

ALL-NEW LEXUS GS HITS LIKE a TORNADO ON THE TRACK IN LAS VEGAS

BY JOE SAGE



As the Lexus GS hits its 21-year mark, it launches its fourth generation. Luxury is still a given, as is a level of performance. The fundamentals remain, but are all revisited, reengineered, revised, upgraded and up-powered. The revisions, though, have Lexus excited enough that they chose the challenging asphalt of Las Vegas Motor Speedway for the introduction. Good plan.

THE LEXUS GS LINEUP

The GS body style has always been distinct from others in the Lexus lineup, with its extended greenhouse and foreshortened rear decklid. The first way to spot the new GS is its new "spindle" grille, not quite as radical as the LF-Gh concept that presaged it—just a year ago—but close. The main difference is a crossbar that maintains a tamer upper/lower intake treatment—for now, but

likely to evolve. Inlets on the outer corners serve as cooling ducts, while high-tech projector-beam headlights include LED daytime running lamps in an "L" shape.

The 2013 Lexus GS lineup comprises three models: the GS 350 (standard or luxury, with or without all-wheel drive), the GS 350 F SPORT (sold as a package for the GS 350)—all due in February—and the GS 450h, a hybrid due to hit showrooms in May. The two GS 350 models can be thought of as three—with both standard and Luxury models plus the F SPORT—or, in a way, as one—with both Luxury and F SPORT as options, which is how they are ordered. The base model includes 17-inch wheels, 10-way power driver's seat and backup camera. The Luxury Package moves to 18-inch wheels and 18-way seats, plus adds 3-zone climate control, adaptive front lighting, adaptive variable suspension and interior finish upgrades (and a Premium Package adds a few

more). The F SPORT package, with its own look and badging—rear lip spoiler, sport interior, sport bumpers and valance, mesh grille—also offers all-wheel drive, ups the wheels to 19-inch (staggered width for RWD or single-width for AWD), has a 16-way power sport driver seat with side bolsters plus thigh and lumbar support, and adds a tuned adaptive variable suspension, larger front brakes with high-friction pads, and—RWD-only—variable gear ratio steering. Notable options include a heads-up display, night vision system and Lexus Dynamic Handling (LDH) System with Dynamic Rear Steering (DRS). And the tire pressure monitoring system shows info for each tire separately, a welcome breakthrough.

The GS 350 gets the numeric half of its name from a 3.5-liter 24-valve V6 generating 306 hp and 277 lb-ft of torque, fed by direct and port injection and Lexus ETCS-i (Electronic Throttle Control System with intelligence) and

At right, top and bottom, the full lineup of Lexus GS models for 2013 prepares to enter Las Vegas Motor Speedway's infield track or to depart for various highway or other local drive routes. Weather upon our arrival the night before was not the most typical palm-tree paradise-type: very heavy rain gave fair warning that a storm was brewin' for tomorrow.

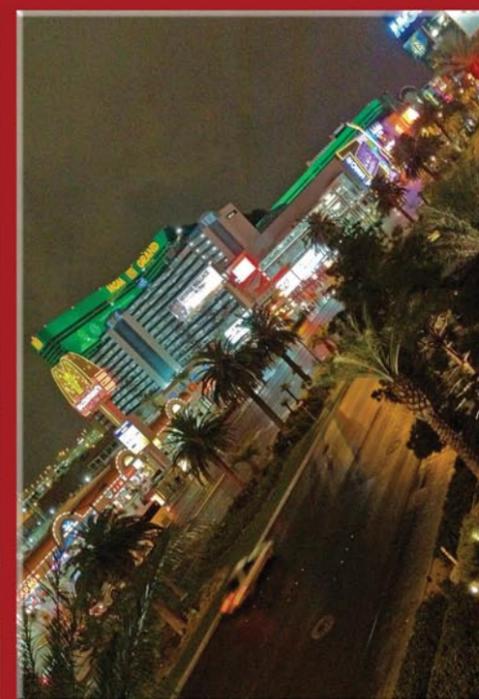
requiring premium fuel. A 6-speed sequential-shift transmission with paddles has options of Normal, ECO, Sport (plus S+ on some models) and Snow modes. The GS 350 weighs in at 3795 pounds, or 3980 with AWD.

The GS 450h hybrid, despite the "450," has the same 3.5L V6, but adds two electric motors: a 180-hp primary generator for starting and to control engine speed, and a 200-hp motor to drive the rear wheels and gather regenerative braking energy. A bundle of 240 sealed NiMH batteries brings GS 450h weight to 4109 pounds.

The new GS, though completely reworked, is the same length as its predecessor. And yet rear seat legroom is increased, as is trunk volume, due to clever repackaging throughout the layout, such as lower rear springs. The trunk is large, even on the 450h hybrid, where an improved stacked battery significantly increases luggage volume.

Here are the quick cues to telling which GS is which: The rear bumper of the GS 350 has L-shaped LED taillights, a distinctive integrated exhaust diffuser, and centered aero fins for underbody airflow.

KEEP RIGHT >>





The rains on our arrival night in Las Vegas were a precursor to powerful Santa Ana winds that blasted through Utah, Nevada and Southern California. Semi trucks were blown on their sides on Interstate highways by winds as high as 98 mph. The morning started out wet, and overnight winds had blown all the course cones away, but the pavement mostly dried out for our track driving time.

At bottom, the rare and powerful new Lexus LFA supercar joins us for some track hot laps. At a price of \$375,000, there are so far only a handful in the US. We took laps with a designated driver.

The GS 350 with F SPORT package includes its own front bumper and rear lower valence, rear lip spoiler and F SPORT mesh grille inserts.

The GS 450h hybrid has concealed tailpipes (if not zero emissions, then at least zero visible tailpipe), and blue badging Lexus uses across its hybrid range. An available three-lamp design combines high- and low-beam LED lamps and turn signals in a single row.

Exterior paint on the GS uses a new advanced coating process with multiple layers of paint and baking—with the Liquid Platinum of the GS its first application. Its pronounced highlights and shadows emphasize folds and details of the car's new sheetmetal.

NO GOING BACK

Brian Smith, vice president of Lexus marketing, had November's sales figures in hand on December 1: up 12 percent month-over-month—the best since Japan's earthquake and tsunami struck earlier in 2011—and the first year-over-year increase of the year, great news in a year that had lost 50,000 units of production.

Smith had evidence that the market is also cautiously recovering, with the luxury market up 3.5 percent year-over-year, and the mid-luxe market (domain of the Lexus GS) cutting its losses to 3 percent. Lexus has targets an ambitious segment share increase of 12-13 percent with the 2013 GS. They hope to obtain fully 50 percent of these buyers from other brands, such as the Mercedes-Benz E-Class, BMW 5 Series and Audi A6.

Their confidence comes from a "One Team" concept, in which all global markets are addressed by the same car—not only accommodating style and taste, but with heavy testing on the tough roads of Russia, China and South America. Though those roads were rough, Lexus aims to deliver luxurious comfort, but with a "sharp and emotional" driving experience. On paper, that's a winning combo. The new GS launches in February, establishing the direction of the whole Lexus brand to come, and from there, says Smith, "there is no going back."

HITTING THE PAVEMENT

The GS 350 hits 0-to-60 in 5.7 seconds (or 6.0 with AWD) with a top speed of 142 mph (131 with AWD). The GS 450h hybrid beats the 350 off the line, at 5.6 for 0-to-60, and ties the all-wheel-driver at 131 mph top.

You might wonder why a car with acceleration numbers in the upper fives would be introduced at a race-track. It's more about personality than land speed records: the new GS looks, sounds and hugs more than the sum of its stats. That sound comes from a true dual exhaust, plus an "intake sound creator" on that side of the manifold, for a nice growl on acceleration.

The new Lexus GS lineup includes the GS 450h hybrid (top right); the GS 350 F SPORT, shown in the photo of our opening spread and represented below right by its performance interior, instrument panel and engine; and the GS 350 (bottom right).

The AWD option allows traction split from the RWD standard of 30/70 to an even 50/50. The car's computerized Active Variable Suspension (standard with F SPORT and Luxury packages, optional with others) provides driver-selectable shock absorber damping, augmented by speed-sensing electric-assist rack and pinion steering and a Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management system (traction, ESC and other functions). Shift paddles can be invoked in either M mode or while still in D. They have been remapped to gain about 0.3 seconds in upshifts and 0.2 in downshifts, and the unit provides throttle blipping as first introduced on the performance-oriented Lexus IS-F and now on the exotic LFA. Body and chassis are 14 percent stiffer than on the previous generation GS, due to features such as hot pressed steel B-pillars that reduce flex overall.

We ran an infield course at Las Vegas Motor Speedway in pretty much every model. Winds in the 60-80 mph range may have affected some of our senses, but the GS seemed powerful and comfortable in all iterations. Controls were well-implemented and easy to use, in typically exemplary Toyota/Lexus fashion, even while distracted by quasi-track driving and a raging typhoon.

We tried the ECO mode on a run of 30 or 40 miles up the Interstate and back, which we know saved us fuel but didn't seem to detract any from our experience. (It's worth noting we were told the ECO mode can affect A/C output, clearly a factor in Arizona, though we don't have any more specific information on that yet.)

While providing that pleasantly powerful aforementioned engine soundtrack, the Lexus GS is quiet where it needs to be: while the brand is already known for very favorable NVH (noise-vibration-harshness) numbers, they have applied new insulating materials throughout. A quiet ride and fuel economy are both also helped by not only small fins in the underbody, but also tiny fins engineered into the sides of the lights.

Rear-wheel steering is implemented on the GS 350 F SPORT. This has been available at times over the past few decades on several vehicles, such as the Honda Prelude and some of GM's full-size pickups. The consensus at our event was that it does seem to have a noticeably favorable impact on handling, but the mystery remains that if it's such an interesting—and you might think obvious—feature, you can only wonder why it never really catches on industrywide (cost and complexity both spring to mind), or in this case, lineup-wide.

FINAL DECISIONS

Fuel mileage for the GS 350 is 19 MPG city, 28 highway and 23 combined (19/26/21 for the AWD model), while the hybrid is 29 MPG city, 34 highway and 31 combined.

Base price for the GS 350 is \$46,900. Optioned as a GS 350 F SPORT, the base price is \$52,590. Prices for the GS 350 Luxury Package and for the GS 450h hybrid had not been released by press time. Variables among models are simultaneously subtle, dramatic and largely about budget and taste. There is not a bad choice among them. ■

