

Curbside



LEXUS HS250H REVIEW By Anthony B. Barthel

Ever since the Toyota Prius became a virtual status symbol in Hollywood, the Oscars haven't been the same. It used to be that a Cadillac's and Mercedes-Benz car was the thing to pull up to the awards with. Now, it's the Prius. But being Toyota's luxury car division, Lexus couldn't just stand by while a Toyota got the lead, so Lexus engineers went to work. The result? The vehicle in this week's review, the Lexus HS250h.

When you're doing a remake of a successful picture, of a vehicle, like the Toyota Prius it helps to start with some of the best talent and a lot of the Prius' genetic code were poured into the mold when the HS250h was created. But then Lexus took that DNA and massaged it with their own ideology and what we have is the 2010 Lexus HS250h.

What's Hot

The HS250h is being advertised as the most fuel-efficient luxury car you can buy, but that comes with a few asterisks. Still, during its stay with me I averaged 35 miles per gallon, which is pretty darned good. The HS250h inherits its four-cylinder engine from the Camry hybrid, making it more powerful than its Prius cousin thereby giving it more performance, which is what you'd expect in a Lexus. It also does not have a hatchback as Americans have proven that we don't like hatchbacks, especially in luxury cars.

Instead, the HS250h looks a lot like other Lexus vehicles, which makes sense, except in the front where someone snuck the plans for the 2009 Ford Fusion and ran it through the copy machine.

Inside, it's clear that Lexus wouldn't think of using any of the Prius hardware and, more importantly, software in their interior. The interior had a rich, luxurious feel to it that was befitting the brand. Even the console had padded edges around the interesting joystick device.

That device is sort of the communications line between operator and vehicle. Essentially, it's a typical joystick right smack in the middle of the console that lets you affect the navigation system, the climate control, audio system and more. You can use it to set your destination on the nav system and then change stations, although Lexus has thankfully provided redundant controls for climate and audio systems. In addition, there are secondary redundant controls on the steering wheel.

I'm sure somewhere in the owners manual it tells you never to touch the joystick while driving, but it's actually relatively intuitive and I thought the system was neat. We're one step closer to having in-car PCs, although cars today have as much, if not more, processing power as the device you're staring at right now.

Another really positive feature was the voice recognition on this system. I was so thrilled that it allowed me to set or alter a destination while driving. For example, if I was headed to a spot and suddenly changed where I wanted to go I could alter the destination using the voice recognition system without having to pull over or ever look away from

the road or take my hands off the wheel. The system functioned perfectly, although waiting for it to repeat every menu option with each input was frustratingly tedious, but at least the option was there.

This car was equipped with Lexus Enform, which enables you to pull up multiple points of interest from a desktop computer or mobile device (iPhone, Blackberry, etc.) and send the info via the Internet directly to the car's navigation system. It will also inform owners of new Lexus owner privileges, which is just another reason to buy a Lexus.

Like other systems, this one offers the ability to warn of impending traffic jams ahead through a link to the XM Radio's traffic system. Cool.

What's Not

I mentioned that there were a few asterisks with the fuel economy numbers. The EPA says the Lexus will get 35 miles per gallon in the city, 34 on the highway. The BMW 335d actually bests these numbers with a rating of 36 miles per gallon on the highway, but is rated at 23 miles per gallon in the city, so the BMW's average is lower. But then with the BMW's 425 ft-lbs of torque, that's excusable.

While I loved the little joystick device and the Nav system, the audio system again had trouble with my iPod, not recognizing all the songs and folders. I wish someone would license the iPod interface and build an in-car audio system that actually worked as well as the now-ancient iPod.

Also, I wonder what the lawsuit is going to look like the first time someone plows one of these into a bus bench because they were playing with that joystick? Of course the court transcripts might be slightly amusing, if not sad.

In Summary

The obvious reason to buy a hybrid anything is for fuel efficiency. Arguably the efficiencies of a hybrid drive train make it worth the additional expense and complexity to help reduce our impact on the planet while also going where we want when we want.

But Lexus has looked at additional ways to reduce their impact. One of those is a green material called known as bioplastic, which comprises about 30 percent of the trunk and interior of the vehicle. This plant-derived material meets Lexus' quality and durability demands while also reducing the vehicle's impact on the environment. Furthermore, it helps to make the vehicle more recyclable once its life has ended. Honestly, all the interior materials felt very high in quality and I couldn't tell you what was bioplastic and what was not.

Lexus has borrowed heavily from the winning script that has brought us three installments of the Prius story, but has added their own DNA to the formula. Using parent Toyota's successful ability to produce reliable hybrids in appealing packages, there's no doubt that you'll be seeing these hit the red carpet at the Oscars. And that's just another reason that Toyota continues to earn the best "pitcher" award for cars most likely to score a home run.. •

Stimulus

from front page

about 15 million dollars worth of grants that we've been awarded," Moe said. "Of course, what's on everybody's mind right now are the stimulus funds, and we're going after those as actively as possible."

The stimulus funds will provide money to resurface streets, install energy-efficient streetlights, buy equipment for the police department and retrofit traffic signals with LED lighting. City Engineer Steve Finton explained that many cities are using stimulus funds to pay for projects with a short timeframe. "The requirement there is that it's shovel-ready, so that's why you will see a lot of pavement projects happening; the environmental process is simple," Finton said. "We could design a [pavement] project and get it started in just a few weeks."

The bulk of the money will go to resurfacing parts of Aviation Boulevard from Marine Avenue to Manhattan Beach Boulevard, and Valley Drive from 15th Street to Sepulveda. Finton estimates the projects will begin early this month and be completed by Christmas. "There's certainly not a lot of street paving money out there, so this really kind of gives us a shot in the arm to do the two streets that we've really needed to have done--Aviation and Valley," Finton said.

Although the resurfacing projects will also include the replacement of striping, traffic signal sensors and signage, Finton said the City received more money than it needs to do all the work. The extra money will be spent on other City projects. "With the economy, the bid prices are coming in quite a bit lower than they had just a couple years ago, so the unit prices for asphalt and concrete and base material are significantly low," Finton said.

Moe told the Council that the City has received \$155,800 to replace regular streetlights with higher efficiency induction lighting for streets and parking lots, and the replacement process will begin early next year. Finton said that the County has received stimulus funds to replace incandescent street signal lighting with LED lights in areas including unincorporated cities like Manhattan Beach. The retrofits are worth \$200,000. "There's energy savings but there's also a maintenance benefit because the LEDs last a lot longer," Finton said.

The police department, which has two vacant police officer positions, will receive \$24,678 in stimulus funds sometime this fall. "[Chief Rod Uyeda] and his department are really active in chasing down many grant opportunities on a regular basis," Moe said.

The money will be spent on equipment and technology to enhance DUI enforcement and officer safety. The department has applied for other stimulus funds as well, including funding for narcotics investigations and money to pay for a DNA criminalist to be shared with other South Bay cities.

Manhattan Beach has also received grant money from state and local agencies that it will spend on projects to be implemented over the next several years. Finton explained that the way the grants usually work is that the City is expected to match part of whatever money it receives for projects, anywhere from 10 to 35 percent. Upcoming grant-funded projects are in the works, including Strand stair renovations, widening the Sepulveda Bridge and widening part of Rosecrans Avenue near Redondo Avenue.

Local organizations have also given the City grants, like the Manhattan Beach Property Owners' Association, which gave the City a \$203,609 grant to purchase an emergency command vehicle for the police department. The Higgins Family Charitable Foundation has given the department a \$26,500 grant to purchase an emergency command vehicle. "The City has been pretty successful compared to other cities that I've worked in," Finton said. "They've got a little bit greater success."

The CalTrans "Safe Routes to School" program is designed to increase the number of children who bike or walk to school. The City has received \$735,000 to install school signs, high visibility crosswalks and markers, and 80 countdown pedestrian signals near schools. The project will be completed in phases over the next five years in order for the improvements to be coordinated with public works' street paving schedules. "I think what it will do is it might make some of the parents feel more comfortable having their children walk to school if there's enhanced visibility for the crosswalks and if the warning signs are enhanced," Finton said.

The process of applying for grants can be time-consuming and the City sometimes hires people who specialize in applying for them. Finton said that some projects, like widening the Sepulveda Bridge, take patience on the part of City staff who will sometimes repeatedly apply for the same grant over long periods of time before achieving success. "The Sepulveda Bridge widening project--we submitted that project to the MTA at least once before and it doesn't come high enough on their priority list," Finton said. "You have to keep it on the radar and keep submitting it and keep trying to get that money." •

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