

Luxury Sport Desert Duel

by H.R. Driver

Track photos
by the author



How much can you learn about the performance of a luxury sport sedan or sport coupe by driving it on the 101 Freeway or around the block of your local car dealer? With radar cameras everywhere, actually not very much.

Yes, you can rate a car's comfort, ergonomics, acceleration and braking from stoplight to stoplight. However, what does this really tell you about the car's true performance and handling? Actually, not very much.

Since your local dealer will not let you take his cars to the race track, we decided that we would do that for you. We

performed a back-to-back track testing of four luxury sport sedans and two luxury sport coupes. Herein are our driving impressions.

Also, rather than put just any automotive writer in these fast machines, *Arizona Driver Magazine* decided to have a former professional race driver test the cars. Thus, if there were any brake fade, mechanical or safety issues with the cars, better he deal with them than you.

Finding the perfect place to test "Luxury Sport Desert Duel" was elementary. Willow Springs Raceway in the high desert of Lancaster, California was the ideal spot. It has

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Mercedes-Benz C350 Sport



Cadillac CTS



comparable temperatures to Arizona's Valley of the Sun. However, being situated on a steep mountainside, Willow Springs is also extremely tough on brakes. So, whether you drive in Scottsdale or Sedona, our track testing will have relevance for you.

We decided upon six four-passenger luxury sport machines for our "Desert Duel." The first four cars in our test are practical four-door models. The final two are utterly self-indulgent sport coupes. Find the one which best suits you.

Mercedes-Benz C350 Sport

In the automotive world, the premier luxury automotive icon is the three-pointed star. However, the old Mercedes-Benz C Class was dated and a bit small. The new C350 Sport is larger, but has the same powerful 3.5 liter, 268 hp V-6 engine.

While not in the 300-plus horsepower range with some of its competitors, the C350 has an "equalizer" with its slick-shifting 7-speed automatic transmission. The extra gear lever-ages the 268 horses to optimal advantage, while still maintaining a respectable 17 mpg city/25 mpg highway.

Mercedes has also incorporated AMG aero-body styling, 6-spoke 17" alloy wheels and an updated electronic ESP suspension system. In basic terms, the Mercedes ESP system helps keep you on the road in miserable weather. In complex terms, ESP traction control interacts with the ABS brakes to help correct oversteer and understeer.

On track, the C350 has slightly more body roll than some of its competitors. However, the C350's chassis takes a solid set in the corners and it telegraphs every bit of road information to the driver. Brake fade from the large 4-wheel disc brakes is nonexistent.

Ergonomics is excellent on the C350. The standard tilt and telescopic steering wheel allows the driver to achieve the perfect driving attitude, with hands in the 3 and 9 position.

Easier to drive and more predictable for the average driver, the C350 Sport is an excellent blend of performance, handling and luxury. Starting at a base price of \$36,500, our test car topped out at a MSRP of \$43,285 due to the Nav system, Xenon headlights, 6-CD Harman/Kardon surround sound, power rear window shade and other details.

Cadillac CTS

When Cadillac launched their 400 hp V-8 CTS-"V" with a 6-speed manual transmission several years ago, they served notice that they were now in the luxury sport sedan market with BMW and Mercedes-Benz.

Cad's road racing success in the USA vs. the Germans further supported their position.

However, there was a huge power gap between the base 240 hp V-6 CTS and Caddy's 400 hp CTS-"V" performance flagship. With the introduction of a 3.6 liter, 304 hp quad-valve V-6, that gap has been markedly narrowed.

With its standard 6-speed automatic transmission, the 3.6 DI V-6 Cadillac CTS has become a genuine market contender vs. the imports. Moreover, with \$3.00 per gallon gasoline, Cadillac seems to have timed the market well. The CTS gets 17 mpg city/26 mpg highway.

"But what about the performance and handling?" you ask. Well, the rear-wheel drive CTS has closed that gap as well. On par with the C350 and Lexus IS350, the CTS's handling is a good compromise between luxury and performance.

While the new CTS's acceleration is quicker than last year's, the braking and handling have also been improved. Under heavy braking, the CTS exhibits little forward weight transference. The CTS's body roll is gradual and predictable.

The base price of a CTS is \$34,545. Ours ran \$44,715 with the optional 18" mag wheels, sport suspension, larger brakes and every electronic accessory known to man. The performance package alone is \$3,300, but well worth it.

Lexus IS 350

Lexus once was known strictly for its opulence and reliability. However, the IS 350 is Lexus' first serious attempt to invade BMW's sport sedan turf. How did they do? Pretty well. Lexus' 3.5 liter V-6 boasts 304 hp, has steering-wheel-mounted paddle shifters, large 4-wheel disc brakes, standard 17" alloy wheels and low profile performance tires.

Like the Cadillac CTS, the IS 350 is a compromise between performance and luxury. It has slightly more body roll than a BMW 335xi or the Audi S5; however Lexus does offers an "F" model with 100 extra horses and stiffer suspension.

The IS 350's 4-wheel disc brakes are very effective, and they did not fade. On the track or on back roads, the IS 350 is a kick to drive with its Ferrari-styled paddle shifters. However, you still have the option of leaving the IS 350 in "D" for daily commuter use.

The IS 350's 18 mpg city/ 25 mpg highway is average for luxury sport sedans in this class. Its \$35,905 base price is also decent. However, the Nav system, Mark Levinson sound system, optional sport suspension and





Lexus IS 350



18" alloys quickly elevated our sticker to \$47,800. Consequently, you should examine the IS 350 option packages carefully.

BMW 335xi

Our BMW 335xi test car had a twin-turbocharged 3.0 liter straight-six, all-wheel drive and a 6-speed manual transmission. It was the only sedan in our test with a standard transmission, and BMW made no apologies for it. Why should they? It was the quickest, best handling car in the group, and it was also the most fun to drive. If you want a 6-speed automatic, BMW will sell you one. However, they believe that real drivers prefer sticks.

BMW did not list their horsepower on the price sticker as the other manufacturers did. While the 335xi has 300 horsepower, it feels like much more when the turbos spool up.

With its AWD system, the 335xi also has remarkable cornering ability. In high speed corners, you simply set the chassis going into the corner and get back on the throttle. The 335xi's AWD system does the rest as it pulls the car into the corner apex. Yes, this car makes you feel like a professional driver. However, the 335xi has its adhesion limits. You had best respect the laws of physics, lest you exit the road at an obscene rate of speed.

With 19 mpg city/27 mpg highway, the Bimmer had the best overall mileage of any of our luxury sport sedans. However, you will probably never achieve 27 mpg. It is just too tempting to step on the gas and listen as the 335xi's twin-turbo engine winds up!

At \$40,000, the base price of our 335xi was reasonable for a BMW. However, you should pass on the \$475 optional paint and \$850 Cold Weather Package if you want to stay south of \$45,000.

Which Luxury Sport Sedan For You?

For the enthusiast who enjoys serious recreational driving, the BMW 335xi is your car. With AWD, the BMW also has the edge in foul-weather driving (considering only the sedans in our group). From this point forward, however, your choices become less obvious.

The Lexus IS 350 has a slight edge over the Cadillac CTS and Mercedes C350 Sport in the area of "enthusiast driving" because of its steering-mounted paddle shifters.

The Cadillac CTS has the "value advantage" based upon its low base price, strong engine, interior space and cutting edge styling. The CTS also gets good gas mileage.

Of course, the Mercedes-Benz leads in the categories of prestige, interior luxury and historically high resale value. Starting at \$36,500, the C350 Sport is a very reasonable Benz.



Infiniti G37 Coupe



(shown with automatic)

Adding Two Luxury Sport Coupes

Our final four-passenger test cars were coupes, not sedans. Not everyone needs or wants a four-door automobile. Generally, coupes are also lighter, have a more rigid chassis and they handle better. That was the case with the Infiniti G37 and Audi S5 Coupes.

Infiniti G37 Coupe

The 330 hp, 3.7 liter V-6 G37 comes with all the right stuff. A 6-speed manual gear box, limited slip differential, competition tuned suspension, 19" standard wheels and tires.

The G37 Coupe proved its prowess on the race track. Like a well prepared tuner car, the G37 took a positive set in corners and was neutrally balanced under throttle.

Obviously, Nissan's NISMO racing division had a hand in the development of the G37. It handles like a slightly larger NISMO 350 Z... and that is a quite a compliment. But the G37 lacks in the ride quality and chassis sophistication of the Audi S5.

However, with 17 mpg city/26 mpg highway and a base price of \$35,500, the G37 does give you maximum bang for your buck when it comes to acceleration, braking and handling. Like our sport sedans, the G37 can be had with a vast array of options.

Audi S5 Coupe

The technology transfer from Audi's race cars is evident in the Audi S5. Their Quattro AWD system allows for optimal torque split between the front and rear drive wheels, with more bias to the rears for perfect handling in the corners.

Of course, the Audi S5's 354 hp, 4.2 liter V-8 engine and a slick shifting 6-speed gearbox also make a substantial contribution to the S5's awesome on-track handling. The S5 also has giant brakes, 19" alloys, high performance tires and an excellent electronic active suspension system.

Collectively, the S5's remarkable components make it one of the most effortless and predictable handling street machines you will ever drive on a race track...or a twisty Arizona back road.

At a base price of \$50,500 the S5 is not inexpensive; however it is worth every penny. The 14 mpg city/21 mpg highway mileage is decent, but not exceptional. However, how many people do you see driving a Prius with a big silly grin on their face? With the Audi S5, the big silly grin comes standard.

Which Luxury Sport Coupe For You?

Need you even ask? If you can afford it, buy the Audi S5. If you cannot, the Infiniti G37 Coupe is a most attractive alternative. ■



Audi S5



BMW 335xi

