

Lexus RX300

Featured model: RX300 SE



NOT CONTENT WITH FIELDING the recently reincarnated RAV 4 in the Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) camp, plus the leviathan Landcruiser in the out-and-out off-roader class, Toyota's premium, upmarket brand – Lexus – is now chasing a piece of the so-called leisure-oriented, "lifestyle vehicle" market, too.

This was once the sole territory of the Range Rover, but a small yet growing band of car makers is now taking on Solihull's all-conquering mud-slinger at its own game. Apart from this lithe-looking Lexus, premium-priced 4x4s from Teutonic arch-rivals BMW and Mercedes, plus Jeep's Grand Cherokee, have all made recent inroads into a sector dominated for decades by the luxury Land Rover. Porsche and VW both have "green-laners" waiting in the wings, too.

Topping the Lexus sales charts in the USA for the past few years, the RX300 makes no claim to being an all-out mud-wrestler; instead it marries limousine-like luxury with four-wheel drive for "all occasions" mobility.

Muscular power comes courtesy of a sideways-set, all-alloy three-litre V6, mated to a four-speed automatic transaxle, which also houses the viscous-coupled, limited-slip centre differential.

In keeping with the Lexus brand "executive class" image, the SE's sumptuously appointed (leather, naturally) cabin, ample accoutrements and hearty-but-hushed V6 engine waft the RX along in lazy refinement. Resorting to

kickdown makes light work of overtaking opportunities, but the four-speed auto clings on to higher ratios (in pursuit of economy) at part-throttle settings – a situation that would be largely remedied by an additional ratio, such as BMW's X5 self-shifter possesses.

Conceding that a short stint up a leafy lane is the farthest many such vehicles will ever venture off the highway, Lexus has endowed the RX with light, accurate steering and a quiet, cossetting cabin. It has also given it suspension that smoothes out urban bumps to match what the very best in this class have to offer.

There's acres of space to pamper the loftily transported occupants, with the added luxury (and convenience) of individual sliding/folding/reclining back seats. Bringing up the rear, the large lift-up tailgate reveals a spacious, well-trimmed load area in keeping with the rest of the Lexus's four-star accommodation, together with the full-sized (alloy) spare wheel tucked away under the floor.

VERDICT

The appealing looking RX300 makes a worthy addition to the "Grand Touring green-laner" class, blending sizeable (if not unsurpassed) prowess off the tarmac together with stress-relieving, executive-class travel on it. It's also well equipped, eschews overtly aggressive styling and retains all the traditional trappings of the luxury Lexus brand image.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Overtaking ability	★★★★○
Space/practicality	★★★★○
Controls/displays	★★★★○
Safety	★★★★○
Handling/steering	★★★★○
Comfort	★★★★○
Fuel economy	★★★★○

SPECIFICATION

engine 2995cc, V6, petrol; 201bhp at 5600rpm, 209 lb ft at 4400rpm; belt-driven quad OHC, 24 valves, VVT-i variable valve timing
transmission 4-speed stepped automatic with torque converter; permanent four-wheel drive; 23.9mph/1000rpm in 4th, 17.0 in 3rd
suspension front: independent damper/struts, coil springs, lower arms. Rear: independent damper/struts, trailing/transverse links, coil springs. Anti-roll bars front and rear
steering hydraulic power assistance; 2.8 turns lock-to-lock; 11.9m diameter turning circle between kerbs (16.6m for one turn of the wheel)
brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with electronic anti-lock and brake-assist controls; drum parking brake
wheels/tyres 6½in alloy with 215/70R16 100T tyres (Toyo Tranpath A11 on test car); full-size (alloy) spare

LIKES ...

ultra smooth V6, seamless auto shifts
 "Chinese puzzle" centre console box sliding/6-position recline back seats illuminated ignition lock surround

and GRIPES

tailgate internal handle awkward/high steering wheel adjusts for tilt only no courtesy lamp at front of cabin seats heavy to fold, load deck not flat

THE RX300 RANGE

size and type large (premium-priced) Sport Utility Vehicle
trim levels standard and SE
engines V6, three-litre, 201bhp petrol; no diesel
drive permanent 4-wheel drive, 4-speed torque converter automatic (no manual)

OVERTAKING ABILITY			★★★★○	
Super smooth V6 and barely perceptible auto shifts serve up quiet, effortless progress. Hangs on to higher gears keenly to aid economy, but kickdown unleashes abundant passing pace				
acceleration in seconds	auto shift to 6050rpm	manual hold to higher rpm		
20-40mph	2.7	no improvement in acceleration using manual override to higher rpm		
30-50mph	3.6			
40-60mph	4.4			
50-70mph	5.5			
30-70mph	9.1			
max speed in each gear (*using auto shift to 6050rpm for best acceleration)				
gear	①*	②*	③*	④
speed (mph)	38	67	103	111 (limited)

SPACE AND PRACTICALITY ★★★○○			
<i>Limousine-like comfort plus all-terrain capability offer ample (if not cheap) all-round appeal. Multi-function storage box, touch-screen radio controls and recline/slide back seats are novelties</i>			
<i>in centimetres (5-door SUV)</i>	inside († with sunroof)		
outside	front - legroom 83-110		
length	458	- headroom	94-98†
width - inc mirrors	207	rear - typical leg/	103/*
- mirrors folded	183	kneeroom	81*
height (no roof bars)	166	- headroom	100
load sill height	2/74	- hiproom	138
(inside/outside)	load space (all seats in use)		
steering	(litres/cu ft)	430/15.2	
turns lock-to-lock	2.8	load length	81*-180
turning circle (metres)	11.9	full length to fascia	No
easy to park/garage?		load width	95-141
	★★★○○○	load height (to shelf	45/
		to top of aperture)	83
* rear seats slid fully back			

CONTROLS AND DISPLAYS ★★★★○	
<i>Distinctive, curvy fascia presents bold, clear dials. Driving position lofty and laid back, with powerful heating and fluid, effortless controls. Wheel adjusts for tilt only, and centre display looks "busy"</i>	
	

HOW THE RX300 COMPARES		engine cyl/cap/power (no/cc/bhp)	revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	fuel economy (mpg)	brakes† – best stop from 50mph (m/kg)	maximum legroom - front (cm)	typical leg/ kneeroom - rear (cm)	steering turns/ circle (m)	overall length (cm)
LEXUS RX300 3.0 V6 (auto)		V6/2995/201	2940	9.1	auto	22½	28/13	110	103/81	2.8/11.9	458
Jeep Grand Cherokee 4.0 (auto)*		6/3960/174	2270	10.6	auto	20	28/22	107	105/73	3.3/11.6	450
Land Rover Freelander 2.0 Td4*		4/1951/112	2880	14.7	22.3/16.9	38	26½/30	104	107/75	3.2/11.9	439
Range Rover 4.0 V8 °		V8/3950/190	2630	10.2	28.0/16.0	17½	24½/20	110	100/86	3.3/12.9	471
Renault Scenic 2.0 RX4		4/1998/140	3260	12.8	28.9/20.3	28½	NA	106	102/76	3.5/10.6	444
Toyota RAV4 2.0 5dr		4/1998/147	3350	9.5	24.2/16.6	29	26½/18	110	98/73	3.0/11.1	426
† all with ABS											

* 1997 model *diesel ° manual

SAFETY ★★★★○	
<i>Plenty of solid metal around you (a good start!) supported by adept road manners, ABS with brake assist, a quartet of front and side airbags, plus 3-point belts and head restraints all round</i>	
braking	dry road stopping distance
pedal feel ★★★★○	from 50mph (with standard ABS)
in emergency ★★★★○	pedal load
handbrake* ★★★○○○	unhurried 10kg
	sudden 13kg
	+4kg ie 17kg
	distance
	31½m
	28m best stop
	30m ABS on
* foot operated parking brake	

EURO NCAP CRASH TEST RATINGS
RX300 not yet tested

SECURITY FEATURES	
central locking ✓	alarm ✓
remote control ✓	immobiliser ✓
auto window closure ✓	luggage security ★★★○○○
deadlocks ✓	
✓ standard	0 dealer option * not available

HANDLING AND STEERING ★★★○○	
<i>Light, accurate steering, bags of grip and responsive, reassuring "feel" make the Lexus a composed performer on the road, albeit with some trade-off when it comes to venturing into the rough</i>	
	
COMFORT ★★★★○	
<i>RX300 majors on refined, comfortable travel on tarmac, aided by the cabin's luxurious, "gentleman's club" atmosphere. "Like your favourite armchair on wheels," was how one driver described it</i>	

FUEL ECONOMY ★★★★○	
<i>Below-average appetite for unleaded, but 4wd, hefty weight and auto 'box all take their toll. £50-a-go refills not easy to swallow, but at least a big tank allows around 350 miles before the next one</i>	
AA test results (mpg)	official figures (mpg)
worst (hard/urban)	16
best (gentle/rural)	28
overall mpg on test 22½	combined 21.7
realistic tank capacity	69 litres
typical range	340 miles
	CO ₂ emissions 311g/km
	car tax band D