

LAST LAUGH HYBRID

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LEXUS REVISITED [2]
Covered at launch, from Little Rock to Lake Hamilton, Hot Springs, Arkansas (see July-August issue), we now spend a week with the Lexus HS 250h hybrid sedan in Arizona.

Last summer, we flew to Little Rock for a double-barreled new-product launch including the Lexus HS 250h hybrid sedan. The trip was quick—all the more reason it would be great to give this vehicle another drive, for a week.

Comparisons of the Lexus HS 250h to its cousin the Toyota Prius are inevitable. The distinctive profile of the Prius, considered essential to its economy, is not present on the HS. Nor is the economy, purchase or fuel. We've decided that the differences aren't as much the question, as the answer, to the conundrum. On the plus side, this is an attractive little sedan with some great tricks up its sleeve. But it does seem to fall short of the panache you'd expect from the Lexus lineup, at least in the larger, more traditional cars. So is this a pricey Prius? A lesser Lexus?

The numbers

Our test HS 250h had a base price of \$36,970 and with lighting options, high-end audio, navigation, Tech Package and a few lesser bits came to \$48,876. EPA fuel economy is estimated at 35 mpg city and 34 mpg highway.

The Toyota Prius starts at \$22,400 and is rated 51/48 mpg by the EPA.

There is, of course, a fuel mileage read-out on the instrument panel, and there are three settings for performance and



economy tradeoffs. We dabbled in driving for fuel economy, but all in all we drove it like a regular car, accelerating to clear the usual mad traffic and so on. Three days into our test, we were at 22.5 mpg (and remembering that one colleague recently logged 24 mpg in a gas-guzzler-taxed performance coupe). While we say we were driving normally and not concentrating on fuel economy, we were doing it in the ECO mode, not the Power mode.

Performance was perfectly acceptable, but next we tried the Power mode for awhile to see how that does. After a day and a half, still driving normally but in ECO, we were now at 22.3 mpg.

We changed from ECO back to Power and went up a hair, to 22.4. At the Prius launch last year, we were assigned a challenging route through Tucson, with the specific aim of achieving the best possible fuel mileage. In the face of considerable hostility from other drivers, results were achieved in the 70s and 80s. We did not try the HS 250h in this dedicated fashion. We just drove it. And that may indeed be the whole point.

The bargain

Some dismiss this car as "not a Prius"—considerably more expensive and with considerably lower fuel economy—and perhaps without the look and feel of a Lexus. On the plus side, if you think the Prius carries a certain sort of virtuous stigma, you'll find the Lexus HS 250h doesn't carry much at all. Performance is strong, carrying its own in aggressive traffic. Other traffic may be wondering whether this is indeed a hybrid, and concluding that, if so, it must be quite a hybrid. Fuel economy is not stratospheric as on the Prius, but it's pretty good.

It's definitely worth a closer look: a hybrid with good performance, carrying a Lexus badge and higher-end appointments. People expect a hybrid owner to get the last laugh with fuel mileage; the Lexus HS 250h hybrid gets the last laugh by having that credential, but with power.

Maybe we're exactly the buyer Lexus has in mind, and maybe we're not, but fuel mileage contest aside, if there's one thing that we found undeniably fun to do, it was to dust a Prius in traffic. ■

HS 250h LOGBOOK NOTES

- The driving? Sweet. Starts out all electric, with a nice little hum. On the road, give it some gas to get through a merge or on-ramp, and it has plenty of power. Even ECO mode is peppy, so that suggests more power on tap. Didn't feel like we had to get out of anybody's way most of the time.
- Tried to use EV mode several times, but it didn't take. Stop, turn on EV mode, proceed very cautiously, yet it immediately says "EV mode deactivated: excessive acceleration."
- The user interface is generally good. We were able to nail the fundamentals of nav and climate during one long red light. The toggle is a little wobbly but works, once you realize "enter" is a button on the side.
- From the plastic grille and emblem to the aftermarket-style taillights, details could be classier for a member of the Lexus lineup.
- The odd little shift lever was disquieting. In the dark, it's hard to tell drive from reverse. Running silent, caution is needed with this.
- A hybrid interface can generate distraction, with a driver concentrating on fuel economy more than driving. This is mitigated here by a neat heads-up speed display.
- The keyless system auto-locks very easily, lights come up softly at night, nice touch.
- Start the car, sit for a few minutes, and *BAM* the compressor closes a trap door or something—a firm little jolt, like somebody hit you gently. Hard to get used to.
- Backup view's high position allows glare, though a multi-stop tilt mechanism helps.
- Backup camera turns off immediately as soon as you shift to drive, and we've come to appreciate a lingering view, to see if some idiot's still trying to zip past you.
- The owner's manual is brutal, 608 pages, and there are eight or nine more, too. We also had several instances of information in the books that didn't match the instruments.
- Even in ECO mode, a/c worked just fine.
- Good daily driver, simple sedan, generally fine size, comfort and appointments.
- We quit worrying whether it looks like a Lexus. It's a handsome car.