

TOP UP OR TOP DOWN, THIS IS IS TOPS

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LEXUS REVISITED [1]

Covered at launch, driving from Hot Springs to Little Rock, Arkansas (see July/August issue), we now spend a week with the Lexus IS 350C hardtop convertible in Arizona.

This was the other half of last summer's dash to Little Rock (see prior story). We drove from downtown to Hot Springs and Lake Hamilton in the Lexus HS 250h hybrid sedan, then back to Little Rock in this nifty new droptop. After that prior night's near-all-nighter, all the more reason to give this one a full week.

As outlined in the July/August issue, the IS is Lexus' clear "3-fighter," taking on the wide-ranging and hot-selling BMW 3 Series (and its comparables from Audi, Mercedes et al, each with sedans, coupes, convertibles, performance versions and so on), a niche known as entry level luxury. The first IS in the US debuted in 2000 as a 2001 model. With the Lexus ES considered "comfort luxury," the IS was presented as "performance luxury." The IS F sedan brought a higher level of flat-out performance in 2007 (see our March/April 2008 issue) with a 416-hp V8 and a price above \$50,000. But quick as that one is, it can't drop its top. This one can.

BMW has gone to a retractable hardtop convertible to cover both its coupe and droptop 3 Series. Lexus starts out there.

A hardtop convertible begins with a couple of tradeoffs. In exchange for a coupe-like look, enhanced security and increased weatherproofing, there are generally losses in style, top-dropping time and luggage space. So how does the



IS 350C LOGBOOK NOTES

- Controls more nicely laid out than the HS, by a long shot: plain and simple and straightforward for the same functions. The radio screen is touch-sensitive, 1000 times easier.
- Short on storage: one little cupholder hole in the console and an awkward slideback cover. A wallet, glasses and phone have you continually swapping things around and/or they just go flying around the interior. Noted more than once as a possible Achilles heel.
- Several sessions of adjustment were needed to get the seats right, a one-time issue.
- Driving and thinking this car is really point-by-point enjoyable to drive. Hadn't put the top down yet (last did in Arkansas), but we know that's always good. We're thinking we have this beef with 3/4-rear style and so on, but it's nice enough overall we're wondering why that even matters.
- Throttle response is good, almost too good as it cuts and grabs in small moves.
- We adjust the audio to a benchmark rock classic: sounds passably okay, not tops.
- The backup camera at night is weak.
- The most maddening experience involved getting out of the car and trying to leave: it beeps and beeps as though the lights are on or the keys are in it, but of course it's keyless, we've turned off the power and the lights are automatic, so we don't know what it's complaining about. We have to restart and go through the whole sequence and turn it off again, and then it works, an experience we also had with the LX recently. This is more of an Achilles heel, as we noted in increasingly annoyed and alarmed memos.
- The keyless feature also means if you just take the trash out it unlocks itself as you approach, then when you relock it you can't tell if it's locked because of the light delay.
- Operating the retractable top is entertainment in itself. Two small corners that rise to perfectly fill the spots flanking the rear roll hoops (see photos above) are fascinatingly complex, but seem vulnerable. We did encounter issues where we'd have to start over due to having one up and one down.

little Lexus do on these?

As fate would have it, all three questions were addressed during one parking lot inquiry. While we sat in the car finishing a phone call, a gentleman waited patiently outside with obvious interest. A commercial pilot with Delta, he has owned a couple of IS 350 models and enthusiastically wanted to check this one out. He was especially interested in the convertible top operation, and as we'd just received the car, we hadn't tried it yet. We timed it: about 20 seconds down and 20 seconds up. Very impressive, compared with a quick ragtop at 15 seconds. He was already pretty familiar with the car, but we had challenges with the top operation: we had to get the whole back luggage compartment arrangement just right, of course, before it would perform, and ultimately we did. We thought it was a little overly complex and a little flimsy (with quite a few key points to align or insert), but he thought it was just fine. We checked the sticker price, and he thought it was quite

suitable at about \$51,000, while we had been thinking for \$51k it should be a little more elegant. So there you have it. High marks for top operation, luggage space tradeoffs and price, from a seasoned (and probable future) owner.

We had found the shape necessitated by the hardtop to be a bit awkward last spring, gently noting "body styling in the rear that features a somewhat narrow roof and rear window and noticeably wide flanks above the rear quarter panels." Another parking lot critic thought the body shape in that area was awkward. But overall, we haven't seen as much interest in one of our test cars since the new Camaro featured in the last issue, from people who know what it is, people who don't and some in between.

The IS has a nice solid ride, solid power, the brakes and cornering are not sports car caliber but plenty sporty, and we're delighted this is a rear-wheel-driver.

We note a few minor things in the sidebar, but when we put the top down, any other little issues we note just go away. ■