

2013 Lexus GS

All-new lineup of sports sedans includes hybrid and F Sport.

Overview

The Lexus GS is all-new for 2013, the fourth generation of the mid-size sport-luxury sedan. The engine and transmission are updated versions of the third generation, while the majority of the 2013 Lexus GS represents wholesale change.

Debuting the next house of Lexus styling, the 2013 Lexus GS approaches with a heavily chiseled front end and a rear that blends LS460 and BMW 5 Series. Although outward appearances suggest a more formal sedan than the previous version, the low, wide interior and seating positions are more sporting than before. Apart from the exotic LFA and the high-strung IS F the GS is Lexus's most driver-oriented car. For starters, the GS uses a rear-wheel drive platform.

The 2013 Lexus GS 350 is equipped with a 3.5-liter V6 rated at 306 horsepower, more than adequate anywhere except a bragging contest or drag strip. And the substantially revised 2013 GS 450h hybrid brings 338 hp, incongruously being the quickest and most economical GS. No V8 is offered.

The Lexus GS blends responsive feel with long-distance comfort; neither edgy like a sports car nor insulated as a big luxury sedan.

All Lexus GS models are rear-wheel drive, and the GS 350 is available with all-wheel drive.

Enthusiasts will embrace the GS 350 F Sport model, which prioritizes driving dynamics. If you consider the drive half the fun of getting there the GS is your kind of car. If you consider getting back the other half, better the IS F. And if you prefer not to think about the driving at all, the Lexus ES may be a more appropriate choice.

Traditional luxuries of fine materials, quiet refinement and power accessories are complemented by the latest in electronics, communications and an operating screen larger than some laptops. Worth noting are the luxury package's front seats that compete with the best in class. and that rear seat space has grown considerably while the exterior has not.

Lexus names the Audi A6, BMW 5 Series and Mercedes-Benz E-Class as the primary GS competitors; both the 5 and E have rear- and all-wheel drive versions while Audi's A6 3-liter is all-wheel drive only. We think the Infiniti M that offers V6, V8, hybrid and rear or all-wheel drive the most logical competitor, and would add the Cadillac CTS, Hyundai Genesis, Jaguar XF and Volvo S60 to the shopping list.

Model Lineup

The 2013 Lexus GS line has many iterations, some identified as models, others as packages. Every GS 350 comes with a 3.5-liter 306-hp V6 and 6-speed automatic transmission in both rear and all-wheel drive. The GS 450h comes with hybrid gas-electric power.

GS 350 (\$46,900) comes with leather upholstery, dual-zone climate control, wood trim, bi-Xenon headlamps, power windows/locks/heated electrochromic mirrors with reverse-tilt, moonroof, heated 10-way power front seats, three-person driver memory, power tilt/telescoping steering column, 8-inch color control screen, Optitron instrumentation, Bluetooth phone and streaming audio, cruise control, keyless entry and pushbutton start, AM/FM/DVD/WMA/MP3 HD radio 12-speaker surround sound with aux/USB inputs, Gracenote, and voice recognition, LED ambient lighting, locking trunk pass-through, paddle shifters, drive mode select, and automatic electronic parking brake. GS 350 AWD (\$49,950) adds all-wheel drive.

Options include HDD navigation (\$1,735) with 12.3-inch screen; traffic, weather, sports, stocks (with 90-day subscription); blind-spot monitor; head-up display; heated rear seats; intuitive park assist; lane keeping assist/lane departure warning; 17-speaker 835-watt Mark Levinson sound system; night vision; adaptive cruise control with collision mitigation and driver eye monitor; Cold Weather Package with heated steering wheel, headlamps washers, wiper deicers, water repellent front door windows; Premium Package with heated/ventilated front seats, power rear sunshade, rain-sensing wipers. Optional 18-inch wheels are available with all-season or summer performance tires.

The Luxury Package (\$5,750) upgrades with semi-aniline leather upholstery, espresso woodwork, wood/leather steering wheel, 18-way power front seats, three-person passenger memory, rear audio/climate controls, rear side sun shades (manual), adaptive headlights, adaptive variable suspension, 18-inch wheels.

F Sport (\$5,690) upgrades with 16-way power sport seats in perforated leather, 19-inch staggered width-wheels and summer performance tires (rear-drive only, all-wheel drive gets same-width wheels and all-season tires), unique suspension tuning with adaptive damping, larger front brakes, rear spoiler, aluminum cabin trim, black headliner, unique front and rear body panels and mesh grilles, and variable gear ratio steering (rear-drive only). A dynamic handling package with rear steering is optional.

The GS 450h model uses a 286-hp version of the 3.5-liter V6 coupled to a dual electric motor and transmission unit for a total system output of 338 horsepower. The GS 450h is rear-wheel drive only. GS 450h standard features mirror those of the GS 350 except the hybrid comes standard with the Premium Package. Hybrid options (including the Luxury Package) match GS 350 options except there are no F Sport or Dynamic Handling packages available.

Safety features that come on all models include front, front side, front knee, side curtain and rear seat aide airbags (with occupant sensors so children can ride safely in back), pre-tensioning seatbelts in all outboard positions, rearview camera, daytime running lights, electronic stability control, security system and Lexus Safety Connect with automatic collision notification, stolen vehicle location, emergency assist button and a year of enhanced roadside assistance. Optional safety systems include blind spot warning, night vision, lane keeping assist and departure warning, heads-up display, and adaptive cruise control with collision mitigation and driver eye monitor. All-wheel drive can enhance safety in slippery conditions.

Walkaround

A heavily chiseled front end is the dominant styling characteristic of the 2013 Lexus GS, and one you wouldn't miss even without the large L badge centered on it. A waist-pinch upper grille opening and widening downward lower aperture look like a snow-blower or vacuum cleaner intent on sucking up anything in its path; any relation to Lexus's exotic LFA is intentional. Arrowhead LED daytime running lights accentuate the grille pinch and fog lamps are low and well outboard where they should be. Lexus GS comes with bi-xenon headlamps but full-LED front lighting is optional on the GS 450h hybrid.

The F Sport version loses the fog lamps and gets an even more aggressively scooped and sculpted nose, like it's intended to catch as much cooling air as possible below the bumper and send everything else over the hood and roof like a race car. With flared nostrils and pouting demeanor the F Sport looks like an angry animal you'd best run away from.

At the rear, the Lexus GS is not as distinctive, the taillights looking more Lexus LS or ES than the rounded themes that have graced earlier GS iterations. The taillights have side strakes molded into the plastic to keep airflow attached around the back (and echoed underneath the car for minimum aero drag), an idea first employed in 1976-model Mercedes sedans and coupes. While we didn't get to drive in the rain, dust build-up suggests they're effective at keeping the lights clean.

Deep side panels behind the rear doors arch upward to the rear bumper, again seen more as a muscular LS. The F Sport's rear spoiler sets it off, but not as much as the wider rear wheels and tires that better fill the fenders. A faux diffuser panel is framed by stylish exhaust openings, but hybrid models get a full-width rear skirt, blue L badge, and under-car tailpipe exits.

Apart from the nose, the GS side view most closely resembles the LS, especially around the rear pillars. It's a more formal look that lacks the higher haunches that gave earlier GS models their sporting definition. It's a smooth side with only a fine lower skirt and occasional badges to punctuate it.

Alloy wheels of 17-inch diameter are standard and 18-inch 10-spoke wheels optional. Luxury package cars, be they GS 450h or GS 350, are distinguished by finer-spoked, almost lace-like 18-inch wheels, and F Sport models ride exclusively on 19-inch wheels. All-wheel drive F Sports do not have the fatter rear wheels.

The Lexus GS has a fractionally shorter wheelbase and is one to four inches shorter overall when compared with the Audi A6, BMW 5 Series, Mercedes-Benz E-Class, Infiniti M, Hyundai Genesis, Cadillac CTS and Jaguar XF. Only the Volvo S60 is notably smaller in this class.

Curb weight for the GS350 is listed as 3,795 pounds. Luxury, AWD, and hybrid versions will weigh more than that.

Interior Features

The MKX is a crossover utility. Utility is seen in features such as the front passenger seat, which folds flat, and each half of the second seat folds flat independently to accommodate cargoes of various sizes and lengths. The 60/40 split rear seat also reclines for passenger comfort. With this layout, the driver can haul objects up to eight feet long on the right side of the cabin, even while carrying belted passengers on the left. The seats themselves appear rich, comfortable, and luxurious.

MyLincoln Touch is an advance on Lincoln's Sync voice-activated communications technology that uses two five-way thumb switches mounted on the steering wheel spokes, two 4.5-inch LED display screens on either side of the big speedometer in the instrument cluster, an 8-inch LED display screen at the top center of the instrument panel with a four-zone color-coding system, and a panel of flat touch buttons below it. With MyLincoln Touch, the thumb switches and the screen combine to control climate, sound system, telephone, navigation and an enormous variety of information functions including turn-by-turn directions, sports scores, fuel prices, movie listings, dining, and even horoscopes, using a list of up to 10,000 voice commands.

The MKX we drove offered an amazing variety of in-car entertainment options from DVD movies (viewable only in Park) to DVD and CD music, USB music, and iPod music. The HD radio and the THX II certified sound system were nothing short of spectacular in their sound power and distortion-free reproduction.

For cargo capacity, the MKX provides 32.2 cubic feet behind the second seat, and 68.6 cubic feet with the second seat folded flat.

Driving Impressions

The 2013 Lexus GS drives much like you'd expect a sports sedan to with a pair of minor exceptions: It's not offered with manual, dual-clutch or 8-speed transmissions like some of the competition, and it's not offered with a V8 engine. It is solid, stable, smooth and has good acoustics.

Three-hundred horsepower is more than adequate for a sports sedan and U.S. speed limits, and a GS 350 delivers 60 mph in less than six seconds, all with the smooth nature the Lexus badge implies. It is always audible with a more pleasant engine note, now louder at full throttle to the point that much time at that level might get tiring.

The 6-speed automatic has been revised for 2013 for quicker shifting. Paddles on the steering wheel allow manual changes though electronics have the last word. Shifts are seamless and well-timed and there's nothing inherently wrong with the transmission, only some others are more advanced and provide better fuel economy, performance or both.

Fuel economy for the GS 350 is EPA-rated at 19/28 mpg City/Highway with rear-wheel drive; 0-60 mph acceleration performance is about 5.7 seconds. The GS 350 AWD is rated 19/26 mpg and takes about 6.0 seconds to go zero to 60. You can vary response to your right foot and transmission characteristics using the round Eco/Normal/Sport knob behind the shifter but it won't go faster in Sport or improve on 19/28 mpg in Eco.

Consider a few competitors. Audi's A6 with supercharged 3-liter V6 (\$50,000 base) has just 4 horsepower on the GS but 48 lb-ft of torque at much lower revs and an 8-speed automatic. With standard all-wheel drive the A6 is notably quicker than the GS rear-drive and has the same EPA ratings, improving on the GS 350 AWD both on performance and fuel economy. BMW's turbocharged 3-liter six-cylinder 535 all-wheel drive (\$54,000) has a similar torque and gearing advantage, is equally quick, and EPA says 21/30 mpg. Mercedes doesn't offer an all-wheel drive V6 E-Class, but the rear-drive E350 (\$50,000, 302 hp and 7-speed automatic) is almost as quick as a GS and EPA 20/30 mpg.

The best GS acceleration and economy figures apply to the GS 450h. Thanks primarily to new electronic controls, the hybrid is a tenth quicker than the 350 and fuel economy is up from 22/25 on the old version to 29/34 mpg on this one. It has plenty of urge, good response, the usual assortment of muted whirring and whining noises and averaged 31.4 mpg in mixed driving. The hybrid puts Lexus in a crossroads: On one hand they can safely state their cleanest, most efficient GS is the quickest; on the other they have a GS Sport version that doesn't accelerate as well as their green car.

Apart from the F Sport, all the GS models we drove had 18-inch tires, and they all rode well with a buttoned down feel that left us wanting for naught. The Lexus GS has a tight, solid, of-a-piece feel and it remains that way regardless of road surface or nuisances like speed bumps and potholes.

Many GS models have AVS adjustable dampers that stiffen the shocks for better control on winding, undulating roads or at speed. These have the desired effect of firmer ride, flatter cornering and another degree of stability but there is no separate switch anymore. The firm damping is available only in Sport (or Sport+) meaning you also get higher engine revs and shift points, and heavier steering effort that go with it. Since that doesn't add more steering feel and we need far less than 300 hp for many fun roads, we miss having the switch.

All-wheel drive adds a slight bit of steering effort but otherwise remains in the background until weather turns and it can put down more acceleration than the rear-drive versions. The system runs a 50/50 split front/rear normally and varies automatically to 30/70 front/rear as needed. Unlike some all-wheel drive it does not feel rough at full steering lock as making a U-turn or exiting a tight driveway. And the all-wheel drive makes that U-turn in less than 35-feet, just like the rear-drive, an impressive showing.

We liked the steering on F Sport rear-drive cars a bit more than BMW's system, but the standard GS steering is already good. You can also add four-wheel steering which makes high-speed response more immediate, ultimate cornering performance better, emergency maneuver stability slightly better and arguably faster around a racetrack. It also adds cost, complexity, weight and to our hands and backsides doesn't make the drive significantly more rewarding.

Lexus matched up GS 350 F Sports against a pair of competitors at a track for us to compare. The Mercedes E350 with sport package, staggered tires (like F Sport), in typical Mercedes conservative style went straight ahead if you pushed too hard (understeer), and it was not as sporty as the GS but the input efforts were all much lighter. BMW's 5 Series, despite not having a sport package and the most mundane tires, was easier to rotate and control once there, the most willing dance party of the trio in spite of the BMW's heftier weight. We drove an A6 almost back-to-back with the GS, and we'd wager the Audi A6 would catch up on the straights and is a better handler in the wet than an F Sport all-wheel drive. The GS had the least body roll, good steering feel and held its line best, what many people want their sports sedan to do.

Brakes worked as expected, and hot lapping made the F Sport smell but not smoke or fade unduly. The hybrid model's brakes are a little touchy at initial application and release near stop, but that's something you can adjust to. The gas-engine shut-off and restart were muted, not invisible to an attentive driver and unnoticed by passengers.

Summary

The Lexus GS line offers precisely what you'd expect from a Lexus sports sedan: a welcoming environment, hallmark quietude, and extensive features in a less-conservative wrapper with more aggressive tuning. Model variety lets you key in to your priorities, while any of them will provide the requisite levels of comfort and performance.

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