



“ Thanks to all the techno magic, fuel consumption is good for such a large and heavy car and overall you'll see around 30 mpg. ”

Lexus LS 600h

Pause awhile at any location where prestigious motorcars linger. You will find blue chip names: Audi, BMW, Bentley, Jaguar, Mercedes Benz: cars to flatter their users' image. Large and grand, they endow dignity upon their owners and the greater the glitter associated with the marque (as with the 'footballers wives' Bentley'), the more puffed up is the perceived dignity it affords.

There is one marque that only began in 1990, and yet has established a new world order in luxury cars, where heritage matters less than extraordinary attention to detail and quality. Just as discretion is a part of the Japanese character, so it is that these cars are discreet, understated – the very antonym of ostentatious – yet so technologically advanced that they don't have to look back to the past: just to the future with conviction.

We are talking here about Lexus – and in particular the LS600h, a performance hybrid version of their flagship saloon.

It's built to provide wealthy customers with serene and seamless transportation in ultra-luxury – and yet even though it is the most

expensive Lexus ever at £81,400, any plutocrat riding in one can rest secure in the knowledge that even though their choice of carriage is not helping to save the great crested newt, it does qualify as a Super Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (SULEV) and therefore, is nearer to nature than nasty V12 propelled models from rival manufacturers.

Appearing at a recycling committee meeting of the local allotment association, I found that alarmed expressions eventually turned to benign approval once the eco-credentials of this awesome machine were recognised. And so it is that once you understand how Lexus has reset the luxury liner standard with the truly amazing LS600h, you will never again think that hybrids are horrid.

It's undoubtedly a big car – but not overly big. Thoroughly modern in style, clean lined and simply drawn, it is strikingly handsome with looks to match and beat European rivals – a balanced car that sits well on the road.

From the moment you pull open the door to reveal lavish luxury, you realise that the experience awaiting

will be one of the finest available. There's a pleasant, light and relaxed feeling to an interior that is a paragon of good taste. Yet the appeal is much more than superficial: the Lexus is loaded with equipment ranging from power everything to a symphony hall Mark Levinson surround sound system that is the finest I have experienced.

Leather seats – heated and cooled of course – are so comfortable that you'd be hard pressed to find anything better in any car. And for your hands, the leather and wood steering wheel is heated too. It goes without saying that there are abundant safety systems, and every possible aid to make the LS600h totally user-friendly and protective. There's even a voice-activated satellite navigation system. For the ultimate in luxury you can have the Rear Seat Relaxation Pack if you choose the long wheelbase L version – a special relaxation seat in which you can enjoy a Shiatsu, shoulder and lower back acupuncture massage, thanks to remotely controlled air pockets in the seat.

While you relax in warmth and comfort, possibly watching a movie on the ceiling-mounted LCD wide screen,

Jaguar's new generation X-Type



The Jaguar X-TYPE gets a fresh new look along with a host of new features inside and outside the vehicle and a new automatic transmission in the acclaimed 2.2 diesel. With significant revisions including nearly 500 new components, the new generation X-TYPE retains all the original car's strengths, and adds some new ones of its own.

'The new X-TYPE stands for accessibility, versatility, luxury and choice within the Jaguar range,' said CJ O'Donnell, Global Marketing Director, Jaguar Cars. 'The package of revisions – particularly the automatic transmission in the 2.2 diesel – presents our established dealers and the key emerging markets with an excellent opportunity to reach new customers and retain existing owners.'

The new X-TYPE's exterior styling is significantly refreshed, with changes that clearly reflect some of Jaguar's new saloon car design language, while subtle interior revisions give more choice of trim and equipment, to further emphasise its luxury car credentials.

For the first time in this model range, the new X-TYPE offers the combination of diesel power with automatic transmission – pairing the 2.2 litre diesel with a six-speed automatic, and the one-touch control of Jaguar Sequential Shift – broadening the new model's appeal to buyers who previously could not have this combination in an X-TYPE.

The new X-TYPE automatic diesel combines superb refinement with optimised performance and economy, and promises more choice and even greater luxury, to appeal especially to a younger, more family-orientated audience.

other travellers who are not sybarites, can enjoy bracing conditions controlled by the four-zone air conditioning. In this remarkable car there's cleverness everywhere.

Should the mood take you and you require perfect peace, then you may switch off the entertainment system and sit in sepulchral serenity: wind noise muted to a sigh and vibration stanchied totally, as you enjoy an almost ethereal experience. You could cross continents in one of these, but you couldn't take much with you because boot space is reduced to accommodate the battery pack.

"But what does it go like?" I hear you ask. Well – as you would expect, it's no lightweight, being such a technological tour de force. The hybrid power train features a 5.0-litre, V8 petrol engine, two high output electric motors and a battery pack. These give a combined output of more than 430 bhp driving through a continuously variable transmission which is seamlessly smooth as it switches between its infinite number of gear ratios. This is in conjunction with all-wheel-drive and adaptive variable suspension – and to quote the car's chief engineer, the LS600h is 'the realisation of everything'.

You get an optimum blend of performance (top speed is limited to 155 mph) efficiency and refinement – a paradox resolved it seems.

With all that performance in a big car, safety is paramount. Needless to say, being one of the world's most technically advanced cars, you get special systems that would be a credit to NASA. There's even a pre-crash safety system which uses radar to detect trouble ahead and apply the brakes, should the inattentive driver have failed to respond to alerts. A camera also monitors driver head

movement and should he/she start to nod off, systems jump to attention to batten down hatches and activate the Pre-Crash Intelligent Headrests. Short of being targeted by a missile you are pretty safe in an LS600h, and at journey's end, the Intelligent Park Assist System can take over and do your parking for you.

Tootle around town and you're all electric, but when performance is needed, electric motors and engine combine. With electric motors of course, maximum torque is instant so the step off from standstill is certainly vivid: 60 mph comes up in around 6 seconds.

Big cars like this are often bloaty rather than balletic when the roads turn twisty, but surprisingly the Lexus flows effortlessly through bends, giving a good feeling to the driver – this is no car for world weary drivers in sad grey suits: it's solid, neutral and drama free, with a dynamic repertoire that is well rounded. What I remember most though is the sheer equanimity when driven hard – just the job for a chap who insists on total comfort, but has sometimes to 'crack on' at a pace. The Lexus reduces driver stress – the most consistent barrier to sustained performance – to a minimum.

It's certainly a mellifluous machine that never seems to have to exert itself to do anything demanded of it, ratifying that Earl who once said that 'the mark of a true aristocrat is effortless superiority' – and superior it is to some of its more recognised rivals.

That's what you get with a Lexus 600h – an eloquent car that looks to the future with conviction. A pointer to a splendid motoring tomorrow perhaps?

Simon Taylor

