

Picking a Kei car

There are quite a few Kei cars available from different car manufacturers. This page will detail what to look for when picking a car, different trims, and other variables.

25-year limitation for street-legal cars

The most important aspect of street-legal Kei cars is that they must be 25 years old. Some websites like CarFromJapan will not even sell you a car that's not 25 years or older. Cars imported to the USA must follow FMVSS (Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards), emissions standards, and bumper standards. However, customs exempts cars 25 years or older from these standards.

Seatbelt tag

The seat belt will have the year when the car was manufactured, sometimes it will have the month. When the car lands in the USA, the date needs to be at least 25 years old.

Example tag




If the date of manufacture is not identified on a label permanently affixed to the vehicle by its original manufacturer, to establish the age of the vehicle, you should have documentation available such as an invoice showing the date the vehicle was first sold or a registration document showing that the vehicle was registered at least 25 years ago.

Vin lookup for date

If you can't find the exact month from the tag, you can search the date from the VIN (also known as chassis number)

[Link to lookup vin](#)

VEHICLE DETAILS - CHASSIS: DF51V-XXXXXXXXXX



Make: SUZUKI	Body: V-DF51V
Model: CARRY/ EVERY	Engine: F6A
Grade: PA LIMITED II	
Drive: PART4WD	Year: 1995-09
Transmission: MT	Fuel: Regular gasoline

Kei cars newer than 25 years

A private individual can't import a Kei car under 25 years old on their own—you must work through a Registered Importer (RI) to certify that the vehicle meets all federal safety, bumper, and theft-prevention standards. It's generally not recommended to try to import a newer Kei truck yourself, and it will probably have issues with title and registration.

If you would like to buy a Kei car that is newer, please visit a [local dealer in the USA](#). Most newer Kei cars are intended for off-road use only.

Cars that were imported when they were newer than 25 years old **can never be registered and street legal**. For instance, if the year is 2025 and you buy a 2001 Kei car from a local dealer, you can't title and register it the following year. It has to be 25 years old on the day of import.

Kei type

Kei trucks tend to be people's first entry into Kei cars. They're unique, high utility, and get tons of looks. However, since they're only two-seaters, their practicality in a city might be limited. Starting with a Kei van is generally recommended since they are just as unique, have a lower import tax, and can fit 4 people with a large trunk space.

WayBeforeTheFame explaining why Kei vans are better

Kei vans

See the [Kei van tag](#) for different street-legal Kei trucks

Lower trim kei vans may be better for hauling stuff, work-related tasks, and quick trips, whereas higher trim kei vans may be better for road trips, daily drivers, and longer commutes.

WayBeforeFame's video below goes over various Kei van cars and the difference in trim levels.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/kSP1F9tyMdU?si=TvinBviHXxWateUW>

General trim variations

Seats

Higher trim vans have split seats, whereas lower trim vans have bench seats.

Split seat on the left vs bench seat on the right



Key hole

Some higher trim models have a 3rd key hole for the back passenger seat, whereas lower trim vans will not.

Key hole in the rear seat vs no key hole in the rear seat



Tactometer

Higher trim models may have a built-in tachometer, whereas lower trim models do not.

Kei trucks

See the [Kei truck tag](#) for different street-legal Kei trucks

Trim variations

Cabin space

Since these are smaller vehicles meant for Japanese body types, they are on the smaller size. The point of these cars is that they are small, so the cabin size is on the smaller side.

Here is an [excellent blog post](#) going over the different cabin spaces for Kei trucks.

Engine location

Kei trucks and vans typically don't have the engines in the front like a normal American truck. Engine location can vary between the different models. For example, the Suzuki Carry will have its engine underneath the passenger seat, but the Subaru Sambar has it in the rear. The Suzuki Carry will be able to be fixed while there's stuff in the back, but will produce heat and noise in the cabin. The Sambar will be quieter and less heat in the cabin, but access to the motor could be blocked by stuff in the cargo.

Suzuki Carry's engine under the passenger seat



Subaru Sambar's engine in the back



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