

Shifting Gears

[Irene and the Hybrid Lexus CT](#)

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By Roger Witherspoon

It was the gray calm after the storm.

The torrential rains from Hurricane Irene's slamming northern side passed through the Lower Hudson River valley in the early morning light, leaving an uneasy calm, a roiling river, and an unpredictable string of roads blocked by downed trees and rampaging streams. The Hudson River swallowed the wide expanse of Peekskill's Riverside Park and splashed against the empty Metro North station as if waiting for a train that was never going to come.

Which made it an interesting day for a drive. Normally, in an unpredictable landscape like this, one would like to be behind the wheel of a Jeep or Toyota's go-anywhere FJ Cruiser. But the car of the day was a hybrid hatchback, the Lexus CT200h, which is billed as a luxury compact for all purpose family driving.



The beginning of the trip was auspicious enough. The Bear Mountain Extension's narrow causeway across Annsville Creek – one of the Hudson River's many, small, nondescript inlets – was half flooded, with the road west towards the Bear Mountain Bridge completely under water. Eastbound, however, on Route 9 looked like a promising trip, since there were only a few meandering streams winding under the road towards the Hudson. But not today. A mile past Annsville the eastbound lane hosted a large, horizontal, elm, and the westbound roadway had become an uninterrupted set of fast-moving rapids undermining the eastbound roadway. If there had been a shoulder, it was long gone.

I was glad the Lexus hybrid was a compact, and not a big SUV, since there was not a lot of room to turn around on what was left of the two-lane roadway. And it helped that in reverse the sharp, color cameras in the bumper take over and the map in the seven-inch, pop-up, navigation screen on the dash is replaced by a crystal clear view of the road behind the car. In a shopping center, the camera serves the safety function of helping the driver avoid backing over small children. In this case, it let me see where the road ended and the rushing water began.

The compact was not designed to bound over downed tree trunks or large branches, or ford deep, fast moving streams. But its traction and stability controls were sufficient to keep the Lexus moving straight down Route 9, even though the swollen streams were now flowing across the road, covering it with an inch or so of rushing water.



As a go-anywhere family car, the Lexus CT200h is an interesting blend, and the company seems intent on developing a new genre of vehicle – the luxury compact. As a compact car, the CT 200h has a lot to offer in terms of comfort, convenience, and performance and clearly stands out in the tiny car field. But with a price just south of \$40,000, it's going to have to compete with much larger, sportier, more comfortable, cars like the Chrysler 200 or Lexus' corporate cousin, the Toyota Camry, as well as

small, sporty, SUVs like the turbo-charged Nissan Juke.

In terms of styling, the CT 200h is low and sleek, with subtle ridges and lines giving it more character than the typical, low budget compact. It is about the size of a Honda Civic, but has a stubby hatchback instead of a long sloping one. And though the rear window on both cars contain windshield wipers, the window on the Lexus can't open. That can be a drawback if you try to haul long cargo which, on the Civic and some other compact vehicles, would stick out the rear window. But with the rear seats folded down, the Lexus CT is long enough to hold a half dozen, eight-foot stakes that lay across on the arm rest and nestled against the passenger side of the center console.

There isn't much under the hood, either. The primary power plant is a 1.8-liter, four-cylinder gasoline engine and an electric motor which, combined, provide 134 horsepower. While compact cars are not generally known for power plants, one might expect more of a compact costing nearly \$40,000 – which is about what you'd pay for a Lincoln MKZ. That hybrid power plant will take about 10 seconds to propel the CT200 from 0 to 60 miles per hour, which means you need to have a lot of space before trying to cut into traffic. It does offer a shift between a more responsive sport mode, or a more ecologically friendly normal driving mode. The most notable change in sport mode is that the instrument panel lighting changes from blue to red, and the hybrid power indicator changes into a tachometer.

On the other hand, the Lexus can drive on just the battery power at up to 28 miles an hour, and the hybrid combination gets an EPA estimated 40 miles per gallon of gasoline on the highway, and 43 miles per gallon in city driving. And one doesn't usually buy a compact if you are looking for a performance car.



Inside, the Lexus luxury compact has a lot going for it. To begin with, despite being a compact, it is extremely comfortable and roomy, with enough leg room in the rear for the average six-footer. The seats are soft leather, and the front set can be heated. Only the driver's seat is power operated, however – the front passenger has the limited manual seats.

Its navigation system is especially easy to use, featuring the company's new "Lexus Enform." This is an interactive program which lets you sit at home at your computer,

input up to 200 addresses or destinations you want to use, and upload them all to the car's navigation system. The addresses can be placed into a maximum of 20 individualized folders with titles such as "Favorite Restaurants" or "relatives" or camp sites. The navigation system also ties with the satellite radio to offer XM updated traffic and weather.

The sound system utilizes 10 speakers – more than enough to envelop the small cabin in a blanket of sound. There is a six-disc CD changer, AM/FM and XM



satellite radio, as well as connections for flash drives, iPods, and MP3 devices. The car has a traditional slot in the console to hold a cell phone, or you can use a plug-in, adjustable holder to contain your cell phone or iPod. The gadget sticks up on the console and takes some getting used to. But it does make the device convenient to see and use, and holds it firmly in place.

Whether Lexus can succeed in creating the luxury compact market, particularly in this economy, will be an interesting experiment. But Lexus put a lot of thought into the CT 200h and, if there is a market for such a category, it will set the standard for competitors.



2011 Lexus CT 200h

MSRP:

\$38,725

EPA Mileage:

43 MPG City

40 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

0 – 60 MPH

9.8 Seconds

Top Speed

113 MPH

1.8-Liter, in-line, 4-cylinder, DOHC gasoline engine and electric motor, producing 134 horsepower and 105 pound/feet of torque; 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels; 4-wheel independent suspension; 4-wheel, power assisted, front & rear disc brakes; anti-lock brakes; stability and traction controls; front driver and passenger knee airbags; front side impact airbags, side curtain airbags; fog lamps, backup camera; rear windshield wiper.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; tilt & telescope leather steering wheel with audio and cruise controls; heated front seats; 7-inch navigation screen; Lexus Enform navigation destination system; Bluetooth; 6-disc CD player; MP3, iPod, and USB connections; Lexus audio with 10 speakers.