

DRIVEN



INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

**BIGGER MAY BE BETTER BUT IT'S
WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS**

STORY COLUM WOOD PHOTOS JOE MAGRO & LEXUS

LEXUS LS600hL



Forget the driver's seat, hop in the back," I tell my coworkers as we stand around the simply monstrous new LS600hL that's sitting in the parking lot.

As I swing open the giant door I can't help but feel like a chauffeur. Once inside the cabin you feel like you've entered another, much more luxurious world, filled with plush, soft leather, glossy wood, stylish Alcantara and rear seats that recline – yes, I said recline. Those present learned to better appreciate the Lexus flagship, a car that is usually described on first impression with adjectives like “nice” and “elegant”, rather than awesome.

You see, the exterior is mostly inconspicuous. Never before has a \$100,000 car looked so tame. It doesn't wow you at first, but what is brilliant about this car is that it always draws a second look. Most people who got near it glanced quickly and then, after looking away, crooked their head back in the direction of the luxury barge to more closely examine it. It's as though they realized there was something special about this Lexus, but couldn't quite put their finger on it.

LOTS TO TALK ABOUT

There is, in fact, a great deal that is special about this Lexus. For starters, it's a hybrid. It's also the extended wheel base version. Not special enough for you? Maybe you'd be interested to know that it has a continuously variable automatic transmission, air ride suspension, adaptive front LED headlights, all-wheel-drive and Lexus's brand new Advanced Parking Guidance System (APGS). This Lexus easily has enough gadgets and gizmos to fill several engineering textbooks.

As for the much-maligned self-parking system, it is rather slow and not very easy to operate. Besides, the car already has parking sensors and a backup camera, so determining where you are in relation to a parked car or a wall is actually quite easy. It will however, be interesting to see how Lexus improves this system.

HYBRID DRIVE

The LS's design may be soft but it is still very masculine and is an apt representation of what you'll find under the hood – the Lexus Hybrid Drive system.

Mated to an eight-speed continuously variable automatic transmission, the V8 Lexus gets decent fuel economy as well as 438 get-up-and-go horses. There is even a small diagram on the dash that displays representations of the 5.0L V8 engine, the wheels and the battery pack. This lets you know whether or not you are using gas or just operating on battery power. You can even see that the wheels are powering the battery when you are braking. It is interesting to watch, but it also shows you how impossible it is to operate the big Lexus on battery power alone – no matter how gingerly you operate the throttle.

Fuel economy is rated at 20 mpg for the city and 22 for the highway, not the big numbers you'd expect from a hybrid but still significantly better than what a 438-hp engine of any other variety can offer. For comparison's sake, the LS460 is rated at 16 and 24 mpg, the V12-powered BMW 760Li at 14 and 22. The fact that the Hybrid is surprisingly efficient on the highway is likely due to the variable transmission. Thanks to the gearing it is possible to sit at roughly 1000 rpm even when you're doing close to 85 mph!

PERFORMANCE

One of the amazing benefits of the Lexus's transmission is the speed at which the car decelerates under engine braking. In the manual “S mode,” by shifting down through the gears it is possible to bring the car to almost a complete stop without having to use the brakes.

In terms of performance, the Lexus really punches off the line, thanks in part to the battery power. The system also ensures this punch is available at all times when you really want it and gives the LS excellent passing abilities on the highway. Surprisingly, when you do put your foot into it, the car responds with a subtle and deep V8 whoosh.

The lunge to 60 passes in 5.5 seconds, a tenth of a second slower than the LS460 – which makes 58 hp less. At higher speeds the Lexus's acceleration also seems to drop off significantly. There may be a 600 on the tail of this whale, but it's no V12.

ELEGANCE AND LEG ROOM

Noticeably absent from our tester was the Executive-Class Seating Package II,



DRIVEN



RIVAL POWERS

If bigger is better, then who's bigger?



LEXUS LS600hL



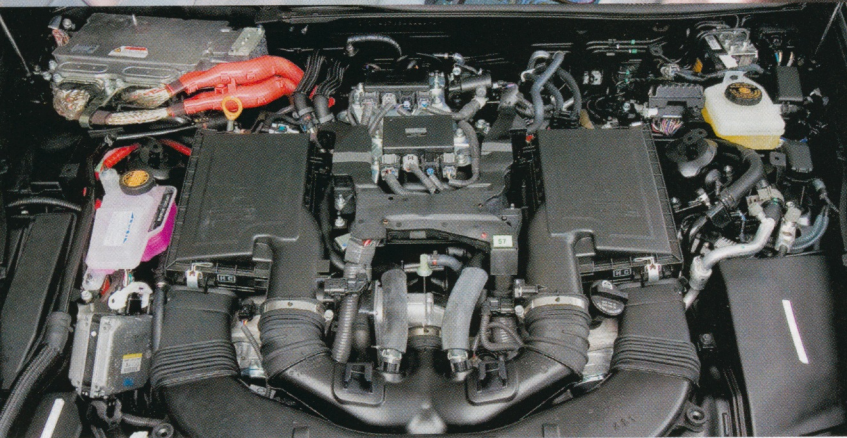
AUDI A8L



BMW 760Li

Wheelbase:	121.7-inches	121.1-inches	123.2-inches
Length:	202.8-inches	204.4-inches	203.9-inches
Curb Weight:	5,049 lbs	4,766 lbs	4,905 lbs

* And if you thought these cars were monstrous, all are roughly 20-inches shorter than the Rolls-Royce Phantom



which retails for an astonishing \$16,000, (\$16,011, to be exact.) Consequently, we didn't get to test out the foot rest and shiatsu massage, or the drink cooler and nine-inch LCD screen. Pity.

Nevertheless, we were able to enjoy the five extra inches of space provided by the extended wheelbase. The larger rear seat provided ample space for my six-foot frame, I still had plenty of room after adjusting the reclining seats as low as they would go. (Note: The model we tested was a base vehicle with the addition of APGS as well as rear power and climate-controlled seats. These are options in the U.S. but come standard on the Canadian-spec model we tested).

Up front are all the amenities one would expect from a car in this class, but the most wonderful is the 19-speaker 450-watt Mark Levinson audio system, which is most likely the best on the market. It reaches a volume that is painful to the ears, but distortion is almost nonexistent. Kanye West's *Stronger* never sounded so good.

ON THE ROAD

The big Lexus drove admirably, although understeer was noticeable. It doesn't really matter, however, as the car should not (and likely never will) be driven to upset those reclining in the rear seats. While Lexus did include a power opening and closing trunk (a very nice feature), the battery packs that sit behind



PLUS

Incredibly roomy back seat
Handy AWD
Great transmission



MINUS

Tiny trunk space
No faster than the LS460
Fuel economy not all that impressive



the rear seats take up half of the room, leaving just barely enough space to lay down a full-size suitcase.

The LS600 has great power off the line and will immediately put many car lengths between you and others when the light turns green – even when you're not trying. Also, despite the car's size, it doesn't feel that big. It did, however, feel rather floaty at high speeds, so perhaps it's a good thing it is limited to an unusually low 130 mph.

The car didn't garner many envious stares, likely because of its subtle looks, but a gentleman in an E-Class took a lengthy gander. Another gentleman in a Chrysler 300C promptly changed parking spots after I slid in next to him – perhaps because he didn't enjoy being overshadowed by a bigger and better car. The best reaction came from a younger driver in a fully modified (rather distastefully, I might add) Maxima, who made a slow left turn in front of me and almost parked his car in the middle of the intersection just to fully appreciate the LS.

THE VERDICT

The LS600hL is a wonderful car and while I normally advise getting a fully loaded model (regardless of whether it's a Kia or a Bentley) I'm not so sure with the LS. The 460 is as fast and arguably as good (or bad) for the environment as the 600h. It also comes with many of the same high-tech features.

Then again, one can't help but be drawn to the LS600hL, without quite knowing why. I, however, knew why, and every time I parked the car I couldn't help but turn around and stare at it a little longer – in awe of how it filled up all four corners of a parking spot.

And besides, depending on where you live, if they let you drive Hybrid cars in the HOV lanes, saving the environment just got a lot more attractive. **MLE**

2008 LEXUS LS600hL

ENGINE	5.0L V8 gasoline engine & two electric motors with Nickel Metal Hydride battery pack
DRIVETRAIN	Continuously variable 'eight-speed' transmission, full time all-wheel drive
STEERING	Rack and Pinion with Electric Power Steering and Variable Gear Ratio Steering
WHEELS, TIRES, BRAKES	(f) 19x8-inch aluminum alloy wheels with 245/45/19 Bridgestone tires; four-piston calipers with 14.1-inch rotors; (r) 19x8-inch aluminum alloy wheels with 245/45/19 Bridgestone tires; two-piston calipers with 13.2-inch rotors
SUSPENSION	Multi-link front and rear suspension with air-suspension
INTERIOR	Semi-aniline leather trimmed seating; front seats feature 16-way driver seat and 12-way passenger seat with three-position memory for driver seat; climate-controlled front and rear seats; power rear seats; leather-trimmed instrument panel, door panels and armrests; wood trim on center console and door panels; wood and leather-trimmed power tilt and telescopic heated steering wheel; wood-trimmed and chrome-plated shift knob; Alcantara headliner; push button start/stop; power tilt and slide moonroof with single touch operation; dual-zone front climate control; 30-GB Hard Disk Drive with Navigation System (voice activated), Bluetooth and rear back-up camera; power rear sunshade; rear seat vanity mirrors; HomeLink programmable garage door opener
AUDIO	19-speaker, 450-watt Mark Levinson reference surround sound audio system with hard disk drive, 7.1 architecture and in-dash, single-feed, six-disc DVD/CD auto-changer featuring DVD-audio and DVD-video playback, auxiliary iPod/MP3/Windows Media Audio port
EXTERIOR	Bumper integrated dual-chrome exhaust tips, world's first low beam 3+1 projector LED headlights with headlight washers, Hybrid badging, one touch power open/close trunk, power folding heated mirrors, shark fin antenna
ADDITIONAL FEATURES	Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management (VDIM) which integrates ABS braking (with Brake Assist and Electronic Brake Force Distribution), steering, Vehicle Stability Control (VSC) and Traction Control (TRAC) systems to help minimize loss of traction; Torsen limited slip center differential; direct tire pressure monitor system; rain-sensing intermittent windshield wipers with mist cycle
OPTIONS	Lexus Pre-Collision System; Dynamic Radar Cruise Control; Executive-Class Seating Package II which includes right-rear power recliner with multifunction massager and leg rest, rear-seat wood-trimmed table, DVD player, rear-seat entertainment system with wireless headphones, four-zone climate control with air purifier and rear infrared temperature sensor, rear-seat cool box, power rear-door sunshade, rear-seat audio controls, climate-comfort rear heated/cooled seats, power rear seats with memory and power headrests, rear seat side airbags, 18-inch nine-spoke wheels, additional wood trim, Lexus Link, Advanced Parking Guidance System
NUMBERS	Engine Horsepower: 389 hp Engine Torque: 385 ft-lbs Battery Horsepower: 221 hp (limited to 49) Combined Horsepower: 438 hp Zero-60: 5.5 sec. Zero-100: 12.4 sec. Quarter mile: 13.8 sec. Top Speed: 130 mph Length 202.8-inches (5,150 mm) Width 73.8-inches (1,875 mm) Height 58.3-inches (1,480 mm) Curb Weight: 5,049 lbs. Weight distribution: 52/48 Fuel Economy: 20 mpg City, 22 mpg Highway MSRP: \$104,000 (\$132,000 CDN)