

Prius's older cousin BY JOE SAGE

The Lexus ES has always generally attracted an upper-middle-aged, upper-middle-class kind of buyer. The word vanilla springs to mind. Nice car, though.

The current ES launched in 2012, its underpinnings shifting from mostly Toyota Camry to mostly Avalon. A hybrid was added midyear. We drove both versions at that time and had been impressed with the hybrid's value. The hybrid has fewer horses—200 hp total in the ES 300h (156 from its 4-cylinder gasoline engine), versus 268 hp with the ES 350's 3.5L V6—but weight gain was just 89 pounds, and highway fuel economy shot up from 31 to 40 MPG. And while most hybrids commanded a significant premium, this cost just \$2750 more.

A 2014 facelift brought a more emphatic spindle grille (nice in the right light—gloss black with strong bars in the open area.) The hybrid price premium remains modest: \$2920. Engines and power remain exactly the same. The ES 350 still comes with a 6-speed automatic, and the ES 300h still comes with a CVT.

The hybrid will still indeed get us from point A to point B, pretty much the ES mission, but

this time, we didn't find the car as transparently normal as we had a few years back. We don't mind a well-implemented CVT, but overall this powertrain needed more juice. We tried every eco-normal-sport combination, as well as manumatic simulation of shift points. But it was as though overly intrusive systems were in control, intent on minimizing driver involvement, or maybe any artificial intelligence just wasn't really heeding our intent.

The car had operational idiosyncrasies at times. Doors would fail to lock or unlock. Warning lights would go full disco. Hybrids, like EVs, can seem to be off when they're on, and we know this. Yet gauges would come to life even with power confirmed to be off. Or the car would stop dead even when power was confirmed to be on—once in traffic.

Braking force often felt absent in normal town driving. The back tires (or one of them?) would noticeably squeal rubber in the simplest low-speed surface street corners. This might earn you a law enforcement conversation in some towns. Both may be attributable to details of the regenerative system, but

that's just our speculation—regenerative systems recover energy that is otherwise "lost," but we had the feeling this was taking energy that otherwise might be stopping the car.

The hybrid has a base price near \$40 grand (\$40,920), but with add-ons (mostly just driver assistance systems that are standard on many cars), ours topped \$50 grand (\$50,530). The Monroney sticker bore the slogan, "The Pursuit of Perfection." A note with humorous intent in our e-logbook suggested that perhaps if it had already *achieved* perfection, you wouldn't need all the options. But instead, feel free to *pursue* perfection—and here's the option list and just what that'll cost you.

We did find that we could have fun in this car when next to a Prius. At 200 hybrid horses versus 121, the stealthy ES could blow the Prius's doors off, all things being relative—and we could theoretically tell the Prius driver we're still getting 40 hybrid MPG while doing so. That was our high point with this car.

The ES 300h does achieve its basic original mission. If you like the size, price, style and mid-premium finish of the ES in general, give this a spin and see what you think. For just a few dollars more than the ES 350, you can save a lot on gas for a long time. ■

