

RUMBLE SEAT

The Mighty Lexus IS F Takes Its Last Bow

The Lexus IS F is in its final model year. Dan Neil pays homage to a wonderful car that will remain a collector's item for years to come



By DAN NEIL



Lexus IS F Dan Neil/The Wall Street Journal

THIS CAR IS GOING AWAY. The Lexus IS F, which made its debut for model-year 2008 as an insolent challenge to BMW's M3 performance sedan, is in its last year of production. Then, Lexus's V8-powered, 416-hp rear-drive stromer was the calling card for the newly formed F SPORT division—the high seriousness was signaled by capital letters—and yes, I remember it well. The IS F was fast, tough, well upholstered and strung with a surprising amount of angry catgut for a Lexus product.

Count it off: Eight-speed, paddle-shifted automatic that changed ratios in a blink, with an expert rev-matching blip at downshifts; a nice edgy set of suspension calibrations (double-wishbone/multilink) dialed in for enthusiasts' track-day excursions; software-optimized limited-slip rear differential; big four-corner Brembo brakes; futuristically sculpted sport seats. The IS F's trousers were certainly well stocked, including a righteous, roaring 5.0-liter, naturally aspirated V-8 engine, about which we will discourse further.

Photos: Lexus IS F



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Six years later, the IS F (as tested, \$67,250) is still all that. It has that miles-deep carbon-fiber interior trim that Lexus calls "aluminized composite," and it has picked up some nightclub-swank aniline leather and Alcantara saddling. The last of the series will be available with Lexus Enform's phone-like app display in the center touch screen (in cars equipped with hard-disk navigation system), which will give these last editions more shelf life.

And, precisely as I remember, the IS F still gets heinous fuel economy. The EPA lists the average fuel economy of 18 mpg, but I assure you one can effortlessly achieve 8.

So why even review the IS F? It's a great question, the answer to which has nothing to do, I assure you, with having the beastly pleasure of this car's company for another week, another go at this horsy, dynamically faultless road machine. The IS F isn't the quickest car on the block anymore (though 0-60 in 4.6 seconds is still humping), but it's a very complete sport and performance sedan, strong on the highways, athletic and chuck-able in turns. Hell, it's even great in parking lots, with a turning circle of just 33.5 feet. And no other car massages exhaust sounds quite like the IS F. As you paddle-shift your way up and down the gears, the V8's deep and distant thrum at lower rpm transforms into something very heated and fine bore at high rpm, a quad exhaust bone saw, velvet pistons, sugar walls. But, as I say, these pleasures had nothing to do with it. Why review the IS F? I'm going to blame logistics.

So here's my argument in favor of the 2014 IS F, not as a new car, but as a fantastic used car and, perhaps, a collectible classic. First, obviously: depreciation. The driving-enthusiast audience goes through cars like J-Lo goes through backup dancers. I'm perfectly confident you will be able to find low-mileage IS Fs for sale at great prices outside any number of dentist offices. So, depreciation: stipulated.

Second: The IS F was the debut project for Lexus's new in-house tuning shop, akin to BMW's M division and Cadillac's V, and the chassis nerds spent months stuck out at Fuji raceway in Japan and the Nürburgring in Germany, dialing in the suspension elastics, the tire packages and what Lexus calls Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management, the software that limits, or allows, certain losses of traction and control.



Toyota Motor Corporation

Base price: \$63,600

Price, as tested: \$67,250

Powertrain: Naturally aspirated 5.0-liter DOHC, 32-valve, direct- and port-injected V8 with variable valve timing and two-stage variable intake geometry; eight-speed automatic transmission (torque converter) with manual-shift mode and automatic rev-matching on downshifts; rear wheel drive, with electronically controlled limited-slip differential.

Horsepower/torque: 416 hp at 6,600 rpm/371 lb-ft at 5,200 rpm

Length/weight: 183.5 inches/3,780 pounds

Wheelbase: 107.5 inches

0-60 mph: 4.6 seconds

Top speed: 170 mph

EPA fuel economy: 16/23/18 mpg, city/highway/combined

Trunk capacity: 13.3 cubic feet

Here, I ask the general audience to go with me down Nerd Road awhile: Chassis tuning involves a lot of small choices that can have big effects on a car's behavior, things such as the interplay between front and rear wheel toe-in or toe-out (affecting agility vs. straight-line stability); wheel camber; spring and roll rates; ride height; range of wheel travel. Tires alone can transform the sound, the performance and the look of a car.

These kinematic choices represent a balance between comfort and stability required of a road car and the agility expected of a performance or occasional track-day car.

It's an open secret that global auto makers, eager to avoid issues of liability, are fairly conservative in chassis setup. Even a factory tuner like the BMW M3, set up for an audience that fancies itself as proficient drivers, comes from Bavaria calibrated for mild understeer so that the car won't rotate too eagerly and get away from the driver. Engineers dryly refer to it as "customer preservation" technology.

But the IS F was an argument made directly to the appassionate, and made, may I say, from a position of weakness. Nobody associated Lexus with performance. So—my theory—the chassis guys went big.

The IS F rides an inch lower than the second-generation IS on which it is based, with substantially uprated springs and monotube dampers; larger diameter antiroll bars; stiffer subframe and engine mounts; and special bump stops to better control roll energies and pitching forward under hard braking.

Once the engineers started hardening the undercarriage, they couldn't stop. Witness the reinforced control arms and hubs, not to mention the heroic 14.2-inch ventilated, cross-drilled front brake rotors or the rad rubber (225/40R19 in front and 255/35's in the rear).

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And then there's code, which is to say, the elaborate computer programming that coordinates the car's multitude of sensors and g-meters with the responses of its steering, braking and powertrain systems. In Sport mode, the IS F's powertrain reflexes amp up, with lashing bursts of mid-rpm acceleration instantly available with a dab of throttle. Accelerating out of a corner, the VDIM software modulates the limited-slip rear differential and you can feel the gathering cornering urgency as the rear axle shifts torque to the outboard wheel. The forward rush is crisp, the ride vivid and ungenerous, the steering pin-sharp and heavy. Hell, yeah.

Among other things, the IS F curates a generation of dynamics software for which we will one day be nostalgic. This is the collectible quality the IS F has: a highly evolved chassis, with thoroughly tested factory integration, hot-rodged with an exuberance, stiffness and hard edge that pleasantly exceeds group wisdom and good conduct. This car is an outlier, plain and simple. I'm not confident Lexus would build the same car today.

But we'll see. The successor to the IS F, based on the current, third-generation IS, is expected next year. Among the major carry-over parts will be the magnificent 5.0-liter naturally aspirated V8, with variable valve timing on intake and exhaust ports; direct and port injection; Yamaha-designed high-flow heads; lightweight valvetrain (titanium valves, hollow camshafts) and an oil-scavenging system to maintain adequate circulation of mink oil.

This engine's a screamer, an opera star with emotional issues, with peak torque at 5,200 rpm and a redline at 6,800 rpm. This is the sort of engine sound you want to put in a bell jar and save for future reference. But with the new IS F coming, maybe we won't have to.