

Road beat: IS 350 – best Lexus model



Lexus IS 350 continues to impress. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

It's been five long years since I last tested the Lexus IS 350 and not much has changed my opinion that this IS is dollar for dollar the best ride in the Lexus line up and perhaps the best Lexus model, although I haven't tested the new RC coupe yet. As far as Lexus sedans go, it is the highest performing, best handling, best looking of the brand while being the smallest and yet extremely comfortable.

Since its introduction as a 2006 model there have been a few changes. Wheelbase has grown by about 3 inches to 110 inches and length is up by a corresponding amount to 184 inches, but

height and width remain at 56 and 71 inches, respectively, as well as the very aggressive and pleasing design. Lexus has refreshed the front end to conform with its L'finesse design theme while also sharpening the edgy theme that was already present in areas like the lower rocker panels. It is still the best looking Lexus sedan. But there are more improvements elsewhere.



Specifications

Price \$40,990 to about \$49,000

Engines

3.5L, 24 valve, DOHC V-6 306 hp @ 6,400 rpm

277 lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4,800 rpm

Redline 6,600 rpm

Transmission

Eight speed automatic with paddle shifters

Configuration

Longitudinal front engine/rear wheel drive/all wheel drive (IS250 AWD)

Dimensions

Wheelbase 110.2 inches

Length 183.7 inches

Width 70.9 inches

Height 56.3 inches
Track (f/r) 60.4/60.6 inches
Weight 3,593 pounds ((IS350)
Weight distribution 54/46
percent
Trunk capacity 13.8 cubic
feet
Fuel capacity 17.4 gallons
Steering lock to lock
2.58-3.493 turns
Turning circle 34.2 feet
Wheels (opt) 18X8/18X8.5
inch alloys
Tires (f/r opt)
225/40X18/255/35X18
Brake diameter (f/r)
13.15/12.2 inches
Coefficient of drag 0.28

Performance

0-60 mph 5.05 seconds
50-70 mph 2.51 seconds
50-70 uphill 3.18 seconds
Top speed Artificially
limited at 143 mph and I
believe them.
Fuel economy EPA rated
19/28/22 mpg
city/highway/combined
(IS350). Expect 20-21 mpg in
rural country driving and 28
mpg on the highway in the
IS350.

While this particular F-Sport optioned IS 350 gets significant handling upgrades, the powertrain is almost identical to the original 2006 model. It still sports the Lexus 306 hp (at 6,400 rpm) 3.5L V-6 which also knocks down 277 pounds of twist

at 4,800 rpm (at 4,800 rpm the engine is making 253 hp). In the process, the IS 350 pick up a couple of speeds as it now sports an eight speed automatic instead of the six-speeder that drives the rear wheels. But if you opt for the AWD version, the tranny reverts to the prior six speed auto, not very significant as you will read.

Performance of the IS 350 is spectacular, but slightly off the prior IS 350 F-Sport test. Zero-60 mph required 5.05 seconds, which is world class. Passing performance is also extremely quick with a 50-70 mph run taking 2.51 seconds and the same run up a 6 percent grade slows that time to 3.18 seconds. On their face these are some of the quickest performance times ever recorded by the Road Beat, but are still slower than two other IS 350 tests (one of those tests also being an F-Sport model) which had average times of 4.55, 2.20 and 2.92 seconds respectively. And those prior tests had six speed trannies. Testing was also performed in the same place so I have no explanation.

Numbers were also down for fuel economy and what makes this so interesting is that window sticker numbers for this 2015 model are up from previous window sticker numbers. This new model was EPA rated 19/28/22 mpg city/highway/combined. My prior 2009 model was rated at 18/25 city/highway. The 2009 model returned in actual testing at 70 mph 31.9 mpg. This new 2015 model "only" averaged 28.0 mpg. Overall fuel economy was 20.0 mpg for the test while the 2009 model averaged 23.5 mpg. I don't have an answer as both cars weighed about 3,600 pounds.

F-Sport adds several important features to the IS 350 including Adaptive Variable Suspension, Variable Gear Ratio Steering, F Sport tuned suspension, twin projector LED headlights, 18 inch staggered wheels and 225/40 and 255/35 performance tires front and rear, heated and ventilated seats, high friction brake pads and more. The IS 350 was already the best handling Lexus, it's a true BMW fighter, but with this additional F-Sport package, not only does it improve handling

and cornering power, it rides beautifully. Handling is superb, great steering, super quick turn-in, great balance, body roll control, rotation and more. BMWs beware, big time.

Its ride quality as mentioned above is about the best the Road Beat has ever experienced. It is extremely supple, quiet and solid, like a bank vault. On the highway it is whisper quiet and very buttoned down. Not many cars surpass the IS 350 experience. The engine spins 2,050 rpm at 70 mph and is inaudible unless you ask for some power and then it speaks with an authoritative bark.

Braking with the upgraded four wheel discs are better than benchmark, stopping the IS 350 in 38 feet from 40 mph. Pedal and feel are outstanding. Of course the IS has about every safety acronym in the book. LED headlights with the F-Sport package are, outstanding, but standard with the IS 350 are also dazzling HID headlights.



Some of the controls are cumbersome.

Now to perhaps the best part, the cockpit. While it may be a bit difficult for an old guy like me to get in and out, once ensconced you will be rewarded with some of the best seats in an automobile. Padding is perfect, the shape is totally supportive and the comfort is extremely long distance. And on top of all that they are great to look at with their sporty

design and soft leather.

Instrumentation is supposedly taken from the Lexus supercar, the 553 hp, \$400K Lexus LFA. It is a TFT screen and the instrumentation is complete with more emphasis on the analog tach than digital speedo. It works, but I prefer traditional analog gauges for everything. The fit and finish of the rest of the interior is outstanding with soft touch and leather covering most surfaces. While rear seating is adequate for two, I certainly wouldn't want to be the middle guy.

But all is not perfect. The radio control system which is controlled by a "mouse" as is the rest of the center stack, is difficult to operate. What happened to two round knobs and a few well identified push buttons. Why do manufacturers have to "fix" what isn't broken? The system is terribly distracting to operate as well. It should be a rule that all mice belong in a trap.

The trunk is large at nearly 14 cubic feet.

Pricing starts for the IS 350 at \$40,065 plus \$925 from the boat from Japan. Funny how that works out to \$40,990. The F Sport package lists for \$3,740 and if it were my purchase that would be part of it as would the \$400 Variable Gear Ratio power steering rack. However, I am not sure I would opt for the \$2,995 Nav system and upgraded radio. The standard sound system which includes XM works for me. But my tester listed for \$48,725 all in which also included the \$600 blind spot monitor and cross traffic alert. The power moonroof is also standard. This is an extremely well equipped standard ride and compared to other vehicles in its class, it might be the bargain. If you are thinking BMW or alike, you need to drive this Lexus. AWD is also an option.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on

racetracks all over the Western United States.