



Lexus IS200



IT'S PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT FOR AA testers to write sensible, objective comment about cars like this new Lexus. You don't buy a smallish four-door saloon with limited accommodation at one end and a two-litre, six-cylinder engine at the other, just to be sensible – especially if it sets you back over £20,000.

You can't apply any of the rules that governed our recent assessment of the Toyota Yaris – cars like this Lexus are an ego trip, a status symbol; grinding on about a limited boot aperture or an intruding rear seat centre tunnel is to miss the point.

What the IS200 can do is to provide a viable alternative to a 3-Series BMW; one which is probably even more reliable and almost as driver-friendly.

The Lexus certainly handles and steers, stops and responds in impressive fashion; the grip around bends is tenacious. Steering response over bumpier surfaces is the only aspect that left us less than fully satisfied in fast driving. The ride is firm but well-damped and suits this Lexus's sporty character well.

If you're looking for a more relaxed driving style, the suspension could be a shade too firm, but the straight-six offers incredible flexibility. A six-speed gearbox comes as standard, yet top slot gives only 21.2mph per 1000rpm and with the kind of vibration-free step-off from 1000rpm that only a good engine of this type can offer,

we really didn't know what to do with all those closely spaced gears.

In fact, with the IS200 as a tourer, or on the motorway, we would have preferred an overdrive sixth gear for cruising only – the other five could easily look after acceleration. Part of the trouble is that although 153bhp should be power enough, the engine's torque doesn't peak until beyond 4000rpm. Result: an engine that's sublime at lower revs yet distinctly leisurely with it; you have to rev it in boy-racer fashion to really make it go.

Actually, it could be the front-wheel driven Alfa Romeo 156 that represents the best challenge to this Lexus. The latest BMW is softer, more civilised but less sharp-edged in its responses, and a six-pot Mercedes C-Class isn't competing in price or character.

Toyotas have an excellent reputation for reliability and we have no reason to doubt that this new, smaller Lexus will offer its owner few problems. There's a serious attempt as well to keep servicing demands at a low level, while the warranty is extended to three years for mechanical and equipment failures and twelve years for the bodywork.

Equipment is generous in matters of safety and security, in particular, and the cheapest S version shares a full complement in this respect; it economises only on comfort and convenience features. Nevertheless,

there are omissions – no lumbar or steering wheel reach adjusters for the driver, no trip computer or cruise control on the manual, and no attempt to provide any sort of load adaptability, beyond a ski-hatch behind the rear centre armrest.

Footroom is cramped behind the driver and getting the luggage in is complicated by a high sill and a limited boot aperture; a full-sized spare sits beneath the floor, however, together with a nifty set of hand tools.

VERDICT

Smaller than most rivals (and it feels it in the back), the IS200 is reminiscent of BMW 3-Series of yesteryear. Still, as we said at the beginning, that's not the point – you can have an Avensis if you want to be sensible. Yet this Lexus does make sense – in terms of build, warranty, safety and security, it's up there with the best. And it's also set up to put a smile on any keen driver's face.

FACTS AND FIGURES

BODY

Style	four-door saloon
Length x width	440 x 172cm (plus mirrors)
Trim levels	S, SE, Sport

ENGINE

Type and size	1988cc straight six cylinder - longitudinal
Power	153bhp at 6200rpm
Torque	144 lb ft at 4600rpm
Valves	belt-driven twin OHC with four valves per cylinder - variable valve timing
Fuel/ignition	electronic multi-point petrol injection and direct ignition (no plug leads)

TRANSMISSION

Type	six-speed manual (or four-speed auto option); rear-wheel drive
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CHASSIS

Suspension	double wishbones and coil springs, front and rear; anti-roll bars and telescopic dampers
Steering	power-assisted rack and pinion
Wheels	alloy wheels with full-size spare; 205/55 R16 tyres on S ; 215/45 R17 on SE/Sport
Brakes	ventilated discs front; solid discs rear with vacuum servo and standard ABS with traction control

