

Rolling With the Leisure Class

By Roger Witherspoon



It was late, storming, and the lightning produced an effect like hyperactive strobe lights on a disco dance floor, alternating between too bright to see and too dark for your eyes to adjust. The single lane road climbing in a series of S-curves some 400 feet from the floor of the Hudson River Valley was awash with overflowing streams and rain slashing down at two inches per hour.

Not that it mattered. Inside the Lexus RX 350, there was little to disturb the soft sounds of Miles Davis flowing from the car's dozen speakers. Even the intermittent cannonade of thunder could not penetrate the heavily insulated windows.

If I could have avoided the storm, I would have preferred to. When I started the car, the soft voice from the navigation system said "storm warnings in your area," and a Doppler map was superimposed on the street map, showing both my preferred route home and the areas encompassed by the storm. There was no way around it, since I needed to take the Bear Mountain Bridge just a few miles south of West Point. But if I had had time for a really wide detour, a simple voice command would have found a scenic, dry route home.

It is not quite like the image portrayed in the Lexus commercials, where at the touch of a button, traffic, buildings, and bad weather magically lift off of the ground and move out of the way. But sometimes, in the RX, it feels that way.



It is difficult to find a more complete or satisfying crossover SUV under \$50,000 without jumping into the \$60,000+ class of the Porsche Cayenne or Infiniti FX. There is little that you can imagine you would want in a car-based, mid-sized SUV or well appointed sedan which you can't find in the RX 350. And the electronic system which makes it all work is intuitive, easy to use,

and comprehensive. It does not break new ground in exterior design the way, for example, a Ford Flex does. But in the category of crossover SUVs, it is sleek, externally eye catching, and has an interior attention to detail which makes it spacious, comfortable, and appealing.

Under the hood is a 275 horsepower V-6 engine which isn't intended for drag racing, but can push the RX into triple digits – which is faster than most SUV drivers care to go. More importantly the RX, with traction and stability control, and all wheel drive, feels and handles like a sedan rather than a top heavy SUV. As a result, you don't hold your breath on highway curves while praying the car won't roll over.

Inside, what's not to like about the RX?

Electronically, the innovations are small, but notable. The command center utilizes a thumb-operated joystick, a feature which can usually be cumbersome and annoying while driving. But this one sits at the end of an ergonomically designed hand rest – which, in itself, is a bonus on long or short trips – and the “Enter” buttons are on the sides, where the thumb and small fingers naturally drape. As a result, operating the command system – for setting the navigation, the phone, climate controls or audio – becomes virtually an automatic function instead of a distraction to overcome.

The 8-inch video screen is recessed deep into the dash, so it is more in line with the driver's vision than one which is further forward, as is usually the case. This makes it easier to see without diverting your gaze from the front of the road.

There is a drawback. The feature seen regularly in the commercial, in which the navigation system helps the driver avoid traffic and other problems, is only partially effective while the car is in motion. The pleasant woman robot will tell you that there are serious storm warnings in the area, and the map gives you an option of ignoring it or putting it up on the regional map so you can, perhaps, plot a route around it. But if you choose to view the Doppler radar, the system tells you it can't show it while you are moving. That is more annoying than useful if you are on a highway or on a potentially disrupted commute and pulling off the road is not practical. There are some functions in the imposed safety system which the designers should let the driver override.

But that is a minor complaint.

For entertainment, the system allows a lot. The in-dash system music loads six CD's into a 12-speaker surround sound system and, at the touch of a button, you can record the entire CD or preferred cuts from it. The center console's arm rest, which can slide forward for comfort, hides a three level storage bin. The small top cup can hold not much more than a cell phone or electronic toll pass. But the main, removable storage box, which is about nine inches deep, is large enough to hold CDs, purses and other items. But if you lift that box out, there are two 12-volt power outlets for electronic chargers, as well as USB and iPod ports. These are next to a discreet, built-in niche which allows external access to the wiring.

There is also XM satellite radio, as well as the standard AM/FM. The seats are soft, ventilated leather, and can be either heated or air cooled, depending on the season. The front seats are powered and adjustable. The rear seats can manually recline or, with the push of a button, fold flat to expand the large cargo area. The rear seats have enough head and leg room for the average professional basketball player.

The interior décor has two tone leather and real wood accents, something you don't always find on vehicles with a price tag under \$50,000.

There are the two center cup holders in the console, but there is also one to the left of the steering wheel. The leather-wrapped steering wheel, which has fingertip controls for the phone, information center, entertainment center, and adaptive cruise command, tilts and telescopes, and automatically retracts when the engine is turned off.

The RX won't move mountains out of your way. But if you're driving an RX on the long route around or through the mountains, you really don't mind.



2010 Lexus RX 350

MSRP:		\$48,061
EPA Mileage:	18 MPG City	24 MPG Highway
Towing Capacity:		3,500 Pounds
Top Speed:		112 MPH

Performance/ Safety:

3.5-Liter aluminum DOHC V-6 engine producing 275 horsepower and 257 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; all wheel drive; 4-wheel, power assisted, ventilated front & solid rear disc brakes; 4-wheel anti-lock brake system; stability and traction controls; backup camera; 19-inch sport-finish alloy wheels; sport tuned suspension; bi-xenon adaptive headlights; intelligent high beams; dual front airbags; knee airbags; rear side curtain airbags.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM XM satellite radio; 12-speaker audio system; 6-disc, in-dash CD player; MP3, iPod, and USB port connections; navigation system with XM weather and traffic and 8-inch LCD screen; Bluetooth cell phone connection; voice activation for phone, navigation, and entertainment; tilt & telescope, leather steering wheel with fingertip entertainment, cruise, and phone controls; power moonroof; power, heated or cooled, front seats; folding or reclining rear seats; dual climate controls with rear vents; wood interior trim; roof rails.