

This is IS

BY JOE SAGE

Lexus IS has been considered by many, since its launch 20 years ago, as a serious contender for the perennially sought and debated BMW 3 Series-killer title. One solid reason for this is the small sedan's rear-wheel-drive basis, relatively rare in this category, though our model here is the 300 AWD, adding power to the front wheels (making it a bit of an Audi A4-killer, though those are front-drive-based). It's also an itself-killer, in a friendly fratricidal way, as there are four ways to buy your Lexus IS—300 or 350, in rear- or all-wheel drive. That in itself has been simplified, as the smaller-displacement 300 used to be called the 200t (and before that the 250). Specwise, however, the 300 and 300 AWD models are as different as they used to be—the rear-drive 300 has a 258-hp 2.0L twin-scroll turbo, while the 300 AWD has a 260-hp 3.5L V6, itself a detuned variant of the 311-hp 3.5L V6 in either IS 350 model. (Moving to the IS 350 from the 300 will run you about \$3300-3600 more, with a two-to-four-point ding in fuel mileage but significant boost in acceleration in rear-drive models, or no change in fuel mileage and a one-tenth-second boost in acceleration with AWD.) It can be a brain-racking set of variables, come purchase time, although you will have probably predetermined the

rear-vs-AWD decision, and you likely are able to quickly dispatch your power-cost-MPG decision. Of course, you will want to drive them all, at which point you will find all four models back in play.

Put it all together, and this model—the IS 300 AWD—is one of two things in the lineup. Either it's a bit of an odd duck, created simply to flesh out a four-car lineup—300 and 350, both with a choice of rear- or all-wheel drive—but requiring a V6 to handle the AWD (despite having lower torque), while detuning that V6 to not compete with the IS 350 AWD. Or it's a desirable balance between the 350 AWD and the base IS 300 rear-driver, allowing you to save some dough compared with the 311-hp 350, while providing a naturally aspirated engine, less subject to performance lag than a turbo (though those have improved mightily) when you take that AWD on a high-altitude ski weekend.

If you're shopping all four, it's a conundrum.

On the other hand, if you aim straight for this one, as an opportunity, not a compromise, you will be perfectly happy with your decision. It's considerably quicker to 60 mph than the bigger turbo rear-driver (6.1 seconds vs 6.9). And whereas your fuel mileage drops—city from 23 mpg to 19, highway from 32 to 26, combined from 26 to 22—when you're in the slickest or curviest conditions, you still benefit from all-wheel drive.

But we'd recommend shopping all four, first. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

SEATING CAPACITY	.....five
ENGINE	.....3.5L alum EFI DOHC VVT-i V6
DRIVETRAIN	.....AWD
HP/TORQUE	.....260 hp / 236 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	.....6-spd Super-ECT auto w paddles
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	.....6.1 sec / 130 mph
STEERING	.....rack & pinion elec pwr steering
SUSPENSION	.....F: dbl wishbone w high-mount upper arms, coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar
	.....R: multi-link, coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar
BRAKES	.....F: 13.15" vented; R: 12.20" vented
WHEELS/TIRES	.....17, 18, 18 staggered / varies
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....184.3 in / 110.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....35.4 ft
HEADROOM (F/R)	.....(w moonroof) 38.2 / 36.9 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	.....44.8 / 32.2 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....10.8 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....3737 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	......91 oct prem / 17.4 gal
MPG	.....19/26/22 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	.....\$40,660
COMFORT PKG:	driver's seat, mirrors and steering column memory; power tilt/telescope wheel; blind spot monitor & rear cross-traffic alert (incl \$600 credit for BSM); rain sense wipers.....1220
18" STAGGERED WHEELS:	alum alloy, liquid graphite finish, 225/40R18 front, 255/35R18 rear.....895
NAV/AUDIO:	Mark Levinson 835w 17-sprk 5.1 surround audio, 10.3" display, remote touch interface, Lexus Enform destination (1-yr), app suite, voice command, electrochromatic auto-dim mirror.....2835
INTUITIVE PARK ASSIST	.....500
PREMIUM PLUS PKG:	heated/vented front seats.....150
BUNDLE:	trunk mat, cargo net, wheels locks, bumper applique, key glove.....334
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....995
TOTAL	.....\$46,294

