

As a premium compact-executive sport sedan with rear-wheel drive and a naturally-aspirated 472-horsepower 5.0-liter V8, the Lexus IS F SPORT Performance pretty much stands alone, whether by individual attributes or in the aggregate. And it's all yours for about \$60 grand, what you might have paid for a similar European (with less horsepower) 20 years ago, or generally considerably less given today's prices.

Lexus seems to know where both its value and its values lie—highly efficient yet powerful powertrains and continuous improvement—and they have stayed quite focused on the IS. The third generation, new back in 2014, has had two significant refreshes, the most recent for 2021, while in early 2021 bringing back an IS with a V8 (the first since the IS F departed in 2014), as a 2022 model.

IS F was not the only “pure F” model to depart; at this point there are none. The “F SPORT” grade, however, more of a trim-and-feature level back in the presence of the “F,” has since matured, includ-

ing the introduction of top “Performance” variants.

On top of the high level of value this car offers via its own formula, Lexus stylists have given the current generation echoes of their renowned LFA supercar, which sits in the \$400,000 range.

Our sample is one of the last 2023s, though it's fundamentally unchanged for 2024 (the chart at lower right shows the new lineup, with more F SPORT variants than ever). They are on a roll—but only the “F SPORT Performance” pair have that V8 (and are the only versions that come as rear-drive only.)

Power in this beast is evident from the moment you push the start button and first step on the gas. In motion, it is all the moreso, with a well developed growl and clearly the power to back it up. The automatic drivetrain has the rock solid feel of a manual, highly connected from head to heel. It's a high-torque performance car in the best tradition. And these impressions were still in default mode.

We philosophize that any vehicle should give its best presentation by default, but moved to sport

mode specifically to tighten up steering in town.

We had our IS F SPORT Performance for a holiday weekend, but as a high-powered, ground-hugging rear-driver, and especially with summer performance tires, it would not be ideal for a snowy high country trip. (It's also tight on rear seat legroom and cargo capacity.)

But we did head out for a spin on a wildly rainy day—and just kept going, up the Beeline Highway, through the piñons into the Ponderosas above the Mogollon Rim. Performance was so solid in the twisties and climbs, even as other vehicles kicked up frozen spit, we had to remind ourselves of the summer tires (which, besides tread and sidewall, can also stiffen up in colder temperatures) and that this is a rear-driver. The latter did not beg as much tradeoff as it might suggest, as the car's handling systems were superb in all conditions.

A glance at our instruments showed the system will put itself in eco mode on its own—with no notable degradation of performance, just seizing itself

any proper opportunity for some fuel-sipping.

It was borderline snowy yet 43 degrees as we reached the edge of Payson. We had already had breakfast as we set out, so we turned off to turn around. Accelerating back across the divided road to turn 90 degrees left onto the main highway, we noted the systems working a little harder here to maintain grip and steering. (Again, swapping the warm-weather tires for special duty would make all the difference.) And we headed back down.

The weather was now a bit of everything—sun breaking out, then rain, snow on the hills around us, clouds in the valleys below, the road getting dry, then wet and twisty again. Basically perfect. We popped back and forth between normal and sport (via its notably handy control) as surfaces varied.

On the highway or in town—as determined in our original setup or on demand as needed—features were all well implemented. Lexus has come a long way with this, basically by finally simplifying its tactile control (no more finicky joysticks and far less touchpad dependence). Options for one or both mirrors (or neither) dipping in reverse are set up well for any circumstances. The wiper stalk

takes a little getting used to—it looks as click-click mechanical as any, but is more of a touch-touch interface, some elements of it more intuitive than others when new to the system.

This top tier Lexus IS provides a rich experience on many levels—from the satisfyingly rich growl of its powertrain, to its wealth of features, to the rich paint job on ours (emphasizing its richly detailed bodywork), to a rich driving experience. And best of all, you don't need to be particularly rich to buy it (which will leave you feeling even richer).

Whenever you get behind the wheel, you could just keep driving. This car is a real pleasure.

Not only is it hard to stop once you're in motion, but we sincerely hope they don't stop making the V8, as murmurs suggest. Though there are always alternatives, this engine is such a key part of the formula—fun, powerful, pleasurable, even bragworthy—that makes the IS F SPORT Performance an IS at its best. Call it a bargain or call it a find, this car demands a look and a drive. And given that opportunities to grab a great V8 are fewer all the time, you might want to hurry. ■

*Red hot.*

**Performance is its name, and performance is its game**

BY JOE SAGE



**SPECIFICATIONS**

ASSEMBLY	Tahara, Aichi, Japan
ENGINE	5.0L V8, 32v DOHC, VVT-iE, EFI D-4S, alum/alum
HP/TORQUE	472 hp / 395 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	12.3:1
TRANSMISSION	8-spd auto AA80E, paddles
DRIVETRAIN	RWD
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	4.4 sec / 149 mph
SUSPENSION	F: dbl wishbone type w high-mount upper arms, coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar; R: multi-link w coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar
STEERING	rack & pinion w EPS
BRAKES	F: 14.0 vented (IS 500); R: 12.7 vented (IS 500)
WHEELS	opt 19-inch BBS matte black forged; F: 19x8.5J; R: 19x9.5J
TIRES	F: 235/40R19; R: 265/35R19 summer
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	(IS 500) 187.3 / 110.2 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.51 in
TURNING CIRCLE	(RWD) 34.2 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	38.2 / 36.9 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	44.8 / 32.2 in
CARGO CAPACITY	10.8 cu.ft
WEIGHT	3891 lb
WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION (F/R)	56 / 44%
FUEL / CAPACITY	premium unl / 17.4
MPG	17/25/20 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE (2023)	\$62,020
PAINT: Infrared	595
WHEELS: 19-in BBS matte black forged	2450
BUNDLE: trunk mat, cargo net, wheels locks, rear bumper appliqué	405
DESTINATION CHARGE	1150
TOTAL	\$66,620

*(Note: price has increased and new IS 300 F SPORT trims are added; see chart below.)*

**2024 LEXUS IS LINEUP**

<b>IS 300</b>	RWD	AWD
• RWD: 2.0L turbo-4 / 241 hp / 258 lb-ft / 8-spd auto		
• AWD: 3.5L V6 / 260 hp / 236 lb-ft / 6-spd auto		
(base)	\$41,235	\$43,235
F SPORT Design (new)	43,055	45,095
F SPORT (new)	44,305	46,345
<b>IS 350</b>	RWD	AWD
• RWD: 3.5L V6 / 311 hp / 280 lb-ft / 8-spd auto		
• AWD 3.5L V6 / 311 hp / 280 lb-ft / 6-spd auto		
F SPORT Design	\$44,410	\$46,410
F SPORT	45,660	47,660
<b>IS 500</b>	RWD	
• RWD: 5.0L V8 / 472 hp / 395 lb-ft / 8-spd auto		
F SPORT Performance	\$60,020	
F SPORT Perf Premium	64,520	

*Infrared paint (\$595) on our Lexus IS F SPORT Performance Premium is a knockout and a standout—an unbelievably deep, rich metallic red, especially at night or in the rain, and when the skies clear it can have an almost mirror-like finish.*