

Road beat: Lexus ES350 oozes luxury



The Lexus ES350 is more popular with women. Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman

While I call the Lexus ES350 a gentleman's express, the buyer's demographics show a majority of the majority of drivers are women. When you look at the performance numbers, you will see that the ES is a real performer, posting numbers well beyond my expectations, although I did receive a clue after testing the Camry V-6.

When introduced in 1990 as a Lexus ES250, there was little question that Toyota rebadged a gussied up Camry V-6, but as time went on with each successive generation the distinction

between to two cars became more pronounced. And now the Lexus ES is based on the Toyota Avalon chassis with its longer 111-inch wheelbase (up 1.7 inches over a Camry). However, the ES is about 3 inches shorter than the Avalon at 193 inches, making the ES a midsize ride. In the area of width, the ES is identical to the Camry at 71.7 inches.



Specifications

Price (base including transportation) SE \$24,115 to over \$30 large for a loaded V-6

Engines

3.5L DOHC, 24 valve V-6 268 hp @ 6,200 rpm
248 lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4,700 rpm

Transmissions

Six speed automatic

Configuration

Transverse front engine/front wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 111.0 inches
Length 192.7 inches
Width 71.7 inches
Height 57.1 inches
Track (f/r) 62.6/62.0 inches

Ground clearance 5.5 inches
Weight 3,549 pounds
Weight distribution (f/r)
61/39 percent
Passenger volume 100.1 cubic
feet
Trunk capacity 15.2 cubic
feet
Fuel capacity 17.2
Steering lock to lock 2.85
turns
Turning circle 37.4 feet
Wheel sizes 7X17 inches
alloy
Tires 215/55X18
Co efficient of drag 0.27

Performance

0-60 mph 5.44 seconds
50-70 mph 2.68 seconds
50-70 mph uphill 3.51
seconds
Top speed Electronically
limited at 130 mph
Fuel economy EPA rated at
21/31/24 mpg
city/highway/combined.
Expect to achieve 25-26 mpg
in overall driving and 33-34
mpg on the highway at legal
speeds.

Externally the shape is definitely Lexus L'finesse and that is good, as the overall Lexus body of work should be considered classically beautiful. Starting with its elegant grille the shapes are flowing and pleasing especially the window line. Nothing is wasted and its leanness can be seen by its lack of add-ons. Designers were intelligent in that less

is more. ES350's co-efficient of drag reflects its trim style with a number of 0.27.

Under the hood are more parts sharing and that is good as its powertrain (transmission included) is nut for nut, bolt for bolt the same as a Camry V-6. (The Avalon differs in a lower final rear axle ratio, but otherwise is also identical.) But this is a good thing as the 2GR-FE engine is one of the best in the business for smoothness and performance. While it is "only" rated at 268 hp at 6,200 rpm and twist is a modest 248 pounds at 4,700 rpm, it performs like 300 plus hp with another 40 pounds of twist.

Sending the power to the front wheels is a six speed automatic. The ES uses the identical transmission as well as the Camry V-6 and the Avalon. But while the ES and Camry use the same axle drive ratio, Avalon gear ratio is slightly lower.

Acceleration is deep into world class numbers. Do not choose off an ES in a drag race or you might very well get a real comeuppance. As with the Camry V-6, the ES performs just a tick behind the super performance Lexus IS350. Even Lexus lists the ES 0-60 mph times at 7.1 seconds. Lexus engineers must have left the emergency brake on. You can throw that number out the window as the road testing consistently ran 0-60 mph in the low 5-second range with an average of 5.44 seconds. That is super-sedan quick.

Other tests demonstrate that 0-60 mph number is no fluke, as ES350 passing tests were also super sedan quick with 50-70 mph simulated passes taking 2.68 seconds on a level highway and only slowing to 3.51 seconds up a 6 percent grade. Interesting is that these numbers are virtually identical to those of Camry V-6, which had times of 5.35, 2.67 and 3.53 seconds. Although the powertrains are identical, the Lexus weighs 3,549 pounds, while the Camry V-6 tips the scales at 70 pounds less, virtually insignificant.

Fuel economy is rated by the EPA at 21/31/24 city/highway/combined. The Camry numbers are 21/31/25. But the reality is the ES350 returned slightly better fuel economy on the highway; perhaps because the engine in the ES only turned 1,900 rpm at 70 mph while the Camry V-6 ran at 1,950 rpm.

That RPM difference was either a tach error or caused by the ES350's larger tire aspect ratio. Overall the ES350 averaged 29.4 mpg largely because 75 percent of the mileage during the test was a Saturday road trip from Placerville to Santa Rosa. Even with some time off the highway, the ES averaged 32.9 mpg for the 300 mile trip. But during a level highway run at 70 mph the ES350 averaged 34.5 mpg. But in purely rural driving 25-26 mpg would be the norm. It's amazing for a luxury car with world class performance to achieve that level of fuel economy.

While the ES350 uses the same suspenders as the Camry V-6 and Avalon, it has its own discernible upscale feel. Its suspension is state of the art four wheel independent. Steering is a quick electric rack that is 2.9 turns lock to lock with a 37.4 foot turning circle. And torque steer is held in check well, only noticeable under low speed, hard acceleration. Standard wheels are 17×7 inch alloys shod with 215/55 all season rubber. In another surprise, handling was good with accurate, quick turn in and strong grip. During its handling course it actually felt tighter than the Camry especially when sport mode is dialed in. Sure the steering feel is a bit isolated, but it can hustle through the twisties quite composed even when pushed hard. At eight-tenths you can feel the ES rotate in tight transitions. It was much better than expected.

Quiet is the operative word in describing ES350 ride quality. And you can say that with a capital "Q." It is one of the smoothest rides for the Road Beat, especially on the highway or even on Caltrans deficient roads. On and off center feel is near perfect making that 300 mile one day trip as comfortable

as it can get. There is simply no wind, road or engine noise, just the sweet sounds from Lexus Premium sound system. Fox News never sounded so good. Speaking of sound, when pushed hard the engine gave a nice tone, uncharacteristic for a V-6.

Braking also uses the same rotors and discs with the same safety systems of ABS and the rest of the acronyms. The ES350 had the shortest stops, coming to rest in just 40 feet from 40 mph. Excellent. Besides its complement of 10 airbags, the Lexus Enform Safety Connect system has automatic collision notification, an emergency connect button, a stolen vehicle location and an emergency assist button, an entire buffet of safety. HID headlights were excellent (\$565).



Lexus understands what luxury means.

Interior quality is pure Lexus, everything you see or touch is of the highest quality. Special mention needs to be made about the sublime front chairs which seem to simply envelope the driver and passengers. The quality of the seats was demonstrated by the lack of fatigue encountered during that five hour drive. The total support was terrific.

Complete instrumentation was perfect with the only downside being the requirement to use a mouse to control the sound system. It is annoying and requires too much distraction. It is also a long learning curve and difficult to use. However, as said before the sound system quality is superb.

The trunk is huge at more than 15 cubic feet.

Pricing for this luxury ride starts at just \$37,550. My tester had about \$5,000 in options plus a \$925 charge for the luxury liner from Japan. Options included Blind spot monitor (\$500), heated and ventilated front seats (\$640), Nav system (\$1,795), intuitive parking assist (\$500), Premium pack Lexus memory system for seats, steering wheel, mirrors, bamboo wood interior trim (\$730), rain sensing wipers (\$155) and \$300 for the bamboo and leather steering wheel which was quite comfortable to use . It was extra thick. The totaled sticker was \$43,660. It is an exquisite motor vehicle.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States.