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Incorporating CARS

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Extra touches put the 'F' into finesse and firepower



CRUISE CONTROL

Grant Edwards

YOU can tell a lot about someone by the car they drive.

Take the premium medium-size sedan segment. In recent times, getting behind the wheel of a Beemer or Audi has been the domain of up-and-comers. When they grow older, Mercedes-Benz is the weapon of choice.

So where does Lexus fit into the mix? Traditionally it is the mature driver seeking value and reliability, and the IS range sells in good numbers in a genre dominated by the Mercedes-Benz C-Class, BMW 3-Series and the Audi A4.

The IS350 arrived late last year to partner its four-cylinder sibling and provide some extra V6 firepower against the big European trio.

While the four-cylinder outsells the new offering about two to one, it remains the more rewarding drive and still stacks up better than the Europeans in the price and features domain.

Those in the market for a premium medium-size sedan should have the IS350 on their shopping list, especially the F Sport derivative for those who like to push the performance envelope.

Comfort

With some extra bling, the F Sport model boasts more athletic touches than the Prestige base model.

It retains the quality finishing

that we've come to expect from Lexus.

Kudos for the excellent sports seats which manage to hug you from all angles but don't constrict movement.

The special steering wheel is a constant reminder that you have shelled out extra coin for the performance derivative.

You also get the vitally important aluminium pedals and a few other faux chrome-look touches to complete the sporty ambience.

It falls short of the German marques in overall quality, with some hard plastics in places, old-school digital clock and even older font selection for the gear shift (one colleague reckons it's the same style found in his Corolla from the 70s).

Despite the firmer suspension and bigger alloys the cabin enjoys impressive levels of silence – only undone by coarse bitumen.

On varying surfaces the Lexus

carries its passengers with aplomb.

The steering wheel drops back into the dash to make getting in and out easier, although the cabin isn't expansive and the rear seats could do with additional leg and knee room.

On the road

Agile and lively, the V6 under the bonnet begs you to exercise your right foot.

While there is little fanfare via engine soundtrack you can reach the national speed limit in just over five seconds. That's quick.

Bolstered by firmer suspension, this IS350 F Sport delivers a rewarding driving experience.

And you can really work it hard. The gated shift has a "sport" function, and you can also make full use of the paddle-shifters and trim your way through the six-speed

box.

Left in automatic mode and the compact Lexus sedan does the job well with smooth and easy changes, rarely feeling flustered.

Steering is direct, and the whole package feels nicely weighted and shows an excellent ability to change direction.

What do you get?

Standard gear is the trump card of all IS350s.

While some competitors require you to visit the options department to get all the luxury trappings, the majority are standard fare with this model.

The F Sport has a unique suspension calibration, 18-inch alloys with five close-paired spokes, rear spoiler, different radiator grille (upper and lower), sport seats with drivers' memory function, F Sport steering wheel and gear shift lever and sports pedals and rain-sensing windscreen wipers.

It also boasts a Mark Levinson 14-speaker premium audio system.

All that comes in top of satellite navigation, electrically adjustable front heated seats, LED daytime running lights, reversing camera, Bluetooth connectivity, metallic paint, eight airbags and stability control.

Other options

The Lexus is a pretty sweet deal when up against the Audi A4 3.2 FSI Quattro (\$91,000), BMW 335i M Sport (\$110,900), Mercedes-Benz C300 (\$90,850) and maybe Volkswagen Passat V6 CC (\$64,990).

Practicality

The cabin is user-friendly with some handy storage options and USB/power outlet in the deep centre console.

Things can get too cramped for five adults, but two in the back is the best scenario as long as they

aren't much over 180cm. The boot allocation is reasonable despite a small opening and the area is good enough for three large bags, but the back seats do not fold.

Running costs

Fuel usage is about nine litres per 100km on average. It's not the best

but not the worst either. Lexus vehicles are rated highly in satisfaction surveys, so reliability and good resale are added bonuses.

Funky factor

The coolest part of the IS350 is the internal gizmos and standard extras.

The F Sport adds some much-needed pizzazz with a body kit and groovy alloys and explains why more than half of all US350s sold are in this guise, but in a beauty contest with the Europeans the Japanese sedan doesn't compete.

The lowdown

There is a whole lot of fun to be had in the IS350.

Zesty and dynamic, the V6 powerplant works well with a chassis that loves being tested.

This F Sport model gives it an external lift with some athletic extras, but the variant desperately needs a makeover.

Still, those longing for value will not be disappointed. Impressive road manners and a long list of standard inclusions mean you can drive away in a premium offering for about 30% less than the European equivalent.

VITAL STATISTICS

Model: Lexus IS350 IS Sport.

Details: Four-door rear-wheel drive premium compact sedan.

Engine: 3.5-litre V6 generating maximum power of 233kW @ 6400rpm and peak torque of 378Nm @ 4800rpm.

Transmission: Six-speed automatic with sequential shift and steering wheel mounted paddles.

Performance: 0-100kmh in 5.6 seconds; top speed 270kmh (electronically limited).

Consumption: 9.4 litres/100km (combined average).

CO2: 223g/km.

Bottom line: \$71,800.



REWARDING DRIVE: With a stiffer suspension the F Sport IS350 is engaging behind the wheel.



ATHLETIC APPEAL: The F Sport gets groovy extras like special alloys, grille and spoiler.



WELL KITTED: The IS350 has an impressive features list.