

Buying a used car? Look out for water damage

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By [Amy Feinstein](#) Thu, Feb 09 2012

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When considering the purchase of a used car, what is your biggest fear? Is it that the car has been in a wreck? That it was not properly maintained? Or, have you considered that your potential purchase could have been water or flood damaged, or have survived a tropical storm or even a [hurricane](#)? There are more of these vehicles out there than you think, and they are not just being sold by individuals in classified ads. Many of these storm-damaged cars are being sold at the dealership in your town.



Photo: [waitscm](#)/Flickr

After hurricanes like Katrina and Irene, we saw images of cars submerged in water, but it is shocking to know how little water it takes to cause catastrophic damage to a vehicle.

A 'ticking time bomb'

John Davis, the Emmy Award-winning host, executive producer and creator of MotorWeek (television's longest-running automotive series) stresses that a car does not have to be under water to be irreparably damaged.

“If the water crests over the door sill, then it is enough water to create a ticking time bomb,” says Davis. “Even if water just gets into the floor boards, there are many wires that run underneath the seats. It takes only one corroded wire to cause a lifetime of problems with the electrical system.”

Davis explains that many of the electrical problems caused by flooding and moisture don't show up right away, but they are always lurking. “You could spend the price of the car or more trying to track down the problem wire, with no guarantee that it hasn't caused damage elsewhere.”

So how can you protect yourself from ending up with a water-damaged car?

Doing research

Davis stresses that it is the buyer's responsibility to do the research. “Many of the cars that were water logged in Hurricane Katrina ended up in the Mid-Atlantic States and the Mid-West about three to six months after the storm,” says Davis. “For this reason and many other reasons, if an offer on a vehicle seems too good, it probably is.”

When buying a used car, the first step is to get the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN). With the VIN, you can get a report from a title search company like Carfax. “Many car dealers will provide you with a Carfax report for free, but if they won't, it's worth spending the money,” he explains. “If anyone selling a car won't give you the VIN, just walk away.”

Davis suggests also getting a thorough inspection from your local mechanic.

“A trained mechanic will know what to look for,” says Davis. “They also generally appreciate the business.”

Do-it-yourself tips

For the DIY kind of person, Davis suggests running your hands under the seats to see if you detect any moisture or any [carpet](#) that is different than the rest of the car. “As a quick fix, many people will replace the upholstery and the carpet, but a damp floorboard is harder and more expensive to replace,” he explains.

Another insightful tip is to remove the spare tire, and see if there is any dampness or silt in the wheel well, which is a telltale sign that water has been where it doesn't belong. Also, sit in the car with the windows closed, start the car and turn on the air conditioning. If you detect any smell of mold or mildew, pass on the car, because it will not get better with time.

So *caveat emptor* or Buyer Beware. Some states have legislation against reselling cars that have been purchased as salvage vehicles, but many don't. Know your rights and the laws in your state before investing in a potential money pit.