

HOTTEST DEAL IN A LEXUS JUST GOT HOTTER

Fast, fuel efficient, fully featured...
all more affordable than before.

By Joe Sage



The Lexus IS has always been a multifaceted and versatile car—much like those it goes head-to-head with, notably the Audi A4, BMW 3 Series and Mercedes-Benz C-Class. Most are rear-drive-based (all but Audi), all have had all-wheel-drive available, all have had performance versions (Audi S4, BMW M, Mercedes-AMG and Lexus IS F). Some offer manual transmissions.

Lexus invited us to northern California to drive a new-generation 2014 IS on autocross courses at the decommissioned Alameda Naval Air Station, next to the busy Port of Oakland—where their F SPORT version could show its stuff—and on great two-lane roads in the East Bay hills.

Models and reduced pricing

The Lexus IS is the brand's "entry luxe" model, aimed at young buyers moving up, empty nesters sizing down, and conquests moving over from competing brands. The IS attracts Lexus' young-

est buyer, at an average age of 45.

There are 250 vs 350 models; F SPORT vs standard models; and rear-wheel vs all-wheel drive.

The key difference between 250 and 350 is the engine: a 2.5-liter V6 with 204 hp and achieving 30 MPG highway, or a 306-hp 3.5-liter V6. While 0-to-60 time improves from 7.7 seconds for the IS 250 to just 5.6 for the IS 350, fuel mileage only dips from 30 to 28, a pretty good tradeoff. Base price for an IS 250 is \$35,950 and for an IS 350, \$39,465, again a pretty easy move to the 350.

Whichever way you go, the rationalization process is easier than ever, with the new IS 350

The IS F SPORT models (facing page) are easily distinguished from the regular models by their lower front fascia—with a mesh grill plus deep scoops that imply performance air intake on the F SPORT.

priced 2.1 percent lower than last year, the differential between the IS 250 and IS 350 trimmed by a whopping 33 percent, and over \$1400 in previous options now included as standard for 2014.

The F SPORT spot

A familiar member of the lineup has been the IS F, whose 5.0L V8 pumps out 416 hp and hits 0-to-60 in 4.6 seconds (with fuel economy of just 18 MPG highway). You can still buy an IS F, but it will be a 2013 model, starting at \$61,750. Unlike comparing IS 250 to IS 350, moving to an IS F offers a less dramatic gain in quickness at considerably more cost, and the drop in fuel economy is significant. The jury is out on whether a new IS F will follow.



What you can get in lieu of a new IS F is an F SPORT model—an option package, really. IS 250 and 350 F SPORT versions have the same engine, power and fuel mileage as standard models.

This is much the same game being played by the Germans: Audi with its S-Line trim or BMW and Mercedes-Benz with M or AMG details available on more standard vehicles. What you do get with an F SPORT is a more affordable car with an F on it. The price differential is that of a typical option package: an IS 250 adds \$3465 to become an IS 250 F SPORT, and an IS 350 adds \$3970.

For that, you get sport-tuned adaptable variable suspension with a Sport+ mode (added to the Eco, normal and Sport settings of all models), bolstered front sport seats, and instrumentation that picks up cues from the über-rare Lexus LFA supercar. An F SPORT also includes aluminum pedals, silver interior trim, perforated leather steering wheel and shift knob, and other features.

All models have a 6-speed automatic except for the RWD IS 350, which has an 8-speed (from the prior year's IS F). All-wheel drive adds \$2535 to an IS 250 or \$2235 to an IS 350. Going the full distance to an IS 350 with AWD seems reasonable.

KEEP RIGHT >>





Inside and outside the IS

The new IS includes an industry first: HD radio for traffic and weather with no subscription, which Lexus says will replace SiriusXM in all models going forward. This is augmented by Lexus Enform apps for stocks, sports and fuel prices. A Mark Levinson audio and navigation system adds Doppler maps and dynamic traffic info. Nav adds birds-eye views and 3D building maps. Climate and other controls are raised for a more tactile interface to help you keep your eyes on the road.

The new IS is 3.5 inches longer, on a 2.5-inch-longer wheelbase. Rear seat space is additionally increased through sculpted front seatbacks

We flew two hours to SFO and gathered in downtown San Francisco. In the morning we shuttled to Alameda, where two different acceleration, handling and autocross tracks were set up. The new IS was joined by the prior IS and competing vehicles. We also took a road loop north out of Oakland, inland through the San Pablo Dam region, back through the Caldecott Tunnel into Oakland, then back across the old Bay Bridge, to our flights.

and improved rear door opening angles.

Outside, the car has a bit higher beltline, which heads noticeably uphill at the back of the rear side glass. This is echoed in a character line that sweeps from the rocker panel up through the rear wheel—emphasizing the car's rear-drive character—to join the dramatic slice of the taillights. This all looks best when seen in person.

Developed to be the "most fun-to-drive" car in its segment, the new IS has drivetrain, suspension and handling features fine-tuned over a million miles of testing. Its rework is comprehensive, with countless details such as side mirrors moved back a little to simultaneously improve aerodynamics, increase straight-line stability and reduce noise-vibration-harshness.

The driver's hip point and cowl line are moved down for a comfort and performance stance. The body is lighter and more rigid than the previous model, with advanced bonding methods from the top-dollar Lexus LS. It grabs the road better with new rear suspension based on the rear-drive GS, including new shocks and relocated sway bars.

Look and driving stance are improved by a half-inch-wider track, made possible by tighter "hemming" of the metal lip around wheel wells.

The car of course receives the Lexus "spindle grille" currently working its way onto every Lexus model, and it sports DRLs separated from the headlamps, exclusive within this segment.

The steering feels solid and mechanical. Econormal-Sport-Sport+ suspension settings are subtle, but do bring something to the table.

Selecting your own new IS

There is a great deal of overlap once you start shopping among all the variables. A 250 F SPORT costs about the same as a standard 350. Bigger engine or sport suspension? This seems a devil's bargain. For more dough, the problem is solved: an IS 350 F SPORT with AWD runs \$48,460 with delivery. (Add every option, and you hit \$50,035.)

The conundrum may come from its identity as "entry luxe." If you come at this car as an entry buyer, you may stop with the standard IS 250, and you will have a fine ride. As you start to apply the luxe (or expensive-is-desirable) factor, your trade-offs are largely between power and style, though the F SPORT does nudge drive performance, too. One look at those sport seats and aluminum pedals, and you'll know who you are. If we had to choose, our leanings might be toward the bigger engine over the F trimmings. If we didn't have to choose, we'd pile it all on—a loaded IS 350 F SPORT with AWD, though above \$50 grand, there is a lot of competition. We'd try to stick with the 350's engine, but other considerations are going to be driven by your own budget and soul. ■

