



DRIVING AMBITIONS

SPORTS SEDANS ▶ THE REFINED LEXUS IS 250 SHINES AMONG SIX SPIRITED FOUR-DOORS



▶ Lexus IS 250



▶ BMW 325i



▶ Audi A4



▶ Cadillac CTS



▶ Mercedes-Benz C230



▶ Saab 9-3

For some, buying a sports sedan is the key to entry for the luxury-sedan club, and the first rung on the ladder to larger and plusher cars. Others, however, may buy them more for their fun factor.

The six sedans in this test follow the same basic recipe: Each has compact dimensions with an interior that is more snug than a typical family sedan. They all have lush trim, nice features, and a generous amount of standard safety equipment. The ride and handling are crafted for the spirited driver.

We pitted the newly redesigned BMW 325i and Lexus IS 250 against the Audi A4, Cadillac CTS, Mercedes-Benz C230, and Saab 9-3, which have all had recent updates. Each model is equipped with the base engine and an automatic transmission. Still, each came with at least 200 hp and performed well.

We skipped the optional navigation systems, which saved money and eliminated

the cumbersome integrated control systems in the Audi, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz. Sticker prices ranged from \$31,615 for the Saab to \$36,720 for the BMW.

The IS 250 outscored the others based on its combination of refinement, interior craftsmanship, easy-to-use controls, and competent performance. The engine and transmission are refined and delivered smooth performance and good fuel economy. Passengers are treated to a quiet and luxurious interior. However, the IS has a fidgety ride and the steering lacks feel, making it less fun to drive than some peers. Rear seating is particularly tight. The IS recently earned top accolades for crash protection.

The 325i is more fun to drive than the IS 250. It's taut and agile, with a smooth engine and a responsive transmission. It has a quiet, comfortable ride and a well-constructed cabin. Despite our decision to forgo the iDrive driver-interaction

system, the cabin controls are still needlessly complicated. Rear seat room is still tight, although it's improved over the previous version. The coupe and convertible retain the old body style until summer 2006. The 3 Series also earned praise for impressive crash protection.

We bought our A4 with optional all-wheel drive, which is how most are sold (the IS, 3 Series, and C-Class all have optional all-wheel drive). The A4 has a nicely detailed interior. The new turbocharged 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine is powerful but coarse. When paired with the automatic transmission it has some hesitation. Handling is secure and responsive but lacks the crispness of some peers. Rear seating is very tight.

The CTS is satisfying to drive with its sporty, precise handling. While not as responsive as the best in class, its engine is smooth and the automatic transmission shifts quickly and smoothly. But