

Shifting Gears

[Cruising in a Luxury Liner: The Lexus GS 350](#)

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By Roger Witherspoon

Peel me a grape, crush me some ice

Skin me a peach, save the fuzz for my pillow

Talk to me nice, talk to me nice

You've got to wine me, and dine me

Don't try to fool me, bejewel me.

Either amuse me, or lose me

I'm getting hungry,

Peel me a grape.

The highway was empty, the road was hard and dry, and the New England sun was setting in a warm, orange cloudscape that seemed out of season on a cold winter night.

My wife leaned forward in the passenger seat, her head cocked at an angle, listening

intently. She glanced periodically at the back seat through eyes that were at half mast as she nodded to the beat of the music. She had heard Diana Krall croon “*Peel Me a Grape*” before. But not like this.

Pop me a cork, French me a fry

Crack me a nut bring a bowl full of bon-bons

Chill me some wine. Keep standing by

Just entertain me. Champagne me

Show me you love me. Kid glove me

Best way to cheer me. Cashmere me

I’m getting hungry.

Peeeeel me.

“I don’t understand,” said Marilyn in a voice barely above a whisper, as if trying not to interrupt a performance. “It sounds like we’re in a live cabaret, and she’s in the back seat. How is that possible?”

“Well,” I whispered back, so as not to break the mood. “It’s an 845-watt sound system, and there are 17 speakers and a sound leveler to balance the music coming to each seat.”

“Aaaah,” she sighed. “That explains it. We don’t have 17 speakers in our whole house.”

At that point, (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfJ_c2tyfQo) the pianist and bassist took off in a tight, syncopated dance of their own – each note, crisp, clear, soft, and the vibrations from the bass could be felt through the thick leather padding in the Lexus’ arm rests. She was so engrossed in the private concert that she didn’t notice the speedometer had crept to 110 – an occupational hazard when driving a musically enhanced living room. Instead of admonishing me to slow down or commenting on the absence of wind noise inside the sedan, she closed her eyes, sighed and said “play it again.”

And the voice-activated audio system did just that.

Send out for scotch, boil me a crab

Cut me a rose make my tea with the petals

Just hang around, pick up the tab and

Never out think me. Just mink me,

Polar bear rug me. Don't bug me

New Thunderbird me. You heard me

I'm getting hungry.

Peel me a grape.

Sloooooowly

One doesn't buy a car for the amenities.

But if you are going to shell out more than \$60,000 for a sedan, you have a right to expect a lot more than basic, comfortable transportation. The Lexus GS-350 is a sport sedan aimed squarely at the upscale, market regularly patrolled by the BMW 535i, Mercedes E-350, Cadillac CTS, and Audi A6. It's a tough crowd with cars justly known for performance and very high levels of comfort. In this case, the high quality sound system is just one of many items Lexus hopes will let the GS stand out in a demanding marketplace.

So far, Lexus' designers seem to be doing something right. According to surveys of owner satisfaction conducted by J.D. Powers and Associates, Lexus is the highest ranking, high end nameplate in 2012, followed by Jaguar, Porsche, Cadillac and Honda, in that order. That's a tough crowd to lead, and aside from the price, they have nothing in common.



The look of the GS starts with its split, black, angular grill featuring sharp edges pointing towards the center and flaring widely towards the bottom. It's an image vaguely reminiscent of ancient Samurai headgear, which flares towards the neck and shoulders. From that aggressive face follows a sleek, flowing silhouette, with soft lines along the sides resembling the tracery of water droplets across a fast-moving plane. The lines aren't all for subliminal

design – they serve to channel the airflow past the car and are part of the reason the interior is a silent theater.

Under that sloping hood is a 3.5-liter V-6 engine capable of cranking out 306 horsepower and 277 pound-feet of torque. That places the Lexus about in the middle of the V-6 power plants of the BMW 535i, Mercedes E350, Cadillac CTS, and Audi A6, which put out between 300 and 310 horsepower. And with a top speed of 142 miles per hour, the Lexus is likely to run with, rather than ahead of its competitors.

On the road the Lexus, with all wheel drive, yields nothing to its competitors in terms of performance. It has a six-speed automatic transmission which shifts without any noticeable or audible lag. And for an extra boost in passing, particularly uphill, there is a sport manual mode and paddle shifts on the steering column providing the type of instant response one finds in a quality sports car.

Where Lexus hopes to make its mark is inside, where the people are. And they gave more than a little thought to that experience, punctuated by a real, analog clock in the



center of the dash.

The décor is leather and dark, polished wood, accented by brushed aluminum trim and, at night, set off by soft tracteries of light. While the exterior design is aggressive, the interior is all soft surfaces and rounded edges. The armrests, for example, curve outward and resemble padded leather shelves rather than the standard door appendage. This is an all-weather car, and the seats in the front and rear can be heated if it's cold or the passenger is just sore and seeks a soothing, hot compress. In the summer, the ventilated leather front seats can also be air cooled. A push of a button also heats the steering wheel. The front seats and the wide sunroof are all power adjustable.

The rear seats have enough legroom for a pair of women basketball players and enough headroom to accommodate any variety of hair styles. There is a push-button sunscreen for the rear windshield, and manually operated screens for each of the rear windows. There are also separate climate controls for the occupants in the back seat.

The centerpiece of the rolling dashboard is a 12.3-inch color screen, which is split into a seven-inch navigation screen and a five-inch section for the active systems in the car, such as

the climate and audio. It's a thoughtful adaptation which is appreciated on trips through strange cities since you do not have to drop the on-screen map in order to adjust the music or temperature. And, for old eyes, it's extremely easy to see.

There is a backup camera, but the placement is a bit awkward. The camera is near the dual exhaust, and the view is cloudy at night when the exhaust fumes are more pronounced. During the day, however, the view is crystal clear.



The GS also comes with a number of safety features. The Lexus' heads-up display, an amenity normally found in GM's Cadillac and Corvette, provides a hologram that appears on the hood in front of the driver, displaying the speedometer and changes in music or temperature. There is a dynamic cruise control, which adjusts to the speed of the car in front of the Lexus. In addition, there is an infrared camera focused on the driver's eyes. If the distance between the Lexus and another car is closing too fast, and the driver is not looking forward, the car sounds an alert. If the driver does not respond the Lexus will automatically begin braking, tightening seat belts, and readying air bags 1.2 seconds before the actual collision to lessen its impact.

Lexus' redesign of the GS sedan was necessary if it is to keep up with an innovative, high performing pack. The GS has a lot going for it. To what extent it can outmuscle the competition remains to be seen.

2013 Lexus GS 350

MSRP:

\$63,232

EPA Mileage:

19 MPG City

26 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

0 – 60 MPH

5.8 Seconds

Top Speed

142 MPH

3.5-Liter, DOHC, direct injection, V-6 aluminum engine producing 306 horsepower and 274 pound-feet of torque; all-wheel drive; 6- speed automatic transmission; electronic manual mode with paddle shifters; independent double wishbone front suspension; independent multi-link rear suspension; 4-wheel, ventilated disc brakes; stability and traction control; b-xenon headlights with automatic leveling; fog lamps; heads-up display; blind spot monitor; lane departure monitor; 18-inch alloy wheels; driver and front passenger knee bags; dual front airbags; side impact and curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/XM satellite radio; 17-speaker, 835-watt, Mark Levinson Premium Surround Sound, Bluetooth; iPod, MP3, and USB ports; CD player; voice activated navigation system with 12.3-inch split color screen; backup camera; heated front and rear seats; leather and wood, heated, tilt and telescoping steering wheel with fingertip audio, Bluetooth and cruise controls; powered sunroof.

