

LEXUS LS 400

High marks for the 'velvet rocket.'

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PM Photos by Humphrey Sutton



● Although Honda's Acura division is credited with the first Japanese challenge to the luxury car establishment, Toyota's Lexus LS 400 represents a far more serious threat to the old order of European grand touring cars.

Though successful, Acura's Legend has only nibbled at the fringes of Mercedes-BMW-Jaguar territory. But the LS 400, with its superb V8, sumptuous interior and Mercedes styling, is aimed squarely at the top of the luxury sedan market.



The LS 400 arrived in August 1989, totally new and engineered from the ground up. Lexus engineers and designers had painstakingly dissected and scrutinized the world's leading luxury cars and used the most prestigious as target vehicles, notably the Mercedes 420SEL, BMW 735i and Jaguar XJ6 Vanden Plas, cars whose prices range from \$40,000 to \$62,500.

Building on Toyota's freshly developed 4.0-liter 32-valve quad-cam aluminum V8, the Japanese aimed

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to best their rivals by a comfortable margin, and at a considerably lower price. This they did, not only in terms of power (250 bhp, 260 ft.-lb. of torque) and performance (0-60 mph in under 8 seconds, 150-mph top speed), but in refinements like aerodynamics (Cd 0.29), fuel mileage (18 mpg city, 23 highway, according to the EPA), interior quiet, smoothness and the thoughtful touches that the Japanese are so good at.

For example, dashboard warning symbols are projected onto the gauge glass from tiny projectors up in the panel cover. The ashtray glides out and back on hydraulic struts. Yamaha's piano division supplies the interior walnut paneling. The engine computer retards spark between shifts to remove driveline jolt from the 4-



LS 400 straightline stability is tops, but understeer sets in during hard cornering. Subdued interior is spacious and comfortable. New 4.0-liter V8 offers excellent power, good mpg, speed automatic transmission.

The driver can also choose from two different sets of shift points (Power and Economy). Suspension is all independent, of course, with load-leveling air springs optional.

In addition to an extensive list of standard equipment—which includes

4-wheel disc brakes with ABS, variable-assist power steering with automatic swingaway column and heated outside electric mirrors—buyers can choose optional traction control along with heated seats, moonroof and a Nakamichi/Lexus premium sound system with remote CD changer.

On paper, and in virtually every published evaluation, the LS 400 grades out very well indeed. But the real testing is performed daily, by the men and women who actually own and/or lease a new car. Which is why we asked a national sample of LS 400 owners to tell us what it's really like to live with this new luxmobile.

And even though we expected enthusiasm, the answers were eye-opening.

According to the owners we surveyed, there's no doubt that the LS 400 excels at transporting driver and passengers in style and comfort. Specific likes, in order of preference, included: interior quiet, riding qualities, power and performance, styling and handling. One owner called the LS 400 his "velvet rocket."

Lexus also seems to excel in building quality and finish into its cars, with a record-breaking 97.7 percent of our respondents rating workmanship as excellent. Never before, in almost 40 years of PM's Owners Reports, have we seen such an unqualified endorsement of an automobile's quality and workmanship.

Reliability also rated high marks. Nearly 90 percent of our owners told us their cars had been entirely trouble-free. Complaints were so minor and scattered that we couldn't tabulate the data—things like wheel alignment, minor radiator leaks and sticky cruise controls. Toyota launched an early voluntary recall to correct the cruise-control defect. A few owners wanted sharper styling (9.6 percent), followed by a complaint that front shoulder harnesses irritated some people's necks.

Front- and rear-seat comfort received mostly marks of excellent again, with the minority opinion running mostly to good, and virtually no one criticized legroom, headroom or lumbar support. Cloth upholstery comes standard, with leather included in the \$4400 Luxury Group, or available separately for \$1400.

Dealer followup and service policies also drew high praise. Several owners mentioned that dealers had topped up their gas tanks after recalls. One woman said she was "flabbergasted" when two Lexus mechanics drove 250 miles round trip to pick up and deliver her car for the voluntary recall and routine service.

The Lexus LS 400 seemed, by all accounts, to sell itself, with no pressure or hardball from salespeople. A number of buyers wrote "best car for the money" on their questionnaires. It's a conviction that's echoed in our bottom-line statistic: If they had it to do over again, nearly 90 percent would still buy an LS 400.



Although Toyota borrowed heavily from Mercedes in LS 400 design, 41.6 percent of owners cited styling as a best-liked feature. Wind tunnel development yielded excellent 0.29 Cd rating, contributing to exceptional interior quiet.

EDITORS REPORT

The Evolution Of Perfection

TOYOTA'S CREDO for the new Lexus division is "the relentless pursuit of perfection," and as an initial proof of that ethic, the LS 400 sedan is probably the best first offering we've ever seen. It has two of the three requirements for cars in this class—refinement and power.

The third requirement, prestige, takes a little more time, but, judging by the responses of our owner group, this isn't far off. The car is already perceived as a bargain in its class, with most of the capabilities and amenities of the great European cruisers for less money. It's not much of a leap from there to equality in status. Lexus has already leapfrogged Cadillac and Lincoln in this regard.

Our own experiences with the LS 400 largely parallel those of the owners. The Lexus V8 is an outstanding achievement, potent, quiet and economical enough to escape the gas guzzler tax—unlike its competitors.

Fit and finish are similarly remarkable. Inside, outside and even under the hood, this car is a symphony of precision and quality. In the course of several encounters, we have yet to find a mismatched panel or paint blemish, or misaligned seam, or anything that didn't work. Paint quality is of the highest order, and the thoughtful people touches that please the owners get high marks here as well. This is a car that begins providing owner pleasure the moment he or she settles in behind the wheel.

Ride quality is precisely what we'd expect of a great luxury car, and more. The LS 400 irons out Manhattan's craggy thoroughfares better than any car in recent memory, and makes even the lumpiest stretch of interstate almost glass-smooth. With its exceptional noise isolation, excellent sealing and world-class ride, it's hard to imagine a car better suited to long-distance travel.

But perfection is an absolute concept, and we have yet to see the perfect car. For example, we disagree with owners who see handling as this car's strongest suit. The LS 400's straightline stability is virtually faultless. But on winding country lanes, the Lexus can be pushed into mulish understeer, and its responses to rapid changes in direction are only ordinary by European standards.

We find that the LS 400's coil spring setup performs better in this regard than the optional air spring suspension, but it still lacks the taut feel and response of, say, a BMW 735i.

But that criticism stems from Toyota's market positioning versus the Europeans. For all its imitation of Mercedes styling, this is not a European car. It's a new interpretation on the luxury sedan theme, one that can stand quite solidly on its own merits.

Perfection will always remain just over the horizon. But for the Lexus LS 400, outstanding makes a pretty good starting point. —Tory Swan

SUMMARY OF LEXUS LS 400 OWNERS REPORTS*

Total miles driven	1,300,844	Handling	36.6	Poor	0.0	Good	14.1
Average miles per gallon:		Comfort	36.2	Comfort opinion:		Average	0.8
In town	18.2	Specific dislikes:		Front seats:		Poor	0.4
On the highway	23.1	No complaints	33.3%	Excellent	87.8%	Number of vehicles owned:	
Major options chosen:		Styling too bland	9.6	Good	10.6	This car only	7.6%
Remote entry system	96.8%	Shoulder harness rubs neck	6.1	Average	1.3	Two cars	42.7
Power moonroof	91.3	Lacks sufficient comfort	5.3	Poor	0.3	Three cars	27.7
Luxury group	54.8	Instrument lighting too dim	4.8	Rear seats:		Four or more cars	22.0
Memory seat	43.8	Fuel mileage lower than expected	3.1	Excellent	77.8%	Would you buy a Lexus again next time?	
CD player	37.5	What changes would you like to see?		Good	20.5	Yes	87.6%
Traction control	35.2	No changes	25.3%	Average	1.7	Maybe	11.5
Cellular telephone	31.8	More distinctive styling	8.4	Poor	0.0	No	1.0
Air suspension system	22.4	Add outside temp gauge	7.7	Had any mechanical trouble?		Would you buy a different luxury car next time?	
Why did you choose the Lexus LS 400?		Reposition shoulder harness	5.1	No	89.8%	No	59.8%
Like the styling	31.5%	Greater comfort	4.4	Yes	10.2	Maybe	38.4
Price is right	28.0	Better lumbar support (passenger seat)	4.4	What type of trouble? (Too few data for meaningful analysis.)		Yes	1.8
Quality	24.5	How much did you pay?		Did you repair it yourself?		Principal driver:	
Performance	22.4	Average	\$39,112	No	100.0%	Male	67.6%
Handling	20.6	Range	\$33,000-\$46,000	Yes	0.0	Female	26.4
Reputation	18.9	Workmanship opinion:		Dealer repairs satisfactory?		Equal	6.1
Specific overall likes:		Excellent	97.7%	Yes	82.8%	Age distribution of owners:	
Silence	50.0%	Good	2.3	No	17.2	Under 29 years	1.9%
Riding qualities	43.1	Average	0.0	Dealer service opinion:		30-49	48.6
Power and performance	42.8			Excellent	84.7%	50-plus	49.3
Styling	41.4						

* Percentages might not equal 100 percent due to rounding or an insufficient amount of data.