

king of the road

striking the perfect balance between comfortable isolation and full road engagement

By Joe Sage

We drove the redesigned Lexus LS flagship lineup at its launch in Tucson last fall (see the Nov-Dec 2012 issue), including a standard-wheelbase LS 460, long-wheelbase LS 460 L, new LS F SPORT performance model and LS 600h L hybrid, also a long-wheelbase model. Back with us for another week this winter was the conventional powertrain LS 460 L long-wheelbase.

The restyling of the LS is apparent, starting with the signature "spindle grille" that is being applied throughout the brand's lineup. Beyond this facelift, there is intense reengineering: over 3000 out of 6000 parts on the car, not counting nuts and bolts, are new. The car appears lower, wider, and more athletic. Instruments are divided into upper (display) and center (operation) zones, to reduce leaning and reaching. Seats are sportier. Rear passengers have audio and climate controls, and in the Executive Class package have luxurious reclining rear seats with ottomans and a vibrating massage feature.

A 12.3-inch panel with second-gen remote-touch interface has nav routes, turn-by-turn and phone info in a three-way split screen. Four-zone climate control is joined by four-zone heated and cooled seats. There are two available Mark Levinson premium audio systems.

Countless small details improve weight, aerodynamics and thus fuel efficiency. Noise-vibration-harshness, already exemplary in the LS, are improved further. Advanced safety systems build upon Lexus "millimeter radar" and near-infrared sensors, for blind spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert, collision warning, advanced pre-collision and dynamic radar cruise control.

This long-wheelbase model is not the most expensive, at base cost. Ours, an all-wheel-drive model, was an early build, delivered with no Monroney sticker, so no pricing or options listings. But its starting price would be \$81,775 (\$78,290 if it were RWD). A standard-wheelbase LS runs about \$6300-6800 less. Nineteen different option packages range from \$4,740 to \$16,130 each (and then there are individual options). The new F SPORT is achieved via option packages priced at \$15,230 or higher. The LS 600h L hybrid tops the lineup at a base price of \$119,910, though that includes much of what is optional on the others. There are only two packages for the hybrid (both priced: \$11,620 and \$12,335, though the pricier package adds all those royal touches in the back seat). Our LS 460 L had a great many options built in and was surely lapping into six digits.

A signature detail of the LS family is its L-shaped taillight assembly. Context-aware and user-adaptable instruments include this available three-way split screen in the center stack. The LS 460 L experience is only complete once you've stretched out and enjoyed the reclining back seat and ottoman.

Pieces and parts

Interior finishes of brushed aluminum, deeply polished wood (very slick, but attractive to its audience), two colors of leather—a dark taupe and ivory—look nice. Only the familiar shiny clock bezel looks out of place.

Heated and cooled seats have an Auto setting; this is an unusual detail, and we wonder how smart it is. On a cool morning, dressed in shorts, we set it on Auto and forget all about it till much later. We conclude it was either unnecessary or really well engineered, or both. Most likely it's really well engineered.

We had this car right up until half an hour before it famously and amazingly snowed in the Valley in late February. On a 42-degree morning, we went for the heated steering wheel. This was a blessing, but apparently only the upholstered part heats up, at 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock, which is a very limited part, while the slick wooden majority of the wheel was very cold.

The trunk is huge. Its latch button is tiny. We found ourselves on one knee, looking for it, more than once. The good news is, you can close the trunk with the electric button, or you can just slam it shut, quick and easy. Also on the plus side, the electric button is lighted, so you don't have to reach, grope and guess. On the downside, if it's pouring rain, as it was for us one day, the open trunk drains its load straight into the trunk.

The electronic parking brake has an Auto option (as do quite a few things in this car)—a convenient plus.

We had annoyances with radio presets and touch-screen icons that weren't actually touch. Keyless locking response was noticeably slow and therefore uncertain. Since this was a preproduction unit, it's possible not everything is in final build, and we surely would have benefited from a manual. You'll have that when you buy yours. Some things are here to stay, though, such as a rocker switch for some audio functions, oddly placed on the console, somewhat in conflict with the shifter.

We made a point of spending some time in the back seat of the LS 460 L, to experience its luxury and also to try to glean the details of this car's build options. We had done this at the launch near Tucson a few months ago, too, though this time we didn't find the massage function. Much as we love to drive, it's not hard to visualize a session back here leading to "hey, you drive."

Driving style

We start off as we would in most any vehicle, ignoring the back seat and slipping behind the wheel. This, despite the back seat being fit for a king or two.

There are three available drive modes: Normal, Eco (maximizing fuel efficiency) and Sport (amping up shift and throttle performance). Cars equipped with optional air suspension also have Comfort (with cushier suspension) and Sport S+ modes (Sport S+ adds aggressive steering to Sport's shift/throttle enhancements).

We have a tendency to prefer driver's cars, those that provide a good feel for the road and a level of connect



SPECIFICATIONS

2013 LEXUS LS 460 L	
ENGINE	4.6L V8
HP	360
LB-FT	347
DRIVETRAIN	AWD
TRANSMISSION	8-spd automatic
0-TO-60 MPH	5.9 sec
MPG (EST)	16/23/18 (city/hwy/comb)
EMISSION CERTIFICATION	ULEVII
WHEELBASE	121.7
LENGTH	205.0
LEGROOM (REAR)	36.7
CARGO (CU.FT.)	18.0
WEIGHT	4695

KEEP RIGHT >>



Advanced electro-mechanical systems provide a variety of engine, suspension and steering tunings for varying conditions or personal impulses. The 18-cu.ft. trunk is wide and deep. Your limo awaits.

Luxurious length is the name of the game, but handling is always appreciated. We tested a divided boulevard U-turn—a 180 from a left-turn lane into two lanes on the far side—and found the car had plenty of room, seeming better than some smaller vehicles lately. The actual specs are full of surprises. There are fully six different turning circles for the LS, depending whether it's the "L" model or not, whether it has air suspension or not, and whether it's AWD or RWD. The "L" has a 4.8-inch longer wheelbase than the standard, and yet, surprisingly, it claims the same turning circle as the shorter car: 35.4 feet with 18-inch or 36.0 feet with 19-inch wheels. All-wheel drive makes a big difference, bringing the SWB model up to 37.4 feet and our LWB up to 38.8 feet. Against our benchmark Jeep Grand Cherokee and its 37.1 feet, this luxu-liner does very well.



Our LS came with automated headlights capable of much more than low and high beams. In fact, we never figured out its full algorithm. Driving on a country road, some of its range could probably save a life. Around town, we never defeated its desire to spotlight folks taking an evening stroll. This may be a pre-production quirk.

Our final drive was to the airport—freeway time in the pouring rain, sharing the roads with plenty of people



who don't like that kind of driving. Faced with a few of their sudden moves, we had time to check our mirrors and avoid all they threw at us, without ruffling a feather on the LS 460 L. It consistently proved itself to be a fine and confident machine.

Riding in style

There were times we found ourselves comparing the LS 460 L with other cars in a parking lot or on the road. Next to a Kia Optima, we contemplated just what exactly it delivered for four or five times the Kia's price. Next to a Volkswagen CC, we wondered whether the considerable heft of the LS L was desirable or overkill. As time went by and we continued to compare, we found the Lexus was ultimately a great package, and everything else started to look too small. It's a well-balanced machine, and the rest can be chalked up to relativity and budget.

Speaking of relativity, we remain intrigued by how quickly a \$70,000-or-so car can become a \$120,000-or-so car, either of them a luxury sedan. A paradox kicks in, in that as the price climbs to \$100,000 and above, rear seating becomes palatial. The Lexus LS 460 L is a fine handling and powerful car, fun to drive. But having invested in the long model, you might want to be more rider than driver. (Or maybe you like to entertain while on the go.) If not, you could save a lot of dough with a short-wheelbase LS 460, especially by forgoing some of the more regal option packages. Does that miss the point of the car? Maybe yes, maybe no. If the whole point is luxurious splendor, spend away. If the whole point is personal luxury and performance, you can spend less.

The LS lineup has enough variety and enough overlap to deliver the precise preference of anyone with the budget for this kind of road-going elbow room.

Ride or drive, you will feel like moderate royalty.

There are a good handful of vehicles that can make you feel like this—Mercedes-Benz S Class, Bentley, Rolls-Royce—but there aren't as many that are sleepers, less obvious or ostentatious. Perhaps the Audi A8, or the VW Phaeton when it briefly existed. You know what you have under you with this Lexus, and it's something very special. Bottom line: if this were your car, you'd likely never tire of it. Our logbook includes references to "great comfort and power" and "driving along dreamily" in a car that is "powerful, smooth and comfortable." There are precious few other things you'd see on a daily basis that you'd wish you had instead. ■

