

### Introduction

Golf cars may have been invented as an accessory for a leisurely game, but their usage has exploded far beyond the bounds of the local country club. The market used to consist almost exclusively of large fleet sales to golf courses. Now, the small vehicles are used everywhere, from farms to airports and from warehouses to universities. Golf cars are also being purchased for personal use as an efficient way to get around a neighborhood.

Reflecting the upsurge in alternate uses, manufacturers have created a new class of vehicle for commercial and industrial use: the “utility vehicle.” In some cases, they’re basically the same as a golf car, with a bed on the back for hauling equipment and supplies. In other instances they’re built from the ground up to serve as heavy-duty material handling vehicles. Other specialized versions are designed for use on rough, hilly ground or to carry more people.

A note on terminology: some manufacturers use the term “golf cars” to refer to the entire range of vehicles, while others reserve the term for vehicles actually intended for use on a golf course. In general, “utility vehicle” can refer to all the vehicles in this class, but “golf car” is more widely understood by those not in the industry.



This **BuyerZone Golf Cars Buyer's Guide** will give you the information you need to purchase any of these vehicles, from the smallest golf car to the largest industrial vehicle.

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### Golf cart pricing

Prices for golf carts and other utility vehicles vary tremendously, from around \$2,000 for a bare-bones used cart to over \$10,000 for a top-of-the-line street-legal car or up to \$20,000 for an industrial burden carrier that's more like a miniature truck than a golf cart.

Below are some of the common price ranges you can expect to find – more details are on page 5.

New golf cart	2 – 4 passengers and clubs, some extras	\$6,000 - \$9,000
Used golf cart	Refurbished, electric, well maintained	\$4,000 - \$7,000
New utility vehicle	Personnel or burden carrier	\$8,000 - \$12,000

### Types of utility vehicles and golf carts

Because basic utility vehicles can serve a wide range of applications, the first step in buying one is to know exactly how you'll be using it. Many of the major manufacturers produce multiple lines of utility vehicles for different purposes, but there are two main categories to choose from: standard golf carts for personal and golfing use, and commercial or industrial models.

#### Golf carts and personal vehicles

The standard golf cart (or "golf car") holds two to four people and their clubs. This category also includes individual vehicles sold for personal use – getting around a neighborhood or gated community, for example. These golf carts can include all manner of accessories and options.

Golf carts are generally not street-legal. However, there are exceptions. When outfitted with appropriate safety features, including turn signals, headlights, brake lights, a windshield, and seatbelts, golf carts can meet the requirements of some localities. There is little Federal legislation governing the use of golf carts that operate at less than 25 mph, so states, counties, cities and towns are mostly free to make their own regulations.



Some communities actually encourage the use of golf carts as the primary mode of transportation. For example, some retirement communities focus on golf: they encourage their residents to drive their golf carts from home straight onto the course. Other communities simply prefer the quiet, low-pollution golf carts and take measures to promote their use within certain boundaries. In these locations, you may even qualify for a rebate or tax write off for using an electric vehicle.

#### Commercial and industrial utility vehicles

Golf course groundskeepers appropriated golf carts for their own use before there was a "utility vehicle" concept. Now there are dedicated utility vehicles for a wide range of uses that sport larger engines, higher suspensions, knobbier tires, and can carry bigger payloads.



Utility vehicles are used in a variety of ways. Facilities with extensive landscaping needs, like colleges, universities, office parks, sports complexes, and cemeteries, use them to carry tools, sod, and fertilizer.

Maintenance personnel in large manufacturing plants use utility vehicles to haul tools, parts and get to far-flung locations quickly. Foremen and managers use them as a quick way to get around and keep operations running smoothly.

Heavy utility vehicles called **burden carriers** can be used to complement other types of material handling equipment, like fork trucks. The biggest models can carry several thousand pounds of cargo and tow even more, yet they're small enough to go spaces fork trucks can't.

**Trail utility vehicles** carry hay, seed, and other essentials around large farms or ranches. Like ATVs, they can get around on the dirt tracks of the back woods. While they can't go 40 mph like an ATV, they can carry two people and a large load – a huge improvement over ATVs for farming work.

### Choosing the right utility vehicle

Given this wide range of uses, it's important that you know exactly what uses you expect out of your golf car or utility vehicle. It's easy to get taken in by the looks and flashy extras on a vehicle if you don't have your requirements outlined in advance.

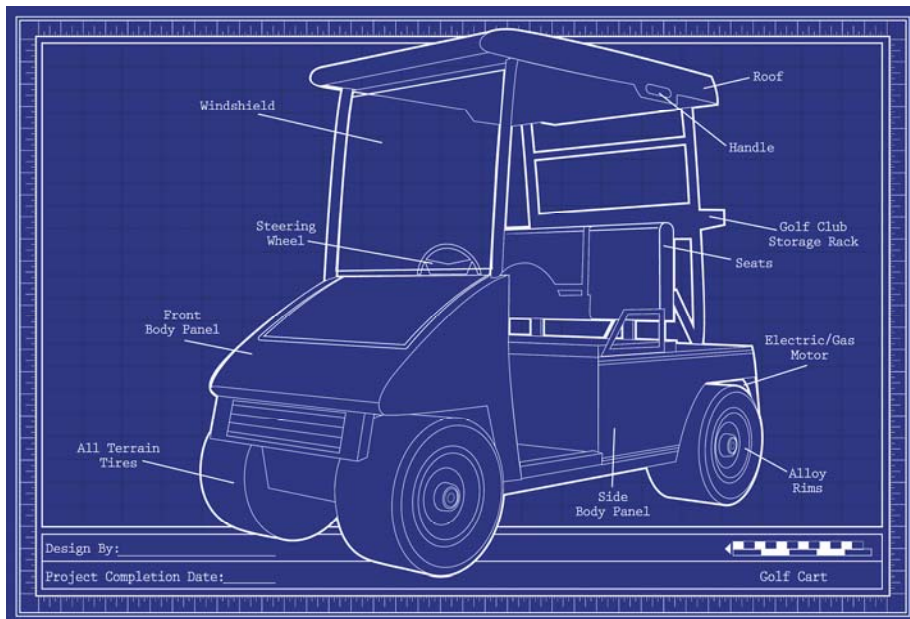
Gather information on your expected driving terrain, including what type of surfaces, hills, and weather. A low horsepower vehicle is more economical and more than capable of ferrying personnel around a warehouse – but it would be insufficient for a hilly golf course.

### Utility vehicle features to evaluate

Estimate the weight you need it to carry: some burden carriers can haul up to 5,000 pounds. Decide how many passengers it needs to carry, as well: you'll have to balance the number of seats with the available space for cargo. A related feature is the type of bed you want for hauling: a simple low-walled box, a bed with rails, or even one that dumps.

Know the physical size cart you need. The typical golf car is around 6' tall, 4' wide, and 8' long, but utility vehicles can range quite a bit – if you have specific narrow or low spaces to get through, make sure you have those limiting factors in mind before you start shopping. Also, most of these vehicles weigh around 900 to 1000 lbs but can be even more – make sure your garages, bridges, and other surfaces are strong enough to support them.

Once you settle on the basics, almost all utility vehicles and golf cars have a wide range of options to choose from, including lights, different types of tires, tops, sides, and windshields, and more. Your decisions on these extras should be based on your intended application.



### Comparing different brands

All of the major golf car and utility vehicle manufacturers make high quality products, but each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Quite a bit of your preference will have to do with the handling and feel of the car: each brand drives differently. You should take the models you're considering for test drives and see how you like them.

Your intended uses will impact which models are right for you, as well. Some brands perform better in cold weather; some have aluminum frames that resist rust; some have better low-end torque for towing. The salesperson should point you to the appropriate features for your particular situation.

Some additional factors to consider when choosing a utility vehicle for commercial use are versatility, dependability, and efficiency. Versatility is important because once you have one of these machines in your fleet, you'll find more and more uses for it. Dependability is essential – breakdowns can quickly impact your productivity. And operating costs are one of the utility vehicle's advantages over larger equipment, so it's important to get the most out of each tank of gas or electric charge.

On the personal transportation side, dependability is still important – but more for your safety and convenience, rather than cost. Versatility and efficiency are both less important – personal preferences about looks and performance can play more of a role in your decision making process.

### Gas vs. electric engines

Thanks to modern technology, what used to be a hotly contested battle between gas and electric power as the best choice for utility vehicles is becoming fairly one-sided: electric vehicles have become the vehicle of choice, largely

because of environmental concerns. Some communities have gone so far as to ban gasoline-powered models.

### Electric utility vehicles

Electric utility vehicles use a bank of standard lead-acid batteries to run an electric motor. They're designed to be used all day then recharged all night: at the end of the day, you plug them into a standard power outlet. Some brands also support "opportunity charging," which allows you to simply plug in the cart whenever you're not using it. The two most common power choices are 36 volt or 48 volt – in most cases, a 48 volt model provides better performance. You may also find 24 volt and 72 volt models, but they're less common.

This type of vehicle has greatly increased power and range over models available five or ten years ago. Features like regenerative braking, which helps recharge the batteries as the car slows or goes downhill, help increase battery life. This increases their utility in non-golf situations, but for two- or three-shift operations, you'll need a model that allows for an easy change of batteries when one set runs out.

A distinct advantage of electric vehicles is their cost to operate: it can be five or 10 times more expensive to operate a gas model. Especially for businesses buying several vehicles, this alone can be enough reason to choose electric vehicles. Another deciding factor for many businesses is indoor use: emission-free electric utility vehicles can be used indoors, gasoline engines can't.

### Gasoline utility vehicles

Gas-powered utility vehicles are no longer as popular as electric models, but for some applications they are still the top choice. With gasoline-powered vehicles you can always carry an extra can or two of gas, giving you much greater range. For farming and hunting use, this is a big advantage.

They're also a good choice for sustained use: spending a weekend away from electric power, or driving quite a bit at night with the lights on. Gasoline engines also provide more power for towing or carrying heavy loads.

Newer 4-cycle engines run cleaner and quieter than older 2-cycle engines that burn an oil and gas mixture, but they're still dirty and loud compared to zero-emission electric motors.

### Alternative power sources

Gas and electric vehicles make up almost all of the current market, but there are a small number of diesel utility vehicles, as well. Diesel is often cheaper than regular gas, and also provides more torque, which is useful for heavy-duty hauling and towing. In most cases, they're fairly comparable to gasoline models in performance and price.

For now, gas and electric will continue their dominance of the market – but your next utility vehicle could have a new power source entirely. Hydrogen fuel cells are a very clean power technology being investigated by utility vehicle and automobile manufacturers alike. Prototypes have been created of carts with solar panels mounted on the roof to recharge the batteries. And hybrid gas/electric engines will soon make the jump from cars to golf cars.

### Choosing a golf car dealer

Which golf car dealer you choose to buy from will be as important as the model you pick. The dealer will provide the service and support to keep your vehicle running smoothly, so it is important that you find one who is reputable, stable, and can provide top-notch service.

Some important questions to ask when evaluating golf car dealers:



- How long have you been in business?
- What kind of parts inventory do you keep on site?
- How many technicians do you have?
- Do you do on-site service?
- Do you have guaranteed response times when a piece of equipment breaks down?

When you're visiting the dealership, ask to see the parts warehouse and service areas for yourself. This can give you a good sense of their capabilities. Look for dealerships that carry full lines of the brands you're interested in, as well – not just one or two models.

You should work with factory-authorized golf car dealers. Many dealers carry multiple brands and as a result hold factory authorizations from each manufacturer. The authorizations give them access to OEM parts and factory training for technicians, ensuring the quality of repairs. You can go onto the manufacturers' web sites and look up their authorized dealers if you have any questions.

Don't discount your own comfort level, as well. Your relationship with the sales staff is important: you should trust that they are giving you honest answers to your questions and not just trying to sell you the most expensive vehicle they can.

### Utility vehicle maintenance and warranties

Maintenance is an important consideration for any vehicle. Gasoline engines require more ongoing maintenance than electric motors – things like changing spark plugs, air filters, and oil. On the other hand, electric vehicles need to have the water level in their batteries checked regularly, which is a simple but critical task. More significantly, the batteries in electric vehicles need to be replaced every couple of years at a cost of \$400 to \$500. The overall maintenance costs work out to be fairly similar – gasoline engines spread the cost out more, but require more frequent servicing.



The bottom line is that having this basic maintenance done regularly – on the schedule recommended by the manufacturer – can drastically extend your vehicle's lifespan and improve its performance. Something as simple as making sure there's enough oil in the engine and air in the tires can help safeguard your investment. With proper maintenance, you can expect about five years of use out of a gasoline engine and 10 years out of an electric motor – but manufacturers report both types lasting 15 or even 30 years in some cases.

In a commercial setting, it's usually worth purchasing a service contract to cover this type of maintenance. Usually the dealer will be able to provide on-site service for all scheduled maintenance, although you may save money on the service contract by agreeing to bring your vehicles in to their shop. For businesses that have a maintenance crew on staff and for individual purchases, a service contract may not be worthwhile: basic automotive expertise is all that's required for most upkeep. The dealer should still provide the parts you need.

If you purchase from an online golf car dealer, make sure you know where you'll turn for service. The dealer should be able to provide you with authorized service locations near you.

### Utility vehicle and golf car pricing

They may seem simple, but golf cars pack a lot of technology into a very small package. Pricing for new golf cars starts at around \$4,000 for a bare-bones model. More typical are prices of \$6,000 to \$9,000. High-end models with all the extras can cost upwards of \$10,000. These luxury models include upgraded upholstery, fancy wheels, lights, and details like radios and cell phone chargers.

Commercial utility vehicle pricing can range even more widely. Stripped-down personnel carriers can be found for as

little as \$3,000, while fully configured burden carriers can reach \$20,000. More common are prices of \$8,000 to \$12,000 for industrial utility vehicles.

The more options you add, the more you'll pay. Some two-seater golf cars can be outfitted with a rear-facing bench seat that lets them carry four people. Some models are open-topped, some have a roof, and some have a roof and a windshield. Expect to pay \$200 to \$400 for a top and that much again for a windshield. A rain enclosure – usually roll-down plastic sides – can be a nice extra in wet climates.

Other popular options for personal golf cars include fancy wheels and tires, paint jobs in flashy colors, camouflage patterns, or other custom designs, power outlets, radios, and more comfortable or adjustable seats. Don't feel compelled to purchase every accessory right off the bat: in most cases, you'll be able to buy a fairly basic golf car at first, then make the upgrades you want over time:

For trail vehicles and commercial applications, one of the most important options is the carry bed: you can upgrade the size, depth, or type of cargo bed on your vehicle, including one that tilts or folds down. Models with four wheel drive will also bump up your total cost, but are much better for getting around on loose terrain or mud.

Because the prices are so high, 75% to 90% of all new golf cars are leased instead of sold outright. Most commonly, these are fleet rentals to golf courses: they need large numbers of golf cars and always want their cars to be in top condition. For industrial and personal use, purchasing a vehicle is more standard.

All new vehicles come with a manufacturer's warranty, usually one year bumper-to-bumper and often longer on specific components.



### Buying used utility vehicles and golf cars

Due to the large rental fleets, there are many used golf cars on the market. For many businesses, buying used golf cars is the economical choice. There are two tiers of used: refurbished vehicles have been taken in by the manufacturer or dealer, inspected, cleaned, and in some cases reupholstered. Dealers often sell refurbished utility vehicles with warranties, giving you additional peace of mind – for at least 30 days.

You can also buy “as is” vehicles. Dealers will still inspect them for obvious damage, but they won't have the comprehensive overhaul that a refurbished vehicle would have. Make sure you take a test drive of the model you want.

Used utility vehicles can be found for as little as \$2,000. You'll rarely find anything for much less than that – at least, not anything you'd want to depend on for transportation. You'll still pay more for fancier models, but prices will be less than half what you'd pay new.

Because almost all new golf cars purchased by country clubs are electric, you're unlikely to find used gas powered models for sale at a decent price. If you absolutely need a gasoline vehicle, you may be better off purchasing a new model.

### Utility vehicle buying tips

- **Play it safe.** Utility vehicles don't usually have individual keys: the same key will operate all cars of the same model – and sometimes all models by the same manufacturer. If you have concerns about theft or vandalism, you can upgrade to individual keys – or be prepared to lock your vehicles in a garage or chain them together.

- **Plan for the future.** If you're buying vehicles for a fleet, choose a dealer with care. You'll be depending on that dealer for ongoing service, as well as for future sales, so make sure the dealer is someone you can work with.
- **Stay charged.** Electric vehicles should always have their batteries charged. Leaving a lead-acid battery 'empty' will slowly damage it, eventually ruining it altogether. A charged battery is also more resistant to freezing.
- **Tune it up.** With proper maintenance, these vehicles can easily last 10 years or more. Take the time to perform regular maintenance and seasonal changes and you'll be rewarded with better performance and durability.
- **Think big.** They may be small, but utility vehicles are built tough. In industrial and commercial settings, they can take on many jobs traditional handled by larger pieces of material handling equipment. Keep an open mind and you may discover that utility vehicles are an economical way to handle many transportation duties.