

Lexus 3-fighter pops its top and broadens its base

The "entry luxury" IS continues to expand—
with standard, performance and now hardtop convertible versions

We drive the Lexus IS 350 C from Lake Hamilton, Arkansas, back to Little Rock



There are a great many people who see the Lexus IS as the maker's competitor to the hugely popular BMW 3 Series (inhabiting a market niche somewhat oxymoronically known as entry level luxury). And, as the 3 Series has expanded to include a variety of engine and performance levels, a convertible and a coupe, so has the Lexus IS lineup. The latest addition is this pair of convertibles.

The first US version of the IS debuted in 2000 as a 2001 model. Whereas the Lexus ES was already established as a "comfort luxury" offering, the IS was presented as a "performance luxury" model. A completely redesigned and reengineered IS appeared in 2005 as a 2006 model, with 2.5- and 3.0-liter engine options, as the IS 250 and IS 350, respectively, and with an all-wheel-drive option for the IS 250 (the others are rear-drivers). In 2007, Lexus launched the IS F sedan, a high-performance version basically akin to the BMW M cars or Audi S/RS cars. The IS F (see *Arizona Driver*, March/April 2008) debuted with a 416-hp 5.0-liter V8, a 0-to-60 time of 4.3 sec-

onds, and a base price north of the \$50,000 mark.

Nonetheless, Lexus still lacked a coupe and a convertible in this category, missing the mark for a third of BMW's 3 Series buyers. Lexus has opted to fill both niches with one car: the IS 250C and IS 350C are retractable hardtop convertibles. (BMW, meanwhile, has gone to a hardtop convertible, as well, but also has a dedicated 3 Series coupe.)

A key goal of the IS convertible development team was to ensure that the space, performance and even driving experiences were shared to some degree even by a passenger. The interior maintains luxury points associated with the IS sport sedans, while new comfort and entertainment features provide a consistent atmosphere with the top up or down. Special attention was given to providing an attractive interior design when the top-down car is seen from outside. Door and side trim flow from front to back. The four seats provide each passenger with his or her own space, and a rear console

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metal folding top, and it even includes, on cars with available Intuitive Park Assist (IPA), sonar sensors in the rear bumper to stop movement if luggage or other obstacles are about to interfere, plus a visual warning on the instrument panel to apprise the driver of this scenario.

The space required for these feats creates body styling in the rear that features a somewhat narrow roof and rear window and noticeably wide flanks above the rear quarter panels. For better or worse, this makes the car look exactly like what it is: a hardtop convertible. Body panels, in fact, are all completely different for the convertible from the IS sedan, with the exception of the hood. (The car features new suspension and wheels, as well.)

The marketers' key theme for the IS C is "open," as in open top, open road and a spacious, open interior. Ironically, we did much of our test drive with the top up, for the sake of checking out instrumentation, road noise, audio and a/c. We chose the 250C so we could enjoy the 6-speed manual transmission. The 350C comes only with a 6-speed automatic (which is also available on the 250C).

Despite the "open" approach to styling and design, market research has revealed a darker side to the convertible owner: when interviewed, owners and prospective buyers had some fairly wild ideas of what they could accomplish when in possession of a drop-top, what Lexus marketing identifies as a darker side. This has led to an advertising campaign featuring edgier lifestyle imagery, along with the slogan, "Live a little... a lot!"

The IS 250C and 350C will have a complement of F-Sport performance accessories available (which will also be offered for the AWD IS sedan). Asked whether there may be a full-blown-performance IS-F-C, Lexus reps grinned and simply said, "hopefully!"... depending upon response and demand. Prices were forecast to start at \$38,490 for the IS 250C and \$43,940 for the IS 350C, making the 250C the only hardtop convertible in this segment "under \$39,000." Lexus hopes to sell 12,000 convertibles a year in the US, anticipating about 75% of sales to be the IS 250C (the same ratio as on the sedan). The 250C has preliminary fuel mileage ratings of 20 mpg, 24 mpg combined. ■



Vince Bodiford prepares his Lexus IS video segment for TheWeekendDrive.com at Lake Hamilton, Arkansas.

provides cup holders and storage. Rear headrests are retractable for improved visibility, with a control accessible from the rear console or from the driver's seat. Rear seat position can be shifted inboard for additional headroom. Enhanced safety features include side impact protection to mitigate the convertible structure.

Eight-way adjustable power front seats with power lumbar support are standard, and the available heated/ventilated functions extend heating range to the shoulders and increase airflow in ventilation mode (a feature that was very popular in our test fleet). The gauge cluster has higher contrast than the sedan and dial-color change for its multi-information LCD, plus decreased surface-glass transmittance, all enhancing visibility with the top down. Audio options include a Mark Levinson system that includes an effective equalizer for quality sound with an

open top. Climate control is also engineered to be effective with the top down, though of course a Phoenix summer will exceed the limits of such a system.

The interior has recycled materials in 13 areas including door and side trim. There are three interior color options, including two new one: in addition to black leather interior, a new alabaster (near-white) color is joined by an alabaster/blue combo. Our test vehicle had the latter, but we couldn't warm up to it.

The electric top mechanism is extremely quiet, and it's quite quick for a hardtop: where as soft tops are commonly in the 15-second range for raising or lowering, and hardtop convertibles often take 30 seconds or more to perform their mission, the complexities of the Lexus IS C top are accomplished and stowed in just 20 seconds. This is a big plus.

This is the world's fastest three-piece

