

a mind of its own by Joe Sage

We met the new 2014 Lexus IS lineup last summer in the Bay Area, where we drove it on an autocross course in Alameda and through the hills northeast of Oakland and Berkeley. "The hottest deal in a Lexus just got hotter," we said. It was "fast, fuel efficient, fully featured and more affordable than before."

The hardest part, we had noted, might come in choosing your own, with considerable overlap among the models. Not counting the IS F, the IS lineup includes two sedans (250 and 350, in RWD or AWD), two convertibles (also 250/350 but RWD only) and an F SPORT package, applicable to any. A rear-drive 250 starts at \$35,950. If you have the budget, we say pile it on, with a fully trimmed out IS 350 AWD F SPORT just a hair above \$50 grand. (An F SPORT package is not to be confused with the very different high-performance Lexus IS F, an LFA supercar cousin at a base price of \$63,600.)

Our tester here is a rear-drive 350, starting under \$40,000 and topping out just above \$48k.

Ours had no F SPORT option—which would include different lights, fascia and grille, larger wheels, adaptive suspension, LFA-style TFT instruments, plus fancier seats, steering wheel, pedals and more. Its add-on price varies—\$3620 if on our 350, or as low as \$2675 on a RWD 250.

We made friends with the car's fundamental driving characteristics and dynamics pretty quickly—it handles quite well. We were particularly

impressed by a mild real-world boulevard slalom, lightly recreating our Alameda grid experience.

We naturally gravitated to Sport mode. But even if we chose it every time—willing to pay for presumed lower fuel economy—it always reverted upon restart, though not to normal, which might make some sort of sense, but rather to Eco—i.e. defaulting to its other specialty mode.

If you switch from Eco to Sport while in motion, rather than feeling a boost, it can feel like dropping an anchor, if just for an instant. Sport seems to run the gears a little higher than we might wish, for a little longer than we might expect.

We rated the interior very high, with layout, fit and finish on a par with the best in the category (a group that includes Audi A4, BMW 3 Series and Mercedes-Benz C-Class).

But its user interface would dominate our logbook notes. Any vehicle owner will likely become familiar with every idiosyncrasy soon enough—though we have our doubts about one key item here: the Remote Touch interface controller (see inset photo), a device with all the precision of a seven-year-old's loose tooth. Our logbook noted it was "hard to point where you want it, it's finicky and jumpy, and by the time you're ready to push it, it's already wobbling to something else." Much of the time, it also generated scolding sound effects.

Not unique to this car, we'd like to have a non-electronic version, just a basic driving machine. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	3.5L DOHC 24v V6 w VVTi
POWER.....	306 hp, 277 lb-ft torque
TRANSMISSION....	8-speed auto, paddle shift
DRIVETRAIN.....	RWD: Eco, normal, sport, snow
ZERO-TO-60 MPH.....	5.6 seconds
MPG.....	22/28/19 (city/hwy/comb)
INCLUDED:	17" aluminum wheels, HID headlamps, LED DRLs, dual chrome exhaust, power moonroof, 10-way power driver's seat w lumbar, 8-way passenger, 60/40 folding rear seats, audio-phone-trip display, premium display audio.

BASE PRICE.....\$39,465

OPTIONS: Luxury and Technology Package: LED headlamps w intelligent high beam, rain-sensing wipers, auto-dim mirrors, leather and wood trim, heated/ventilated seats, power tilt/telescope wheel, seat/mirror/column memory, BSM and rear cross-traffic alerts, lane departure warning.....4115
Intuitive parking assist.....500
Navigation/Mark Levinson audio.....1225

DESTINATION CHARGE.....910

TOTAL.....\$48,215



LOGBOOK NOTES

Is this car smarter than you? Our notes referred to it as a nanny sedan, constantly undoing your choices for controls and settings; other times, it just made it too difficult to make your choices in the first place.

Some may welcome all the alarms and alerts, some may despise them, and some can likely take or leave them. But there are surely times when one little *blip* would be more appropriate than alarms going to Defcon Three.

Despite an overblown reliance on electronic interfaces for everything, it still has a foot-operated, spring-loaded parking brake.

It appears the rain-sensing wipers also have to be reactivated if you've had the car shut off in between—not ideal for Arizona.

We would run an appreciative eye over the creases in the hood, fenders and lights, and every intersection, every crease and flow.



Lookin' good. If we could get the IS with about half of its most superfluous add-ons stripped back off, it would be simply a handsome car and a great drive.

