

AUTO SHOWCASE

TEST DRIVE



1996 Lexus GS 300

Lexus still satisfies enthusiasts



Winfred B. Cross

The sports car market is still taking a beating. The casualties so far are Nissan's glorious 300ZX and possibly Toyota's Supra (it won't say

for sure). Who knows what will be next.

Lexus, Toyota's luxury division, isn't giving in, however. It's committed to making the stunning GS and SC series sedan and coupes, respectively, for some time.

The '96 version of both give subtle improvements over the previous models, which didn't need a whole bunch of changes.

The GS 300 gets the most significant changes. The exterior gets a freshened rear

panel with new combination tail lamps. The GS 300 badge is also a bolder typeface. This adds to the overall beauty of the car. It's always been a looker, possibly the best looking sedan Lexus makes. It's even better looking now.

The major addition is a slick, five-speed automatic transmission. It's about the same size and weight as the previous year's four-speed unit. Lexus engineers inserted another gear between the former first and second gears.

This pushed 2nd, 3rd and 4th to 3rd, 4th and 5th. The final gear ratio was raised from 4.083:1 to 4.272:1. The higher the ratio the better.

What all this does is make the car's ability to pass much quicker than it was. Zero to 60 time is improved to 8.3 seconds down from the low 9.0 second range.

The setup sounds simple but it took a complicated computer program to make the shifts smooth and seamless, which they are.

Is it actually faster? Yes, but the car's major fault still lies in its engine. It is the same 3.0 liter in-line six cylinder used in the lighter, naturally aspirated Supra and the SC 300. Its output is 220 horsepower with 210 pounds-feet of torque. That's more than generous in the SC 300 which is 110 pounds lighter with the standard five-speed manual transmission. It's not quite so with the GS. It needs a bit more torque to deal with the additional heft.

The obvious solution would be to drop the Supra's turbo engine and (now defunct) six-speed transmission. That would be stunning. Actually, that would be the Aristo, the Japanese version of the car. Alas, it's too expensive for EPA emissions certification, so it won't make it to these shores, darn it.

But speed is a relative thing. The GS 300 is fast enough. And it's big enough. The 109-inch wheelbase allows for generous interior space. Head room is plentiful as well. Big people will appreciate the wide, sporty front seats or the comfortable bench in the rear.

Amenities? Please, this is a Lexus. The only thing missing was the kitchen sink, a rest room and a telephone. You can get the phone, but the sink and lavatory will have to be farmed out.

Its handling and ride are on par with the best in its class. It's a touch light footed in cornering and has a little more mind and road noise than other Lexi, but its still better than most in that department. I wouldn't turn one a way as a gift. Hint.

The GS is a tad expensive at \$49,668 plus. But it will hold its value and your attention

for year's to come.

If a sporty sedan doesn't tickle your fancy as, say, a tightly-fitting sport coupe, simply sample the SC 300, one of the sexiest looking car's on the road. Your desires will be answered and then some.

The SC 300 is the twin sister to the phenomenally smooth SC400. The major difference lies under the hood. It's two cylinder's shy of the 400's 4.0-liter V8. But with a five-speed, its performance numbers aren't far off. Zero to 60 can be claimed in 7.5 seconds. The car will top out at about 146 mph. These, of course, are Lexus numbers, but I think the numbers should be very, very close.

I've had the pleasure of driving the SC since it's introduction back in 1992. This car never fails to delight. The five speed stick is one of the smoothest shifting transmissions I've ever driven. The clutch take up is a bit too light, but the driver can adjust to that fairly quickly.

Blasting down a straight-away or just cruising a city street gives you the same feeling of supreme confidence. The car tracks like a guided missile. Cornering is splendid,

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Lexus SC 300

Car pooling becomes lost art

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Commuters are walking, taking car pools and using public transportation less often, and relying on their cars more, a new study says.

In addition, people are commuting almost as often to the suburbs as to cities, according to a study of U.S. census data released Thursday by the Eno Transportation Foundation.

About 73 percent of commuters drove to work alone in 1990, up from 64 percent in 1980, the report said. Just 13 percent of workers used car pools to get to work in 1990, down from 20 percent a decade before.

In order to car pool, you have to have somebody where you live and going where you're going and going at the same time," said Alan Pisarski, author of the study, "Commuting in America II." The first report, "Commuting in America I," was published in 1987.

People who used public transportation to get to work dropped from 6 percent to 5 percent in the same time period; and the number of people who walked to work fell from 6 percent to 4 percent.

Bus and trolley use fell 12 percent between 1980 and

1990, but subway and elevated rail use climbed nearly 15 percent, the study said. Also railroad use increased about 4 percent.

The decade has also seen a rise in the commuting from and to suburbs, the study said. More than 44 percent of commuting trips are between suburbs, and city-to-suburb commutes rose from 9 percent in 1980, to 12 percent a decade later.

In addition, 50 percent of all commuters and 41 percent of all jobs are in the suburbs, the study said.

Other findings in the study, which was reported in USA Today and The Dallas Morning News:

The average commute climbed about 30 seconds to more than 22 minutes in 1990.

Just 6 percent of commuters travel for more than an hour to get to work.

New York still has the longest commute, about 31 minutes, down from about 34 minutes in 1980. Washington followed with about 30 minutes, and Los Angeles with 28. The 19-minute commute in Buffalo, N.Y., was the shortest of the major cities.

The number of cars owned by white Americans exceeds the number of white licensed drivers. In contrast, 30 percent of black households and 19 percent of Hispanic households did not own a car in 1990.



Cadillac slashes prices on 1997's

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WARREN, Mich. (AP) - General Motors Corp. announced Friday it is lowering the price of its 1997 Seville and Eldorado model Cadillacs.

GM cut the price of its 1997 Seville SLS to \$39,995. The 1996 model sold for \$42,995 and GM previously had announced the 1997 model would sell for \$43,995.

The Seville STS has dropped in cost from \$47,495 to \$44,995. GM had said it would sell for \$48,595. And the Eldorado and the Eldorado Touring Coupe prices will drop by \$1,600 each.

The cuts come one day after Ford Motor Co. announced it was dropping prices and making several options standard on its 1997 Lincoln Continental sedans and Lincoln Mark VIII coupes.

"Cadillac is focused on building brand equity by offering customers state-of-the-art technology and an outstanding ownership experience," said John Grettenberger, Cadillac general manager. "We want Cadillac to be regarded as the best luxury value in the industry."

Grettenberger said the price savings will not come by removing content from the cars, adding that all equipment standard in 1996 is again standard in 1997.



Mercedes-Benz Alabama plant could build Porsche-brand sport utility vehicles, M-Class

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

STUTTGART, Germany - Mercedes-Benz is considering allowing Porsche to use part of its new Alabama factory to build its own brand of sport utility vehicles, a Mercedes spokesman said Monday.

We're currently studying whether it would be possible," the Mercedes spokesman said. But he added that no final

decisions have been made yet.

According to a weekend report in the German magazine Der Spiegel, Porsche would base its model on Mercedes' M-Class vehicle, which is to be launched in the U.S. some time next year.

Spiegel cited a memo from Michael Bassermann, head of Mercedes-Benz of North America, to Mercedes dealers as saying there will be a

Porsche model of the sports utility vehicle in addition to Mercedes' M-Class.

Porsche's model would have a somewhat different body and a different motor, and is to be more expensive than Mercedes' model, Spiegel reported.

A spokesman for Porsche couldn't be reached immediately.

