

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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LEXUS IS F AND LEXUS LX 570 AT LAKE LAS VEGAS
SCOTTSDALE-PHOENIX AUCTION RESULTS
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F as in Fast

Lexus IS F makes short work of Lakeshore Scenic Drive to Hoover Dam

Ever since Honda, Toyota and Nissan brought the Acura, Lexus and Infiniti brands to North America, with what originally seemed like a daunting challenge, unseating the German quality/luxury brands from a good share of their market, they have made remarkable inroads, especially Toyota's Lexus. The Germans, however, have had another tier in their lineup: enhanced performance vehicles from BMW with its M series, Audi with its S and RS cars and AMG from Mercedes-Benz. Now, Lexus tackles those head-on, with its new F series, engineered and marketed to compete head-to-head with the above.

First up is the IS F, a performance sedan built off the popular Lexus IS, first introduced in the US in 2001. We traveled to Lake Las Vegas, Nevada, to give this car a hands-on trial.

David Nordstrom, Lexus Division VP Marketing, explained that the F cars began as an internal project code-named Circle F, which evolved to F1. The development process was unusual for the Japanese, with a "skunk works" development team doing their own thing, their own way, much as the original Pontiac GTO, Corvette and Ford Mustang came to be. When the IS F neared production, it almost followed the existing nomenclature to become the IS 500, but instead the F name came to life, and today we have the first in what will surely be a series: the 2008 Lexus IS F.

The fundamentals are strong. The engine is the car's key

element: a 416 hp V-8 with aluminum block and cylinder heads, generating 371 lb.ft. of torque, and mounted within a 3780-pound body and chassis. The IS F also boasts the world's first 8-speed transmission, with noticeably fast paddle-shifting Sport Direct Shift and a console shifter with Manual mode, for those who like shifting control, but without a clutch. The 8-speed transmission, at just 211 pounds, is about the same size as the preceding 6-speed, due to reengineering that replaces four gears with just two. Weight distribution is 54% front / 46% rear, and the car features performance-favoring rear-wheel drive.

As with many performance cars entering the market today, special attention was paid to the sound effects that bathe the driver and occupants in the power experience. Lexus claims more of a range inside the cockpit, with more attention paid to intake noise than to exhaust noise. Four exhaust diffusers built into the rear fascia enhance performance by reducing backpressure. Hands are connected to the road via Electric Power Steering, which is calibrated for ideal force and feel.

VDIM—Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management—comprises a comprehensive set of electronics including Vehicle Stability Control, Traction Control, Anti-lock Braking System, Electronic Brake-force Distribution, Brake Assist and throttle input. With both a Normal and a Sport mode (and a cut-off switch), Lexus states that the VDIM system in Sport mode was faster than professional track drivers with the system off, in tests at Laguna Seca Raceway near Monterey.

Toyota is already walking a fine—or wide—line, offering the gas-sipping Prius halo car, as well as the thirsty Toyota Tundra and Lexus LX 570, among others, so where does a small but seriously sporty sedan fall on the fuel mileage continuum? The anticipated ratings as of test time are 16/23 MPG, which could have the car in Gas Guzzler Tax range, but they expect to come out better than that in final ratings, having determined the finer points of performance modes and their effects on mileage during the testing regimen. We're confident they'll end up where they want to be on this, and you will still have wide-ranging ability to balance economy and performance to suit your own tastes.

David Hubbard, Lexus Senior Product Education Administrator, responsible for making sure dealers know exactly what they're selling, says, "This is the car you didn't think we were." In a market of well-executed, reliable but not exactly pulse-pumping Toyota and Lexus vehicles, he makes a point. Certainly, they don't want to erode any of the market that has been pushing Toyota to the number one spot in US sales, but as surely as Chevrolet can market a Corvette, Lexus can market an F car. And whereas Corvette may notice some impact from the IS F, Lexus certainly hopes the Germans notice the most.

We had a choice of test routes for the IS F and, saving the rugged northern route for the LX 570, took the Lakeshore Scenic Drive through Lake Mead National Recreation Area to US 93, across Hoover Dam and back into Arizona. We'd heard from the first media wave that there was a significant speed enforcement presence the first day, so we were pretty



Background and inset photos: Joe Sage

KEEP RIGHT >>

much on our best behavior. However, this road gave us plenty of opportunity to experience the acceleration, roadholding, curve- and hill-commanding and general power and performance of the IS F, none of which were lacking. The two parties in our car were over six feet tall, and despite the generally compact nature of the vehicle, we were comfortable on ingress and egress, and once seated we were in the lap of high-performance comfort and fully-appointed luxury. We experimented with Normal and Sport Modes, and each offers a largely transparent but well-tuned driving experience. Similarly, it's easy enough to use the Sport Direct Shift paddles, the console shifter with manumatic controls, or just to leave the car in D and concentrate on steering, braking and acceleration. Of course we'd love to try the IS F with a manual transmission.

Toyota expanded its presence significantly when the Lexus brand came to our shores. The introduction of Scion gave Toyota three marques in America. They identify the F as a new Lexus sub-brand, on the one hand addressing a new and expanded market (as they did with Scion), while on the other hand addressing BMW M, Audi S/RS and Mercedes-Benz AMG (as they do with their performance sub-brands or lineups).

As with Scion, Lexus is aiming for a new generation of buyers, which they identify as those ready to migrate from such vehicles as the Subaru WRX STI, while offering an alternative to the European brands. In comparing demographics with the three Germans, all numbers are very close, with Lexus IS F toward the higher end of an already heavily male scale, expanding the lower end by age (targeting those 40-45, compared with 44-47 for the various Germans), more singles by as much as 10 percentage points, and an income level of about \$150k, compared to a range of \$145k for AMG to \$180k for Audi S4/RS4.

The car will be promoted through an all-new "F is..." ad series, track events and a new line of F-Sport accessories, which was launched at this winter's SEMA show. Their goal is to sell 200-300 cars per month, at about a \$56,000 base price. Lexus has its work cut out, going up against the German performance brands. But they had their work cut out for them when they tackled the luxury sedan market, too, and with prestige writ large, they made huge inroads in a market that seemed already fully defined. There is no reason to think, with performance writ equally large, that they can't achieve the same with the powerful, well-built and ergonomically-friendly F series. ■

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