

fine tuning

All-new but familiar Lexus ES includes a smooth, powerful hybrid

By Joe Sage



This is the sixth generation of the Lexus ES, a model that helped launch the brand—and the whole concept of high-end Japanese product in the US—24 years ago, in 1989. Stylewise, it is more evolutionary than revolutionary, easily recognizable as the successor to the prior ES, yet immediately recognizable as new by its spindle grille, the signature element of all new Lexus models.

What lies beneath

Similar though the new Lexus ES may appear to its predecessor, it has actually moved to a new platform this year. The first five generations were based on the Toyota Camry, but the sixth generation is based on the slightly larger Avalon. Considering the stretching and chopping various brands do within platforms, anyway, this 2-inch-or-so difference is almost imperceptible.

What's more significant, perhaps, is the addition of an ES 300h hybrid this year (alongside an ES 350 gasoline-engine model). Lexus has made a point of consistently expanding its hybrid lineup for years, and as big as this news is, it could almost fall into the "they didn't already have this?" category. And that is meant in a good way: it's just a perfect fit for the car, and seamlessly integrated into its design and build.

Takumi "L" design

The Takumi master craftsmen at Lexus are highly disciplined and highly skilled. One unexpected skill test they must pass is to create a piece of origami in 90 seconds using their non-dominant hand. Try that. Their applied skills are evident throughout the development of the new Lexus ES—for example in the hand-stitched leather interior, a highly skilled endeavor performed by just a dozen of these Takumi technicians.

New sheetmetal features mildly crisper lines, and that spindle grille is framed by headlamp assemblies featuring "L"-shaped LED lights. Body corners are pulled in tighter to enhanced wheel arches. The grille—more subtle than some spindle implementations—has its shape carried back through the hood, and body lines flow below the beltline to the rear deck. At the rear, the ES 350 sports dual exhaust tips, while the ES 300h hybrid can be distinguished by a modest spoiler and its hidden exhaust.

The driver's realm is divided into a display zone and an operation zone, upper and lower respectively, intended to keep your eyes on the road, while hands fall naturally to operations. Ten-way power seats have improved bolstering, to reduce fatigue, and are set an inch lower than before, to accommodate taller drivers. The steering column has changed from a 24-degree angle to 22, easier on the shoulders and better for long drives. The back seats are larger, with bolstering (so you "sit in, not on"), the additional length of the new platform adds to rear legroom (plus improved ingress/egress), and rear headroom is increased by almost an inch.

Electronics of course abound, including available Blind Spot Monitoring, Rear Cross Traffic Alert, Lane Departure Alert and Automatic High Beam technologies.

Attention to cabin quietness extends to an acoustic windshield, as well as side mirrors that are set out and back for quiet-enhancing aerodynamics. Ambient light-



ing adds to the peaceful setting.

The new ES has a standard moonroof, and an Ultra Luxury Package on the ES 350 offers a panorama glass roof. The panorama glass roof's front panel slides up and back over its rear panel.

The panorama roof has two tenths of an inch more headroom in the front, whereas the moonroof offers half an inch more headroom in the rear. The rear window has an electronic sunshade, and rear side window shades are manual.

Trunk volume is significant: 15.2 cubic feet, or 12.1 cubic feet in the hybrid, which makes room for a very compact and well-placed battery pack.

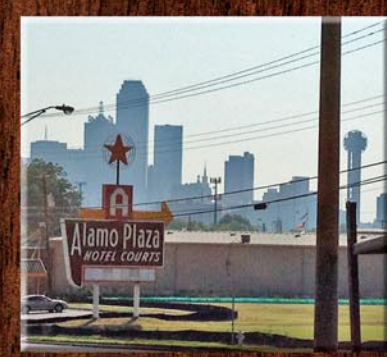
Making your ES your own

There are ten colors this year—mostly fairly sedate, but also including Matador Red Mica and Deep Sea Mica (blue)—with interiors in black, grey or parchment, with choice of piano black, bird's-eye maple or—in the hybrid—bamboo interior trim. Standard seats are finished in NuLuxe synthetic leather, with two levels of leather—embossed, semi-aniline—available.

Customization is more than skin deep on this car, however, with over 300 combinations of lock, climate, lighting and other vehicle presets possible. Not only does each standard smart key remember seats and mirrors—as expected—but also prior climate settings. And you can touch-open and lock all four doors.

The new ES is the fourth vehicle to receive the Lexus Enform App Suite, a voice-controlled technology bringing audio playback, destination assistance, Facebook, Pandora and more—all of which you can download to your phone and then load to the car.

The Lexus ES 350 starts at \$36,100 and the ES 300h at \$38,850—one of the smallest differences ever for a hybrid price in a vehicle that offers both drivetrains.





The Lexus ES 350 and the ES 300h hybrid are hard to tell apart at a glance—a taste of just how mainstream the hybrid adaptation is in this car. Ten new colors can help you tell your ES from the pack. The two-panel “panorama” glass roof is only available on the ES 350 for now. While in Dallas, we visited infamously historic Dealey Plaza, third photo at left.



There are several option packages, with Premium starting at \$2895, Luxury about \$6000 and Ultra Luxury topping out at \$11,000-plus.

Cleverly frugal luxury

Lexus, as the luxury arm of world fuel economy image leader Toyota, has access to a great many cutting-edge technologies, large and small. The Lexus ES adds tiny aero stabilizing fins to mirrors, door frames and taillight lenses—as seen on the new smaller Toyota Prius c (see our March/April 2012 issue)—to create vehicle-stabilizing vortices. Air is pulled toward the car’s body, for aerodynamic flow and

also to improve tracking. Underbody covers—also with fins—increase aero slipperiness below. As with the side mirrors, all this aerodynamic attention not only improves fuel economy, but also interior tranquility.

The 2013 Lexus ES 350 has a 3.5-liter V6 running on 87-octane regular gas and producing 268 hp and 248 lb-ft of torque. This gets the 3605-pound ES 350 from 0 to 60 in 7.0 seconds, while achieving 21/31 MPG city/highway fuel mileage (24 combined). A 6-speed automatic works with eco, normal and sport drive modes.

The 2013 Lexus ES 300h—new to this model, and the latest of Lexus’ always-growing hybrid lineup—has a 2.5-liter Atkinson cycle DOHC inline-4, also running on regular, and producing 156 hp and 156 lb-ft of torque if measured by the gasoline engine alone. Total system horsepower is stated as 200 hp. The 3660-pound ES 300h hybrid accelerates from 0 to 60 in 8.1 seconds, and fuel mileage is an impressive 40/39 MPG city/highway (40 combined).

Lexus US marketing communications manager Brian Bolain says, “Since its debut in 1989, the ES buyer has been one of our most loyal. There are over one million ES owners on the road today, and they are going to love this

car. But to reach our sales goals, we’ll need to look beyond our current customers.” Updating the car’s styling, driving dynamics and technical features is one part of the plan. The other part is the hybrid.

The typical buyer of a rear-wheel-drive (or all-wheel-drive) Lexus GS is in his or her 50s and earning \$200,000 a year. For the front-wheel-drive ES, age is in the 60s and income around \$130,000. Visual cues and the driving experience of the new ES are expected to separate the two models even more clearly.

The ES 300h is expected to bring in younger customers than the ES traditionally has, and to attract converts from other luxury and sub-luxury brands. The hybrid is expected to produce 25 percent of ES sales.

Tackling Texas highways

Lexus has engineered the new ES for the expected very high degree of comfort, while also for more engaging driving and handling. Opposite-wound front coil springs keep the vehicle centered—a seemingly simple but significant breakthrough when compared to two springs wound the same way, which causes most vehicles to jerk to one side on a bump. Electric power steering has been given a quicker gear ratio. Dual-link strut rear suspension and reduced-friction shocks are new, atop an optimized foundation of body rigidity which has been increased numerous ways.

Our time in the Lexus ES was centered around Dallas, with open highway time, urban freeway, downtown city streets and high-end suburbs. We drove the ES 300h hybrid for the first hour or two, then the ES 350 for the next. For our third leg, we chose the hybrid again, because we wanted to confirm what we were already thinking: this hybrid is a comfortable and straightforward car, offering power that—between the various modes and with the extra grunt from the electric portion—is almost indistinguishable from the gasoline model. And all this with a conventional interior, not the My Science Project instrument panel of many hybrids. For a couple of grand more, you can top 40 MPG in the hybrid. Lexus expects 25 percent sales, but unless that couple of grand makes all the difference, we could easily see the hybrid accounting for 75 percent of the mix.

Lexus says the new ES will be unforgettable: “impossible to ignore and impossible to forget.” That’s a tall order. But we’d think of it this way. The Lexus ES has always been a fine car, though somewhat a sleeper. We’ve found the prior generation attractive—looking like a smaller LS—and easy to live with, though we’ve noted that it has carried some aura of an older demographic and some from its former Camry basis. As with some of its stated competition—eg the Mercedes-Benz C-Class or the Cadillac CTS—it has now absorbed style, technology and panache from its higher-end siblings, which is exactly how it delivers what the segment announces: luxury and value. ■

