

Learning About a Vehicle's History

by Dar Francise, June 12, 2015

Before you purchase any used vehicle—whether car, truck, or SUV—you will want to know its history. Why? Not every car was driven gently by an experienced, cautious driver. Many have been through floods, which can permanently damage the electrical system. Some have been in major accidents that leave the vehicle vulnerable. Some may even have been stolen.

So how do you go about finding your vehicle's history? Your first step is to identify the VIN, or vehicle identification number. This long string of numbers and letters is found in various places on the car: on the driver's side door jamb, in the rear wheel well, or at the bottom of the windshield, for example. Knowing the VIN is the key to unlocking the vehicle's history.

The first thing you want to do is ensure that the car has not been stolen. Armed with the VIN, visit the National Insurance Crime Bureau's database at www.nicb.org. Click on "VIN Check," and enter the VIN. The database keeps records for the past five years, and it will alert you if the vehicle has been stolen. It will also provide information about any police reports that are related to the car.

Next, you want to make sure that you get as much information about the vehicle's history as possible. CARFAX provides a service that offers basic information for free, but you will have to pay if you want a full report that includes maintenance records, history of rental or lease, accident history, and flood repair history. Fees are generally \$10 - \$40. Other companies that provide these services are Auto Check and the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System (NMVTIS).

A relatively new service called VehicleHistory.com offers a detailed vehicle history report (VHR) for free. The information on this free VHR is not as complete as the information on a purchased VHR, but it does provide government records, background history, and vehicle ownership records, among other pieces of information.

Because you want to spend all your money on getting the best car you can, and not on purchasing a detailed VHR, one option is for you to ask the seller to purchase the VHR. Many sellers are willing to do so because a good VHR is written proof that the car does not have specific problems. Of course, a VHR cannot and will not tell you everything about a car. Perhaps it takes a while to warm up in the winter, or it tends to stall on rainy days.

If you plan to purchase your car from an auto dealership, you will likely find that the VHR is already waiting for you on the front seat, with a copy also available on the dealership's website. Most auto dealerships know that today's car buyers are savvy consumers, and they want to show potential customers that they are offering quality vehicles for sale.

Though you may not want to spend \$40 for a CARFAX report, you should consider it an investment rather than an expense. Knowing a car's history can prevent you from making a costly mistake and having major regrets about your purchase. In general, auto repairs are expensive, so also check out reliability ratings from a trusted source, such as *Consumer Reports*.