

Lexus GS series gains an attitude

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THE CHARLOTTE POST

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Tire-smokin' fun and Lexus sound as likely a combination as oil and vinegar — they just don't mix.

That is until Lexus got the brilliant idea to dial "F" for fun when rethinking its GS series. Like all Lexi, it was well built, quiet and good to look at. But it lacked the proper motivation, namely a kick-butt engine to go with the comely body.

It now has both. The 1998 GS series comes in two scrumptious flavors — the spicy in line-six powered GS300 and the fire-breathing V8-powered GS400.

Let's talk about that V8. Most have come to love it in the LS 400 for its refinement. Lexus has changed its attitude completely by throwing in variable valve timing (VVT-i) — the first-ever used on a V8. I don't understand exactly how it works or why, but I do know it increases the horsepower from 270 to 300. Torque is bumped from 290 to 310.

What does all that mean? How about 0-60 times of 5.7 seconds? That's according to Car and Driver and Motor Trend magazines. Lexus says 6.0 seconds.

Whatever, it's fast and furious. The V8 has the kind of kick-in-the-pants feeling which will make other manufacturers jealous. Stomp the gas pedal and the forward motion



1998 GS 400

plasters you against the front seat. And the sound is simply gorgeous.

The GS 300's V6 also uses VVT-i. Its power remains the same at 225 hp, but it comes on more aggressively. Zero-to-60 mph has been trimmed to 7.6 seconds.

Lexus invited a bunch of journalists to sample its new line, minus the coupes. Most of my time was spent in the GS400 and I can tell you this is a heck of a car.

There is lots of interesting standard stuff, such as traction control and Vehicle Skid Control. VSC works by using a motion sensor and the traction control and ABS systems. If the car's direction isn't the same as the driver's input — which happens during severe oversteer and understeer — VCS kicks in by applying the appropriate brake and adjusting the engine's output. I rode in an LS400

for a demonstration of the system and it's mighty impressive.

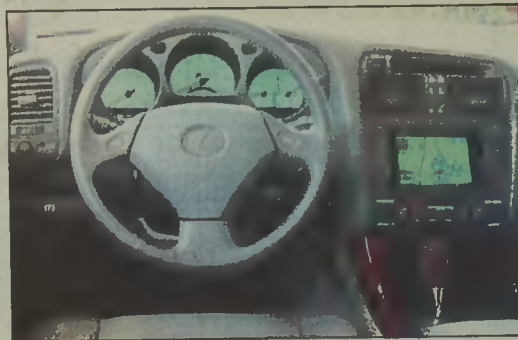
And there's the slick five-speed automatic transmission. The shift pattern is gated like a Mercedes. It can also be used like a manual by shifting over to "M" and using the gear selectors under your thumbs on the steering wheel. I didn't try it. I was enjoying the automatic way too much.

A navigational system is available. It works much

like Acura's, except you can't make changes while the vehicle's moving. I did use that. Fellow journalist Gregg Morris and I got lost. The system got us back on course — and boy were we *waaaaay* off — without a problem.

The cars look as good as they drive. The 300 and 400 are nearly identical, except for engines and the 400's optional big spoiler. The shape is a lot like the

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GS 400 dash