

# Lexus LS 400 - is it the best sedan in the world?

Clutching the keys to the much-awaited Lexus LS 400, I didn't twig when Toyota's head communications man said, "Our only problem will be meeting demand," and the car was theirs and the tickets would be mine.

After a week with the Lexus I see what he means about meeting demand and I know what he means about the tickets.

Lexus is the new ultra-luxury car division of Toyota. There are two models: the LS 400 and the smaller, less expensive LS 250.

The story has been told before of Toyota chairman Eiji Toyoda instructing his corporation to "build the best sedan in the world." Billions of dollars and the work of more than 1,400 engineers, 2,300 technicians and 200 support staff were poured into Lexus which is finally coming to Canada in the fall. The price has not been set at this writing, but look for something in the neighborhood of \$60,000.

Actually the car has been on sale in the States for about a year now, but the Canadian versions will be different. The only options on Canadian cars will be an in-trunk CD player; dealer-installed cellular phone (it is pre-wired); and all-season tires (the standard tires are special-for-lexus Goodyear GA radials).

The statistics surrounding the car are astounding. The vehicle required more than 300 new patents. Some of the 450 prototypes built were tested to destruction. The top-line LS 400 air-bag system was tested over 2.7 million miles by more than 350 drivers.

An "anti-aging committee" looked at 96 items subject to wear. The idea was to come up with new fabrics and metals so the whole car ages at the same rate.

There was even a committee to ensure the engine compartment looked pretty when the hood was raised; and I assure you they did the job well.

The engine is a V8 with four cams and four valves per cylinder putting out 250 hp and 260 ft./lbs. of torque. The engine idles so smoothly you can (and I did) balance a Loonie on the intake manifold while it was running. Amazingly, 90 per cent of the torque is available between 2,000 and 5,600 rpm. Lexus says it will do 0-100 kph in 8.5 seconds. But for all that umph, not a lot of noise or road vibration gets through - all this the result of what all those people did to build this car the way it is.

I put the Lexus up on a hoist and marvelled at just how pretty this car is underneath. All four wheels are on double A-arms and each is fully adjustable like a Formula 1 car. The front end looked similar to that used by Rolls-Royce. You must see the propeller shaft, which is in a perfectly straight line from the electronic automatic trans to the rear-drive differential. The concept, along with a computer-designed, extremely rigid engine mount system, was to eliminate driveline vibrations.

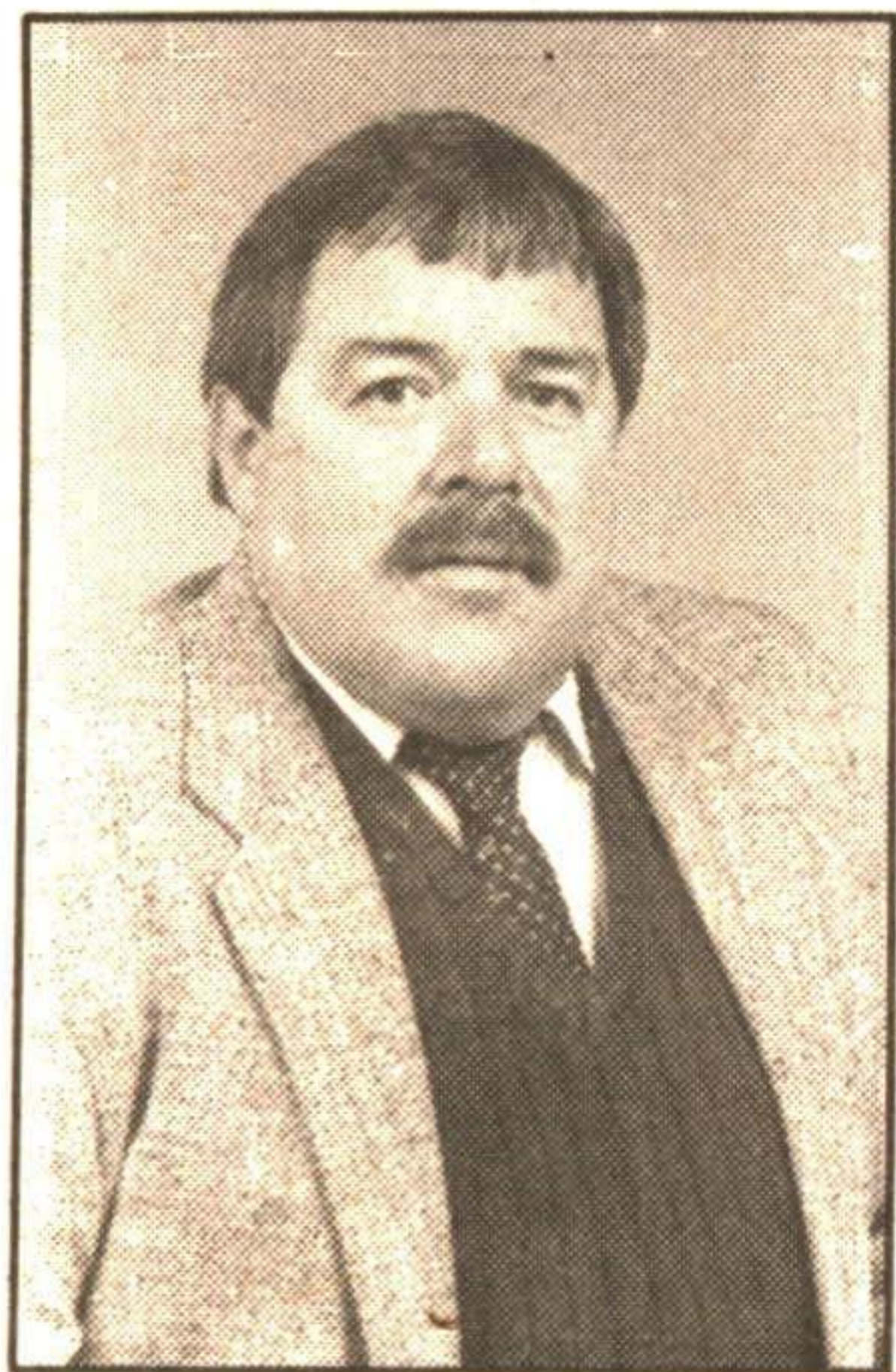
Even though it is the size of a Lincoln Town Car, the Lexus has a drag coefficient of 0.29, one of the very lowest in the automotive world. This is achieved through a host of clever aerodynamic tricks, too numerous to list in this small space, that enable the car and its 250 hp to hit the design speed of 240 kph.

The slippery shape, coupled to an engine you only rarely hear, results in the warning about the tickets.

Like the BMW M5, this is a car so well conceived that going fast feels like you're going slow. But holy cow does the speed creep up

## Roadworthy

By  
JIM ROBINSON



on you. I found myself once going down a side street at an indicated 90 kph, although it felt like 50 kph. Coming home from a wedding I looked down and, to my horror, found I was cruising at 140 kph. I immediately switched on the cruise and dialed in 100 kph.

The aforementioned automatic transmission, but it also is electronically controlled with intelligence. It can automatically delay spark advance and lower engine torque momentarily to eliminate sharp shifts. Over time, it monitors its own wear and automatically adjusts for wear of certain parts. It even comes with a special long-life trans fluid.

The Canadian cars will all have Traction Control. Think of it as a form of limited-slip differential with a brain.

They really have thought of everything. If you mess up the carpet in the trunk, there is another underneath you can use while you get the soiled one cleaned.

What I found most interesting was the shutlines on this car. I know they use a laser at the Lexus plant to align doors and hoods, but so does everyone else. The Lexus fit, I am told, is half again as fine as that used on Toyotas and that is saying something.

I wish the column was longer to describe the leather interior. Ergonomics is a hackneyed expression these days, but the Lexus is a marked improvement on its sombre German rivals in this department. It is much more modern, while not as gentlemen's-clubbish as Rolls-Royce and Jaguar. The shape of the dash and the use of vinyl is very Japanese, however, so there is no mistaking where this car came from. The Nakamichi CD-stereo cassette was specially designed for the acoustics of the passenger compartment. There is now another system as good as or better than the Fujitsu-10 used in Toyota's Celica.

The finish requires 42 steps. It has five coats of paint and two of clearcoat. One of the finishes is Mica for deeper brilliance in sunlight.

Some have described the front as being Benz 300 S-ish and the side as being along the lines of the Jag Sovereign. In fact, it is neither and the only area where I find fault with this car.

If Toyota wanted to "build the best sedan in the world," they should have wrapped it in a body that stands up and leaves you in awe. This is what Mercedes-Benz did with the new SL. Benz made a statement with the SL and this is what Lexus, and Infiniti for that matter, should have done. But then it's easy for me to say the

body should have been done by Marcello Gandini (Countach) or Ercole Strada (BMW 5 and 7 Series). The Japanese are traditionally conservative about the lines of their cars. If this is what Mr. Toyoda wants, who am I to quibble?

And I doubt this will matter to buyers, and the reason why meeting demand is going to be a problem. There are already something like 100 people in Canada who could not wait and imported a Lexus from the United States. I know two of them. One formerly owned several Benzes, the other a high-end BMW. They say they won't buy German again.

I could add my own superlatives to those from every auto magazine in the western world, but I'd need the rest of this page.

Suffice it to say, that of all the cars I have tested to date, the Lexus LS 400 comes the closest to being "the best sedan in the world."



The Lexus is a pricey, but well engineered Toyota product.

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