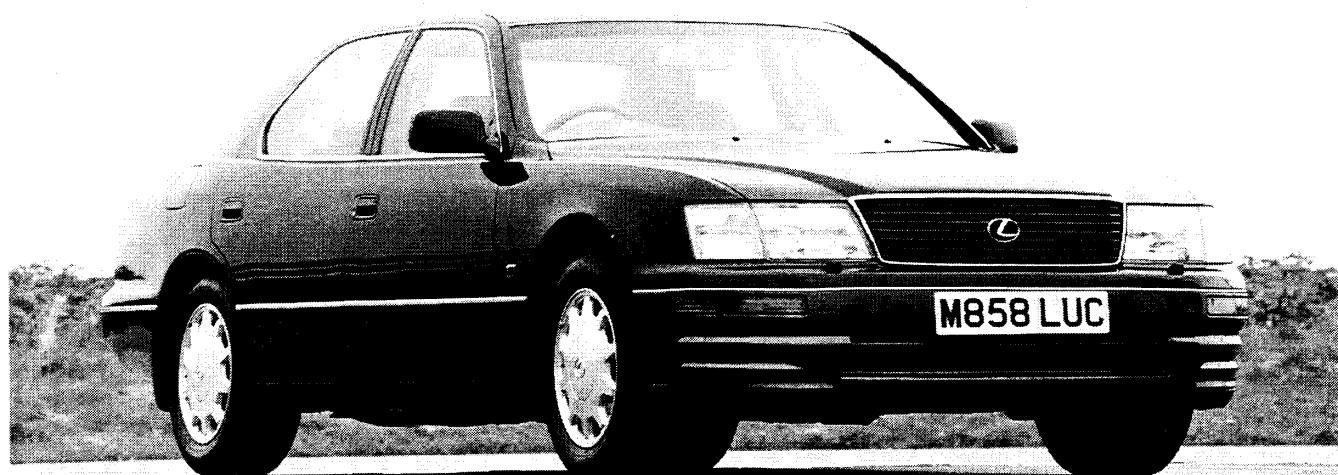


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Lexus LS400



MAKING A GOOD CAR BETTER IS A hard enough job, but perfecting a superb one is an unenviable task, yet that's just what Toy... sorry, Lexus has attempted with the latest LS400. The formula for the original model was clearly a successful one. In just six years the car has become one of the world's finest luxury performance saloons and has given Mercedes-Benz, BMW and Jaguar a very hard time, particularly in the USA.

The plan behind the development of the latest LS was to further refine the formula and improve all aspects of the model. The result is that 85 per cent of the car is all new, with 1700 detailed improvements. At first glance the new car looks similar to the old one, but the body has been made sleeker and more rounded to give it a more purposeful stance, yet overall length and width are unchanged. An extended wheelbase and small changes to the interior layout mean that there's 2³/₄in more cabin length, with extra passenger space in all directions.

Peerless power

Power from the quad-cam, four-litre V8 engine is up

from 241 to 260bhp, with improvements in low- and mid-range torque – and what an absolutely superb power unit it is! It's literally inaudible at idle (you have to glance at the tachometer to check that it's running) and uncannily smooth and hushed when accelerating or when cruising at 60–70mph; it's the quietest engine we've never heard. It's a revelation when you drive the car for the first time, especially when such sublime effortlessness is combined with searing performance – Lexus claims 0–60mph in 7.4sec and a top speed of 156mph.

Not surprisingly the LS400 is automatic only. It has a sophisticated three-speed transmission with an overdrive fourth gear selected by niftily nudging the selector lever sideways from D. Slick shifts are silkily unobtrusive, and although you can override the 'box, it always seems to know best. There's also a power mode switch to delay upchanges and make the car feel more responsive.

On the road

The double-wishbone, coil-spring suspension all round has been fine-tuned for better response and stability,

with the result that ride comfort has also been made all the more impressive. We didn't drive the car fully laden, but with two-up, progress was smooth and beautifully cushioned. The only time the ride falters is on broken surfaces taken at low speed and when crossing transverse ridges, when there's a touch of unseemly bump-thump.

We also like the power steering. There's still not much feel to the revised system, but it's positive, seamlessly smooth and ideally weighted. Although it's a big, easy-going car, the LS400 feels very surefooted and handles twisting roads with great confidence. Larger disc brakes all round with ABS provide excellent stopping power; pity about the tiresome foot-operated parking brake, though.

At the wheel

The heated front seats have been completely redesigned and prove really comfortable. Everything that can move does so electrically (with two driving position memories) and the soft leather trim isn't as slippery to sit on as some we've met. All-round vision is good, but although the driver can see the end of the bootlid when reversing, the whereabouts of the front bumper calls for some guesswork. All the instruments are permanently illuminated and are models of clarity. A nice touch is the way that the electrochromic wing mirrors dim automatically to prevent dazzle.

That's typical of the numerous clever items that go to make up a superb and unrivalled inventory of equipment, including an electric rake-and-reach steering wheel (which raises as you enter and leave the car), separate driver and passenger climate control (with air conditioning), cruise control, an electric sunroof and an even better audio system with a CD autochanger that's housed in the top "glovebox" – it no longer takes up space in the good-sized, well-lined boot. Storage boxes, fold-away drinks holders and damped-action coat hooks all add to the comfort and convenience. The luxury trimming and high quality carpeting are beautifully executed and provide a real clubland atmosphere. There's never the hint of a creak and the sensibly positioned switches and controls have a skilfully engineered feel to them.

Back seat passengers also enjoy individually heated seats, along with excellent legroom and knee-room. There's plenty of width, too, although foot space is rather limited and headroom isn't over-generous. There are three rear seatbelts – all of the lap-and-diagonal type. Other safety features include side impact beams, front seatbelt pretensioners, twin airbags and a high rear brake light.

As in the past, the LS400's build quality reveals carefully consistent panel gaps and lustrous paintwork. Pearlescent paint (at £300) is the model's only extra – no other options are offered. The car comes with a three-year/60,000-mile warranty and owners are given red carpet VIP treatment when they visit any of the 70 Lexus dealers.

VERDICT

It's a pity that the Lexus LS400's understated looks don't do the car any favours. Under the (to our eyes) deadly dull styling lies the quietest, smoothest engine money can buy, a ride that's as close to that fabled magic carpet as you can get, and a leather and wood interior that puts St James's to shame. But the LS not only *appears* to ooze excellence, engineers in the know who have taken them apart and have studied the machinery and the electrics, marvel at the superb quality of the cogs and chips.

This and a host of luxury touches only confirm that although perfection is elusive, Lexus has so nearly achieved it. It just goes to show that for only £45,000 you can have the best car in the world – probably. Rolls-Royce eat your heart out.

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Layout	longitudinal 90° V8
Capacity	3969cc
Valve gear	DOHC per bank, 4 valves per cylinder
Compression ratio	10.4:1
Fuel system	sequential multi-point electronic fuel injection
Maximum power	260bhp at 5400rpm
Maximum torque	269 lb ft at 4600rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type	4-speed automatic with electronic control
Mph per 1000rpm	27.1 in top gear
Rpm at 70mph	2600

CHASSIS

Suspension – front and rear	independent by double wishbones, coil springs telescopic dampers and anti-roll bars
Steering	speed-sensitive power-assisted rack and pinion with 3.5 turns between full locks
Wheels	7JJx16 alloy with 225/60R16 tyres
Brakes	servo-assisted ventilated discs front and rear. ABS standard

DIMENSIONS

Length	196½in
Width	72in
Height	56½in
Kerb weight	3700 lb