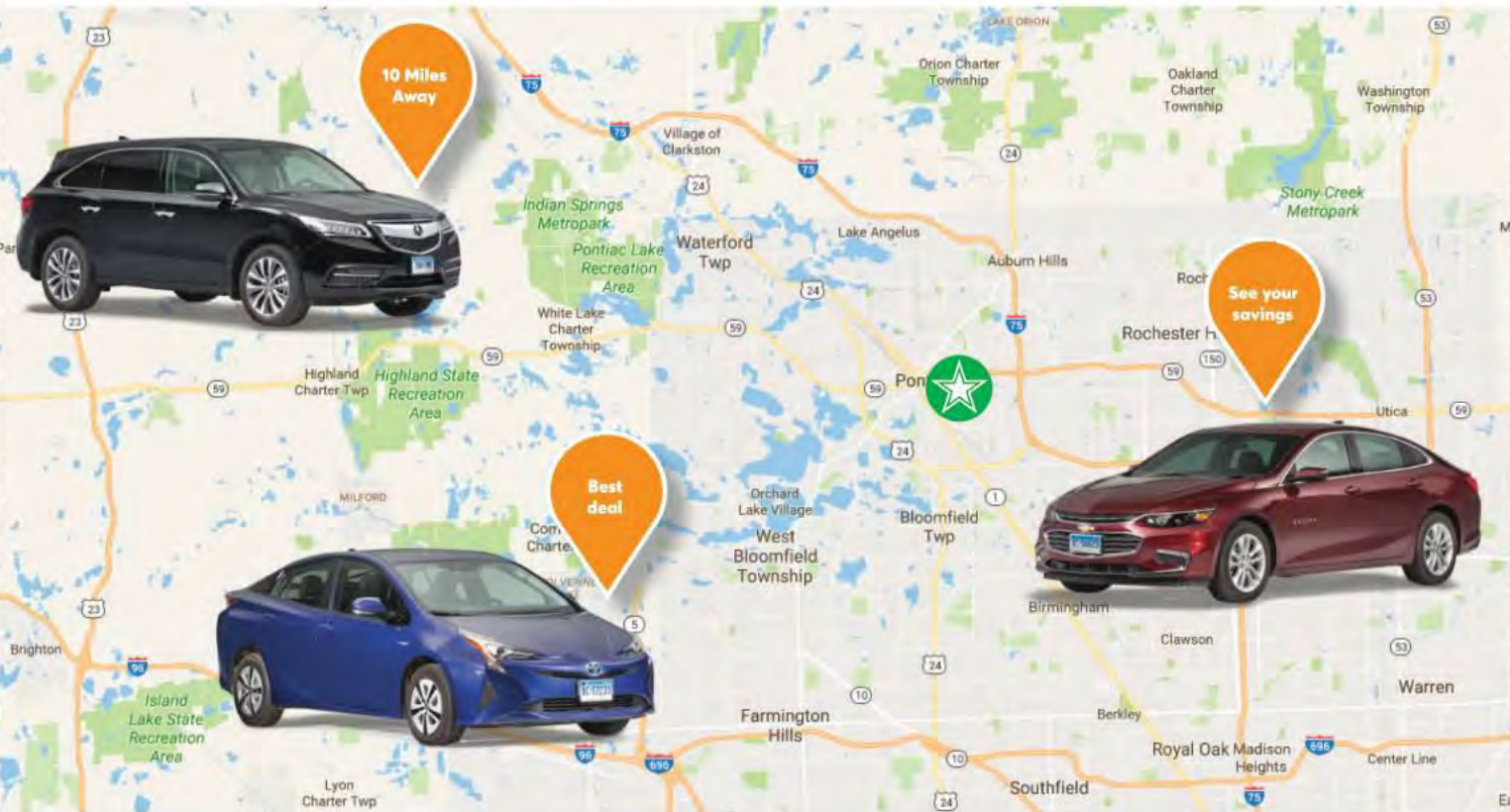
## TOP-RATED PRODUCTS

Tested for performance & safety

- Smartphones • TVs
- Laptops • Coffee makers
- Grills • Earbuds
- Smartwatches • Video cameras
- Cookware • Tablets
- Gourmet coffees
- Wireless speakers • Blenders
- Fitness trackers
- Desktop computers • Tires
- TV sound bars • Color printers
- Vacuums • Headphones
- Toasters & toaster ovens
- Streaming media players
- Electric kettles • Bike helmets
- and more!



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## The Great Gift Guide of 2016

Spend your holiday shopping dollars wisely by using our list of 104 top-rated products. You'll find something for everyone you love. Along the way, learn the latest on charity choices, gift registries, group giving, and more.

**May Your Cookies Never Crumble.**  
This Panasonic toaster oven is hot stuff.

P. 17

### 18 For the Family Chef

The way to a cook's heart is through great gear like this, guaranteed to make the kitchen a happier place.

### 26 For the Gadget Geek

Need a gift for someone who's gaga for gadgets? These top tech offerings will satisfy each and every tech fan you know.

### 34 For Your Favorite Foodie

Chocolate, pancakes, nuts, and more: We have treats to please any palate.

### 38 For the Social Animal

Stay in constant touch with these top-rated options in tablets, smartphones, and earbuds.

### 42 For the Globetrotter

Show the traveler in your life a little love with all the tools she needs to ease and enjoy the journey.

### 46 For the Get Up and Go-Getter

Choose from the best of everything your active pal has an eye on, from fitness trackers to winter tires, from cameras to bike helmets.

### 52 For the Home Entertainment Aficionado

Got a giftee who loves the comforts of home? Check out these top TVs and other media musts.

### 58 For the Coffee Connoisseur

Coffee makers, kettles, and cool beans will win you points with caffeine-loving cronies.

### 62 For When You Have the Urge to Splurge

Love knows no limits, and when your budget doesn't either, these are the gifts to go for.

### GIFT GUIDE FEATURES

- 25 Show Me the Money
- 29 Return Policies That Rock—And Not That
- 31 A Gift for Kids That Pays Dividends
- 33 Top Shops for Tech **RATINGS**
- 41 Write a Better Wish List
- 45 Gifts That Go the Distance
- 48 A Smart Choice for Savvy Consumers
- 49 Donate to Create a Better World
- 50 A Truly Heartfelt Gift
- 57 Gifts That Stir the Soul
- 65 Group Giving: The More the Merrier



## Contents

### IN EVERY ISSUE

#### 5 From the President: A Year of Celebration

CR ends its 80th anniversary with gifts galore.

#### 5 About the Cover

#### 6 Your Feedback

Readers' comments about our recent content.

#### 7 Recalls

#### 8 Building a Better World, Together

An antibiotics-overuse scorecard for fast-food chains, a victory over surprise medical bills, and a way to fight bad banking practices.

#### 78 Index

A year's worth of products.

#### 79 Selling It

Goofs and gaffes.



**A Need for Speed**  
Three-stage blowers are like older models on steroids.

### PRODUCT UPDATES

#### 9 This Winter, Be Ready for Anything

Whether you choose to fight the weather or flee it, we're on top of your options.

#### 10 Let It Blow

A new breed of snow blower makes short work of tall drifts.

#### RATINGS

#### 12 Ahead of the Pack

Strategies to choose the best bag for you, including the secret suitcase sniff test.

#### RATINGS

### INSIGHTS

#### 16 Ask Our Experts

Who has the best laptop tech support, how do you clean a mattress, and what will keep a wooden cutting board safe and sanitary?



### ROAD REPORT

#### 66 Staying Power

Our annual roundup of the most—and least—reliable new vehicles out on the road. Prepare to be surprised.

#### RATINGS

#### 74 Road Tests

Sporty standout? Design dud? We rate the Cadillac XT5 and CT6, as well as the Jaguar F-Pace and XF. Learn which of these pricey performers is worth the splurge.

#### RATINGS

#### 76 Luxury SUVs and Sedans Chart

#### RATINGS



**Avoid This Detour.**  
Our reliability data reduces your chances of having a car that could leave you stranded.

### ABOUT CONSUMER REPORTS

We are the world's largest independent, nonprofit, consumer-product-testing organization, based in Yonkers, N.Y. We survey millions of consumers about their experiences with products and services. We pay for all of the products we rate. We don't

accept paid advertising. We don't accept free test samples from manufacturers. We do not allow our name or content to be used for any promotional purposes.

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**RATINGS** Overall scores are based on a scale of 0 to 100. We rate products using these symbols:

POOR FAIR GOOD  
VERY GOOD EXCELLENT



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## A Year of Celebration

HERE AT CONSUMER REPORTS, this year has provided a chance to reflect on our storied past, a chance to look forward toward a bright future, and a chance to transform ourselves to better serve your needs in an increasingly complex world. This December we're taking the opportunity to wrap up our 80th anniversary year by thanking you, our loyal readers, whose support, feedback, and partnership have sustained and strengthened us across the generations. The gift guide you'll find in these pages will help you to celebrate the people you love, with expert guidance on the best gifts out there for the chef, technophile, globetrotter—and just about anyone else in your life. Our new Overall Scores, along with the refreshed ratings system we unveiled in our last issue, will make it easier than ever for you to identify the top-rated products to match your gift-giving needs.

As always at this time of year, we're also including our renowned car reliability ratings so that you can start 2017 off on the right chassis.

As we prepare to close the books on a year of transformation and growth at CR, there is so much that we can be thankful for and look



back on with pride. It is our honor not only to equip you with the trusted, independent knowledge you need to make informed choices in the marketplace but also to stand alongside you, raising the voices of consumers when it comes to the policies that shape so many areas of our lives. To take a look back at some of the victories we've won together this year—and to get a sneak peek at some of our goals for the year ahead—you can read our online annual report by going to [ConsumerReports.org/annualreport](http://ConsumerReports.org/annualreport).

*Marta Tellado*

**Marta L. Tellado,**  
**President and CEO**  
 Follow me on Twitter  
 @MLTellado

### ABOUT THE COVER



Knowing that this is gift-giving season, we've been busy gathering up a list of our top-rated products for our Great Gift Guide, starting on page 17. We want to make sure that the cold, hard cash or digital dollars you spend will go toward products that are high-performing and safe. You'll find a wide variety of choices at many prices. For more suggestions, go to [ConsumerReports.org/giftguide](http://ConsumerReports.org/giftguide).  
 —Diane Salvatore, Editor in Chief, Consumer Reports magazine





## Could Someone Hijack Your Healthcare?

Medical identity theft—when someone else steals your insurance information in order to get prescription drugs, surgery, or other medical services—has been increasing dramatically. Our in-depth report “Body Snatchers” (October 2016) looked at how much damage this crime can cause and how you can minimize the chance of falling prey to identity-theft predators.

YOUR ARTICLE “Body Snatchers” in the October 2016 issue was very informative. It amazes me that Social Security and Medicare still use Social Security numbers as ID numbers for Medicare service and even put them prominently on our Medicare cards. This information, along with name and date of birth from a driver’s license, gives the identity thief all he/she needs to steal not only our medical records but financial identity as well. In this day and age of identity theft and Medicare ID fraud (which even Medicare now has PSAs about), it is unthinkable that SSNs would still be used. It is time to convert Medicare ID numbers to

a random number and replace our Medicare ID cards with something more secure than a printed paperboard card.  
—Ronald Gurney, Cathedral City, CA

**EDITOR’S NOTE** A bill signed by President Obama in the spring of 2015 requires HHS to issue new Medicare cards that don’t display or embed SSNs. However, it’s unclear how quickly that will happen. The bill gives HHS four years from April 2015 to make this change for new beneficiaries and an additional four years to get new cards without SSNs to those already using Medicare.

IN YOUR ARTICLE, you alerted readers that Medicare ID cards bear our SSNs. I simply photocopy the card and black out the last 4 digits of the SSN on the copy. That’s what I carry in my wallet. The original

card is safely locked away. No doctor has refused to accept this “amended” Medicare card. I simply tell them the last four digits whenever they ask.  
—Ronald Kitchenman, Southampton, PA

ARTICLES ON MEDICAL fraud keep advising us to keep our private health information out of the reach of hackers and to check every explanation-of-benefits notice. However, the medical files of the insurers are often hacked—for example, the 2015 Anthem database breach containing nearly 80 million records, including SSNs. Also, notifications of charges are not sent out until months after they are incurred. By then it’s too late. When I purchase gas, charge over \$100, or have unusual activity on my credit, I receive almost instant notification. So it’s clear that

the technology exists to greatly reduce medical fraud.  
—Richard Verbitski, Longmont, CO

AS A MORE practical alternative, rather than requesting copies of files, patients could use their doctor’s “patient portal.” Many practices that have converted to electronic medical records now offer patient portals where patients can access most of their own records. Again, these systems, as with most medical records, are not interconnected, so there will be large holes through which medical fraud can go undetected, but at least the portals allow for frequent monitoring at no cost to the patient or the physician.  
—Michael Melgar, M.D., Great Neck, NY

### Fear of Flying

IN REFERENCE TO “Secrets to Stress-Free Flying”: If grocery stores were run like the airlines, we’d have to pay extra for parking, cart rental, the ability to pick out our own fruits and meats, checking out at lines staffed with a clerk, and choosing paper or plastic bags. Oh, and don’t forget the fuel surcharge for their merchandise delivery trucks.  
—Paul Walorski, Columbus, IN

Wouldn’t it be nice if people didn’t have to play these silly games to get a good deal? If airlines all had to charge a reasonable rate and stick to it, flying would be a lot less aggravating.  
—William Smith, via Facebook

AS A LONGTIME travel agent, I was surprised that in this 14-page report you never suggested consulting a travel agent. We not only have the same or lower fares as online websites but also have access to real-time availability, unpublished fares, and sold-out flights. Our service is included in the cost of the ticket, and many find it invaluable when things go unexpectedly. To our clients, spending hours



WRITE

Go to [ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor](http://ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor) to share your comments for publication.



and days engaging in complex online searches, as your writer recommends, seems the old-fashioned way to book travel.  
—Mike Zaloudek,  
West Hollywood, CA

YOUR STORY REALLY resonated with me. I no longer care to fly on American-flagged airlines, owing to the deterioration of customer service, particularly regarding seat size (although I am not a large person), and the lack of decent food service. A few years back, I was moved to undertake a wee bit of research regarding seat size, and discovered that the average coach seat is 2 inches narrower than the average casket. My takeaway from this is that if you have to fly coach, you're better off dead!

—Ralph McCaskey, San Pablo, CA

IF YOU WANT to fly stress-free, get a second job and go business class.

—Frank Heppner, Wakefield, RI



### The Future of Cars

IN "THE PROMISE of a Post-Driver Life," Edward Humes predicts we will have "autonomous transport" within the next 20 years or so. He correctly points out "bad driving is the primary cause of fatal car crashes." Why don't we make improvements that will help reduce the carnage now? Our driver education courses cover only the very basics of driving, and are often the only driver training motorists ever receive. I distrust vehicles that are "smarter" than the driver. How many motorists do you see at night with no headlamps on, because they think the automatic feature did it for

them? My view is that people need more training, not just more gadgets.

—Gregory Schmeckpeper,  
Tinley Park, IL

ACCORDING TO Edward Humes' editorial in the October issue, by 2096 "driving alone in a car for a long distance will be viewed as a shockingly wasteful historical absurdity." Call me a relic or a romantic, but I think it's a pity that future generations won't get to experience the pleasures and joys of a real road trip, surely one of America's greatest pastimes.

—James Toth, Richmond, VA

### Power Doors

REGARDING your article on generators ("Power Plays"): I'd like to remind your readers that the automatic garage door opener won't work during a power outage. If you can't get the door open manually (I couldn't lift my unbalanced, heavy door) you can't drive to where there is power. And if you want to charge your cell phone or laptop from your car charger, it is dangerous to run the car unless the garage door is open.

—Nicola Nelson,  
North Salt Lake, UT

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *Great reminder about automatic garage door openers from this savvy reader! There's just one more thing we'd like to note on this topic: It's not enough to simply leave the garage door open when you're running your car in the garage. For safety's sake, be sure to fully pull the car out into the open air first.*

### CLARIFICATION

In the article "Your Burning Questions, Answered" (July 2016), we included a rating of the BabyGanics Mineral-Based SPF 50+. We have since been notified by the company that the version we included was an older formulation no longer on the market. We plan to retest the new formulation as part of our ongoing sunscreen coverage.



## RECALLS



### SAMSUNG GALAXY NOTE7

In mid-September, Samsung and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) announced an official recall of about 1 million Galaxy Note7 smartphones—two weeks after Consumer Reports called for just such an action—based on multiple reports of the phone catching fire due to defective batteries.

The recall covers 97 percent of Note7s sold in the U.S. since the phone's mid-August launch.

**What to do** To determine if your phone has been recalled, locate the IMEI number on the packaging or by checking in the phone's settings (it's also printed on the back of the phone), and call Samsung toll-free at 844-365-6197 or go to [samsung.com](http://samsung.com) for details about getting a refund. Though Samsung is also offering a replacement Note7 phone, at press time, the government and Samsung were investigating a report that one of these new replacement phones caught fire on a recent domestic flight.



### CLOTHES WASHERS

GE is recalling about 222,000 top-loading GE Profile washing machines. They contain an electrical component that can over-heat, posing a fire hazard.

**What to do** Unplug the washer; contact GE Appliances at 877-830-9732 or go to [geappliances.com](http://geappliances.com) and click on "Recall Information" for a free repair.



## SUBSCRIPTION ALERT

**Readers should** be on guard against offers of new Consumer Reports subscriptions or renewals from companies that are not authorized to offer subscriptions on our behalf. The ones we're aware of include Secured Publisher Mail Center (SPMC), Atlantic Publishers Group, LLC (APG), Pacific Magazine Billing (PMB), Publishers Distribution Services, and Publishers Billing Exchange, and there may be others, as well.

Consumer Reports is taking action to address this problem. Meanwhile, how can you spot those unauthorized companies? For starters, an unauthorized mailing may include subscription options for both new subscribers and renewals, or not specify the subscription's expiration date.

If you want to be sure that a subscription or renewal mailing came from us directly:

- CR addresses your subscription status in its mailings by always providing your expiration date on our notices (and it will match the date on your magazine label).
- CR renewal payments require you to make your check payable to Consumer Reports.
- CR renewal orders are mailed to our Harlan, Iowa, or Markham, Ontario, addresses.
- CR does not charge cancellation fees.

For more information, visit [ConsumerReports.org/alert](http://ConsumerReports.org/alert).





## Antibiotics Exit the Menu

THE FAST-FOOD industry has historically been slow to change its ways, particularly when profits are involved. But on one issue, it seems that more chains are now responding to pressure from consumers. These restaurants are moving to keep unnecessary antibiotics out of the production of the billions of pounds of beef, chicken, turkey, and pork that the industry serves every year. According to a new joint investigation by several health and environmental organizations—including Consumers Union, the policy and mobilization arm of Consumer Reports—nine of the top 25 fast-food restaurants have publicly committed to significantly limiting their use of the drugs (up from five chains in 2015).

The report, which grades the chains on their antibiotic policies and practices, found that Panera and Chipotle lead the pack with A grades; almost all the meat they serve—beef, chicken, pork, and turkey—is raised without the routine use

of antibiotics. Subway might rate a “most improved”: Last year it got an F; this year, a B. It says that by the end of 2016 all of its chicken will be raised without antibiotics. But KFC, Burger King, and 14 other chains received failing grades.

Antibiotics are frequently used to help fatten livestock and keep the animals healthy in crowded, unsanitary conditions. But overuse contributes to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which infect an estimated 2 million people in the U.S. each year, of whom roughly 23,000 die, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“This is the health crisis of our generation,” Consumer Reports’ president and CEO, Marta Tellado, told delegates to the United Nations in September during a special session on antibiotic resistance. “We need leadership on a scale that we have not yet seen.” The U.N. ultimately passed a resolution to help combat the epidemic. To find out more about the overuse of antibiotics, go to [ConsumerReports.org/superbugs](http://ConsumerReports.org/superbugs). You can read the scorecard of restaurant grades at [ConsumerReports.org/holdantibiotics](http://ConsumerReports.org/holdantibiotics).

## Minding Our Medical Bills

WITHIN THE PAST two years, almost one in four privately insured Californians received a medical bill only to discover that his or her health plan paid less than expected, according to a 2015 Consumer Reports survey of 825 privately insured California residents. Among those patients, almost one in four was charged an out-of-network rate for healthcare even though he or she had thought a provider was in-network, an all-too-common scenario as more and more medical specialists are declining to enter into contracts with health insurers.

But although unwelcome surprises like those continue to plague patients nationwide, Californians can now recover from their ailments without that worry. That’s because the Golden State recently enacted a law that ensures that its residents will pay only in-network prices when receiving treatment at in-network hospitals, labs, imaging centers, and other healthcare facilities. California already had those consumer protections in place for emergency care. Consumer

Reports strongly supported the California law and worked with legislators to share stories of Californians hit with such unfair bills. We also helped to generate calls, emails, and social media outreach to lawmakers.

“This bill is a victory for the millions of Californians who will be protected from surprise medical bills, and it boosts the movement to end the financial pain in states around the country,” says Betsy Imholz, special projects director at Consumers Union.

In fact, our advocates are working in several states to help push for similar legislation and were strong proponents of a law recently passed in Florida that also strengthens patient protections. Go to [EndSurpriseMedicalBills.org](http://EndSurpriseMedicalBills.org) to learn more about our campaign to safeguard your rights in this area.

## Pushing Back on Bad Banks

OUR FINANCIAL SYSTEM lost a lot of credit with the public in 2008, and so far it doesn’t seem to be too concerned about improving its reputation. Comparing the months of May through July of this year with the same period in 2015, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has seen consumer complaints involving bank accounts and services spike 26 percent.

A majority of the complaints are about problems with checking accounts, including overdraft fees and inaccuracies in credit reports—concerns that we at Consumer Reports have raised for years.

The CFPB’s complaint database is a crucial tool that helps track and tackle troubling trends. If you find that you’re experiencing a problem like those mentioned with your own banking services, we encourage you to report the problem at [cfpb.gov/complaint](http://cfpb.gov/complaint).



# Product Updates

The latest ratings from our labs

## This Winter, Be Ready for Anything

Don't let a blizzard—or a wobbly piece of luggage—slow you down this season. Our ratings and expert advice give you all the intel you need to make snow blowing a breeze, and then to blow out of town with new luggage in tow.

**Don't Let This Happen to You.** Choosing the right snow blower, equal to the task of the amount of snow you get, will save you pain and strain.





**TROY-BILT  
VORTEX 2890**  
\$1,300

**90**

OVERALL  
SCORE

**CRAFTSMAN  
88694**  
\$900

**80**

OVERALL  
SCORE

**TORO POWER  
CLEAR 721E**  
\$570

**71**

OVERALL  
SCORE

## LET IT BLOW

A new design pumps up the power of snow blowers.

by Daniel DiClerico

RAISE YOUR FROSTBITTEN hand if you like clearing snow. We thought not. Happily, the newest breed of snow blower tackles that woeful winter chore up to 30 percent faster. Known as “three stage” snow blowers, you can hardly miss them in our ratings: They’ve stormed to the top.

“We think of these as two-stage blowers on steroids,” says Peter Sawchuk, our outdoor-power-equipment guru.

“The faster push comes from the addition of an accelerator.” Sawchuk is referring to a third auger, which corkscrews into drifts and zips snow, ice, and slush into the discharge impeller to be jettisoned out of your path. Two-stage blowers have the collection augers and impeller but don’t have the accelerator, and single-stage models rely solely on a quick-turning auger.

The reigning champ for value and performance among three-stagers in our tests is the Troy-Bilt Vortex 2890, \$1,300 at Lowe’s. The 28-inch-wide machine clears heavy 2-foot drifts with ease. Spending more on the Cub Cadet 3X 30HD, \$1,600, gets you a

wider, 30-inch clearing deck—better for long driveways. Power steering and single-hand controls make for superb handling on both models, earning them excellent marks in those categories.

Not everyone needs a three-stage model, but if you get a lot of wet, heavy snow or have a large area to clear, you’ll want to consider one. What’s a lot of snow? See our ratings on the facing page for snowfall-specific recommendations. If you live outside the snow belt but still get the occasional dump, a two-stage blower should suffice. The Craftsman 88694 delivers excellent performance for \$900. For lighter snow, the single-stage Toro Power Clear 721E, \$570, impressed us with its speed and handling, though its throwing distance was merely so-so. But with the money you’ll save, you can always hire the neighborhood shovel crew in a pinch.



WATCH

For a buying guide and a video on how we test snow blowers, go to [ConsumerReports.org/sbguide](https://www.ConsumerReports.org/sbguide). For a full list of snow blower ratings, online subscribers can go to [ConsumerReports.org/sbratings](https://www.ConsumerReports.org/sbratings).



**Ratings** > Get the drift: Snow blowers that are up to the task

❌ POOR 
 ⚠️ FAIR 
 👍 GOOD 
 👍👍 VERY GOOD 
 👍👍👍 EXCELLENT  
\$ CR BEST BUY 
 ✔️ RECOMMENDED

Recommended	Rank	Brand & Model	Price	Overall Score	Test Results										Features					
					Width (in.)	Engine Size	Type	Removal Speed	Plow-Pile Removal	Throwing Distance	Surface Cleaning	Controls	Handling	Electric Start	Heated Handgrips	Headlight	Single-Hand Controls	Freewheel Steering	Warranty (Yr.)	
<b>HEAVY SNOWFALL (12 to 24 inches)</b>																				
✔️	1	Cub Cadet 3X 30HD	\$1,600	92	30	420 cc	3-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
\$	2	Troy-Bilt Vortex 2890	\$1,300	90	28	357 cc	3-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	3	Craftsman 88874	\$1,300	89	28	357 cc	3-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	4	Ariens 921032	\$1,300	88	30	291 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
✔️	5	Craftsman 88396	\$1,200	88	30	357 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
\$	6	Ariens AX254 921030	\$1,000	87	28	254 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
✔️	7	Troy-Bilt Storm 3090	\$1,200	87	30	357 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
\$	8	Troy-Bilt Vortex 2490	\$1,100	82	24	277 cc	3-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
\$	9	Troy-Bilt Storm 2840	\$900	81	28	277 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	10	Craftsman 88870	\$1,200	79	24	277 cc	3-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
<b>MEDIUM SNOWFALL (8 to 12 inches)</b>																				
✔️	1	Craftsman 88694	\$900	80	26	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	2	Cub Cadet 2X 24HP	\$950	78	24	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
	3	Honda HS928K1WA	\$2,580	74	28	270 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
	4	Troy-Bilt Storm 2620	\$800	73	26	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
	5	Craftsman 88394	\$1,000	73	28	243 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
\$	6	Craftsman 88173	\$680	73	24	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
	7	Craftsman 88970	\$750	72	26	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	8	Toro Power Max 724 OE 37779	\$800	69	24	205 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	9	Ariens 920021	\$900	68	24	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
	10	Troy-Bilt Storm 2410	\$600	63	24	208 cc	2-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
<b>LIGHT SNOWFALL (Less than 8 inches)</b>																				
\$	1	Toro Power Clear 721E	\$570	71	21	212 cc	1-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2
✔️	2	Cub Cadet 221 LHP	\$550	67	21	208 cc	1-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	3
✔️	3	Honda HS 720AS	\$700	64	20	187 cc	1-Stage	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	👍👍	•	•	•	•	•	2

**HOW WE TEST:** Score is mainly removal speed, plow-pile removal, throwing distance, surface cleaning, controls, and handling. We've rounded displayed scores and ranked models in order of precise overall score. Removal Speed is how quickly and smoothly a model cleared an area; we pushed single-stage machines

as quickly as possible before they sounded as though they were stalling. Plow-Pile Removal is how fast the snow blower can remove snow-simulating wet sawdust piled like snow plowed to the edge of a driveway; we check-test in real, dense snow piles. Throwing Distance

is how far a snow blower hurled snow straight ahead, left, and right with its chute set for maximum distance; lengths range from roughly 10 feet to more than 30 feet (the farther the better). Surface Cleaning is how little snow is left on a blacktop surface with the machine set for best clearing (a bare surface is best).

Controls includes handle comfort and ease of adjusting handle height, discharge chute, engine controls, and ground speed. Handling is how easy it is to push, pull, and steer with the engine or motor on and off, along with how straight the unit tracks. Price is approximate retail.





## AHEAD OF THE PACK

Our buying advice and reader-satisfaction scores will make shopping for your next suitcase an open-and-shut case.

by Susan Feinstein

**WHILE SHOPPING** for a new suitcase, you can quickly find yourself foggy about the things that matter most. We've researched the features that go into making a reliable and user-friendly suitcase and are here to clear the air: When shopping for luggage, the important considerations are material, measurements, wheels, and durability. That advice, combined with reader-satisfaction scores and feedback from

our recent survey of 65,000 Consumer Reports subscribers, will help guide you to the suitcase that's best for you.

### BUYING BASICS

#### Choose a Side

Though bags come in countless shapes and sizes, luggage can generally be divided into two basic categories: hard-sided and soft-sided. Each has its advantages.

Hard-sided bags were the standard until the 1990s, when soft-sided luggage pulled ahead in popularity, according to Michele Marini Pittenger, president of the Travel Goods Association, a trade group. Some advantages: Soft-sided bags are lighter and can also flex and compress to more easily fit into the snug spaces of the overhead bin in an airplane.

Soft-sided bags are usually made of nylon or polyester fabric. An easy way

to determine the quality of the material is to subject a bag to a sniff test, says Bernard Majeau, director of product development at eBags, an online luggage retailer. A strong or offensive odor suggests that the bag is made from a low-grade polyester.

For nylon and polyester bags, Majeau says to check the denier, a measure of the material's thickness. There should be a manufacturer's tag on the luggage with a number followed by the letter D. A common denier rating is 600D, though the number can go much higher. In general, the higher the number, the more wear and tear it can handle.

To keep fragile items from being crushed or your clothes from being creased, nothing beats hard-sided, or hard-shell, suitcases. They're making a comeback, thanks to new materials that are rigid and lightweight. Of the 27,000 people who rated their suitcase in our recent subscriber survey, 21 percent said they chose hard-sided luggage for their midsized and large pieces, and 14 percent chose it for their carry-on pieces.

Most hard-shell luggage is made with modern plastics, such as polypropylene, ABS, or polycarbonate. According to Majeau, polypropylene and polycarbonate are more flexible and ABS is more rigid. Aluminum luggage is probably the most durable and secure—it often features metal draw-bolt latches instead of zippers—but aluminum bags can also be comparatively heavy.

Another advantage of hard-sided luggage is that you can't overstuff it to bulging, so as long as you buy the right size, it'll fit in the luggage sizers at the gate. Hard-sided luggage might also be more secure because it can't be ripped open as easily and the locks are usually built in vs. having an external padlock.

Still, hard luggage is not without potential drawbacks. For instance, some suitcases open like a clamshell, which allows you to pack two equal sides but also takes up more space



when the bag is open than many soft-sided bags, which have a flap closure that unzips and flips over the side. Hard-sided bags can also scuff and scratch more easily than soft-sided, and if you crack one, you can pretty much forget about repairing it.

### Determine Durability

Once you've settled on hard or soft, it's time to deal with the overall durability of the bag. Our survey shows that durability is the single greatest predictor of overall satisfaction with luggage: Among the readers who rated their suitcases, 61 percent said that durability was among the three most important factors when choosing carry-on, midsized, or large luggage. How do you judge a bag's durability?

**ZERO IN ON ZIPPERS.** Majeau says that most pieces of luggage come with a coil zipper, which is usually made of polyester and differs from the metal tooth zipper found on, say, a pair of jeans. Majeau says that the larger the zipper, the stronger it is likely to be.

**HOIST THE HANDLE.** Handles take a lot of abuse as bags are pulled up and down curbs and yanked mercilessly by bellhops and airline baggage workers. Make sure your handle is built to last: It should feel solid and sturdy, and not wiggle or rattle as you pull. It should also telescope smoothly up and down. Note that a handle that retracts completely into the bag is less likely to sustain damage.

**WADE INTO THE WARRANTY.** A lifetime warranty for repair or replacement is, of course, the best option and a good indication that the manufacturer stands behind a bag's durability. But make sure to check for exclusions and to read the fine print. Certain manufacturers will cover damage caused by an airline, for instance; others won't. And most won't cover normal wear and tear.

### Deal With the Wheels

A majority of our survey respondents said that the ease of wheeling a bag was among the three most important

#### BAGGAGE BY THE NUMBERS

A look at how readers shop for and use their luggage.

#### TOP CONCERNS WHEN SHOPPING FOR LUGGAGE



**34%**

of readers say that price is a top priority when buying luggage.

**55%**

of readers say that durability is a top priority when buying luggage.



#### CHECKING IN ON WHO CHECKS THEIR BAGS

**65%**

of readers say they check a bag often or every time they fly.

**71%**

of readers say they check their bag because it's too big to carry on.

Of the readers who carry on their bags:



**Source** Consumer Reports National Research Center 2016 Winter Survey of 64,916 CR subscribers.

requirements when choosing carry-on, midsized, or large luggage.

When it comes to wheels, the first decision you'll need to make is whether you want two or four.

Four-wheeled suitcases, also called spinner suitcases, are more versatile and ergonomic. You can easily wheel a spinner at your side or in front of you, or pull it behind you without putting much stress on your back or shoulders. Spinners are a cinch to navigate down narrow airplane aisles and through other tight spaces, but you need to keep an eye on them: Because a spinner doesn't have stationary legs, it can roll away when it's placed on an incline. The wheels on spinner suitcases are mounted externally, which could leave them vulnerable to snapping off if they're subjected to rough handling.

A two-wheeler, on the other hand, rolls only forward and backward. It's less ergonomic because you have to drag it behind you, which could irritate your shoulder, wrist, or back. It can also be awkward to navigate in crowded places because you need some clearance between yourself and the bag (unlike spinners, which can be wheeled directly at your side). But two-wheelers usually have the advantage over four-wheelers at clearing curbs and rolling on sidewalks and uneven surfaces—something you should keep in mind if you plan to spend a lot of time on the cobblestone streets of Europe.

A two-wheeler will also stay put on an incline and might be easier to fit into the overhead compartment because its wheels are slightly recessed.

A wobbly suitcase will slow you down, so pull any bag you're considering buying around the showroom to make sure that the wheels roll smoothly. Gently jiggle them to determine whether they are firmly attached. (Wheels that are secured to the suitcase with screws can be more easily replaced if damaged or broken than wheels that are attached with rivets.)



## HOW TO SIZE UP A CARRY-ON

THE SINGLE most important factor in buying a carry-on bag is its measurements: If it doesn't fit in the overhead compartment, you'll be forced to check it at the gate. Ignore

claims on tags and labels that a bag is "official carry-on luggage." There is no such thing. The dimensions airlines allow can vary by company and by aircraft. In a 2015 Consumer

Reports investigation, nine of the 11 models we measured were larger than the size claimed by the manufacturer. So take a tape measure to the store and verify the dimensions

yourself. When measuring, make sure to include the wheels and other parts that can add dimension, such as outer pouches and handles. Here are other points to keep in mind.



### CARRY-ON CONCERNS

More than half of the 39,000 readers who we surveyed and who said they had flown over the past year reported that they take a carry-on bag on some or all of their trips. Almost three-quarters said that they do so to save time at the airport.

Of course, the timesaving convenience of a carry-on bag is lost if it turns out to be too big for the overhead compartment and the airline forces you to check it. Follow these tips to make sure you buy the right carry-on luggage.

**MEASURE IT.** The maximum allowable (for now, at least) dimensions for a carry-on bag on domestic flights on American, Delta, and United are

22 inches high, 9 inches deep, and 14 inches wide. That includes wheels, retracted handles, and compartment protrusions. Measure the bag with a tape measure. You can't always rely on the product dimensions found on the bag's hangtag or on a seller's website to determine whether a piece of luggage is carry-on compliant (see above).

**SPIN IT.** A four-wheeled spinner, with wheels that turn 360 degrees, is usually easier to maneuver than a two-wheeler. That will come in handy as you're wheeling it down the narrow aisle of the aircraft.

**LOOK INSIDE.** Not all interiors are created equal, even with the same

exterior dimensions. But certain features maximize interior packing space. They include squared (as opposed to curved) corners and outer compartments that are integrated (not protruding). If you need every last bit of space, a two-wheeler will usually give you a few more cubic inches than a spinner of the same size.

**WEIGH IT.** Most of the weight you lug around should be that of your belongings, not the bag. In our survey, 31 percent of recent luggage purchasers said they were looking for something lighter. Majeau says that if you are an infrequent traveler, consider sacrificing durability for a lighter-weight bag.



Brand	Reader Score	Survey Results				
		Ease of Carrying	Wheelability	Ease of Packing	Durability	Stowability
<b>CARRY-ON</b>						
Briggs & Riley	90	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑
Hartmann	89	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Eagle Creek	88	↑↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Rick Steves	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Tumi	87	↑↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑
L.L.Bean	86	↑	↑	↑	↑↑	↑
Kirkland Signature (Costco)	86	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Travelpro	86	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Heys	85	↑↑	↑↑	↑	↑	↑
Ricardo Beverly Hills	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Victorinox	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Samsonite	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓
Swissgear	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Delsey	83	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓
American Tourister	82	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓
Atlantic	82	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓

<b>CHECKED</b>						
Brand	Reader Score	Ease of Carrying	Wheelability	Ease of Packing	Durability	Stowability
Briggs & Riley	88	↑	↑↑	↑↑	↑↑	NA
Eagle Creek	88	↑	↑↑	↑	↑↑	NA
L.L.Bean	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA

Brand	Reader Score	Survey Results				
		Ease of Carrying	Wheelability	Ease of Packing	Durability	Stowability
<b>CHECKED (Continued)</b>						
Tumi	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA
Kirkland Signature (Costco)	83	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA
Travelpro	82	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA
Hartmann	82	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA
Victorinox	82	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA
Nautica	82	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
Ricardo Beverly Hills	82	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA
Samsonite	81	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA
Delsey	80	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
London Fog	80	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
It Luggage	80	↑	↑	↑	↓	NA
Swissgear	80	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
Skyway	79	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA
Heys	79	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
Kenneth Cole	79	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
Chaps	78	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA
Atlantic	78	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA
American Tourister	77	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA
American Flyer	77	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA
Dockers	76	↓	↓	↓	↓	NA
Protocol	75	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA

**HOW WE SURVEY:** Ratings are based on responses to luggage-satisfaction questions. Respondents—8,218 carry-on owners and 18,973 owners of midsized and large suitcases—were Consumer Reports subscribers surveyed online as

part of the Consumer Reports National Research Center's 2016 Winter Survey. The Reader Score represents overall satisfaction and is not exclusively determined by factors under the survey results. If all respondents were completely

satisfied with a brand of suitcase, the reader score would be 100; a score of 80 indicates that respondents were very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well-satisfied. Differences of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. Each category under Survey Results

reflects average scores on the same 6-point satisfaction scale ranging from completely satisfied to completely dissatisfied. Ratings are based on subscribers, who may not be representative of the general U.S. population.

## WHERE TO BUY LUGGAGE

IN OUR SURVEY, 13 retailers met the criteria for inclusion in our luggage-store Ratings: Amazon.com, Costco, eBags, JCPenney, Kohl's, Macy's, Marshalls, Ross, Samsonite, Sears, T.J.Maxx, Target, and Walmart. Overall, 80 percent

of the 4,400 readers who participated in the luggage-store ratings were highly satisfied with their shopping experience at those retailers. Amazon.com, eBags, and Costco were among the highest-rated, and Target and Walmart were among the

lowest-rated. Amazon.com and eBags earned high marks across all criteria. Among the respondents who rated the 13 retailers, 21 percent bought their luggage at the online retailers Amazon.com and eBags. Both were

rated highly for all aspects of purchasing luggage.

Though survey respondents were happy with the prices and quality of the luggage they bought at Costco, the retailer scored low on selection and quality of service.





## I want to buy my husband a laptop that comes with great tech support because he always has a million questions. Who has the best?

Like any computers, laptops don't always perform perfectly. If you're not a tech guru, good support can be invaluable.

In this year's CR survey on the topic, we asked almost 10,000 subscribers about experiences with computer manufacturers' phone staff support, websites, email, or online live chat support, and whether manufacturers actually solved the problem at hand.

"Apple got top marks, providing significantly better service than all other computer manufacturers," says Adam

Troy, Ph.D., the CR senior research associate who headed up the survey. In manufacturer tech support, Apple scored an 82 out of 100, as well as a 5 out of 5 for phone support and a 4 out of 5 for online support. And readers reported that their problems were solved 79 percent of the time. The next two most highly rated companies, Microsoft and Dell, scored a 68 and 56, respectively. Though Lenovo ranks in the top three in many of our computer ratings, in support it was fourth, with a 54.

For in-store tech support, the Apple Store's Genius Bar was also tops but was matched by independent local computer retailers. Both got an 81 in our reader survey. (Always check to see whether fees apply.)

CR.org subscribers can see our full tech support survey results at [ConsumerReports.org/techsupport](http://ConsumerReports.org/techsupport).

## My guest room mattress is a pillowtop that can't be flipped, and I have guests visiting for the holidays. What's the best way to clean it?

Even if your mattress is unflippable, there are simple steps you can take to help keep it clean and fresh.

First, remove any pads or covers and clean them according to the directions. Then vacuum the mattress with the upholstery attachment on your vacuum cleaner. Switch to the crevice tool for deep cleaning of seams, where dirt, dust, and undesirables collect.

A normal vacuum is fine, says John Galeotafiore, who led our recent vacuum tests, but if you're a stickler, try the Dyson V6 Mattress Handheld Vacuum, \$250. Though it's a bit pricey, it sucked up three times more material from a mattress than a highly rated canister vacuum.

Don't forget to spot-treat any stains. A carpet cleaner or enzyme-based pet-odor remover can do the job on bodily fluids. Then deodorize the mattress by sprinkling a box of baking soda over it. For best results, leave it on for 24 hours. Last, vacuum the mattress once again and put on clean sheets.

## I just got a fancy wooden cutting board. How can I make sure it stays sanitary and pretty?

You're right to be concerned, because wood is porous and can trap microorganisms. That's why it's important to create a barrier that will prevent absorption of liquids. It will also prolong the life of an expensive wood cutting board. First rub food-grade mineral oil and then a beeswax-based cream into the wood using a paper towel. Consumer Reports countertop expert Chris Regan reports that Clapham's Beeswax Salad Bowl Finish worked well on wooden countertops we tested.

But hygienic habits shouldn't end there. Once you've treated your cutting board, handwash it after use with hot, soapy water; don't immerse it. Rinse with cold water, pat dry, and stand it up on its side to air-dry completely.

You can also occasionally sanitize it with a solution of 1 tablespoon of liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water. Reapply mineral oil and beeswax after each bleach sanitizing or whenever the wood starts to look dry or becomes noticeably lighter in color.

Last, be sure to prevent cross-contamination when preparing a meal by using one board for produce and bread and another for cutting raw meat and poultry, says Michael Hansen, Ph.D., a food-safety and environmental health expert at Consumer Reports.



We have more than 140 in-house experts who research, test, and compare—so you don't have to! Send your questions to: [ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts](http://ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts) ... and watch this space for the answers.



# The Great Gift Guide of 2016

► **This is a gift guide like no other.** We hope you'll find it the most trustworthy guide you'll use all season, because we've worked hard on it all year with you in mind.

The products we're showcasing are not the favorites of fashionistas or the picks of public relations firms—and certainly not the fingers-crossed-that-it-sells selections of retailers or manufacturers. No, no. This stellar constellation of 104 gift suggestions represents our top-rated products from among the thousands we buy, test, and torture all year long, so we can tell you which excel in performance, safety, efficiency, and value. (Along the way, you'll find an additional 21 personal picks from our editors and experts.)

Then we organized the choices into groupings to appeal to all the special people in your life, whether they are foodies, social connectors, weekend warriors, or homebodies. Bearing your budget in mind, about a third overall cost less than \$100. Digital subscribers can find these and more at [ConsumerReports.org/giftguide](http://ConsumerReports.org/giftguide).

So let the shopping, wrapping, and unwrapping begin!



## What the Ratings Mean

You'll find three kinds of designations in our Gift Guide.

### 83 OVERALL SCORE

The Overall Score is the numeric value given after we conduct rigorous comparative testing on a large number of models. (Just don't compare the absolute numbers in the Overall Score across different categories of products; the numbers reflect the specific tests that are important to that product, whether it's a laptop or a washing machine.)

### OVERALL SCORE

The circles with arrow symbols (but no number) are on products that underwent comparative testing but with a pool of fewer models. If you want to see the full ratings charts for a product category (laptops, for example), go to CR.org (for digital subscribers) or consult our full-year index on page 78 to see when they ran in earlier issues of the magazine.



### EXPERT OR EDITOR PICK

The third designation is an Expert or Editor Pick; these are products that our engineers or editors endorse based on their own use of the product, either at home or in our labs.





GETTING EVEN

### Panasonic FlashXpress NB-G1110P Toaster Oven

\$110

69

OVERALL  
SCORE

The world of toaster ovens is not exactly a hotbed of innovation. That's why we're excited about this groundbreaking model. Its quartz and ceramic elements deliver infrared heat *instantly*. The result? That morning English muffin hits the table faster—and evenly browned every time.



The fastest way to a cook's heart is with a gift that makes meal prep easy and delicious. Show your appreciation by giving one of these culinary wonders.







**Expert Pick**  
**Sur La Table Citrus Reamer**  
 \$5

"It's small but pleasing to the palm—with nice heft—and it gets every last drop out of your fruit. It's so easy to use and clean that I find I use fresh juice much more often."

—Amy Keating, R.D., a dietitian in our food-testing lab



**WHIP SMART**  
**Cuisinart Power Advantage HM-50**  
 \$40

**78**  
 OVERALL SCORE

In our lab tests, this nicely priced hand mixer outperformed models costing twice as much. It'll turn whipping cream into fluffy peaks in seconds. Stiff cookie dough, which undoes many bargain mixers, proved no problem. You won't get much in the way of add-ons, but its wire beaters do just fine.

**GO FRY AN EGG**

**Cuisinart CastLite Nonstick Fry Pan**  
 \$35

**70**  
 OVERALL SCORE

This 10-inch pan turns out evenly browned pancakes, and fried eggs slide out like silk when done, without any scraping or sticking.

The handle stays cool to the touch, too, so with all hassles removed, the only thing left is to eat and enjoy.







**Expert Pick**  
**Cuisinart Classic**  
**Knife Set**  
 \$80

"The lightweight design of the knives in this 15-piece set makes them easy on your hands, and the price makes them just as easy on your wallet."

—Bernie Daitrick, senior product tester

PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH



BROWNED AND DETERMINED

**ThermoWorks Pocket RT600C**  
 \$20

**80**

OVERALL  
SCORE

Tired of guessing or poking your way to the answer of whether your festive roast is perfectly done? With this battery-operated, instant-read digital thermometer, all the cook has to do is turn it on and stick it in the meat as the end of the cooking time nears. It provides quick, accurate, reliable results in an easily readable display.



FAST FOOD PHENOM

**Fagor Premium 6 Quart**  
**Pressure & Rice Cooker**  
 \$100

**85**

OVERALL  
SCORE

Save time, eat well. That's the pressure-cooker promise, and this one is the fastest of three electric models we tested—much speedier than using a stovetop to prepare some foods. Whoever's lucky enough to receive it can cook braised ribs, bouillabaisse, and more, with recipes included.



POP-UP PERFECTION

**Proctor Silex Cool**  
**Touch 22203 Toaster**  
 \$15

**69**

OVERALL  
SCORE

The simple plastic housing keeps the price low, but the performance is not compromised. In terms of toasting consistency, this humble two-slicer outperformed models that cost many times more. It's perfect for a college student or that first-time apartment renter in your life.





CIRCLE THE WAGONS

**The Pioneer Woman Vintage Speckle Nonstick 10-Piece Set**  
\$99

**64**  
OVERALL SCORE

Ree Drummond, The Pioneer Woman blogger and Food Network star, lends her name to this porcelain-enamel nonstick cookware set. Cooking evenness

and nonstick durability were among the best we tested, and most pieces are relatively lightweight.

DESIGN FOR GIVING

**Krups KH732D50 Toaster**  
\$70

**78**  
OVERALL SCORE

You might imagine all toasters are created equal, with walls of filaments that turn red hot when electricity flows through. Yet many models struggle to serve up

evenly browned toast. Enter this top-scoring Krups. Thanks to the layout of its heating coils, it delivers consistent results, whether set for light or dark.



**Expert Pick**  
**Microplane Premium Classic Zester/Grater**  
\$15

"It's so much easier to zest any kind of citrus with my Microplane than with a box grater. The zest doesn't stick—it just falls right off. And it's just as good for hard cheeses, too. I have one at home, and I just bought another one to use at work!"

—Claudia Gallo, CR recipe developer



NICELY DONE

**Oregon Scientific Wireless BBQ/Oven AW131**

\$40

**82**  
OVERALL SCORE

No more need for a host to linger near the grill or oven with one eye on the meat—this leave-in digital thermometer frees the cook for higher-level tasks such as enjoying some eggnog. All he has to do is select meat type and doneness, insert the probe, and wait for the portable receiver to prompt him.



QUICK FIX

**Philippe Richard 6-Quart Pressure Cooker, Aluminum TTUI9554**

\$20

**82**  
OVERALL SCORE

Costing less than a single night of takeout, this stovetop model cooks even faster than electric pressure cookers, especially on gas burners. But however speedy it may be, its limited lifetime warranty means it should be around for the long haul.



COOL CUSTOMER

**All-Clad Stainless Fry Pan**

\$100

**47**  
OVERALL SCORE

Not a fan of nonstick coatings? This 10-inch pan doesn't have one. But it does have a handle that stays cool to the touch, no matter how hot the pan itself gets, and its magnetic material means this versatile model also works with an induction cooktop or range.



COUNTER INTELLIGENCE

**Breville Smart Oven Pro BOV845BSS Toaster Oven**

\$270

**74**  
OVERALL SCORE

Our number-one-rated countertop cooker lives up to its name with a combination of intuitive controls and pinpoint temperature performance. In addition to the morning toast, it'll turn out perfectly roasted meats, broiled vegetables, baked goods, and 13-inch pizzas—making any cook look clever.



BURNING LOVE

**Weber Spirit S-210 46110001 Grill**

\$450

**71**  
OVERALL SCORE

Grilling should be fun, but tempers can flare if the propane tank is empty or the burners conk out. This small grill guards against both crises with a fuel gauge and a 10-year warranty on its burners. Plus, it heats evenly, a rarity among small models we tested.

PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH (THERMOMETER); BRENDAN WIXTED (PRESSURE COOKER)





MIX IT UP  
**Electrolux Expressionist  
 ELJB56B8PS Blender**  
 \$170

**80**  
 OVERALL SCORE

It's not quite the poor man's Vitamix, but it does cost hundreds less than most über-blenders while delivering performance in the same league, especially when it comes to making smoothies and other frozen drinks. Its compact design—just 16 inches tall—means it's simple to store, too.



Expert Pick  
**Kitchen Grips  
 Chef's Mitt**  
 \$20 per mitt

"These oven mitts are so much better than the cloth kind that feel like mittens. They're thin and flexible, so I can still move my hands."

—Maxine Siegel, R.D., head of food testing



A COOK'S BEST FRIEND  
**Swiss Diamond Reinforced  
 10-Piece Set**  
 \$600

**72**  
 OVERALL SCORE

It wasn't merely the diamond particles in the nonstick coating that dazzled us. Food cooked evenly, the pots and pans have heft, the handles are sturdy, and a lifetime warranty backs it all up.



PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH (OVEN MITT AND POTS)



# Show Me the Money

Cash may be king, but other options could make an even better gift of buying power this year.

## WHO DOESN'T LIKE MONEY?

The near-universal appeal of cash has made it a popular gift for special occasions since the Lydians minted the first coins in the 7th century B.C. Cash also saves a lot of time and trouble. What could be simpler than opening your wallet or change purse?

To give the gift of cash properly, you'll want to get crisp bills

from the bank and slip them into a card with a handwritten message. If you're really ambitious (and generous), you might even roll up a few new notes and tie them with a festive ribbon to hew to the holiday theme.

But cash isn't without its drawbacks. For one, if it's lost, it's gone forever. For another, it's a gift that tends to be forgotten

almost as soon as it's put into a wallet with other bills.

Consumers who want to give cash for the holidays should also consider gift cards and prepaid cards, some of which are almost as widely accepted as cash and can come with some benefits that cash lacks.

Here's what to consider when deciding between these options.

## GIFT CARDS

### Pros

In a word: convenience. Just grab merchant cards or payment network cards (American Express, Discover, MasterCard, and Visa) at a drugstore, retailer, or supermarket. They can also be purchased online and sent to you or your giftee by mail. Federal law prevents cards from expiring for at least five years from the purchase date or from the last date any additional money was loaded onto them. State laws often provide additional protections.

### Cons

Merchant cards can be used only at the walk-in or online store of the issuing retailer. If the company goes out of business, the recipient might not get the full value of the card, or it might become worthless. And the merchant might not be a favorite of your intended recipient. If you're sending a gift card to someone in a different region of the U.S. or overseas, there might be few convenient store locations (or none). There might be a small fee to buy and activate network cards.

### Security

Some issuers won't replace a lost or stolen gift card, the Federal Trade Commission says. Others will—with proof of purchase and the card's ID number—so give the receipt along with the card. But don't expect to get back any value stolen before you report the loss. Scammers can also copy gift card codes while they're still on a rack, then steal whatever money a gift-giver loads onto the card. Before you buy a gift card, inspect its protective stickers or coating for tampering, and don't buy it if the PIN has been revealed or the sticker seems to have been replaced.

### Our Advice

Don't give a merchant gift card unless you're certain the intended recipient really loves the store. Almost one billion dollars in gift cards went unspent 2015, according to the market research firm CEB.

## PREPAID CARDS

### Pros

Prepaid cards can be used wherever merchants accept American Express (3.4 million locations in the U.S.) or MasterCard and Visa (12 million). Also, the recipient can add money to a card and continue using it to pay for purchases. (The cards are also a good money-management tool.) Make sure you give cards with low or no monthly fees or other user charges.

### Cons

You'll usually pay a few dollars for a prepaid card at a store or online. And not all prepaid cards are a good deal. Some have fees that can eat up the balance. When we rated 20 prepaid cards earlier this year, we recommended only about half of them.

### Security

Many issuers of prepaid cards voluntarily offer the same consumer protections against fraud loss as bank debit cards by limiting your liability to \$50 if you report the unauthorized use within two days of discovering it. Prepaid cards with the MasterCard and Visa brands go further by providing zero liability. But to get those protections, you must register the card. In October the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau issued a rule requiring that all prepaid cards match the liability protections of debit cards, but the new regulations won't take effect until October 2017.

### Our Advice

Three cards stood out in our ratings: Bluebird by American Express and Walmart, Chase Liquid Visa, and Green Dot Prepaid Visa. They were highly rated for safety (insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation), fee accessibility, and clarity. They also rated well for value (low fees).





For those who go gaga for gizmos, these gifts are as much fun to use as they are useful.





ROAR ON THE FLOOR  
**Roomba 960 Robotic Vacuum**  
\$700

**87**

OVERALL  
SCORE

Yes, it costs maybe as much as your first used car, but the idea of never having to push a vacuum again is priceless for some. Our tests demonstrate its excellent cleaning capability on carpets and bare floors alike. This latest version also allows you to control it via an app on your smartphone—nice for when you need to clean up in advance of unexpected visitors.





DYNAMIC TRIO

**Eero Home WiFi System**  
\$500

**71**  
OVERALL SCORE

Now you can give the gift of good WiFi all throughout anyone's home. The three routers in this pack work in unison to create a "mesh network" that helps eliminate dead zones in the basement, backyard, and other nether reaches. The setup takes roughly 15 minutes, and the network can be managed via an app on your smartphone.



COOL TO THE CORE

**Apple Watch Series 2**  
\$370

**85**  
OVERALL SCORE

The old Apple Watch was aimed at keeping you connected. This new one has added some serious fitness tracker muscle. It's water-resistant to a depth of 50 meters and has built-in GPS to map your runs, and the heart-rate monitor and step tracking features are plenty accurate. The updated watchOS 3 operating system also lets you share workout data with family and friends.



STICK WITH A WINNER

**Dyson V8 Absolute**  
\$600

**93**  
OVERALL SCORE

Once you get past the price, there's nothing you won't like about this new model—the best stick vacuum we've ever tested. It aced our carpet and bare floor tests and picked up pet hair like a pro. It's also surprisingly quiet. We wouldn't blame you for stuffing the V8 into your own stocking. Just don't turn the thing on!



FINE PRINT

**Epson Expression Premium XP-830**  
\$200

**74**  
OVERALL SCORE

Perfect for the home office, this versatile inkjet printer is speedy, spitting out 10 text pages per minute (at 5 cents per page). It has a touch-screen display and a document feeder for copying and scanning, and it lets you send paperless faxes with your PC. It also prints very good photos on glossy paper, as well as text pages or images from a mobile device using a WiFi connection.



GAMES ON!

**Nvidia Shield K1**  
\$200

**75**  
OVERALL SCORE

This 8-inch tablet is an excellent performer—especially for gaming. What it lacks in all-day battery life it more than makes up for with an excellent high-res display and expandable storage. Toss in plenty of processing power, a Mini-HDMI port, support for Nvidia's line of gaming accessories, and access to Google Play's gaming library, and it's a Borderlands 2 player's dream machine.

PHOTO: OPENING SPREAD; TOP LEFT: GETTY IMAGES; PHOTOS: BRENDAN WIXTED (WATCH); MIKE BUONY (VACUUM); REBEKAH NEMETHY (TABLET)





Editor Pick  
**Amazon Echo**  
5180

"I use my Echo wireless speaker most of all for Alexa, Amazon's voice-activated personal assistant. She tells me the weather, plays my favorite music, orders household products online, and turns out the lights on command. My whole life is Alex-afied, and my wife is as much of a fan as I am."

—Mike Gikas, electronics editor



## RETURN POLICIES THAT ROCK—AND NOT

IF YOU BELIEVE it's the thought that counts, then you won't be offended if the recipient of a gift you've given can't use it for whatever reason. So why not make it easy for him or her to return it? Here are retailers with the best and worst policies:

### The Best

**1. NORDSTROM** No formal return policy. Returns are handled case by case. No receipts required, no time limits, no original tags needed (except for special occasion dresses).

**2. L.L.BEAN** Guarantees "100% satisfaction in every way" and means it: You can exchange or return an item years after purchasing it, even if it's well-used. Having a gift receipt makes returns easier, but if you don't, you can exchange for a similar item or get a store credit.

**3. BED BATH & BEYOND** You can return in-store or by mail with no time limit (except for baby and maternity clothes) and free shipping. No gift receipt? An employee can look up purchases made in the last year. If the item can't be found, you can get a refund for store credit at its current price, minus 20 percent.

**4. COSTCO** No time limit on returns, except for appliances and electronics, which must go back within 90 days. No receipt necessary.

**5. JCPENNEY** Accepts returns and exchanges without a receipt at any time, except for furniture, fine jewelry, and electronics. Formal dresses and electronics require original tags or packing.

### The Worst

**1. FOREVER 21** You must have a receipt. Takes returns within 30 days but offers only exchanges for other items or store credit; no refunds. Online is better: You can get a refund if you return within 30 days, but you pay shipping.

**2. KMART** Allows 30 days for returns with a receipt. With a gift receipt, you get only store credit. Many items, including music, movies, and video games, are not eligible for return if their packages are opened.

**3. BARNES & NOBLE** Two weeks to return for a refund. Items must be unopened, with receipt. With a gift receipt, you have 60 days to return for store credit.

**4. GAMESTOP** Thirty days for returns (7 days for preowned items), receipt required. With a gift receipt, items qualify only for exchanges or store credit.

**5. SEARS** Returns must be made within 30 days and with a receipt. With a gift receipt, you get an exchange or a gift card. Some items may have a 15 percent restocking fee.

—Donna Rosato





**Expert Pick**  
 THE HIP DIMENSION  
**Virtual Reality Headsets**

"The HTC Vive virtual reality headset tops my list. The two wireless controllers allow you to interact with objects such as a bow and arrow in VR games. But you need to be tethered to a powerful computer to use it. The Samsung Gear VR and the Merge VR Goggles, which both use a smartphone for processing power, are also good. The Gear works with Samsung phones and has a wheel to sharpen the focus; the Merge (Android and iOS phones) has a soft foam body and adjustable lenses for a better fit." —Bernie Deitrick, senior product tester



**Samsung Gear VR Powered by Oculus**  
 \$100

**HTC Vive VR Headset**  
 \$800



**Merge VR Goggles**  
 \$80



**LEAN CLEAN MACHINE**  
**Shark Rocket DeluxePro TruePet HV322**  
 \$230

**78**

**OVERALL SCORE**

Battery-powered stick vacuums are convenient for quick cleanups, but to vacuum an entire home you need a corded model that will go the distance. This Shark is our current favorite. It's one of the few recommended stick vacs that provides impressive suction on both carpets and bare floors. We also like that it converts easily to a hand vac, which you can carry far and wide, thanks to the generous 30-foot-long cord.



**IMAGE CONSCIOUS**  
**Brother mfc-J680dw**  
 \$120

**70**

**OVERALL SCORE**

This inkjet printer is a great gift for the family photographer. It quickly prints very good photographs on glossy paper (only fair on plain paper) and has a separate tray for snapshot-sized photo paper. Its 1.3-inch touch-screen display lets you preview the images on a memory card reader. It also prints two-sided copies and has scan and fax functions and built-in WiFi networking.

PHOTOS: REBEKAH NEMETHY (TABLET); PETE PEZZELLA (VACUUM)





TIME OF YOUR LIFE  
**Samsung Gear S2 Classic Smartwatch**  
 \$350

**83**  
 OVERALL SCORE

Don't let the fancy facade fool you: This state-of-the-art smartwatch is water-resistant and loaded with functions, including GPS tracking, a heart-rate monitor and step counter, and the ability to make and receive telephone calls—and even to pay for transactions at stores via Samsung Pay. The watch will work only with Android devices running Android 4.3 Jellybean or higher.



DREAM SCREEN  
**Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 8**  
 \$350

**83**  
 OVERALL SCORE

This 8-inch tablet has an excellent OLED display that's one of the best our testers have ever seen. Crisp and bright, it provides accurate colors, deeper blacks, and better viewing angles than most other tablets. What's more, the Galaxy Tab has a fingerprint reader, a pre-installed file manager, an 8-megapixel camera (but no flash), 11 hours of battery life, and the ability to connect to USB storage devices.



**A GIFT FOR KIDS THAT PAYS DIVIDENDS**

ARE YOU SEARCHING for a gift for a young person in your life that will last a lot longer than the paper it's wrapped in? Here's a solution: stock.

Is this kind of gift too high-concept for a kid? If a child is old enough to covet a sneaker, say experts, he's probably old enough to begin to appreciate

stocks—and how their prices reflect how well a company is doing. (Children can't trade stocks themselves until they're 18, so you—and potentially the child's parents—would have to be involved, anyway.) But such a gift can spark a conversational economics lesson about the importance of saving, and waiting. "It's a great way to introduce kids to the world of investing in a tangible way," says Robin Taub, a Toronto-based financial consultant and author of "A Parent's Guide to Raising Money-Smart Kids" (Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada, 2015). With your gift, you can introduce them to websites such as Morningstar or Yahoo Finance, where they can track their

holdings. Here are ways to buy:

**GIFT CARDS** At Stockpile, an adult can create a custom e-gift card entitling the recipient to buy stock in Apple, Coca-Cola, or hundreds of other choices. Or buy a Stockpile plastic gift card, which is available at Kmart, Office Depot, and Wegmans, among other outlets. The cards show a particular company's name, but holders can purchase shares—or fractional shares—of many companies or exchange-traded funds. (An adult must open a custodial account to hold a minor's stock.)

**DIRECT STOCK PURCHASE** The Walt Disney Company's direct stock purchase plan lets you buy stock directly from

Disney for an initial cash investment of \$175, or monthly deductions of \$50 from a qualified bank account (the \$50 buys a partial share, which builds into multiple shares with subsequent investments and dividends). Other direct plans with kid appeal that let you purchase stock directly include Harley-Davidson and Nike.

**CERTIFICATES** GiveAShare can send you real, paper stock certificates from companies kids know, including Facebook and Netflix. The basic \$40 fee includes a cardboard frame. You may be required to pay \$25 additional to a transfer agent.

As to how to wrap it? Well, we'll leave it up to you about how creative to get!

—Tobie Stanger





**Expert Pick**  
**BATTLE OF THE BOTS: ROUND ONE**  
**Toy Robots**

"In the first of our robot face-offs, we pitted Wonder Workshop's Dash against the Sphero BB-8, each \$150. "The BB-8 is cool. Its head floats like magic above its rolling-orb body. And its app-enabled functionality offers things like voice commands, recorded messages, and autonomous navigation. But the Dash is the better toy of the two, with five free educational apps that introduce programming skills for different age groups." —Emilio Garza, appliance tester

FOR THE LATEST RESULTS OF OUR ROBOT FACE-OFFS, GO TO [CONSUMERREPORTS.ORG/BOTS1216](http://CONSUMERREPORTS.ORG/BOTS1216).

**Wonder Workshop Dash**  
 \$150



**Sphero BB-8**  
 \$150



**FUN AND FUNCTIONAL**  
**ZenPad S 8.0 Z580C-B1 (32GB)**  
 \$170

**73**  
 OVERALL SCORE

A fantastic screen, fast performance, excellent touch response, and good battery life make this tablet an easy choice even for demanding web surfers and gamers. With a sharp, 328ppi resolution display, this ZenPad is outstanding for watching videos, and its full access to the Google Docs app market provides a large and varied selection of apps.



**SIGNAL MINDED**  
**Linksys AC2600 Router**  
 \$240

**89**  
 OVERALL SCORE

The reigning king of routers (at least in our labs), this Linksys model can admirably handle a legion of smartphones, laptops, and other internet-connected devices with ease in even very large homes. It also comes with automatic firmware updates, an admirably easy setup, and four Ethernet and two USB ports. Power users will appreciate its speed and many settings for optimizing their network.

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS (PRINTER AND SPHERO)



# Top Shops for Tech

The best places—online and off—to buy wired and wireless gifts

ACCORDING TO the Consumer Technology Association, 75 percent of holiday shoppers will buy tech gifts this year. They'll be glad to know that in a recent survey of almost 95,000 Consumer Reports subscribers, most people reported having good experiences buying digital gear both in stores and

online—though web-based retailers have an edge over walk-in outfits. As you can see below, BHPHotoVideo.com, Crutchfield.com, and Abt.com were the top online retailers, and Abt Electronics, B&H Photo Video, Navy Exchange, and Nebraska Furniture Mart were the top walk-in stores.

Another survey finding: Pushing back on prices can net you savings. Not many of our survey respondents asked for a sweeter deal, but almost two-thirds of walk-in shoppers who requested a better price reported that they were offered one. And for online shoppers that figure was 69 percent.



Retailer	Reader Score	Survey Results					
		Product Quality	Customer Service	Price Paid	Selection	Checkout Ease	Website Usability
<b>ONLINE STORES</b>							
BHPHotoVideo.com	96	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Crutchfield.com	96	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Abt.com	95	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Adorama.com	94	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Apple.com	94	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑
Amazon.com	94	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Costco.com	93	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑
Shopmyexchange.com	93	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Bose.com	93	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑
Newegg.com	92	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
MacMall.com	92	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Target.com	91	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
SamsClub.com	91	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
BJs.com	91	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
QVC.com	90	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑
Independent Websites	90	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Sears.com	90	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
BestBuy.com	89	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
TigerDirect.com	89	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Staples.com	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Microsoft.com	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Frys.com	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Walmart.com	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Groupon.com	87	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑
HSN.com	87	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑
HHGregg.com	87	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
HP.com	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
OfficeDepot.com	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Dell.com	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Lenovo.com	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑

Retailer	Reader Score	Survey Results							
		Product Quality	Customer Service	Price Paid	Selection	Checkout Ease	Website Usability	Walk-in Retailer Buying Ease	Walk-in Retailer Web Customer Support
<b>WALK-IN STORES</b>									
Abt Electronics	95	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
B&H Photo Video	93	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Navy Exchange	93	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Nebraska Furniture Mart	93	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Bose	92	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Video Only	92	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Apple Store	92	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Costco	92	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Independent Stores	91	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Simply Mac	90	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Army & Air Force Exchange	90	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Meijer	89	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
P.C. Richard & Son	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Microsoft	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
BJ's	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
GameStop	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Sam's Club	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Micro Center	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Fred Meyer	88	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Barnes & Noble	87	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
HHGregg	87	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Target	86	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Best Buy	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
BrandsMart USA	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Staples	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Sears	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
RadioShack	85	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Office Depot/OfficeMax	84	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Fry's Electronics	83	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Walmart	82	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Kmart	81	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑

**GUIDE TO THE RATINGS:** Scores are based on 156,999 purchases of camcorders, cameras, desktop computers, DVD/Blu-ray players, e-book readers, fitness trackers, headphones, laptops, routers, smartwatches, sound bars, streaming

media players, tablets, TVs, video game consoles, and wireless speakers by 94,983 Consumer Reports subscribers between January 2015 and June 2016. Reader Score reflects overall satisfaction with the shopping experience. A score of 100 would

mean all respondents are completely satisfied; 80, that respondents are very satisfied, on average. Differences of fewer than 5 points between stores and 6 points between online retailers are not meaningful. Each rating category under Survey Results (other

than Walk-in Retailer Buying Ease) reflects average scores on a scale from very poor to excellent. Ratings are based on subscribers who may not be representative of the general U.S. population. A dash (-) indicates that we lacked sufficient data.





For Your  
Favorite  
Foodie

Choose from our expert-approved edibles to help bring out the inner gourmet in anyone on your list.



OVERALL  
SCORE

Spring Tree Pure  
Maple Syrup  
Dark Amber  
\$8.80 per  
12.5-ounce bottle







Experts in our food-testing lab like to give homemade goodies as gifts. "These two treats are delicious and healthy," says Amy Keating, R.D., a dietitian in our food-testing lab. "Dark chocolate has flavanols—antioxidants linked to heart health—and the whole-grain flour in this pancake mix amps up nutrition and flavor." Package either one in a festive container and include the recipe so that your recipients can make these delicacies again.



#### HOLIDAY HOTCAKES

##### Pancakes & Maple Syrup

"Using white whole-wheat flour means you get the health benefits of whole grains, but the result is still light and fluffy," explains Ellen Kloss, who conducts tests in CR's food-testing lab. Pack the dry ingredients in a 16-ounce Mason jar and pair it with a bottle of good maple syrup. Spring Tree Pure Maple Syrup Dark Amber (\$8.80 per 12.5-ounce bottle) has complex caramelized flavors that earned it one of our top rankings among syrups.

##### Whole-Wheat Pancakes With Wheat Germ (Makes about 14 pancakes)

- 2 cups white whole-wheat flour**
- ¼ cup toasted wheat germ**
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder**
- ½ teaspoon baking soda**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**
- 2½ cups buttermilk**
- 2 large eggs**
- 1 tablespoon canola oil**
- Maple syrup**
- Blueberries, optional**

- 1.** Mix the flour, wheat germ, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in a large bowl. If you're giving the pancake mix as a gift, place this dry mixture in a 16-ounce Mason jar: It can be stored this way for several months.
- 2.** When ready to prepare, place the dry mixture in a large bowl. Combine the buttermilk, eggs, and oil in a medium bowl.
- 3.** Pour the wet ingredients into the dry mixture. Mix with just a few strokes until the batter is evenly moist.
- 4.** Heat a nonstick pan or griddle over medium heat. Scoop the batter (about ¼ cup per pancake) onto the pan or griddle. Let the pancakes cook about 1½ minutes. Flip pancakes and cook about 1 minute more. Serve immediately with maple syrup and blueberries.



##### A BARK YOU'LL WANT TO BITE Chocolate Bark

To make this easy chocolate bark recipe, CR recipe developer Claudia Gallo recommends using Trader Joe's 72% Cacao Dark Chocolate (\$1.80 for three 1.65-ounce bars). "It's a complex-flavored dark chocolate," she says, "and it got an excellent rating in our last chocolate test."



**92**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

**Trader Joe's  
72% Cacao Dark  
Chocolate**  
\$1.80 for three  
1.65-ounce bars

##### ▲ Claudia's Chocolate Bark With Fruit and Nuts (Makes about 24 pieces)

- ½ cup sliced almonds**
- ½ cup coconut chips**
- 6 1.65-ounce bars Trader Joe's 72% Cacao Dark Chocolate, chopped**
- ½ cup dried apricots, finely chopped**
- 1 tablespoon salted pumpkin seeds**
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped crystallized ginger**

- 1.** Toast almonds and coconut in a small skillet over medium heat for 5 minutes or until lightly toasted; do not burn. Remove from heat; cool.
- 2.** Line a baking sheet with parchment or wax paper. In a glass bowl, heat ¾ of the chocolate in a microwave at high power for 30-second intervals until just melted. Stir until smooth. Add remaining chocolate and stir until melted.
- 3.** Spread melted chocolate evenly on pan in a 12x8-inch rectangle. Sprinkle with almonds, coconut, apricots, pumpkin seeds, and ginger.
- 4.** Refrigerate for 1 hour or until firm. Break bark into pieces and serve cold or at room temperature. Keep it in an airtight container at room temperature for up to four days.



DELICIOUS DINNER, DONE

**Meal Delivery Service Subscriptions**

Give a budding chef or a busy couple a smart shortcut to healthy meals. In our recent review of plans that bring preportioned recipe ingredients to your door, two especially stood out. The meals we evaluated from **HelloFresh** (\$69 for three meals per week for two people; \$276 for one month; [hellofresh.com](http://hellofresh.com)) received very good taste scores. On average, the dishes were lower in calories, fat, and sodium than those from the other services we tested, and step-by-step photos made them easy to prepare. With all organic ingredients, the recipes from **Green Chef** (\$72 for three meals per week for two people; \$288 for one month; [greenchef.com](http://greenchef.com)) earned some of the best taste scores in our tests. We reviewed the company's omnivore plan, but more selective eaters may prefer diet-specific options, such as carnivore, gluten-free, Paleo, and vegetarian.



OVERALL SCORE

**HelloFresh**

\$69 for three meals per week for two people



OVERALL SCORE

**Green Chef**

\$72 for three meals per week for two people



**Expert Pick**  
JAM SESSION  
**Almond Butter and Jam**

"I love the bold, real fruit flavors and the simple ingredients in SideHill Farm Jams (\$6 for 9 ounces, plus shipping; [sidehillfarmjam.com](http://sidehillfarmjam.com)). This year, I'm pairing the blueberry jam with a jar of Justin's Classic Almond Butter (\$11 for 16 ounces; grocery stores), which was a top pick in our recent nut butter tasting."

—Maxine Siegel, R.D., head of food testing

**SideHill Farm Jams**  
\$6 for 9 ounces, plus shipping



OVERALL SCORE

**Justin's Classic Almond Butter**  
\$11 for 16 ounces

PHOTOS: REBEKAH NEMETHY AND JOHN WALSH





**Editor Pick**  
SALAD DAYS  
**Olive Oil and Balsamic Vinegar**

"Cooks will appreciate a high-quality olive oil and balsamic vinegar pairing. Drizzle them on cheeses, vegetables, grilled meats, pasta, and bread. McEvoy Ranch Traditional Blend Extra Virgin Olive Oil (\$27 for 12.7 fluid ounces, plus shipping; mcevoyranch.com) was No. 1 in our tests from previous years, but the 2016 vintage is just as tasty. Pair it with Rubio Aceto Balsamic Vinegar of Modena (\$31 for 8.5 fluid ounces, plus shipping; salumeriaitaliana.com). Thick and rich, it's pricey but tastes like some of the more expensive balsamics I've tried."

—Trisha Calvo, health and food editor



**Rubio Aceto Balsamic Vinegar of Modena**  
\$31 for 8.5 fluid ounces, plus shipping



OVERALL SCORE

**McEvoy Ranch Traditional Blend Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
\$27 for 12.7 fluid ounces, plus shipping



**NUTS TO YOU**  
**Mail-Order Mixed Nuts**

When you're shelling out premium prices, you want this healthy gift to look (and taste) as though you've done more than just grab it off the grocery store shelf. CR's experts conducted a blind taste test of several mail-order mixed nut offerings. Some were disappointing—small sizes, broken pieces, even a rancid taste. But in the end, our tests revealed three options that looked and tasted special—and shipping is included in the prices.

**Superior Quattro Gift Tray**

\$40/24 ounces  
superiornutstore.com



OVERALL SCORE

Large, whole, salted, fresh-tasting roasted nuts—almonds, cashews,

pistachios—and macadamias, which made this assortment extra special.

**Superior Trio Gift Tray**

\$25/20 ounces  
superiornutstore.com



OVERALL SCORE

Similar in quality to the Quattro, the Trio Gift Tray features the same selection of nuts, minus the macadamias.

**Oh Nuts 4-Section Wooden Nut Gift Tray**

\$30/16 ounces



OVERALL SCORE

A winning combination of lightly salted almonds, cashews, pistachios, and mixed nuts.





For the  
**Social Animal**

Whether it's for Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or old-fashioned phone chatting, these gadgets will help your plugged-in pal stay connected year-round.



STARK RAVING MOD

**Parrot Zik 3 Headphones**

\$400

69

OVERALL  
SCORE

Sure, there are cheaper choices, but these Philippe Starck-designed Bluetooth headphones marry form and function beautifully. They have very good sound quality and excellent active-noise reduction, and can be controlled by touch (on the right ear cup) or via the Parrot Zik 3's mobile app.

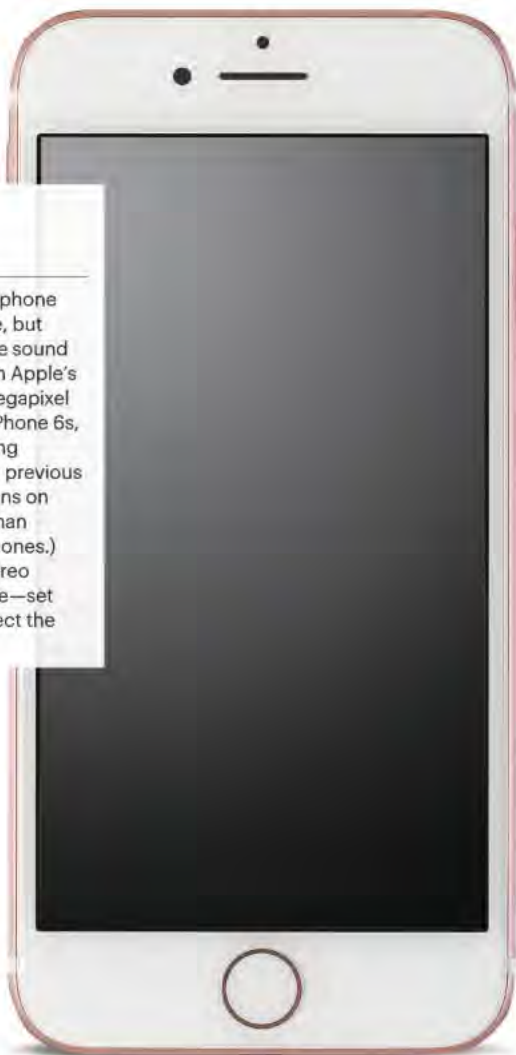


LESS IS MORE

**Apple iPhone 7**  
From \$650

**78**  
OVERALL SCORE

Apple removed the headphone jack on its newest iPhone, but our testers report that the sound quality loses nothing with Apple's new EarPods. The 12.2-megapixel camera is similar to the one on the iPhone 6s, though the 7.2-megapixel front-facing camera has a higher resolution than previous models. (The 2x optical telephoto lens on the 7 Plus provides a better image than the digital zooms found on many phones.) Two speakers provide a sense of stereo separation, although the bottom one—set into the phone's side—seems to direct the sound away from the listener.



A PHONE FOR ALL SERVICES

**OnePlus 3 Phone**  
\$400

**73**  
OVERALL SCORE

The OnePlus 3 is unlocked, which means you can switch service providers by changing the SIM card. (The phone also has a dual SIM-card slot, so it can accommodate a second number for, say, work.) Add in premium features like an ample 64GB of storage, rapid recharging, and a 16.1-megapixel camera and you're looking at a premier phone at a pleasing price.

STRAIGHT TO VIDEO

**Samsung Galaxy S7 Phone**  
\$650

**80**  
OVERALL SCORE

The highly rated high-def display, 12.2-megapixel camera (capable of recording Ultra HD video), and long battery life make this a natural for the video virtuoso in your life. Other pluses: The phone's sleek aluminum and glass body is water-resistant, and the microSD slot allows for expanded storage capacity with inexpensive memory cards.



SAFE AND SOUND

**Jabra Sport Coach Earphones**  
\$125

**71**  
OVERALL SCORE

Ideal for someone who likes to keep in touch while keeping fit, this pair of Bluetooth headphones has a built-in microphone and an integrated cross-training app that Jabra claims has more than 50 exercises. A motion sensor measures distance traveled, pace, steps, cadence, and calories burned, and the hybrid in-ear/earbud design keeps the buds in place on even exercisers' ears.





**Expert Pick**

A ZOOM OF ONE'S OWN  
**New Smartphone Add-on Lenses**

"These lenses let you get more camera out of your phone. When we attached them to an iPhone 6s and tested them, we found that in most cases they improved sharpness—at least in the mid-image sweet spot. The \$95 Schneider Optics iPro Lens 2x provided the best image quality and comes with a protective phone case that lets you twist-mount it securely over the camera. I also liked the 2x telephoto lens in the \$100 Olloclip Active Lens Kit (which offers an ultrawide angle lens, too) and the \$20 Photojojo 2x. But both present ease-of-use issues. The Olloclip lens attaches to the phone via a clip, which can obscure controls on the phone's touch screen. The Photojojo attaches via a magnet applied to the phone with a sticker that can lose its grip with heavy use." —Kerry Allen, product tester

**Schneider Optics iPro Lens 2x**  
 \$95



**Olloclip Active Lens Kit**  
 \$100



**Photojojo Telephoto Lens 2X**  
 \$20



LEADING THE CHARGE  
**Acer Aspire S5-371-52JR Laptop**  
 \$725

**73**  
 OVERALL SCORE

This powerful, versatile laptop has ample processing power to edit photos, play games, or video chat. The 13.5-hour battery life gives it staying power even when the user is on the go, and the wide-angle display and matte screen make it easy to share photos and videos in any lighting environment. A potential downside: The machine lacks an optical disc drive.



PHOTO: BRENDAN WIXTED (LAPTOP)





# Canada Extra

Snow Blowers **40a**  
 Gift Guide **40b**  
 Autos **40c**  
 Contact Info **40d**

## How to Use the Canada Extra Section

EVERY MONTH, Canada Extra provides Canadian pricing and availability information about products tested for that issue. The ratings in this section are based on this month's reports, but they narrow your choices to the products that are sold in Canada.

You can use this section in either of two ways: Start with the main report, read about the products that interest you, and turn to this section to find whether they're sold—and for what price—in Canada. Or start here, find products sold in Canada whose price and overall score appear promising, and read more about them in the main report and full ratings chart; page numbers appear

with each Canadian report. (For some products, the Canadian model designation differs slightly from the one used in the U.S.)

In most cases, the prices we list here are the approximate retail in Canadian dollars; manufacturers' list prices are indicated by an asterisk (\*). Check marks identify CR Best Buys or recommended products in the U.S. ratings. "NA" in a chart means that information wasn't available from the manufacturer. We include, in the Contact Info list on page 40d, the manufacturer's phone number and web address in Canada so that you can call or go online to get information on a model you can't find in the stores. (Many products that aren't available

in Canadian stores can be bought online.)

We appreciate your support, but we don't take it for granted. Please write to [CanadaExtra@cu.consumer.org](mailto:CanadaExtra@cu.consumer.org) and tell us what you think. We can't reply to every email message or implement every suggestion, but with your help we'll try to keep growing to serve your needs.

- 💰 **CR Best Buy Products** with this icon offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.
- ✔ **Recommended Models** with this designation perform well and stand out for reasons we note.

## Snow Blowers

Nine of the top-scoring snow blowers are available. **Report and Ratings, pages 9-11**

Rec.	Rank	Brand & Model	Price	Overall Score
<b>HEAVY SNOWFALL (12 to 24 inches)</b>				
✔	1	Cub Cadet 3X 30HD 31AH5ESV596	\$1,900	<b>92</b>
✔	5	Ariens 921032	\$1,845	<b>88</b>
💰	7	Ariens AX254 92103000	\$1,500	<b>87</b>
💰	9	Troy-Bilt Vortex 2490 31AH54Q	\$1,300	<b>82</b>
<b>MEDIUM SNOWFALL (8 to 12 inches)</b>				
✔	2	Cub Cadet 2X 24HP 31AMEBTR596	\$1,200	<b>78</b>
✔	9	Toro Power Max 724 OE 37779	\$1,450	<b>69</b>

Rec.	Rank	Brand & Model	Price	Overall Score
<b>LIGHT SNOWFALL (Less than 8 inches)</b>				
💰	1	Toro Power Clear 721E	\$850	<b>71</b>
✔	3	Cub Cadet 221 LHP 31AM2T6D	\$800	<b>67</b>
✔	4	Honda HS 720CS	\$900	<b>64</b>

Cub Cadet  
3X 30HD  
31AH5ESV596  
\$1,900

**92**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



Ariens  
921032  
\$1,845

**88**  
OVERALL  
SCORE





# Gift Guide

Product	Price
<b>BREAK THE BANK/SPLURGE</b>	
Apple MacBook Air MF855LL/A laptop	\$1,500
Apple Watch 2 (stainless steel case with Milanese loop)	\$850
Bodyguard E-40 elliptical	\$2,750
Dell XPS 27-inch desktop	\$1,950
KitchenAid KDTM804ESS dishwasher	\$2,450
LG OLED55E6P television	\$4,500
Microsoft Surface Book laptop	\$2,200
Napoleon Prestige Pro 665RSIB grill	\$3,300
Nikon D500 camera (price includes 16-80mm lens that was tested with camera)	\$3,600
<b>FOR THE GET UP AND GO-GETTER</b>	
Bell Draft MIPS bike helmet	\$95
Braven BRV-XXL wireless speaker system	\$500
Fitbit Surge fitness tracker	\$330
Fujifilm FinePix XP90 camera	\$240
Garmin Vivosmart HR fitness tracker	\$180
LifeSpan TR2000e treadmill	\$1,700
Michelin X-ice Xi3 winter tire	\$155
Mio Fuse fitness tracker	\$120
Ninja Personal Blender with Auto-iQ BL480C	\$130
Scott Arx Plus bike helmet	\$260
Sony HDR-AS50 action cam	\$300
Yeti Roadie 20 cooler	\$360

24-Inch  
Lenovo  
Ideacentre  
AIO 700  
\$900

83

OVERALL  
SCORE



Product	Price
<b>FOR THE GADGET GEEK</b>	
Apple Watch Series 2	\$490
Asus ZenPad S 8.0 Z580CA (32GB) tablet	\$280
Brother MFC-J680DW printer	\$150
Dyson V8 Absolute stick vacuum	\$700
Epson Expression Premium XP-830 all-in-one printer	\$150
Linksys EA8500 (AC2600) router	\$300
Merge VR goggles	\$100
Roomba 960 vac	\$900
Samsung Galaxy Tab S2 8 (32GB) tablet	\$450
Samsung Gear S2 smartwatch	\$300
Samsung Gear VR powered by Oculus	\$140
Shark Rocket Deluxe Pro HV321 stick vacuum	\$320
Sphero BB8 robot	\$180
Wonder Dash robot	\$150
<b>FOR THE SOCIAL ANIMAL</b>	
Apple iPhone 7	\$920
Clarity BT914 cordless phone	\$170
Jabra Sport Coach wireless earphones	\$170
OnePlus 3 phone	\$520
Parrot Zik 3 headphones	\$500
Samsung Galaxy S7 phone	\$910
Sony h.ear MDR-EX750BT headphones	\$270
<b>FOR THE GLOBETROTTER</b>	
1More E1001 earbuds	\$140
Acer Aspire S5-371-52JR laptop	\$1,300
Amazon Kindle Oasis	\$400
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite	\$140
Canon EOS Rebel T5i camera (price includes kit lens that was tested with camera)	\$780
Hunter QLS-O3 humidifier	\$35
Michelin Defender tire	\$160
Nikon P900 camera	\$770
Olympus Stylus TG-4 camera	\$500
Sony FDR-AX33 camcorder	\$1,050
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-RX100 IV camera	\$1,250



## Gift Guide

Product	Price
<b>FOR THE COFFEE CONNOISSEUR</b>	
Baratza Virtuoso coffee grinder	\$330
Bialetti Moka Express stovetop espresso maker	\$40
Frieling insulated brushed stainless steel French press	\$130
Hamilton Beach 40998 teakettle	\$30
iCoffee RCB100-BC12 French press style	\$130
Melitta pour-over coffee brewer	\$15
<b>FOR THE FAMILY CHEF</b>	
All-Clad Stainless Steel nonstick fry pan	\$140
Breville Smart Oven Pro BOV845BSS	\$370
Cuisinart CastLite nonstick fry pan	\$90
Cuisinart Graphix Collection cutlery	\$130
Cuisinart Power Advantage HM-50C hand mixer	\$50
Electrolux Expressionist ELJB56B8PS blender	\$350
Fagor Premium 6 qt. pressure cooker	\$150
Kitchen Grips Chef's Mitt	\$40
Microplane 40020 Classic	\$18
Panasonic FlashXpress NB-G110P toaster oven	\$175
Swiss Diamond Reinforced cookware	\$735
ThermoWorks Pocket RT600C thermometer	NA
Weber Spirit grill S-210 4610001	\$700

Product	Price
<b>FOR THE HOME ENTERTAINMENT FAN</b>	
Apple TV 32GB (4th gen.)	\$200
Bose QuietComfort 35 wireless headphones	\$450
Hoover WindTunnel T-Series Rewind Bagless UH70120 vac	\$160
Lenovo Ideacentre AIO 700 24-inch desktop	\$1,350
Logitech Harmony 650 universal remote	\$100
Roku Streaming Stick	\$60
Samsung UBD-K8500 Ultra HD Blu-ray player	\$400
Sonos Play:5 wireless speaker	\$649
Sonos Playbar	\$900
Vizio SB3821-C6 sound bar	\$230
Xbox One S (Canadian price is for a 500GB hard drive & a game)	\$399

Breville Smart Oven Pro BOV845BSS \$270

74

OVERALL SCORE



## Autos

All of the tested vehicles are available in Canada. [Report and Ratings, pages 74-76](#)

Make & Model	Price Range	Acceleration (Sec.)				Fuel Economy (Liters per 100 km)		
		0-50 km/h	0-100 km/h	80-100 km/h	500 Meters	City Driving	Highway Driving	Overall
<b>LUXURY MIDSIZED SEDANS</b>								
Cadillac CT6	\$61,695-\$99,670	2.6	6.9	3.1	17.0	17.1	6.9	10.7
Jaguar XF	\$60,000-\$74,000	2.4	6.1	3.1	16.3	16.7	7.8	11.1
<b>LUXURY SUVs</b>								
Cadillac XT5	\$45,100-\$68,595	2.8	7.6	3.7	17.9	18.0	7.8	11.6
Jaguar F-Pace	\$50,900-\$67,900	2.5	6.3	3.0	16.5	16.9	8.8	11.8



## Contact Info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada

**1More**  
855-551-6673  
[1more.com](http://1more.com)

**Acer**  
866-645-2237  
[acer.ca](http://acer.ca)

**All-Clad**  
800-255-2523  
[all-clad.com](http://all-clad.com)

**Amazon**  
877-344-9801  
[amazon.ca](http://amazon.ca)

**Apple**  
800-263-3394  
[apple.com/ca](http://apple.com/ca)

**Ariens**  
[ariens.com](http://ariens.com)

**Asus**  
800-726-7864  
[asus.com/ca-en](http://asus.com/ca-en)

**Baratza**  
425-641-1245  
[baratza.com](http://baratza.com)

**Bell**  
866-301-1942  
[support.bell.ca](http://support.bell.ca)

**Bialetti**  
800-421-6290  
[bialetti.com](http://bialetti.com)

**Bodyguard Fitness**  
888-407-3784  
[bodyguardfitness.com](http://bodyguardfitness.com)

**Bose**  
800-869-2114  
[bose.ca](http://bose.ca)

**Braven**  
877-927-2836  
[braven.com](http://braven.com)

**Breville**  
855-683-3535  
[breville.ca](http://breville.ca)

**Brother**  
[brother.ca](http://brother.ca)

**Canon**  
800-652-2666  
[canon.ca](http://canon.ca)

**Clarity**  
800-426-3738  
[clarityproducts.com](http://clarityproducts.com)

**Cub Cadet**  
800-668-1238  
[cubcadet.ca](http://cubcadet.ca)

**Cuisinart**  
800-472-7606  
[cuisinart.ca](http://cuisinart.ca)

**Cuispro**  
905-475-6104  
[cuispro.com](http://cuispro.com)

**Dell**  
800-999-3355  
[dell.ca](http://dell.ca)

**Dyson**  
877-397-6622  
[dysoncanada.ca](http://dysoncanada.ca)

**Electrolux**  
800-265-8352  
[electroluxappliances.ca](http://electroluxappliances.ca)

**Epson**  
800-463-7766  
[epson.ca](http://epson.ca)

**Fagor**  
800-207-0806  
[fagoramerica.com](http://fagoramerica.com)

**Fitbit**  
844-434-8248  
[fitbit.com/ca](http://fitbit.com/ca)

**Frieling**  
800-827-2582  
[frieling.com](http://frieling.com)

**Fujifilm**  
[fujifilm.ca](http://fujifilm.ca)

**Garmin**  
866-429-9296  
[garmin.com/en-ca](http://garmin.com/en-ca)

**Hamilton Beach**  
800-267-2826  
[hamiltonbeach.ca](http://hamiltonbeach.ca)

**Honda**  
888-946-6329  
[powerequipment.honda.ca](http://powerequipment.honda.ca)

**Hoover**  
800-944-9200

**Hunter**  
866-268-1936  
[hunterfan.com](http://hunterfan.com)

**iCoffee**  
844-257-0810  
[icoffee.com](http://icoffee.com)

**Jabra**  
877-318-7311  
[jabra.ca](http://jabra.ca)

**KitchenAid**  
800-807-6777  
[kitchenaid.ca](http://kitchenaid.ca)

**Lenovo**  
855-253-6686  
[lenovo.com/ca/en](http://lenovo.com/ca/en)

**LG**  
888-542-2623  
[lg.com/ca](http://lg.com/ca)

**LifeSpan Fitness**  
877-654-3837  
[lifespansfitness.com/canada](http://lifespansfitness.com/canada)

**Linksys**  
800-326-7114  
[linksys.com/ca](http://linksys.com/ca)

**Logitech**  
510-795-8500  
[logitech.com](http://logitech.com)

**Melitta**  
800-565-4882  
[melitta.ca](http://melitta.ca)

**Merge**  
210-478-9919  
[mergevr.com](http://mergevr.com)

**Michelin**  
888-871-4444  
[michelin.ca](http://michelin.ca)

**Microplane**  
800-555-2767  
[microplane.com](http://microplane.com)

**Microsoft**  
877-696-7786  
[microsoft.com/en-ca](http://microsoft.com/en-ca)

**Mio**  
877-770-1116  
[mioglobal.com](http://mioglobal.com)

**Napoleon Grills**  
866-820-8686  
[napoleongrills.com](http://napoleongrills.com)

**Nikon**  
905-625-9910  
[nikon.ca](http://nikon.ca)

**Ninja**  
877-646-5288  
[ninjakitchen.com](http://ninjakitchen.com)

**Olloclip**  
[olloclip.com](http://olloclip.com)

**Olympus**  
800-201-7766  
[olympus.com](http://olympus.com)

**OnePlus**  
646-851-2228  
[oneplus.net/ca](http://oneplus.net/ca)

**Panasonic**  
800-265-8352  
[panasonic.ca](http://panasonic.ca)

**Parrot**  
877-972-7768  
[parrot.com](http://parrot.com)

**Roku**  
888-621-0891  
[roku.ca](http://roku.ca)

**Roomba**  
877-855-8593  
[irobot.com](http://irobot.com)

**Samsung**  
800-726-7864  
[samsung.ca](http://samsung.ca)

**Scott**  
[scott-sports.com/ca/en](http://scott-sports.com/ca/en)

**Shark**  
800-798-7398  
[sharkclean.com](http://sharkclean.com)

**Sonos**  
800-680-2345  
[sonos.com](http://sonos.com)

**Sony**  
800-222-7669  
[sony.ca](http://sony.ca)

**Sphero**  
888-977-4376  
[sphero.com](http://sphero.com)

**Swiss Diamond**  
980-224-9044  
[swissdiamond.com](http://swissdiamond.com)

**ThermoWorks**  
800-393-6434  
[thermoworks.com](http://thermoworks.com)

**Toro**  
[toro.com/en-ca](http://toro.com/en-ca)

**Troy-Bilt**  
800-828-5500  
[troybilt.com](http://troybilt.com)

**Vizio**  
[vizio.ca](http://vizio.ca)

**Weber**  
800-446-1071  
[webercanada.ca](http://webercanada.ca)

**Wonder Dash**  
408-846-7460  
[makewonder.com](http://makewonder.com)

**Xbox**  
877-696-7786  
[microsoft.com/en-ca](http://microsoft.com/en-ca)

**Yeti**  
512-394-9384  
[yeti.com](http://yeti.com)





CUT THE CORD

**Clarity BT914 Cordless Phone**  
\$120

**68**  
OVERALL SCORE

Complete with a built-in answering machine, this cordless phone is thoughtfully designed to assist anyone who may sometimes need a little help. The volume on the handset, for example, can be increased to accommodate family or friends with moderate to severe hearing loss. The large, backlit buttons are easy to see in any light. And those big buttons and the louder-than-average speaker can even be enlisted to let the user make and take calls from a cell phone via Bluetooth.



HEARING THINGS

**Sony h.ear MDR-EX750BT**  
\$200

**71**  
OVERALL SCORE

These Bluetooth headphones produce very good sound quality and have a built-in microphone—handy for fielding calls on the go. Though this model isn't noise-canceling per se, the in-ear design will at least muffle most sounds that might interfere with your listening pleasure.



WRITE A BETTER WISH LIST

GIFT REGISTRIES aren't just for brides and babies anymore. Increasingly, retailer and specialty websites are offering them for any occasion, including holidays. Sometimes called gift lists, they give you an easy way to let your nearest and dearest in on exactly what you want, right down to the model number. Think of them as high-tech versions of a letter to Santa.

Sometimes, one retail site is enough. Planning to paddle through Patagonia? Try REI's gift registry. Is your idea of a stocking stuffer a 75-inch 4K Ultra HD TV? Broadcast your wishes on the Best Buy Wish List. Willing to settle for 5 quarts of motor oil or a two-pack of Super Poligrip? Then sign up on Walmart Lists.

For those whose interests are more varied, Amazon will host the lists you create and let you merrily add to them from any website by using its Amazon Assistant app. Universal gift registries such as CheckedTwice, Giftster, and MyRegistry.com let you gather your goodies from different vendors in one virtual place. Some even have apps that let you add items while you're browsing in actual stores. All you have to do is let people

know where you're registered. The sites will show them (though not necessarily you) what's already been purchased.

**A caveat:** Read the fine print. The sites are generally free, but you'll want to know what they'll do with your email address and any other personal information you may be asked to provide—and it varies. The privacy policy at MyRegistry.com, for instance, says the site may use your information to "inform you about our products and services and those of our promotional partners." The policy at CheckedTwice says the site has no plans to sell users' email to third parties but then adds this oddity: "If someone offers us a ton of money, we will gleefully sell your information to outside parties." If it does, it goes on to say, it promises to update its privacy policy and not to "part with your information in any really scummy way."

As for other downsides, gift lists can take the surprise and creativity out of giving and receiving. But then again, do you really want to give dad another new tie when he's really craving a camouflage T-shirt and cargo pants?

—Anthony Giangianni





Footloose friends and family members will appreciate these grown-up toys to help them document their travels—and stay entertained along the way.



LONG SHOTS

**Nikon P900**  
\$600

67

OVERALL  
SCORE

This full-featured camera's 83x optical zoom lens can capture craters on the moon. It's pricey but versatile enough to capture distant wildlife on safari as well as sweeping landscapes—without the hassle of having to change lenses.





PLAY MISTY FOR ME  
**Hunter QLS-03 Humidifier**  
\$40

**87**  
OVERALL SCORE

Hermetically sealed hotel rooms can have notoriously dry air. This petite, packable humidifier is small enough to stash in your suitcase and sit on your night stand, quietly adding much-needed water vapor to the air. It mists in any direction you want, and because the tank is an inverted water bottle, all you have to take along is the base.



NOISES OFF  
**Phiaton BT 220 NC**  
\$160

**76**  
OVERALL SCORE

If you're looking for an inconspicuous way to block out the world around you, this pocket-size pair of Bluetooth noise-canceling earbuds from Phiaton just might be the ticket. They have a clip-style remote control, combine elements of in-ear and earbud design, deliver excellent sound, and have good active noise reduction.

SMOOTH OPERATOR  
**Sony FDR-AX33**  
\$800

**74**  
OVERALL SCORE

Whether documenting a walk atop the Great Wall or someone walking down the aisle, this Sony Handycam is up to the job. It shoots excellent 4K (Ultra High Definition) video, and it has very good audio quality and an image stabilizer to smooth out any shake or jitter. It also has a large LCD as well as an electronic viewfinder—and even takes excellent still images.



PHOTO, FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT: GETTY IMAGES; PHOTOS: BRENDAN WIXTED (EARBUDS); JOHN WALSH (CAMCORDER)





IT'S ALL IN THE SWIVEL  
**Canon Eos Rebel T5i**  
 \$600

**73**  
 OVERALL SCORE

If you're looking for very good video capability combined with the versatility of a digital SLR at an affordable price, this model should top your list. Its automatic features will please novices, and its manual controls let savvier sorts get creative. Image quality is very good, and it comes with a swiveling touch-screen LCD, which makes shooting and playback a breeze.



ON THE ROAD AGAIN  
**Michelin Defender**  
 \$120 (size tested, 215/60R16)

**70**  
 OVERALL SCORE

For climates where snow is an infrequent annoyance rather than a daily challenge, a set of all-season tires is the way to go. In our tests of 16 models, the Defender was the best overall, with solid four-season performance, grip in wintry and rainy conditions, crisp handling, and a quiet ride. Plus, based on our treadwear test, you could expect tread life up to 90,000 miles.



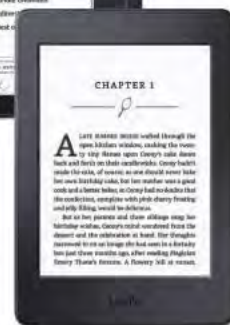
Editor Pick  
 WORDS TO THE WISE  
 E-Readers

"Thinner and lighter than any other Kindle, the Oasis e-reader is the ideal indulgence for literary travelers. Its nonglare screen makes for easy reading on the brightest beach, and the eight-week battery life means you could get through 'War and Peace' and 'Ulysses' on a desert island with juice to spare. Though the Amazon Kindle Paperwhite is slightly heavier and has a shorter charge, it's a solid second choice at less than half the price."

—Kevin Doyle, executive editor, Consumer Reports



**Amazon Kindle Oasis**  
 \$310



**Amazon Kindle Paperwhite**  
 \$140





SMALL WONDER

**Sony Cyber-shot DSC-RX100 IV**  
\$998

**77**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

This point-and-shoot packs an impressive number of features into a surprisingly petite and easy-to-use package. It comes with a Zeiss lens, is excellent in low-light settings, and records 4K video as well as most any camera we've tested. It's also nicely designed, with an electronic viewfinder that saves space by hiding until needed, then popping up like an onboard flash.



SLEEK, SNUG SOUND

**1More E1001**  
\$100

**86**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

These small, sleek earphones are one of the few portable models that deliver excellent sound quality. They're also great to look at and come with nine earpieces in a variety of sizes to help you find a comfortable fit.



## GIFTS THAT GO THE DISTANCE

RESEARCH SHOWS that experiences satisfy far longer than things. So if you really want to make an impression this holiday season, don't give stuff—give travel. These three tips will help you navigate in the right direction.

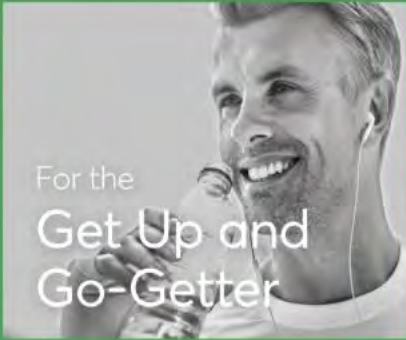
**BUY A TRAVEL-THEMED GIFT CARD OR CERTIFICATE** Most major airlines and hotel companies offer gift cards or certificates, but for a more personal touch, consider tour operators that specialize in themes. For example, active types might appreciate a gift card from an operator, such as Butterfield & Robinson or Backroads, that organizes cycling, hiking, and walking trips around the world. Tauck offers small ship and river cruises for those seeking a more intimate cruise experience. Some travel agencies, such as Andavo and Regency (members of the Virtuoso luxury travel network) and Liberty Travel, sell gift certificates and provide professional booking assistance.

**KEEP YOUR MILES TO YOURSELF** Gifting frequent-flyer miles often doesn't pay. United Airlines, for instance, charges \$7.50 for every 500 miles transferred, plus a \$30 processing fee, which comes to \$480 to gift 30,000 miles—only enough

for a domestic round-trip flight. Hotel programs make it easier to gift points and don't charge hefty fees, says Zach Honig, editor in chief of ThePointsGuy.com. But some cap the amount: Marriott, for example, won't let you transfer more than 50,000 per year, which would cover one to six nights, depending on the property.

**GIVE A SAFETY NET** You can make sure the globetrotters in your life are prepared for a medical emergency abroad with MedjetAssist, a medical transport program for travelers. You can buy an annual membership (\$270 for an individual or \$395 for a family) or cover as little as a week (\$99 or \$195). Unlike basic travel medical insurance, which usually covers transportation to the closest hospital that can provide adequate care, MedjetAssist will take you from almost anywhere in the world to the hospital of your choice in your home country. All that's required is that you've been admitted to a hospital and are 150 miles or more from home. There are no limits on total medical transport expenses. (A more restrictive membership is available for people ages 75 to 85.)  
—Donna Rosato





For the  
**Get Up and  
Go-Getter**

Keep your outdoor  
adventurer and action  
hero happy, healthy,  
and safer with these  
savvy choices.



ACTIVE IMAGINATION

**Sony HDR-AS50 Action Cam**

\$200

67

OVERALL  
SCORE

For someone who's always on the go, this easy-to-use model is a great gift. Like the larger, pricier Sony FDR-AX33, this one includes an excellent image stabilizer—a rarity for an action cam—which lets the photographer take high-quality video while skiing or biking or otherwise mixing it up.





ALL MIXED UP  
**Ninja Personal Blender  
With Auto-iQ BL480**  
\$100

**67**  
OVERALL SCORE

Can't afford a personal trainer? Try a Ninja. Okay, it's not quite the same, but you won't find a better personal blender for under \$100. Whether your loved one is into fresh smoothies or whole-fruit juicing, this Ninja is up to the task. Once the breakfast beverage is ready, she can take it on the go in the 18- or 24-ounce container.



TOUGH LITTLE TECHIE  
**Olympus Stylus TG-4**  
\$330

**66**  
OVERALL SCORE

When waterproof cameras were introduced, they could take nice pictures underwater, but on dry land they weren't as good. This top-rated Olympus shows how far these devices have come. It can withstand falls from up to 7 feet, is waterproof to 50 feet—and takes good photos (on a par with most point-and-shoots).

PHOTO, FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT: ISTOCK

SPEAK EASY  
**Braven BRV-XXL  
Wireless Bluetooth Speaker**  
\$350

**62**  
OVERALL SCORE

At about 19 pounds, this large but portable speaker system is rugged. That makes it great for the outdoors, but even better, it also offers very good sound quality, so it's an ideal companion for ice fishers and tailgaters. Plus it's simple to use, with a clearly marked 3.5 mm input, microphone inputs, and bass and treble controls.



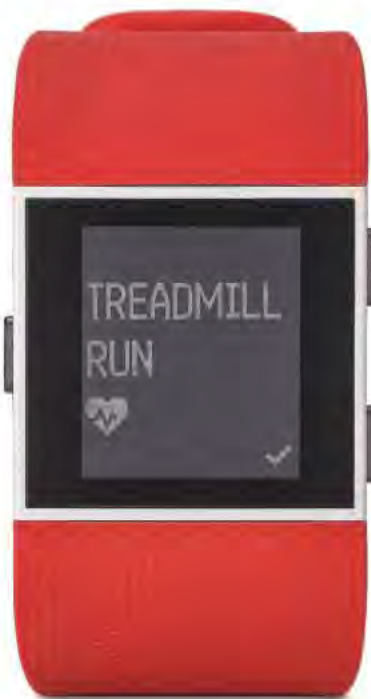




GRILL ON THE GO  
**Cuisinart Portable Grill CGG-306**  
 \$200

**67**  
 OVERALL  
 SCORE

Camping and tailgating are a lot more tasty with this portable gas grill. After just 10 minutes of preheating, it serves up sizzling burgers and steaks, complete with appetizing sear marks. Cooking temps are fairly even across the surface on this two-burner model, and surprisingly, the cooking area—at 245 square inches—is larger than even our top-rated small grill.



TRACK STAR  
**Fitbit Surge Fitness Tracker**  
 \$250

**87**  
 OVERALL  
 SCORE

Easy to operate and loaded with features, this is our top-rated tracker. It has GPS, a real-time heart-rate monitor, and a large touch-screen display for reviewing step count, stairs climbed, and calories burned. It's also a watch, gets phone and text notifications from Android and iOS smartphones, and lets you control a smartphone's music playback.



THRILLS AND CHILLS  
**Yeti Roadie 20 Cooler**  
 \$250

**88**  
 OVERALL  
 SCORE

For a cooler that can really go the distance, turn to this heavy-duty model. Weighing in at 15 pounds, it's got a polyethylene shell designed to withstand a hungry bear, making it ideal for the outdoors type. You can even have a custom design imprinted on top. Best of all, the Yeti stays cool when it counts: In our tests, ice lasted up to twice as long in the Yeti compared with other coolers.



A SMART CHOICE FOR SAVVY CONSUMERS

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\*Limited time offer, good until 12/31/16



SHARP SHOOTER

**Fujifilm FinePix XP90**  
\$185

52

OVERALL SCORE

If you're looking for a waterproof camera that won't sink your budget, this is one to train your sights on. It has a bold design and comes in blue, green, orange, or yellow. But it's got more going for it than just a pretty face. It performs well and even has geotagging, so it's easy to prove whether the photos were taken in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the one in Las Vegas.



ROCK AND ROLL

**Michelin X-Ice XI3**  
\$116 (size tested, 215/60R16)

70

OVERALL SCORE

Every winter wonderland has a downside: driving. To help keep your loved ones safe, consider giving them Michelin's X-Ice XI3 winter/snow tires. These bad-weather babies provide superior snow traction and grip on ice without sacrificing a smooth, quiet ride. But they usually wear faster than all-season tires because their tread is designed to bite into snow and ice.

## DONATE TO CREATE A BETTER WORLD

IF YOU WANT to join with us to improve the consumer marketplace for everyone, consider making a gift to Consumer Reports. Our extensive lab testing and investigative reporting highlight products and practices—both good and bad. And we share these insights in order to protect and empower consumers. We hold government and manufacturers accountable. We make sure that the consumer voice is heard in the hallways of government and industry. We push automakers to make driver and passenger safety a top priority and to be truthful in claims, whether they're about self-driving cars, air bags, or fuel economy. We fight for a cleaner, more sustainable food system. We seek to reduce the number of hospital-acquired infections and the high cost of lifesaving drugs. We endorse digital innovations but seek to protect consumers' privacy in the process. We push for fair and transparent practices by banks and financial advisers, and we warn consumers against scams. If these are issues important to you, please give today, at [ConsumerReports.org/donate](https://www.ConsumerReports.org/donate) today.





## FOCUS-POCUS

**Mio Fuse Fitness Tracker**  
\$100

**72**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

It's nice that some fitness trackers offer push notifications, but not everyone wants to be flooded with texts and email 24 hours a day. For people who want workout data, plain and simple, the Mio Fuse is a welcome option. It monitors heart rate, step count, and calories burned. No GPS. No stairs climbed. The LED matrix display gives the time and color-coded alerts to keep you on track.



## HEARD ON HIGH

**Scosche SportClip 3 Earbuds**  
\$30

**76**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

These isolating ear-insert headphones are great for anyone heading out into winter weather who wants to listen to Twenty One Pilots instead of the local carolers. They're compatible with iPods, iPads, iPhones, and a variety of other mobile devices. And in addition to being splashproof, they offer very good sound at a surprisingly affordable price.

## A TRULY HEARTFELT GIFT

ALMOST ONE-THIRD of annual charitable giving occurs in December, according to a 2015 analysis of donations made by 1.1 million people through the Network for Good online giving platform. Maybe you want to support the prevention of cruelty to animals, the promotion of sustainability in developing countries, or research to find a cure for cancer. But how do you find a legitimate charity focused on your goal—and determine whether it will spend your contribution efficiently? These simple tips can help:

Check with the experts. Three major watchdogs can help you find top options in many different categories and make informed judgments about them.

**Charity Navigator** ([charitynavigator.org](http://charitynavigator.org)) divides nonprofits into 11 areas (animals, the environment, human services, and so on), then

organizes them by focus (animal welfare, wildlife conservation, and zoos and aquariums, for example). You can narrow the results still further by using the group's own ratings, which make it easy to find the top nonprofits in each category—or by the worst, to see whether a past favorite should fall off your list.

The **BBB Wise Giving Alliance** ([give.org](http://give.org)) lets you filter charities participating in its National Charity Seal Program in one of 20 categories, which include veterans and the military, arts and culture, child sponsorship, and more. The BBB gives its evaluation of each based on an extensive list of criteria.

**Charity Watch** ([charitywatch.org](http://charitywatch.org)) lists organizations that have received its top ratings. It divides them into 37 categories, among them groups that support American Indians, LGBTQ rights and advocacy, and drug and



alcohol abuse prevention.

The charity watchdogs usually evaluate national organizations. If you want a charity closer to home, consider donating to a local group that has helped you or someone you know. Did you adopt a pet from a nearby animal shelter? Has a loved one benefited from a regional hospital or civil-rights organization? If you want to know how the group spends its money, you can often find its federal tax return and other financial documents on its website. If you don't find the info there, sign up for a free account at GuideStar, a clearinghouse for information about

nonprofits, by going to [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org). Those documents generally contain details about how a group is governed and where its money goes, but they can be difficult to navigate. For tips on interpreting a nonprofit's federal tax return, search the internet using the term "GuideStar Highlights of IRS Form 900."

And last, if tax consequences are a consideration for you, keep in mind that just because an organization is a nonprofit doesn't mean that your donation will be deductible. When in doubt, check before giving: Go to [irs.gov](http://irs.gov) and search for "Exempt Organizations Select Check."  
—Anthony Giordanni





HARD HATS

**Bicycle Helmets**

Sleek and sporty, the Bell Draft MIPS (pictured) is equipped with Multi-Directional Impact Protection System (MIPS) technology, which may reduce the rotational force and amount of energy transferred to the rider's head in a crash. The Scott Arx Plus is a similarly good MIPS option. Lightweight (and higher-priced), it keeps a cyclist's head cool and protected. For kids, consider the Bell Sidetrack MIPS. And a final note: Fit matters, so confirm when you buy a helmet that your giftee will be able to exchange it if it's necessary.

<b>Bell Draft MIPS</b> \$60	<b>Scott Arx Plus</b> \$125	<b>Bell Sidetrack MIPS</b> \$60
<b>80</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>78</b>
OVERALL SCORE	OVERALL SCORE	OVERALL SCORE

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS (HELMET); BRENDAN WIXTED (FITNESS TRACKER)



CHEAP TRACK  
**Garmin Vivosmart HR Fitness Tracker**  
\$145

**83**  
OVERALL SCORE

It doesn't have GPS, but this budget-friendly model has lots to recommend it, starting with the \$105 it saves you over the Fitbit Surge—and no skimping on fitness features. It tracks real-time heart rate, step count, stairs climbed, calories burned, and sleep patterns, and displays smartphone notifications (Android or iOS).



RUNNING IN PLACE  
**LifeSpan TR2000e Treadmill**  
\$999

**76**  
OVERALL SCORE

This treadmill folds and unfolds with the press of a button. The fitness fan in your life will also appreciate the Lifespan's sturdy deck and intuitive controls, which include additional incline and speed buttons on the front handrail. The Intelli-Guard safety feature helps keep users safe by pausing the treadmill after they step off the running belt, reducing the risk of trips and falls.



Video gamers, movie and music lovers, and couch potatoes of every stripe will be turned on by our experts' picks of the best televisions, speakers, and other entertainment gear of the season.

ROCK THE HOUSE

**Sonos Play:5 Wireless Speaker**

\$500

73

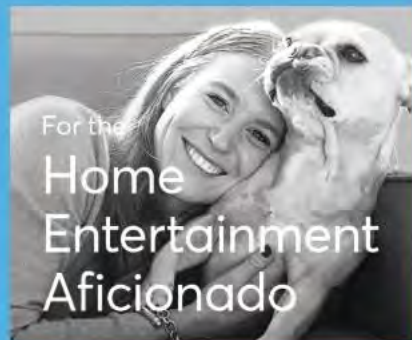
OVERALL  
SCORE

This is a great gift for anyone who values sound quality and simple setup in a speaker. It's pricey, but this Sonos delivers very good sound and is easy to use because

there are no wires to attach to anything. You can carry it from one room to another (it has enough power to fill a medium or large room with sound) or connect two or more wirelessly to pump sound throughout the entire house.

SONOS









**Expert Pick**  
**Xbox One S**  
\$300

"This is a cool two-for-one play and a great value. You get the latest Xbox gaming console and an Ultra HD Blu-ray player, all in one compact unit. It also has excellent picture quality and built-in WiFi, so you can stream 4K content from Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and other services."

—Elias Arias, audio and video tester



**VALUE VIEWING**  
**LG 55UH6550 55-Inch TV**  
\$900

**72**

OVERALL SCORE

Getting a 4K TV doesn't have to require breaking the bank. Case in point: This 55-inch Ultra High Definition TV from LG, which costs a fraction of the price of some other 4K TVs. But it still delivers excellent HD and UHD picture quality, excellent color accuracy, and excellent black levels (for enhanced contrast). It also has advanced internet capabilities and a full web browser.



**PETITE AND POWERFUL**  
**Creative Sound Blaster Roar Pro Wireless Speaker**  
\$175

**58**

OVERALL SCORE

This versatile Bluetooth speaker produces satisfying sound from its 2.25x8x6-inch package. It connects wirelessly or via a 3.5-mm input and has a built-in MP3 player, allowing you to play your favorite tunes on a microSD card inserted directly into the speaker. It can even function as a PC computer's audio output device.



**ELEVATED ENTERTAINMENT**  
**Apple TV (4th Generation)**  
\$150

**67**

OVERALL SCORE

Just as the Apple TV was starting to feel a bit dated, Apple launched this version with a faster processor, a cool new touchpad remote, and Siri voice control. (Miss something a character said? Siri will rewind the video by a few seconds and turn on captions.) Apple TV has always been a no-brainer for Apple fans, and this fourth-gen model makes the choice even easier.





VIDEO VANGUARD

**Samsung UBD-K8500**  
4K Ultra HD Blu-ray Player  
\$320

**72**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

Samsung's 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray player delivers excellent picture quality from new 4K Blu-ray discs, including those with high-dynamic range (HDR) technology.

It's also 3D-capable, can stream 4K videos, and will look great on the shelf: Its sleek, curved design mirrors the shape of many of Samsung's 4K TVs.



A JOYFUL NOISE

**Sonos Playbar**  
\$700

**61**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

Does your elephantine TV have mousy sound? Here's a solution even discerning ears will applaud. In addition to delivering very good audio from your TV, the

WiFi-enabled Playbar can team up with other Sonos speakers to create a multiroom sound system. It also streams from mobile devices and internet-based music services such as Pandora, SiriusXM, and Spotify.



**Editor Pick**  
**Logitech Harmony**  
650 Universal Remote  
\$60

"If your coffee table is starting to look like a remote-control crash pad, this universal remote, which can operate up to eight different electronic devices, is a smart and easy way to clean up the clutter."

—Jim Wilcox, senior electronics editor



BACK TO BASICS

**LG 32LH570B 32-Inch TV**  
\$200

**57**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

Looking for a smaller TV for an office or a bedroom? Consider this affordable 32-inch model. It's not loaded with features, but it delivers very good high-definition picture quality and a wider-than-average viewing angle. It's also a smart TV, so you can access Amazon, Hulu Plus, Netflix, Vudu, and YouTube without having to buy a streaming media player.



RAISE THE BAR

**LG SH7B Sound Bar**  
\$350

**53**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

Designed for TVs up to 50 inches, this 4.1-channel sound bar speaker system offers good overall sound (for music and movies) and comes with a wireless subwoofer for better bass response. It offers access to streaming services such as Pandora and Spotify, and the built-in Bluetooth lets you wirelessly send music to the speaker from a smartphone or tablet.





**Editor Pick**  
**Roku Streaming Stick**  
\$50

"This Roku model packs most of what you get with much larger Roku boxes into a small, flash-drive-shaped player that slips into a TV's HDMI port. It has excellent picture quality and is easy to set up—just plug it in and register on the Roku website. It also streams programs from all the major services and alerts you when movies and TV shows you've been wanting to see are available."

—Jim Willcox, senior electronics editor



**HUBBUB HIDEOUT**  
**Bose QuietComfort 35 Noise-Canceling Headphones**  
\$350

**87**

OVERALL SCORE

These might not bring peace on earth, but this wireless pair of noise-canceling, over-the-ear headphones will certainly give you some peace and quiet at home, at the office, or on an airplane. They're big and very comfortable, produce very good sound, and most important of all, are excellent at blocking out noise.

**FAMILY FAVORITE**  
**24-Inch Lenovo Ideacentre AIO 700**  
\$900

**83**

OVERALL SCORE

Families with gamers will love this all-in-one, lightning-fast desktop computer. It has enough muscle to handle video editing, and its 1-terabyte hard drive has room to store every family member's favorite music (and at least a few of their favorite movies). It also has touch-screen functionality, a webcam, a very good display, and a wireless keyboard and mouse.







THE SMART SET

**Samsung UN40KU6300**  
40-Inch TV  
\$500

**71**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

If your giftee has a small space and big TV dreams, this 40-inch 4K set is a great gift. It's well-priced and has excellent HD and Ultra HD picture quality and excellent color accuracy. Sound quality is good, and Samsung's latest smart-TV platform lets you stream content from Amazon, HBO Go, Hulu Plus, Netflix, Vudu, and YouTube.



POPCORN PREDATOR

**Hoover WindTunnel T-Series**  
Rewind Bagless UH70120  
\$130

**69**  
OVERALL  
SCORE

Stellar cleaning performance on carpets and bare floors makes this light and lively 18-pound vacuum great for cleaning up kernels after a movie marathon. It's also one of the few bagless uprights with a retractable cord. The only downside is that it lacks a brush on/off switch, which can safeguard bare floors and prevent scattering dust.



GIFTS THAT STIR THE SOUL

GOOD THINGS MAY COME in small packages, but the best presents don't necessarily come in a box. Unlike an itchy sweater, gifts of entertainment and culture rarely disappoint.

**LIVE PERFORMANCES** If someone on your list loves live events but you're not sure whether he or she prefers Metallica or Mozart, consider a gift card from Ticketmaster, which sells tickets to plays, concerts, comedy shows, and more nationwide. Cards in denominations of \$25 to \$250 can be purchased at ticketmaster.com, via the Ticketmaster app, by phone (800-745-3000), or at any Ticketmaster location. The cards don't expire but are not replaceable if lost or stolen.

**MUSEUM MEMBERSHIPS** Annual memberships to institutions such as New York's American Museum of Natural History, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Los Angeles' Griffith Observatory can start at less than \$100. They usually include museum admission, free or discounted tickets to special exhibitions, a subscription to the institution's publication, and gift-shop and

restaurant discounts. Most or all of the membership fee is tax-deductible, which is like giving a gift to yourself.

**LISTENING PLEASURES** Subscriptions to streaming music services let music fans listen to commercial-free entertainment on their devices. Spotify Premium costs \$10 per month for high-quality streaming and downloads (spotify.com). Apple Music also costs \$10 per month, but with an Apple Music gift card (apple.com/itunes/gifts), you get 12 months for the price of 10. People with long car commutes will appreciate SiriusXM satellite radio, which has more than 175 commercial-free music, sports, news, and entertainment channels. Prepaid service cards are available in \$30 and \$50 denominations at Best Buy and siriusxm.com. Book lovers will appreciate Audible (audible.com; \$15/month or \$150/year), which offers audiobooks of more than 180,000 best sellers, new releases, and more. (Note that most services auto-renew, so the recipient will be charged if he or she doesn't cancel.)

—*Tod Marks*

PHOTOS: BRENDAN WIXTED (SOUND BAR); JOHN WALSH (TV AND STREAMING STICK)





Let coffee perk up your holidays. We've selected the best-rated beans, grinders, kettles, frothers, and brewers for the discriminating caffeine cravers on your list.



ITALIAN LESSON

**Bialetti Moka Express Stovetop Espresso Maker**  
\$35



OVERALL SCORE

After testing this iconic stovetop espresso maker in our labs, our testers understand why it's a fixture in almost 90 percent of Italian kitchens.

The octagonal design evenly distributes heat and also makes it easy to grip to connect the two halves tightly. It comes in five sizes and in unadorned aluminum, as well as several colors.



FOAM SWEET FOAM

**Capresso Froth Plus 104.04**  
\$60



OVERALL SCORE

This squat electric frother makes whipping up a batch of hot, frothed milk simple—and free of the mess we made with some of the manual models we tested. The unit has

three temperature settings, an auto-shutoff function, and a two-piece design (the pitcher separates from the heating element) that makes it easy to pour and clean. Tip: Use skim milk; it foams better. Also sold in black.



SIMPLE PLEASURE

**Melitta Pour-Over Coffee Brewer**  
\$13



OVERALL SCORE

Of all the methods devised to extract flavor from coffee beans, this device—invented by a German hausfrau more than a century ago—remains a favorite for pour-over coffee brewers and our testers alike.

Line the cone with a filter, pour hot water over the grinds, and the rest is left to gravity. It doesn't take a hausfrau to appreciate that it's as easy to clean as it is to use.



SUPER SIPPER

**Blue Bottle Three Africans**  
\$21 per pound; [bluebottlecoffee.com](http://bluebottlecoffee.com)



OVERALL SCORE

This medium-bodied brew is made with a blend of one Congolese and two Ethiopian coffees. The tangy flavor is complex, with mostly citrus, floral, and berry notes.

BARGAIN BOIL

**Hamilton Beach 40998**  
\$20



OVERALL SCORE

An electric teakettle can set you back as much as \$180, which makes this \$20 Hamilton Beach a steal. It's almost as fast as the more expensive Capresso (on

page 61), holds 4 cups of water, and is made of stainless steel, which will please anyone on your list who's not a fan of plastic.







GREAT GRINDS

**Baratza Virtuoso Coffee Grinder**  
\$240



OVERALL SCORE

With a sticker-shock-inducing price and a fancy name, this burr coffee grinder promises a lot. It also delivers. Quiet and powerful, the Virtuoso grinds beans to a consistent size every time—even on the finest setting—making it an equally exquisite tool for drip coffee, espresso, and everything in between.



BEST IN SHOW

**iCoffee RCB100-BC12 French-Press Style**  
\$100



OVERALL SCORE

The iCoffee's SteamBrew process spritzes and swirls the grounds as the carafe fills, combining the ease of a drip machine with the rich-tasting results of a French press—an uncommon combo that made it the highest-scoring specialty coffee maker in our tests. It's also one of the few coffee makers that's fun to watch.



BUZZWORTHY

**Cafe Altura Organic Colombian**  
\$14 per pound; [cafealtura.com](http://cafealtura.com)



OVERALL SCORE

Medium-bodied coffee with big flavor and notes of fruit and chocolate.



Expert Pick  
**Bruer Cold Bruer**  
\$80

"If you want to earn some coffee cred with a budding barista, you can't go wrong with the simple and stylish Bruer Cold Bruer. A mixture of ice and water placed in the upper chamber drains onto the grounds at a rate of a drop per second. In 12 to 24 hours, it produces up to 20 ounces of smooth brew without the familiar bitterness of coffees made with hot water. Also available in gray and red."

—Bernie Deltrio, senior product tester





PICK-ME-UP

**Heart Coffee Roasters  
Stereo Blend**

\$18 per pound; [heartroasters.com](http://heartroasters.com)

**80**

OVERALL  
SCORE

Our top-rated boutique blend makes for a bright cup with a pleasantly strong aroma. Note: The mix of beans changes seasonally.



EYE-OPENER

**Counter Culture  
La Golondrina Colombia  
Certified Organic**

\$23 per pound; [counterculturecoffee.com](http://counterculturecoffee.com)

**88**

OVERALL  
SCORE

A complex, intensely flavored organic Colombian coffee, this brew is fruity and floral with a hint of chocolate.



DOUBLE FEATURES

**Frieling Insulated Brushed  
Stainless Steel French Press 0131**  
\$125



OVERALL  
SCORE

This forward-thinking French-press coffee maker is twice as nice as traditional models: Its double-walled stainless carafe keeps coffee hot long after it's made, and its surface stays cool. The double layer of mesh on the plunger helps prevent grounds from polluting the brew. With a 44-ounce capacity, it's an ideal size to brew loose tea, too.



IN HOT WATER

**Capresso H2O Plus**  
\$70



OVERALL  
SCORE

All six of the electric teakettles we tested brought a liter of water to a rolling boil faster than a microwave (around 4½ minutes for most) and shut off automatically.

The 6-cup Capresso makes the wish list because it's slightly faster than the rest; the glass carafe and silver handle add a dash of style to the counter.







Sometimes nothing says "I love you" like no-holds-barred extravagance. We've got some quality indulgences for anyone who's ready to be a big spender.



BEST IN SHOW  
**LG OLED55E6P TV**  
\$4,000

**84**

OVERALL  
SCORE

This 55-inch 4K UHD TV topped our ratings this past year—a testament to organic light-emitting diode (OLED) technology. Blessed with best-in-class deep black levels and an unlimited viewing angle no LED LCD can match, it delivers excellent high-def picture quality and ultra-high-def performance.



PHOTO, FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT: MASTERFILE ROYALTY FREE; PHOTOS: BRENDAN WIXTED (WATCH); JOHN WALSH (LAPTOP)

VIDEO VIRTUOSO

**Vaio Flip Z Laptop**  
\$1,800

**81**  
OVERALL SCORE

Who says a high-end laptop has to be all business? This one combines an Intel Core i5 processor, 8GB of RAM, and Intel's Iris Graphics tech to handle video editing and video game playing with ease. The 256GB solid-state drive loads files with superb speed. And the integrated hinge lets you flip the high-resolution touch screen to transform the laptop into a tablet.



BEAUTY AND BRAINS

**Apple Watch Series 2**  
\$650

**85**  
OVERALL SCORE

This dressy version of Apple's new smartwatch is encased in stainless steel (rather than aluminum) and comes with an elegant Milanese mesh band, elevating the techie timepiece to a fashion accessory. Hardworking as well as handsome, it's water-resistant to 50 meters, offers built-in GPS, heart-rate monitor and step-tracking features, and allows workout data sharing.



FRIEND OF THE FAMILY  
**27-Inch Dell XPS**  
\$1,500

**85**  
OVERALL SCORE

This all-in-one desktop is flush with features everyone will appreciate. It has a high-resolution touch-screen monitor and plenty of processing power for editing, gaming, and streaming. The 1TB hard drive offers ample room for movies, music, and photos. Plus there's a DVD burner, a webcam, and a two-piece speaker system with better-than-you'd-expect sound.



PICTURE PERFECT

**Nikon D500 (with 16-80 mm lens)**  
\$2,600

**79**  
OVERALL SCORE

When you spring for a top-notch camera you want options, and this Nikon provides plenty. Set it on auto and let it do all of the work. Or take control by shifting to one of several manual modes. The viewfinder and spacious swiveling touch-screen display are both excellent, and the image quality and 4K video got high marks in our tests.



VIEW TO A FILL

**KitchenAid KDTM804ESS**  
**Dishwasher**  
\$1,800

**83**  
OVERALL SCORE

This model is quiet, not meek, with a window that lights up at the end of a cycle to announce that the dishes are done. Cleaning and efficiency are first-rate.





HOT AND HEAVY

**Napoleon Prestige Pro 665RSIB**  
\$2,600

**72**  
OVERALL SCORE

No Napoleon complex here: This large grill is the sole representative of its stature to earn our recommendation. Its cooking surface heats evenly and can fit at least 28 burgers. But it's not merely a high-Btu brute. The five main burners possess enough finesse to snag an excellent score in our indirect-cooking and temperature-range tests.



THE LAPTOP OF LUXURY  
**Lenovo Thinkpad X1**  
\$1,300

**69**  
OVERALL SCORE

The ThinkPad X1 is a fine tablet. But what makes it really cool is its modular design. You can customize it with all manner of meaningful extras. Add the detachable keyboard and it's a very good laptop—thin and light, with 11.25 hours of battery life. Another add-on (\$130) provides a battery and extra ports. And yet another module (\$250) supplies a tiny Pico projector.



LIGHTER THAN AIR  
**Apple MacBook 12-Inch Laptop MF855LL/A**  
\$1,200

**77**  
OVERALL SCORE

The jewel in Apple's revived MacBook line, this 12-inch laptop offers an excellent Retina display, a fast, efficient solid-state drive, and more than 16 hours of battery life. There's no optical drive for handling CDs or DVDs, but it does handle web browsing, video editing, and midrange gaming with effortless speed. Best of all, it weighs only 2 pounds.



ARTISTIC INSPIRATION  
**Microsoft Surface Book Laptop**  
\$1,500

**76**  
OVERALL SCORE

A hip look, bountiful features, and a detachable screen make this a go-to gift for creative types who want a tablet with the power of a traditional laptop. The high-resolution touch-screen display, Intel Core i5 processor, and 8GB of RAM are ideal for photo and video editing. And the included Surface Pen makes old-fashioned drawing and note-taking easy and precise.





POWER COUPLE

**LG Washer WT1701CV**

\$700

**LG Dryer DLEY1701V, DLG172V**

\$700, \$850

74

OVERALL SCORE

They look and work well together. Even better, they're designed to deliver impressive performance and save time. Their big capacities allow for larger loads, and the high-efficiency top-loader's TurboWash option cuts about 15 minutes off normal wash time without sacrificing performance.



FIT AND PROPER

**Bodyguard E-40**

\$2,100

73

OVERALL SCORE

Thanks to an innovative design, Bodyguard shrank the footprint of this elegant elliptical down to 62 inches—at least a foot shorter than our other top picks. There's no sacrifice in performance, and our testers were impressed with the durable construction.

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS (ELLIPTICAL AND WASHER/DRYER)



## GROUP GIVING: THE MORE THE MERRIER

CHIPPING IN FOR a gift with a bunch of friends or family members can be a logistical nightmare, but some new websites promise to make the pain of passing the envelope a thing of the past. Be aware: These sites don't offer returns or exchanges. And always read a site's privacy policy before placing an order.

**eGifter** lets you pick an electronic gift card from more than 250 national merchants, including Amazon and Best Buy, and then invite people via email, text, or social media to contribute. Payments can be made by credit card, PayPal, or even bitcoin, and everyone who gives can add a message or photo, animation, or video to the accompanying greeting card. There are no fees for the service.

**HipChip** sells gift cards from dozens of restaurants

and retailers as well as Visa network gift cards, which can be used anywhere Visa is accepted. It sends invitations and tracks all contributions, charging each contributor a 50 cent processing fee. There's also a \$5 to \$35 charge for the Visa gift card, depending on the denomination. A bit pricey, so decide whether it's worth the convenience.

**GiftStarter** offers gift cards and a curated selection of products, including electronic Beats wireless headphones (\$380) and a 9-foot-long shuffleboard table (\$900). It charges an 8 percent fee for the service. Some of the product details and pictures are skimpy, which can make it difficult to compare prices with those for the same items elsewhere.

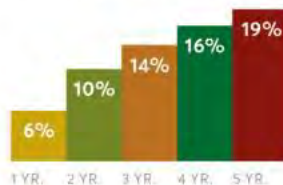
—Jeff Blyskal



# Road Report

Ratings from our test track plus expert car advice

CHANCES OF HAVING  
A RELIABILITY PROBLEM  
DURING THE FIRST  
FIVE YEARS OF OWNERSHIP





# Staying Power

This year's Annual Auto Reliability Survey saw the rise of luxury brands, a mixed bag for Japanese brands, and some reliability stumbles by stalwarts—causing big and surprising shuffles in our rankings.

by Michelle Naranjo

IT'S EASY TO assess the style, spaciousness, and features of a new vehicle in a showroom. You can even take it out for a spin to see whether its performance is up to your expectations. But there's no way to test drive a vehicle's reliability. For that, you need time and data. So every year we send Consumer Reports subscribers our Annual Auto Reliability Survey to determine which vehicles are likely to be dependable and which ones are an invitation to years of headaches.

This year we gathered data on more than half a million vehicles, covering more than 300 models from 2000 to 2016, plus a few early 2017s. With that much information, Consumer Reports can predict the future reliability of established models. We can also make predictions on new or redesigned models based on similar models and brand history (see "Our Expert Predictions of Reliability for 2017 Cars," on page 68).

A close inspection of this year's data reveals a few trends:

First, the least surprising news: Toyota and Lexus topped our list of the most reliable brands again. Toyota uses tried-and-true methods to build its vehicles, taking a conservative, evolutionary approach.

Buick moves into the top three brands this year. Its core product line is mature, with most problems having been ironed out. But Buick has introduced several new vehicles, which could have an impact on future brand performance.

Subaru dropped out of the top 10 reliable brands because of multiple problems in the Legacy sedan and

Outback wagon, which now have average reliability. The drop was compounded by the WRX/STi falling to below average reliability.

Tesla's Model S has improved to average reliability, which now makes the electric car one of our recommended models. But its new Model X SUV has been plagued with malfunctions, including its complex Falcon-wing doors. Both vehicles can be upgraded to include Tesla's optional semi-autonomous Autopilot software, which can allow the car to maintain lane position, speed, and following distances on its own.

Consumer Reports has serious concerns about how some automakers, including Tesla, have designed, deployed, and marketed semi-autonomous technology. We believe automakers need to clearly communicate what these systems can and cannot do. (See "What You Need to Know About Semi-Autonomous Technology," on page 73.) To that end, we have identified models in our ratings that offer semi-autonomous features.

## LESSONS FROM OUR ANNUAL AUTO RELIABILITY SURVEY

If you study reliability as long as we have, you start to notice recurring themes. Those are general principles that cut across pretty much all models and brands, and serve as good advice for anyone in the market for a new vehicle. Here are three key insights.

### LESSON 1 Don't just shop by brand.

Not all vehicles in a brand lineup are created equally. In fact, most are a

mixed bag. Infiniti, for instance, has products that stretch from a best score of 91 for the Q70 sedan down to a lowly 33 for the QX60. Ford's Expedition SUV is impressive, but the Fiesta and Focus have persistent reliability issues. And Audi is in the top five brands, but its small A3 ranked below average.

### LESSON 2 Wait a year or two before buying a new or redesigned model.

It's true that a few brands, like Lexus and Toyota, have lines that are consistently reliable, but even they can launch a few clunkers. The redesigned Tacoma pickup was unreliable in its first year, and it took three years after being redesigned for the Ford Escape to improve to average reliability. It can take years for an automaker to work out the kinks. When a car model is brand new or "completely redesigned," that can mean new parts, new systems—and new problems.

### LESSON 3 Increased complexity equals increased problems.

It's also wise to avoid complicated new systems. In the past few years, Ford introduced its troublesome MyFord Touch and MyLincoln Touch infotainment systems, as well as a dual-clutch automated transmission in its Fiesta and Focus that also had significant problems. Honda and Acura owners told us they have been stymied by problematic infotainment systems and transmissions as well. For Ford and Honda, models with less complex infotainment systems or proven transmissions fared far better.



# OUR EXPERT PREDICTIONS OF RELIABILITY FOR 2017 CARS

CONSUMER REPORTS' Annual Auto Reliability Survey is the largest of its kind. This year we gathered detailed data from our digital and print subscribers on more than half a million vehicles. Our survey takes a deep dive into the numerous things that can go wrong with a vehicle. We study 17 trouble areas, from nuisances, such as squeaky brakes and broken interior trim, to major bummer, such as out-of-warranty transmission repairs or trouble with four-wheel-drive systems.

We weight the severity of each type of problem to create a Predicted Reliability Score

for each vehicle. That score is then combined with data collected from our track testing, as well as our owner-satisfaction survey results and safety data, to calculate each test vehicle's Overall Score.

The charts that follow focus on the reliability part of that equation. Our new survey has probed deeper than ever before to get a more complete picture of vehicle dependability. Previously, we collected information on 10 years of history for each model. To better reflect the longer service life of modern cars, we've gone back 16 years.

We also now have the confidence to predict reliability for new and redesigned models. For obvious reasons, reliability data for those models is limited. But by combining what we know about the reliability of the brand with detailed information about previous models, we can give a rating for models that are new to the market.

New this year, we converted the Predicted Reliability Score from a percentage better or worse than average to a 0 to 100 point scale. This makes it easier to compare different models. The average rating now ranges from 41 to 60,

with better than average and worse than average spanning 20 points on either side of that range.

Our predictions for the 2017 models are based on the frequency of problems for each car for the past three model years, provided the vehicle wasn't changed significantly in that time. Some ratings might be based on a single model year's data; those vehicles are marked with an asterisk (\*).

We hope this information can help you make a more informed decision on your next new-car purchase.

## Hybrid/Electric Cars

Toyota Prius*	94
Toyota Prius V	83
Nissan Leaf	79
Toyota Prius C	72
BMW i3	69
Ford C-MAX	63
Tesla Model S 	44
Chevrolet Volt*	15
Tesla Model X* 	12

## Subcompact Cars

Hyundai Accent*	79
Nissan Versa Note	64
Chevrolet Sonic	52
Honda Fit	51
Fiat 500*	20
Ford Fiesta	13

## Compact Cars

Chevrolet Cruze*	89
Toyota Corolla	86
Mazda3	66
Kia Forte	61
Kia Soul	57
Nissan Sentra	51
Mini Cooper	30
Volkswagen Golf	23
Volkswagen Beetle*	20
Volkswagen Jetta	18
Honda Civic*	17
Fiat 500L*	13
Ford Focus	6

## Midsize Cars

Kia Optima*	84
Toyota Camry	83
Honda Accord	75
Mazda6	70
Ford Fusion	65
Chevrolet Malibu*	65
Hyundai Sonata	62
Subaru Legacy	48
Nissan Altima	47
Volkswagen Passat	34
Chrysler 200*	11

## Large Cars

Hyundai Azera*	83
Toyota Avalon	82
Chevrolet Impala	50
Ford Taurus	49
Nissan Maxima*	43
Chrysler 300	42
Dodge Charger	18

## Luxury Entry-Level Cars

Lexus CT 200h*	94
Buick Verano	87
Acura ILX*	73
Audi A3	40

## Luxury Compact Cars

Lexus IS	86
Buick Regal	81
BMW 3 Series	50
Volvo S60	48
Infiniti Q50	37
Mercedes-Benz C-Class 	33
Cadillac ATS	20
Acura TLX	19

\*Based on one model year of data.



### Luxury Midsize Cars

Infiniti Q70*	91
Lexus GS	89
Lexus ES	86
Audi A7*	71
Audi A6	65
Acura RLX*	63
Cadillac XTS*	61
Lincoln MKZ	50
BMW 5 Series	51
Hyundai Genesis	44
Cadillac CTS	43

### Ultra-Luxury Cars

Lexus LS	87
Tesla Model S ⚠	44
Mercedes-Benz S-Class* ⚠	20

### Sports/Sporty Cars Over \$40,000

Lexus RC*	91
BMW 2 Series	81
Audi A5/S5	79
Chevrolet Corvette	48
BMW 4 Series	48
Dodge Challenger*	18
Ford Mustang	17

### Sports/Sporty Cars Under \$40,000

Mazda MX-5 Miata*	72
Volkswagen GTI	38
Subaru WRX/STI	22

### Wagons

Volvo V60*	45
Subaru Outback	43
Volkswagen Golf SportWagen	20

### Minivans

Toyota Sienna	81
Honda Odyssey	57
Dodge Grand Caravan	50

### Subcompact SUVs

Chevrolet Trax*	83
Subaru Crosstrek	81
Honda HR-V*	75
Mazda CX-3*	58
Jeep Renegade*	8

### Compact SUVs

Toyota RAV4	82
Subaru Forester	78
Volkswagen Tiguan	75
Mazda CX-5	73
Honda CR-V	67
Jeep Patriot*	65
Nissan Rogue	61
Ford Escape	55
Hyundai Tucson*	55
Jeep Cherokee	24

### Midsized SUVs

Toyota 4Runner	88
Hyundai Santa Fe Sport	82
Toyota Highlander	80
Chevrolet Equinox	78
GMC Terrain	78
Kia Sorento*	74
Hyundai Santa Fe	67
Honda Pilot*	63
Nissan Murano	51
Ford Edge	43
Ford Explorer	38
Jeep Wrangler	34
Dodge Journey	30
Nissan Pathfinder	21
Jeep Grand Cherokee	18

### Large SUVs

Ford Expedition*	81
Ford Flex	74
Chevrolet Traverse	70
Dodge Durango	23
Chevrolet Tahoe	13
GMC Yukon	13
Chevrolet Suburban	10
GMC Yukon XL	10

### Luxury Entry-Level SUVs

Audi Q3	91
Buick Encore	75
Mini Cooper Countryman	63
BMW X1*	61
Mercedes-Benz GLA*	60

### Luxury Compact SUVs

Mercedes-Benz GLC* ⚠	89
Infiniti QX50*	87
Lexus NX	86
Audi Q5	66
Acura RDX	63
BMW X3	52
Volvo XC60	51
Porsche Macan	41
Lincoln MKC	18

### Luxury Midsized SUVs

Lexus GX	90
Audi Q7*	88
Lexus RX*	70
Mercedes-Benz GLE ⚠	49
Porsche Cayenne*	48
BMW X5	45
Acura MDX*	45
Infiniti QX60	33
Lincoln MKX*	23
Volkswagen Touareg*	20
Volvo XC90* ⚠	19
Tesla Model X* ⚠	12

### Luxury Large SUVs

Buick Enclave	58
Mercedes-Benz GLS ⚠	14
Cadillac Escalade	3

### Compact Pickup Trucks

Nissan Frontier	47
Chevrolet Colorado	28
GMC Canyon	28
Toyota Tacoma*	20

### Full-Sized Pickup Trucks

Toyota Tundra	85
Ford F-250	55
Ford F-350*	48
Chevrolet Silverado 1500	34
GMC Sierra 1500	34
Ford F-150	29
Ram 1500	19
Chevrolet Silverado 2500HD	19
GMC Sierra 2500HD	19
Chevrolet Silverado 3500HD*	18
GMC Sierra 3500HD*	18
Ram 2500	13



RELIABILITY PREDICTIONS FOR REDESIGNED VEHICLES OR THOSE JUST HITTING SHOWROOMS

WE ARE NOW ABLE to give a reliability rating to models that are brand new to the market, have been redesigned, or have limited data. Our auto experts look at the brand's overall history of building good- or poor-quality vehicles as well as, if applicable, the previous generation of that particular model's reliability. We can't score new vehicles precisely on a 0 to 100 scale, but based on the information we have, we have given the models below a rough prediction.

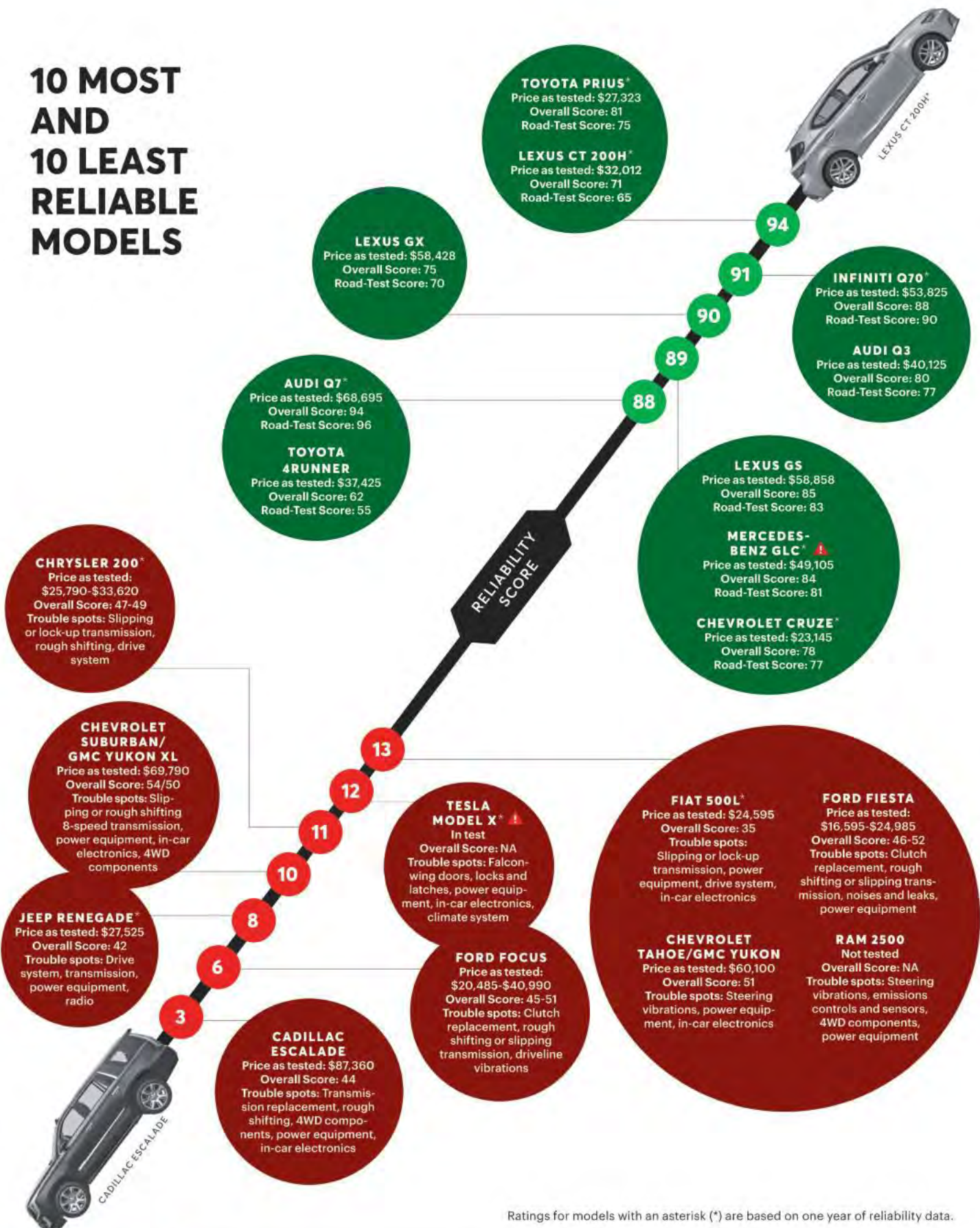
Hybrid/Electric Cars	
Toyota Mirai	➡
Hyundai Ioniq	⚠
Kia Niro	⚠
Mercedes-Benz B-Class ED	⚠
Mitsubishi i-MiEV	⚠
Subcompact Cars	
Toyota Yaris	➡
Toyota Yaris iA	➡
Chevrolet Spark	⚠
Hyundai Veloster	⚠
Kia Rio	⚠
Mitsubishi Mirage	⚠
Nissan Versa	⚠
Smart ForTwo	⚠
Compact Cars	
Toyota Corolla iM	➡
Hyundai Elantra	➡
Subaru Impreza	➡
Mitsubishi Lancer	⚠
Dodge Dart	⚠
Mini Cooper Clubman	⚠
Large Cars	
Kia Cadenza	➡
Kia K900	⚠
Chevrolet SS	⚠
Luxury Compact Cars	
Audi A4	➡
Volkswagen CC	⚠
Jaguar XE	⚠
Mercedes-Benz CLA	⚠
Alfa Romeo Giulia	⚠
Luxury Midsize Cars	
Buick LaCrosse	⚠
Cadillac CT6	⚠
Lincoln Continental	⚠
Mercedes-Benz CLS ⚠	⚠
Mercedes-Benz E-Class ⚠	⚠
Jaguar XF	⚠
Volvo S90 ⚠	⚠
Maserati Ghibli	⚠

Ultra-Luxury Cars	
Audi A8	➡
BMW 7 Series ⚠	⚠
Genesis G90	⚠
Porsche Panamera	⚠
Jaguar XJ	⚠
Sports/Sporty Cars Over \$40,000	
Audi TT	➡
Lexus LC	➡
BMW 6 Series	⚠
BMW Z4	⚠
Chevrolet Camaro	⚠
Mercedes-Benz SL ⚠	⚠
Mercedes-Benz SLC	⚠
Nissan Z	⚠
Porsche 718 Boxster	⚠
Porsche 718 Cayman	⚠
Porsche 911	⚠
Jaguar F-Type	⚠
Alfa Romeo 4C	⚠
Sports/Sporty Cars Under \$40,000	
Buick Cascada	➡
Fiat 124	⚠
Subaru BRZ	⚠
Toyota 86	⚠
Minivans	
Ford Transit Connect	⚠
Kia Sedona	⚠
Mercedes-Benz Metris	⚠
Nissan Quest	⚠
Chrysler Pacifica	⚠
Subcompact SUVs	
Mitsubishi Outlander Sport	⚠
Nissan Juke	⚠
Fiat 500X	⚠

Compact SUVs	
Kia Sportage	➡
Mitsubishi Outlander	⚠
Jeep Compass	⚠
Midsize SUVs	
GMC Acadia	⚠
Mazda CX-9	⚠
Large SUVs	
Toyota Sequoia	➡
Nissan Armada	⚠
Luxury Entry-Level SUVs	
Infiniti QX30	⚠
Land Rover Range Rover Evoque	⚠
Luxury Compact SUVs	
BMW X4	⚠
Buick Envision	⚠
Cadillac XT5	⚠
Jaguar F-Pace	⚠
Land Rover Discovery Sport	⚠
Luxury Midsize SUVs	
BMW X6	⚠
Lincoln MKT	⚠
Infiniti QX70	⚠
Land Rover LR4	⚠
Land Rover Range Rover	⚠
Land Rover Range Rover Sport	⚠
Maserati Levante	⚠
Luxury Large SUVs	
Lexus LX	➡
Toyota Land Cruiser	➡
Lincoln Navigator	⚠
Infiniti QX80	⚠
Compact Pickup Trucks	
Honda Ridgeline	⚠
Full-Sized Pickup Trucks	
Nissan Titan XD	⚠



# 10 MOST AND 10 LEAST RELIABLE MODELS



Ratings for models with an asterisk (\*) are based on one year of reliability data.



## HOW THE BRANDS STACK UP

WE SAW A SIGNIFICANT SHUFFLING of car brands as we scrutinized this year's data. Our brand-level rankings are based on an average predicted-reliability score across each brand's model line. We also tracked whether each brand's rank went up or down since our 2015 survey.

Infiniti is the biggest mover this year, jumping 16 places to crack the top 10. It has a small model lineup, so slight improvements in reliability can result in big brand gains. Three brands dropped significantly: Subaru, Volvo, and Volkswagen. They also have small model lineups, so one or two models suffering a drop in reliability had big repercussions for each brand.

This year we converted our Predicted Reliability Score to a 0 to 100 point scale, with the average rating falling between 41 and 60 points. Better or worse than average ratings fall on either side of that range.

2017 Rank	Rank Change From Last Year	Brand	No. of Models	Average Reliability Score	Best Score	Worst Score	Most Reliable	Least Reliable
<b>MORE RELIABLE</b>								
1	-	Lexus	9	86	94	70	CT 200h	RX
2	-	Toyota	12	78	94	20	Prius*	Tacoma*
3	↑ 4	Buick	4	75	87	58	Verano	Enclave
4	↓ 1	Audi	7	71	91	40	Q3	A3
5	↑ 1	Kia	4	69	84	57	Optima*	Soul
6	↓ 2	Mazda	5	68	73	58	CX-5	CX-3
7	↑ 2	Hyundai	7	66	83	44	Azera	Genesis
8	↑ 16	Infiniti	4	62	91	33	Q70	QX60
<b>RELIABLE</b>								
9	↑ 2	BMW	8	57	81	45	2 Series	X5
10	↓ 2	Honda	7	57	75	17	HR-V*	Civic*
11	↓ 6	Subaru	5	54	81	22	Crosstrek	WRX/STI
12	↑ 6	Acura	5	53	73	19	ILX*	TLX
13	↑ 2	Nissan	9	52	79	21	Leaf	Pathfinder
14	↓ 4	Mini	2	47	63	30	Countryman	Cooper
15	↑ 5	Chevrolet	15	45	89	10	Cruze*	Suburban
16	↓ 2	Porsche	2	45	48	41	Cayenne	Macan
17	↑ 4	Mercedes-Benz	6	44	89	14	GLC* ⚠	GLS ⚠
18	↓ 1	Ford	14	44	81	6	Expedition*	Focus
<b>LESS RELIABLE</b>								
19	↓ 7	Volvo	4	40	51	19	XC60	XC90* ⚠
20	↓ 4	Lincoln	3	33	60	18	MKZ	MKC
21	↑ 4	Cadillac	4	32	61	3	XTS	Escalade
22	↓ 9	Volkswagen	8	30	75	18	Tiguan	Jetta
23	↑ 4	Jeep	5	30	65	8	Patriot	Renegade*
24	↓ 5	GMC	7	29	79	10	Terrain	Yukon XL
25	NA	Tesla	2	28	44	12	Model S ⚠	Model X ⚠
26	↓ 3	Dodge	5	28	50	18	Grand Caravan	Challenger*
27	↓ 5	Chrysler	2	26	42	11	300	200
28	-	Fiat	2	17	20	13	500*	500L*
29	↓ 3	Ram	2	16	19	13	1500	2500

\* Based on one model year of data.

## WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT

Our recommendations are based on: our road-test scores; predicted reliability and owner-satisfaction data from our Annual Auto Survey; and independent safety testing. The recommendations may change from year to year based on the latest information available. Here we list models that are either newly recommended or no longer recommended based on our newest reliability data.

### NEWLY RECOMMENDED

#### Models with improved reliability

- BMW i3
- BMW X5
- Cadillac XTS\*
- Chevrolet Camaro\*
- Chevrolet Corvette
- Chevrolet Cruze\*
- Chrysler 300
- Ford Escape
- Hyundai Santa Fe
- Mercedes-Benz GLC\* ⚠
- Porsche Macan
- Tesla Model S ⚠

### NO LONGER RECOMMENDED

#### Models with declining reliability

- Audi A3
- Chevrolet Volt
- Dodge Durango
- Ford F-150
- Honda Civic\*
- Lincoln MKX\*
- Mini Cooper
- Subaru WRX/STI
- Volkswagen GTI
- Volkswagen Jetta
- Volkswagen Passat



## WHEN LUXURY TAKES A TOLL ON RELIABILITY

SOME LUXURY MANUFACTURERS made gains in our brand reports this year, but that doesn't mean that buying a prestigious nameplate ensures better reliability. In fact, when we compared mainstream and luxury versions of similar vehicles, we found that paying more doesn't automatically result in a more reliable vehicle. That underscores the need to base your car-buying decision on the model rather than on brand prestige.

In some cases, luxury vehicles are nicely dressed versions of more mainstream models but with additional features. In such cases, the smartest choice is to buy a well-equipped version of that mainstream model, which can deliver an upscale driving experience without the premium price or greater reliability risks.

Here we compare pairs of models—a mainstream and a luxury version of the same vehicle—highlighting our survey findings.

The **Edge**, in its second year of the current design, has improved overall reliability.



RELIABILITY SCORE



The **MKX** has had problems with the power equipment and infotainment systems in its first year of redesign.



RELIABILITY SCORE

	Less Expensive	Score	Luxury Version	Score
Less expensive model is more reliable than the luxury version	Chevrolet Traverse	⬆️	Buick Enclave	⬇️
	Ford Edge	1	Lincoln MKX	⬇️
	Ford Fusion	⬆️	Lincoln MKZ	1
Less expensive and luxury models That are equally reliable	Honda CR-V	⬆️	Acura RDX	⬆️
	Toyota Camry	⬆️	Lexus ES	⬆️
	Toyota RAV4	⬆️	Lexus NX	⬆️
Less expensive and luxury models That are equally unreliable	Chevrolet Suburban	⬇️	Cadillac Escalade	⬇️
	Nissan Pathfinder	⬇️	Infiniti QX60	⬇️



## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SEMI-AUTONOMOUS TECHNOLOGY

CONSUMER REPORTS believes that autonomous vehicle technology has the potential to improve driver safety. But we also have serious concerns about the way certain semi-autonomous systems, some of which allow a car to steer for itself, are currently being designed, deployed, and marketed. We think automakers need to clearly communicate the capabilities—and the limitations—of these systems.

Because this is a new and rapidly evolving technology, little data exists on the safety or benefits of these systems, so we currently don't factor them

into our ratings criteria. Our ratings and recommendations are based on a performance assessment from Consumer Reports track evaluations of how well a car drives (i.e., braking, handling, fuel economy) and reliability scores from our Annual Auto Survey, as well as safety evaluations and external crash tests.

But we do monitor these types of emerging technologies closely. Many automakers have promoted semi-autonomous systems as a safety feature to help with driver distraction and fatigue, but drivers are supposed to remain engaged

with the driving process at all times. Some companies, such as Tesla and Mercedes-Benz, have used names such as Autopilot and Drive Pilot, which can give the false and dangerous impression that these cars are more capable than they really are. Several of these systems also allow you to take your hands off the wheel. Consumer Reports believes that as long as these systems require driver engagement, they should also require the driver to keep his or her hands on the wheel.

Several of the vehicles in these reliability charts offer semi-autonomous features. They

include Tesla's Model S, whose reliability improved enough to qualify for recommended status under our criteria, as well as certain vehicles from BMW, Mercedes-Benz, and Volvo.

We will continue to monitor the evolution of self-driving technology and evaluate whether to make future adjustments to our ratings.



LEARN

To learn more about self-driving technology and see our expert evaluations, go to [ConsumerReports.org/selfdriving](https://www.ConsumerReports.org/selfdriving).



**Road Report** ➤ We conduct more than 50 tests on each vehicle at our 327-acre Auto Test Center.

**68**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



**LUXURY SUVs**

## Cadillac XT5

Neither a luxury leader nor a sporty standout, the new Cadillac XT5 stalls in SUV limbo.

AS THE CT6 demonstrates, Cadillac can build brilliant-driving sedans. But the brand's SUVs lack the same magic. The XT5 isn't as rewarding to drive as a German compact SUV or as pampering as a Lexus RX, placing it in luxury-SUV limbo.

Though the smooth 3.6-liter V6 propels the XT5 from 0 to

60 mph in a reasonably quick 7.1 seconds, the car feels lumbering in everyday driving—made worse by the sluggish automatic transmission.

During relaxed driving, the XT5 swiftly responds to steering input. But handling becomes reluctant when you pick up the pace, as the XT5's eagerness

to corner wanes. Emergency handling, however, remains secure and confident.

There's nothing luxurious about the Caddy's stiff, choppy ride. However, plushness abounds inside the hushed cabin, with generous amounts of wood, chrome, and soft-touch material. The front seats deliver all-day support, but shorter-legged drivers felt that the seat cushion was too long. The reclining rear seat is spacious.

Visibility is hampered by thick roof pillars and a small rear window. An optional rear-view mirror camera gives a wider view but lacks resolution.

The Cue infotainment system has been improved, but we'd prefer knobs and buttons to the touch-sensitive controls. Cadillac's bewildering gear selector makes finding Reverse a challenge, which is frustrating when parking.

Despite a few positives, the XT5 doesn't stand out among luxury and upscale SUVs.

### Cadillac XT5

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 76

**HIGHS**

Plush interior, seat comfort, quietness

**LOWS**

Stiff ride, unintuitive gear selector, visibility

**POWERTRAIN**

310-hp, 3.6-liter V6 engine; 8-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

**FUEL**

20 mpg

**PRICE AS TESTED**

\$51,025

**60**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



**LUXURY SUVs**

## Jaguar F-Pace

Though Jaguar's athletic new SUV is supercharged and agile, its loud exhaust is a sour note.

JAGUAR'S FIRST-EVER SUV—the F-Pace—is based on the same rear-drive platform as the new XE and redesigned XF sedans.

This new Jag definitely has the “pace,” with its 340-hp supercharged V6 launching the all-wheel-drive SUV to 60 mph in 6.0 seconds. There's a 380-hp version, too, along with a four-cylinder diesel. And

the eight-speed automatic is a smooth operator, although the auto start/stop system fires up the engine with a shudder and hobbles the air conditioner's ability to keep the cabin cool when stopped.

The F-Pace's quick steering makes it feel athletic, and body lean is kept in check. But the ride is stiff, and passengers feel

many quick, short bounces. Though the subdued levels of road and wind noise are commendable, the always-prominent exhaust drone becomes irritating.

Expanses of hard plastic contribute to a disappointing lack of flair for a \$50,000-plus vehicle. The F-Pace's infotainment system is dated and limited.

Positives include a roomy driving position, with well-padded and supportive seats. The rear seat is spacious and comfortable, but the seatback can't recline. Sleek styling shrinks the rear window to practically a sliver.

Safety systems such as forward-collision warning and automatic braking are available only on the top R-Sport and S trims.

Despite its speed and agility, the F-Pace loses ground because of its choppy ride, loud exhaust, and unremarkable interior.

### Jaguar F-Pace

**ROAD-TEST SCORE** 72

**HIGHS**

Agility, acceleration, braking, transmission, rear seat

**LOWS**

Ride, noise, rear visibility, so-so infotainment system, wimpy A/C

**POWERTRAIN**

340-hp, 3.0-liter supercharged V6 engine; 8-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

**FUEL**

20 mpg

**PRICE AS TESTED**

\$53,895



81

OVERALL  
SCORE

## LUXURY SEDANS

## Cadillac CT6

The plush, high-tech flagship sedan boasts performance and panache.

AS WITNESSED with the ATS and CTS, Cadillac has continued to evolve the concept of the sport sedan. With the CT6, it has crafted a stately, plush, large sedan with engaging driving dynamics. Aim the CT6's sharp steering toward a curve and this big sedan seems to shrink in size, carving up

twisty roads with confidence. And yet the supple and composed ride befits a flagship.

The midlevel 3.6-liter V6 delivers ample power in a nonchalant fashion, pushing the CT6 to 60 mph in 6.5 seconds. Other engine choices include a 265-hp turbo four-cylinder and a 404-hp

twin-turbo V6, all mated to a smooth and responsive eight-speed automatic.

Inside, the CT6 has a tasteful mix of supple leather and well-crafted trim. It's easy to find comfort in the big, nicely padded front seats, thanks to the wide range of adjustments. The huge rear seat is a cinch to access, but the short bottom cushion compromises posture.

Cadillac has made some improvements to the Cue infotainment system, but the dashboard is still shy on easy-to-use buttons and knobs. The low-mounted dashboard vents compromise air distribution and tend to freeze your elbows.

Commendably, forward-collision warning, low-speed automatic braking, and blind-spot monitoring are standard on all versions of the CT6 except the Base trim.

The CT6's superb road-test score proves that it's worthy of Cadillac's old slogan, "Standard of the world."

## Cadillac CT6

ROAD-TEST SCORE 95

## HIGHS

Agility, ride, braking, quietness, seat comfort, interior room, fit and finish

## LOWS

Some controls, low dash vents, scant in-cabin storage

## POWERTRAIN

335-hp, 3.6-liter V6 engine; 8-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

## FUEL

22 mpg

## PRICE AS TESTED

\$64,485

66

OVERALL  
SCORE

## LUXURY SEDANS

## Jaguar XF

An odd pairing of first-class driving dynamics with a coach-class interior costs this Jag points.

JAGUAR CONTINUES to struggle to find its place amid the highly polished German elite. Although the redesigned XF delivers exemplary ride and handling characteristics, several miscues mean this big cat comes across as not quite housebroken.

The engine has plenty of power on tap, catapulting

our XF to 60 mph in a catlike 5.8 seconds. But the supercharged V6 often sounds like it's choking on a hair ball rather than purring happily.

On the road, the XF's handling makes it stand out from rivals. The Jag steers into corners with immediacy and feels engaging. It further demonstrated its athletic

demeanor at our track. But it was hindered by tail slide in our avoidance maneuver.

The Jag lives up to its reputation for soaking up all manner of bumps, and the hushed cabin isolates occupants from road and wind noise. The firm front seats are supportive for long trips, although even average-sized adults will find the driving position more Savile Row slim-cut than off-the-rack generous. Rear room is snug for the class.

For a brand known for sitting-roomlike interiors, there is too much hard plastic in the plain cabin. The dated-looking touch screen responds slowly, and the A/C blows patches of humid air. Plus, forward-collision warning and automatic emergency braking weren't available on our \$66,000 XF Prestige.

The XF is a viable alternative for buyers looking to Brexit from the German sedan dominance, but with ambience and ergonomic concessions.

## Jaguar XF

ROAD-TEST SCORE 83

## HIGHS

Ride, agility, acceleration, braking, transmission, front-seat comfort

## LOWS

So-so infotainment system, snug interior, expensive to get advanced safety features, weak A/C

## POWERTRAIN

340-hp, 3.0-liter supercharged V6 engine; 8-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

## FUEL

21 mpg

## PRICE AS TESTED

\$66,586



**Ratings** > Upscale sedans and SUVs capable of hauling five passengers and their belongings in comfort and style.



Recommended	Rank	Make & Model	Price	Overall Score	Survey Results		Safety	Road-Test Results										
					Predicted Reliability	Owner Satisfaction		Front-Crash Prevention	Road-Test Score	Overall MPG	Dry Braking, 60-0 MPH, Ft.	Acceleration, 0-60 MPH, Sec.	Avoidance Maneuver Speed, MPH	Routine Handling	Ride/Noise	Seat Comfort, Front/Rear	Controls	Luggage, Suitcases + Duffels or Cargo Volume, Cu. Ft.
<b>LUXURY SEDANS</b>																		
✓	1	Infiniti Q70 (V6)	\$53,825	88	↑	↓	Opt.	90	21	128	5.8	54.5	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	3+2
✓	2	Lexus GS 350**	\$58,858	85	↑	↑	Std./↑	83	21	137	6.2	53.5	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	3+1
✓	3	Audi A6 3.0 Premium Plus Quattro	\$56,295	84	↑	↑	Opt.	90	22	132	5.7	52.5	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	3+1
✓	4	Cadillac CT6 Luxury (3.6L, AWD)	\$64,485	81	↓*	↓*	Opt.	95	22	125	6.5	52.0	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	3+2
✓	5	Genesis G80 3.8 (AWD)	\$52,450	80	↓	↑	Std./↑	89	20	129	7.2	53.0	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	3+1
✓	6	Cadillac XTS Premium	\$57,200	77	↑	↓	Opt.	82	22	128	7.2	53.0	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	4+1
	7	Acura RLX Tech	\$55,345	75	↓	↓	Std./↑	75	23	128	6.5	51.5	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	2+3
	8	BMW 535i	\$58,375	73	↓	↑	Opt.	81	23	137	6.1	51.5	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	3+1
	9	Cadillac CTS Luxury (3.6L, AWD)	\$58,780	71	↓	↓	Opt.	83	22	127	6.5	54.5	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	2+2
	10	Jaguar XF Prestige (V6, AWD)	\$66,586	66	↓*	↓*	Opt.	83	21	128	5.8	51.0	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	2+1
<b>LUXURY SUVs</b>																		
✓	1	Mercedes-Benz GLC300	\$49,105	84	↑	↑	Std./↑	81	22	132	6.8	50.0	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	28.0
✓	2	Lexus RX 350	\$51,630	79	↑	↑	Std./↑	77	22	139	7.5	49.0	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	30.0
✓	3	Lexus NX 200t	\$43,284	76	↑	↓	Opt.	74	24	132	7.5	49.5	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	28.5
✓	4	BMW X3 xDrive28i (2.0T)	\$44,595	76	↓	↓	Opt.	82	23	130	7.3	53.0	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	33.0
✓	5	Audi Q5 Premium Plus (2.0T)	\$43,675	75	↑	↑	Opt.	78	21	130	7.9	52.0	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	32.0
✓	6	Porsche Macan S	\$63,290	74	↓	↑	Opt.	85	19	130	6.4	51.0	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	29.0
✓	7	Mercedes-Benz GLE350 (ML)	\$56,960	73	↓	↑	Std./↑	75	18	138	6.8	48.0	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	37.5
✓	8	Acura RDX	\$38,990	72	↑	↓	Opt.	75	22	132	6.6	51.0	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	31.5
✓	9	Volvo XC60 T6**	\$42,245	70	↓	↓	Std./↑	71	17	132	7.4	52.5	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	32.5
	10	Cadillac XT5 Luxury	\$51,025	68	↓*	↓*	Opt.	76	20	132	7.1	53.5	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	33.0
	11	Lincoln MKX (2.7 EcoBoost)	\$54,945	67	↓	↓	Opt.	87	18	128	7.2	53.5	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	32.5
	12	Infiniti QX70**	\$51,635	60	↓*	↓*	Opt.	72	18	133	6.8	51.0	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	25.5
	13	Jaguar F-Pace Prestige	\$53,895	60	↓*	↓*	Opt.	72	20	129	6.0	50.5	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	28.5
	14	Lincoln MKC Reserve	\$46,485	55	↓	↓	Opt.	72	19	125	7.8	54.0	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	30.5
	15	Land Rover Discovery Sport HSE	\$49,895	47	↓*	↓*	Opt.	58	21	136	8.6	50.5	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	33.0

**Scores in Context** Recommended models did well in our Overall Score, which factors in road-test results, predicted reliability, owner satisfaction, crash-test results, and

availability of front crash prevention features, such as forward-collision warning and automatic emergency braking. For these systems, NA means no such system is offered;

Opt. means it's available on some versions, but not necessarily the one we tested; and models with standard systems are rated from ↓ to ↑ based on their ability to warn drivers or

brake autonomously to avoid a crash. For full ratings, go to [ConsumerReports.org/cars](http://ConsumerReports.org/cars).







**A**

- Air conditioners..... Jul 16, 17
- Air travel industry trends..... Oct 16, 18
- passenger tips..... Oct 16, 18
- Antibiotics in meat..... Jan 16, 40; Jun 16, 8

**AUTOMOBILE RATINGS**

- Acura MDX..... Nov 16, 60
- Audi A4..... Nov 16, 66
- Audi Q7..... Jul 16, 62; Oct 16, 57; Nov 16, 60
- Audi TT..... Mar 16, 56
- BMW 7 Series..... Oct 16, 57
- BMW 750i..... May 16, 66
- BMW X1..... Jul 16, 63
- Buick Cascada..... Oct 16, 63
- Buick Enclave..... Nov 16, 60
- Cadillac CT6..... Dec 16, 75
- Cadillac XT5..... Dec 16, 74
- Chevrolet Camaro..... Oct 16, 63
- Chevrolet Cruze..... Sep 16, 66
- Chevrolet Malibu..... Oct 16, 62
- Chevrolet Sonic 1.8..... Sep 16, 60
- Chevrolet Spark..... Sep 16, 66; Oct 16, 57
- Chevrolet Volt LT..... Aug 16, 68
- Chrysler Pacifica..... Nov 16, 66
- Dodge Durango..... Nov 16, 60
- Fiat 500X..... Jan 16, 59
- Ford Flex..... Nov 16, 60
- Honda Accord..... Sep 16, 63; Nov 16, 60
- Honda Civic..... May 16, 67; Sep 16, 63; Oct 16, 57
- Honda Fit..... Sep 16, 60
- Honda HR-V..... Sep 16, 60
- Hyundai Azera..... Nov 16, 60
- Hyundai Elantra..... Sep 16, 67
- Hyundai Tucson..... Jan 16, 57
- Jaguar F-Pace..... Dec 16, 74
- Jaguar XF..... Dec 16, 75
- Kia Optima..... Jun 16, 62; Oct 16, 57
- Kia Sorento..... Nov 16, 60
- Kia Soul..... Sep 16, 60, 63; Nov 16, 60
- Kia Sportage..... Oct 16, 62
- Lexus ES..... Nov 16, 60
- Lexus LS 460..... Nov 16, 60
- Lexus RX..... May 16, 65; Nov 16, 60
- Lincoln MKX..... May 16, 64; Oct 16, 57
- Mazda CX-3..... Jan 16, 58; Sep 16, 60
- Mazda CX-9..... Nov 16, 67
- Mazda MX-5 Miata..... Mar 16, 57
- Mazda3..... Sep 16, 63
- Mercedes-Benz GLC300..... Jul 16, 62
- Mini Clubman..... Sep 16, 67
- Mitsubishi Outlander..... Feb 16, 59
- Nissan Sentra..... Oct 16, 57
- Nissan Titan XD..... Nov 16, 67
- Nissan Versa Note..... Sep 16, 60
- Scion iA..... Mar 16, 58; Sep 16, 60, 63
- Scion iM..... Feb 16, 58
- scoring system..... Apr 16, 8
- Smart ForTwo..... Mar 16, 59; Oct 16, 57
- Subaru Forester..... Sep 16, 63; Nov 16, 60
- Subaru Impreza Hatchback..... Nov 16, 60
- Subaru Legacy..... Sep 16, 63
- Subaru Outback..... Nov 16, 60
- Toyota Avalon..... Jun 16, 64; Nov 16, 60
- Toyota Highlander..... Nov 16, 60
- Toyota Prius..... Oct 16, 57
- Prius Three..... Aug 16, 67
- Prius V..... Nov 16, 60
- Toyota RAV4..... Jul 16, 63; Sep 16, 63; Nov 16, 60
- Toyota Sienna..... Nov 16, 60
- Toyota Tacoma..... Jun 16, 63; Oct 16, 57
- Volkswagen Jetta..... Feb 16, 59
- Volvo XC90..... Jan 16, 56

**AUTOMOBILES & AUTO EQUIPMENT**

- automatic braking..... Jun 16, 8
- batteries..... Jan 16, 53
- brand report card..... Apr 16, 23
- child safety seats..... Feb 16, 55
- choosing a car..... Apr 16, 16
- coming in 2016..... Apr 16, 20
- for families..... Nov 16, 60
- for first-time drivers..... Sep 16, 63
- infotainment systems..... Jul 16, 58
- mechanics..... Mar 16, 53
- new car preview..... Oct 16, 57
- owner satisfaction..... Jan 16, 49
- profiles, 2016..... Apr 16, 32

- ratings, 2015..... Apr 16, 70
- reliability..... Apr 16, 86; Dec 16, 66
- safety features..... Apr 16, 24
- seat belts..... Aug 16, 61
- self-driving cars..... May 16, 44
- tires..... Apr 16, 84
- top picks for 2016..... Apr 16, 10
- Toyota Prius..... Apr 16, 14
- for urban driving..... Sep 16, 60
- used cars..... Apr 16, 79
- shopping..... Jun 16, 57

**B-D**

- Banks and financial institutions services..... Jan 16, 24
- Bicycle helmets..... Aug 16, 20
- Cashless payment..... Nov 16, 48
- Casual restaurants..... Nov 16, 38
- Chicken food safety..... Jun 16, 8
- Clothing insect-repellent-treated..... Aug 16, 25
- Cloud services..... Feb 16, 13
- Coffee..... Nov 16, 11
- beans and equipment as gifts..... Dec 16, 58
- cold-brew..... Jun 16, 23
- Computers..... Jan 16, 21
- convertible tablets..... May 16, 24
- laptops reliability..... Jan 16, 18
- Consumer action antibiotic scorecard, fast food..... Dec 16, 8
- antibiotic-free chicken at Pizza Hut..... Oct 16, 8
- banking complaints..... Dec 16, 8
- cable costs..... Aug 16, 10
- car advertising, misleading..... Nov 16, 8
- drug prices..... Oct 16, 8
- financial advisers..... Jul 16, 8
- food arsenic levels..... Jul 16, 8
- labeling..... Oct 16, 8
- fuel economy..... Sep 16, 8
- health insurance mergers..... Nov 16, 10
- Ikea dresser recall..... Sep 16, 8
- medical bills sur prise bills..... Aug 16, 8; Dec 16, 8
- net neutrality..... Sep 16, 8
- non-disparagement clauses..... Nov 16, 10
- payday loans..... Oct 16, 8
- student debt..... Aug 16, 8; Oct 16, 8
- Coolers..... Jul 16, 15
- Countertops kitchen..... Aug 16, 40
- Crowdfunding scams..... Jan 16, 10
- Debt educational/student..... Aug 16, 28
- key questions..... Aug 16, 34
- Dishwashers..... Feb 16, 13; Aug 16, 40
- detergents..... May 16, 25
- drying function..... Jun 16, 26
- odors..... Mar 16, 15
- Doctors disciplinary status..... May 16, 30
- Driveway patches..... Mar 16, 20
- Drugs pain relievers..... Jun 16, 28
- pricing..... Jan 16, 13; Aug 16, 52
- sleeping pills..... Feb 16, 22
- Dryers..... May 16, 56

**E-G**

- Education debt key questions..... Aug 16, 28
- Aug 16, 34
- Electronics as gifts..... Dec 16, 26
- for social media users..... Dec 16, 38
- retailer ratings..... Dec 16, 33
- Entertainment as gifts..... Dec 16, 57
- Exercise equipment..... Feb 16, 14
- Facial recognition..... Feb 16, 40
- Financial services roboadvisers..... Sep 16, 44
- Fireplaces gas..... Feb 16, 9
- Fitness trackers..... Feb 16, 20; Jul 16, 9
- Flooring

- formaldehyde in..... Sep 16, 15
- kitchen..... Aug 16, 40
- Flower delivery..... May 16, 26
- Food as gifts..... Dec 16, 34
- history of Consumer Reports advocacy..... May 16, 52
- industry practices..... May 16, 50
- labeling GMO..... Mar 16, 8
- "natural"..... Mar 16, 10
- meal-kit delivery services..... Oct 16, 32
- prepared..... Mar 16, 38
- storage..... Sep 16, 50
- waste reduction..... Sep 16, 50
- Generators..... Oct 16, 14
- Gift cards..... Dec 16, 25
- Gift registries..... Dec 16, 41
- Gifts for coffee connoisseurs..... Dec 16, 58
- for family chefs..... Dec 16, 18
- for food lovers..... Dec 16, 34
- for gadget geeks..... Dec 16, 26
- high-end..... Dec 16, 62
- for home entertainment enthusiasts..... Dec 16, 52
- for outdoor enthusiasts..... Dec 16, 46
- for social media users..... Dec 16, 38
- for travelers..... Dec 16, 42
- Grills..... Jul 16, 30

**H-K**

- Headphones..... Jul 16, 44
- Health insurance open enrollment..... Nov 16, 20
- Healthcare advances..... Jul 16, 52
- history of Consumer Reports advocacy..... Jul 16, 54
- Helmets bicycle..... Aug 16, 20
- Home entertainment equipment as gifts..... Dec 16, 52
- Home improvements for increasing value..... Mar 16, 30
- renovation..... Jun 16, 40
- Home ownership financing..... Mar 16, 34
- trends..... Mar 16, 26
- Homeopathy..... Mar 16, 15
- Humidifiers..... Jan 16, 9
- Identity theft medical..... Oct 16, 42
- In-home care..... Jan 16, 12
- Insect repellents..... Jul 16, 40
- clothing..... Aug 16, 25
- Insurance for pets..... May 16, 12
- Investment for kids..... Dec 16, 31
- Juice cleanses..... Mar 16, 19
- Kettles electric..... Sep 16, 9
- Kitchen equipment as gifts..... Dec 16, 18
- Kitchens remodeling..... Aug 16, 40

**L-P**

- Laundry detergents..... May 16, 56
- Laundry machines..... May 16, 56
- Lawn care..... May 16, 18
- Lawn mowers..... May 16, 22
- Lightbulbs smart..... Jun 16, 9
- Loans mortgage reverse..... May 16, 14
- Luggage..... Dec 16, 12
- carry-on..... Feb 16, 12
- Maple syrup..... Mar 16, 20
- Mattresses..... Feb 16, 34
- Meal-kit delivery services..... Oct 16, 32
- Medical alert systems..... May 16, 24
- Medical bills..... Mar 16, 8
- Medical marijuana..... Jun 16, 28
- Mortgages reverse..... May 16, 14
- Nut butters..... Nov 16, 16
- Outdoor equipment

- as gifts..... Dec 16, 46
- Pain relief..... Jun 16, 28
- Pet insurance..... May 16, 12
- Photography, smartphone..... Jun 16, 10
- Pillows..... Feb 16, 34
- Prepaid cards..... Sep 16, 18
- Pressure cookers..... Oct 16, 9
- Pressure washers..... Mar 16, 22
- Privacy, personal data protection tips..... Nov 16, 28

**R-S**

- Ranges..... Aug 16, 40; Nov 16, 54
- Refrigerators..... Aug 16, 40
- Restaurants, casual..... Nov 16, 38
- Reverse mortgages..... May 16, 14
- Robocalls..... Mar 16, 8
- Routers..... Jan 16, 12
- Scales smart..... Mar 16, 16
- Scams medical identity theft..... Oct 16, 42
- taxes..... Feb 16, 11
- Shaving supplies subscription services..... May 16, 11
- Sleep aids..... Feb 16, 32
- Smartphones devices and services..... Feb 16, 46
- photo lens add-ons..... Jun 16, 10
- Samsung Galaxy S line..... Jun 16, 27
- Snow blowers..... Jan 16, 34; Dec 16, 9
- Snow shovels..... Jan 16, 38
- Soft drinks reduced-calorie..... Jan 16, 10
- Solar power..... Aug 16, 10
- Space heaters..... Jan 16, 22
- Speakers wireless..... Mar 16, 20; Jul 16, 44
- Stores return policies..... Dec 16, 30
- Streaming media services and players..... Jun 16, 15
- streaming music services..... Jul 16, 44
- Student debt..... Aug 16, 28
- key questions..... Aug 16, 34
- Sunscreens..... Jan 16, 12; Jul 16, 20
- Supplements..... Sep 16, 20

**T**

- Taxes scams..... Feb 16, 11
- tips..... Feb 16, 11
- Tax-preparation software..... Mar 16, 21
- Telephones smartphones Samsung Galaxy S line..... Jun 16, 27
- Television sets..... Sep 16, 34
- Ultra HD..... Mar 16, 15
- Tickets pricing, scalpers..... Aug 16, 16
- Timeshares..... Mar 16, 48
- Toilets..... Jun 16, 13
- Towels sandproof..... Jul 16, 15
- Transportation coming developments..... Oct 16, 50
- history of Consumer Reports advocacy..... Oct 16, 52
- Travel gifts suitable for..... Dec 16, 42

**U-W**

- Umbrellas beach..... Jul 16, 15
- Vacuum cleaners performance on super-plush carpet..... Mar 16, 9
- Veggie burgers..... Jun 16, 20
- Virtual reality..... Mar 16, 12; Oct 16, 10
- Voice-activated devices..... Sep 16, 10
- Voting online..... Jul 16, 10
- Waffle makers..... Mar 16, 20
- Washing machines..... May 16, 56
- Wedding industry..... Jun 16, 48
- Windshield defrosting..... Feb 16, 13



# Food for Thought

Ring in the holiday festivities with these culinary clunkers



### A Sandwich Best Enjoyed Solo

Maybe it's a billboard blunder—but you can't say you weren't warned.

Submitted by Tim, Clio, and Romy Vos of Seattle

### Free Is Just Another Word ...

Has the dollar bill dropped dramatically in value without anyone telling us?

Submitted by Sharon and John Veatch of Bremerton, Wash.



### This Isn't Going to Pan Out

What part of "dishwasher safe" don't we understand?

Submitted by Kate Johnson of New Bedford, Mass.

### A Fowl's Gotta Eat

How do we know that large chickens like their fries small?

Submitted by Joan Hinshaw of Brea, Calif.



Be on the lookout for goofs and glitches like these. Share them with us—by email at [SellingIt@cro.consumer.org](mailto:SellingIt@cro.consumer.org); by mail to Selling It, Consumer Reports, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703; or by social media using the hashtag #CRSellingIt—and we might publish yours. Please include key information, such as the publication's name and date.



