

LEXUS LUXURY, SPORTING STYLE

BY JOE SAGE

The IS is the only convertible in the Lexus lineup, so the calculation is pretty specific: if you would like the luxury, quality and value of a Lexus, but would like to put the top down, this is your car. It has other advantages, too—all founded in its being an iteration of the popular and capable Lexus IS.

There are seven basic models in the Lexus IS lineup: four V6 sedans—an IS 250 and an IS 350 in rear-wheel drive, plus the same two in all-wheel drive—and a fifth sedan, the high-performance Lexus IS F, with a 5-liter V8 and rear-wheel drive only. And there are two convertibles in the lineup: the IS 250 C and IS 350 C, both with rear-wheel drive only. (Apart from the true IS F with V8, there are also F Sport add-ons available for non-F V6 models, as was the case with our tester. This confusing form of enhancement is being done by other brands, too, such as Audi S-Line as opposed to actual S-cars, or a set of M doorsills on your non-M BMW, and so on.)

The Lexus IS 250's 2.5-liter V6 delivers 204 hp, and the IS 350's 3.5-liter 306 hp. Both come with a six-speed paddle-shift automatic. The Lexus IS F's 5.0-liter V8 has 416 hp and an 8-speed paddle-shift automatic.

The IS 250 sedan starts at about \$35,000, the IS 350 at just over \$40,000. Add about \$2500 to either for

AWD. The potent IS F starts at almost \$62,000. Options and accessories quickly add \$5000-10,000 to any.

In between, we have the IS convertibles: the IS 250 C starting at \$42,610 and IS 350 C at \$46,890. Ditto on the options. Our test IS 350 C included an F Sport Package—the least expensive of three different F Sport Packages—this one including F Sport suspension, sport pedals, scuff plates, dark graphite 18-inch wheels, spoilers, special grille, enhanced interior trim, even heated/ventilated front seats—all for \$2550. (Once again, this is not an actual IS F with a V8, but F Sport is a nice option set.) High-intensity headlamps and LED DRLs added \$875, headlamp washers \$100, parking sensors and assist \$500, and a comprehensive nav and audio system—ranging from 12-speaker sound to inclusion of a backup camera—added \$3520. Add trunk mat, cargo net and destination, and this one was out the door for \$55,499.

So what starts out seductively seeming like the \$35,000-ish bargain known as the Lexus IS has quickly worked into the lower end of Porsche territory. But that would be before you option out that Boxster. And the Lexus IS still seals up with a built-in retractable hardtop—at which point it is considered a coupe—though it lags far behind the two-trunk Boxster in luggage capac-

ity. The IS C price point can also be compared with the Mercedes-Benz SLK, which is even more favorable in cost, but shares the loss of luggage space, due to a retractable top and just one trunk. But wait—the Boxster and the SLK are two-seaters. Advantage: IS.

A more direct comparison—invited since the IS was new and commonly described as a 3 Series fighter—is with the four-seat BMW. Against a range of 328i, 335i and 335is convertibles, the Lexus IS has a decent price advantage, and that's a good place to start. As the 3 Series coupes/convertibles become 4 Series, as just announced, the IS advantage will continue to grow.

The Lexus IS C was new in 2009, as we drove it through the mountains and hills of Arkansas for a day at press launch, then drove it for another week in Arizona, later in the year. At the time, we noted that "overall, we haven't seen as much interest in one of our test cars since the new Camaro...from people who know what it is, people who don't and some in between."

Four years later, it's a fair bet that more people know what it is—and, by now, that plenty of them have purchased an IS convertible for themselves.

Our 2013 Lexus IS 350 C was delivered with just 420 miles on it, still sporting a temporary tag. Young, fresh and innocent, but capable of so much.

Rear brakes on a base IS 250 C or IS 350 C are 12.2-inch discs. Fronts are 11.7-inchers with aluminum four-piston calipers for the 250 and 13.2-inch for the 350. Add the F Sport Package to the IS 350 C—our test model—and all are larger, with 14.2-inch drilled rotors and

six-piston aluminum calipers in front, and 13.6-inch two-piston in back. We'd opt for at least that \$2550 basic F Sport Package just for the brakes (although, to be fair, we need to drive the regular ones back to back with these). In our F-packaged car, they were clearly strong—so strong we had to be extra vigilant about any traffic following us on Valley freeways.

The IS with F Sport Package tuning has a nice solid suspension, tight steering and perfect tracking. Brand new tires helped ours perform optimally.

A 306-horse V6 is respectable, though it falls well short of the 416-horse V8 at the core of an IS F. We noted instances where our IS seemed a little hesitant with power, a little slow in gearing, a little governed in output. We chalked it up to programming in pursuit of tightening fuel mileage goals, not atypical. If you have the budget, you will want to drive the actual IS F, to compare. But any hesitancy was by far not a dominant experience. Gunning it up a freeway ramp, we could choose lanes, pass the minivans and the Corvettes and be easily at freeway speed in no time, ready to tackle conditions with power and confidence.

The retractable hardtop does its magic in just a tick over 20 seconds. We've seen faster (see the new VW Beetle ragtop in this issue), but consider 15 decent for a soft top. With the complexities of a hardtop convertible, the IS's time is quite respectable. And you can pass the time by watching the show. As we noted in 2009, "Operating the retractable top is entertainment in itself...fascinatingly complex." It does have a few more parts and motions than the average retractable hardtop.

There's no question this feature—on any retractable—gobbles up space. Stopping at the store (and leaving the top down), we put a gym bag, small briefcase and ballcap in the trunk. That fit fine, but there was no room left for even minor groceries till we juggled it all back.

Our logbook noted some annoyances with the center stack display and controls, which is par for the course. We left the audio on, partly to avoid the default screen, with its big image of a speaker staring us down like HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We spent an inordinate amount of time struggling with the climate control system, trying to stop heavy cooling on chilly evenings, or heat that finally started flowing

strongly once the top was raised. And we had to extract the passenger seatbelt from the far side of the seat and buckle it across nobody, to stop its ticking and flapping in the breeze.

Being brand new, the radio had never been set. It had some station presets, but no audio settings. These were very easy to accomplish: while waiting for a red light, we were able to dig into the menu, adjust settings easily, and produce very good sound from the Premium Audio system that was part of our nav/audio package. (With the topmost option package, you get a Mark Levinson Premium Audio system, but that one package runs higher than our two together.)

For 2013, Lexus has added availability of Enform 2.0 and App Suite systems, as well as HD radio with iTunes tagging and Bluetooth phone connectivity with automatic phonebook download. All these are in any of four other packages that run from \$6265 to \$8545, but which our test vehicle did not include. It might be nice to have all that—and we'd want to compare the audio output—but driving this up toward \$60,000 before tax would be really starting to push it. Then again, if you want a Lexus convertible, this is the only one, so you might indeed want to pile it all on and max yours out.

We checked our flanks at a traffic light: a beige metallic Lexus RX, a silver LS and our screaming Ultrasonic Blue Metallic IS convertible in the middle. We were definitely in the heart of Lexus country, and we were happy with our model.

One thing we would like to see in the lineup would be the IS C convertible with AWD, as with the sedan. This seems especially appropriate since it has a warm and weathertight hardtop. Weight and space considerations would be amplified by the presence of both a retractable top and an all-wheel-drive system, and that may well be why it doesn't exist so far. But as a fundamental concept, it seems like a hard combination to beat, especially in the diverse conditions of climate and geography offered in Arizona. Spring ski trip or Grand Canyon fall road trip? Say no more.

This is likely the funnest set of vehicles in the Lexus lineup—a tidy and trim luxury package with a sporting bent. The Lexus IS C is light, perky, upbeat and lots of fun to drive—and the top goes down. Lexus loyalists in this segment will likely not be disappointed. ■

