

Lexus IS 250 combines styling, comfort and drivability

by Mark_Maynard

The Lexus IS 250 is a svelte slice of personal-size, sport-sedan luxury. The 2008 version of the all-wheel-drive IS 250 has attracted attention because its price was cut \$200 without sacrificing any equipment or features. The price "adjustment" probably had something to do with the new and larger Mercedes-Benz C300 4Matic, which has a starting price of \$35,215.

LEXUS IS 250 - The Lexus IS 250 is quiet and assured, but not boastful. All-wheel drive gives grip but saps some of the performance. CNS Photo courtesy of Lexus. The Lexus comes with a fairly thrifty, 204-horsepower, 2.5-liter V-6 and six-speed automatic transmission with paddle shifters. The starting price of \$34,850 grew to \$40,555 on the test model equipped with a few desirable option packages.

That's a lot of money for a car with restricted back seat legroom, and a rear-center seat so small that it merely suggests this is a five-passenger sedan. But for the young career professional ready to unload the old Camry, this car is an effective image enhancer in styling, drivability and comfort.

And when power and presence are required, there's the 306-hp IS 350, starting at \$37,670, which is \$200 more this year. The IS 350 isn't available with all-wheel drive.

Not much is new on the IS models for 2008. Among the changes are a darker finish to the 17-inch wheels (standard equipment), backlighting on the outside power-mirror control, white illuminated scuff plates and an additional coin holder.

But not much was needed, either.

I liked the IS 250 for its simplicity and refinement. It's almost delicate in its communications with the driver. Steering, brake and throttle feedback are polite. Cornering is so flat and sticky, it's fun to just let it fly.

However, Lexus recommends snow treads for adhesion in wintry areas.

But the all-wheel-drive IS isn't a performance sedan. At 3,651 pounds, it's 124 pounds heavier than the more-powerful IS 350. The paddle shifters are an impressive feature, but I used them little in my nearly 300 miles of driving. The power output doesn't urge playful driving, and I'm the first to appreciate the manual-shift versatility of such a transmission.

Fuel mileage is 20 mpg around town, 26 on the highway with 91 octane, which cost me \$3.79 a gallon in mid-November. And if the mileage numbers seem low, consider that the rear-drive IS 250 with manual transmission gets 18/26. Also a bit surprising may be that the IS equipped with an automatic transmission weighs 20 pounds less than the six-speed manual-transmission car. The rear-drive IS with automatic, which weighs 216 pounds less than the all-wheel-drive model, is rated 21/29.

Inside, sound isolation is almost intimate, provided by sound-dampening asphalt sheets in the roof and floor pan and an acoustic glass windshield. But as quiet as the cabin is, the ride can be choppy and monotonous on some sections of concrete expressway. On blacktop roads, the ride is carpet-smooth.

And, even with all-wheel drive, the turning circle seems shorter than its 38.1 feet. The car pivots into tight places.

While lighted "Lexus" door sills add cachet, I'd trade them for a light in the trunk.

Sightlines for the driver are unhindered. Visibility is so good that a rearview camera is unnecessary, but it's part of the \$2,550 navigation package that is as easy to use as any I've tried.

The dark-blue test car with light, leather-trimmed upholstery was elegant without being fussy except, possibly, for the networked electronic systems for climate and audio controls, which require paging to a screen to make adjustments. At first, I was annoyed that there wasn't a simple knob or dial control, but the screen system isn't difficult to master, though it does require taking eyes from the road.

On some levels of justification, the IS isn't convincing for the cost. However it comes down to the Lexusization. The IS package is agreeable to drive; it makes commuting pleasurable and it surely doesn't hurt the image.

SPECS

2008 Lexus IS 250

Body style: compact, five-passenger sport sedan

Engine: 204-horsepower, 2.5-liter, DOHC V-6 with dual, continuously Variable Valve Timing; 185 foot-pounds of torque at 4,800 rpm; emissions certified ULEV II

Transmission: six-speed, electronically controlled automatic with steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters

Acceleration: 0-60 mph, 8.3 seconds

EPA fuel-economy estimates: 20 mpg city, 26 highway; 91 octane recommended

Trunk space: 13 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 37.2/43.9/54.4 inches (with moonroof)

Length/wheelbase: 180.1/107.5 inches

Curb weight: 3,651 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: multifunction remote locking and push-button starting, heated front seats with leather trim, 17-inch wheels, fabric sun visors and headliner, cut-pile carpeting, floor mats, front seatback pockets, rear-seat pass-through to trunk, manual tilt and telescopic steering wheel, Dynamic Radar Cruise Control, scuff plates with white illumination, 13-speaker audio system with six-disc, in-dash CD changer and MP3/iPod plug

Safety features include: front air bags, front and rear side-curtain air bags, front ventilated and rear solid disc brakes with ABS with electronic brake-force distribution, brake assist, traction control, stability control with cutoff switch and Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management with cutoff switch

PRICING

Base: \$34,850, including \$765 freight charge; price as tested, \$40,555

Options on test car: Luxury package (\$2,205) includes outside rearview mirror functions (electrochromic, memory, reverse tilt-down), illuminated scuff plates, power rear sunshade, front-seat memory presets, HID headlamps with adaptive lighting system, rain-sensing wipers, power tilt-telescopic steering wheel with memory.

Navigation system (\$2,550): Voice-activated system includes rearview camera.

Premium package (\$850) adds heated and vented front seats, wood trim, perforated-leather seat upgrade.

Competitors: Audi A4, Acura TL, BMW 3-Series, Cadillac CTS, Infiniti G35, Mercedes C-class.

PLUSES: Enduring but compact luxury.

MINUSES: Small back seat; no trunk light; harsh ride on some concrete highways. Show-and-shine awards

Car clubs entering Eagle One's 15th annual Golden Rule Awards have a chance to win a \$1,500 grand prize donated to a charity of their choice. Three runners-up clubs will receive a \$500 cash contribution for a charity of their choice.

The award recognizes a car club in four U.S. regions for outstanding achievement in community service.

Winning clubs will also receive a supply of Eagle One car-care products and motor oil from parent company Valvoline.

Entry forms are available at eagleone.com or by calling 818-501-1445. Deadline for entries is Dec. 31. Winners will be notified by Feb. 10.

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