

First-Class Travelers

Just as the luxury-sedan category was bumping its head on excellence, the ceiling got raised.

BY PATRICK BEDARD

Could it be? The in-depth selection of four-doors newly available and popularly priced at 60 large has escaped your attention?

Tsk, tsk.

While you weren't looking, automakers have been particularly energetic in this rarefied stratum—three new entries within the last few months. Comparison test, anyone?

For the record, placing the seats of our trou against this much leather for the better part of a thousand miles—through metro congestion, over inter-

states, and into the mountain twisties—is not a job we dread.

Still, such exquisite choices have agonies of their own. Dom Perignon or Perrier-Jouet? That only begins to suggest the dueling delights of this 60-grand class.

From Lexus, a brand that's zoomed from skepticism ("Sure, the Japanese are great at little cars, but...") to worldwide admiration in about two weeks, we have a reengineered

LS400. Not, mind you, that the old one had grown tiresome in the five years since its debut.

Also from Japan, and modestly reworked last year, is the Infiniti Q45. We always look forward to the 278-

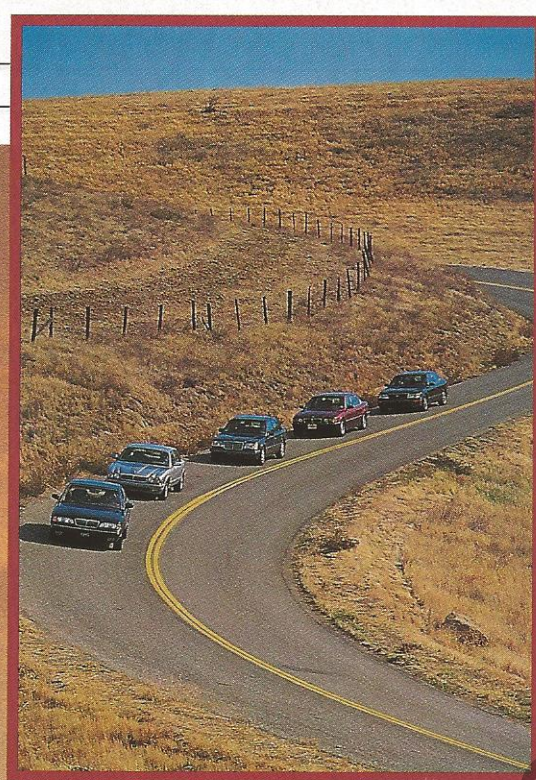


PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DEWHURST

horsepower rush of the Q's four-cam 4.5-liter V-8.

From Jaguar of Coventry we have a refreshed XJ6, now looking very much like Jaguar's previous classic, the XJ6 introduced in the late Sixties. Merely parking one of those aging beauties in a driveway has been known to lift property values for blocks around.

Still warm from its Munich bakery is an all-new BMW 7-series, the V-8-powered 740i. BMW kneaded and stretched the sheetmetal into a muscular, wide-stance shape that looks the same as before, only better. If this company has any doubts about what BMWs should look like, they never show.



Facing these newcomers is a car that's constant as Gibraltar and just about as old: the Mercedes-Benz E420. Oh, sure, the model number has been uplifted—it was 400E when we last tested it as a 1993 model—and the price has been chopped nearly \$4500. (Mercedes discovered that price sensitivity extends all the way up to the automotive stratosphere.) Are these minor tweaks enough to keep this veteran, with its new-in-1985 body, alive and vital against the best efforts of four other world-class makers?

Comparison tests were invented to answer tougher questions than that. So let's move into the ratings section, where answers abound.



Infiniti Q45

Highs: Silken V-8 sings to 6900, good visibility all around.

Lows: Indecisive steering, illogical small controls, slippery leather seats.

The Verdict: A powerful player that's a little unsure of its mission.

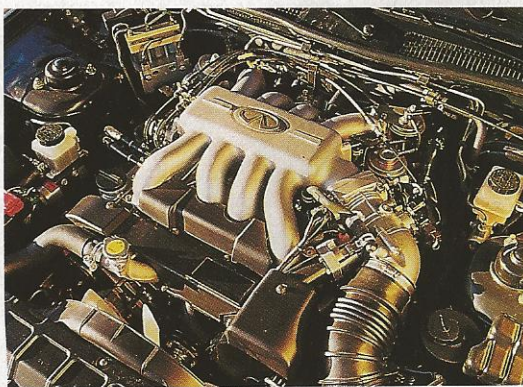
Fifth Place Infiniti Q45

The Q45 that debuted in the 1990 model year was a heroic nonconformist. It hustled down the road with muscular grace that stood out in this comfort class, and it showed a smooth face to a world that expects luxury cars to present their credentials in the form of a recognizable grille. It also refused to decorate the interior with wood.

Although we were charmed by that car, affluent buyers contained their enthusiasm, and Nissan has been backing away from the original definition ever since. A chrome grille appeared in 1993, there's wood now, and the suspension keeps getting softer.

This current Q finishes in fifth place largely because the muscle tone of its suspension doesn't meet the needs of enthusiastic driving. When spending this much, we expect a car to do it all. This one's suspension reaches the end of its travel too easily, a severe impairment to handling, and the steering is uncommunicative. As it's turned off-center, the steering effort tapers up too gradually to give a sense of what the front wheels are doing. So hurrying into turns is less secure than it needs to be.

Perhaps a footnote is in order here. On the fast California mountain roads where we conducted this test, the Q45 would likely have benefited from one of the two handling options Infiniti offers: the Touring Package (\$3795) with a stiffer suspension and performance wheels and tires, or the Full-Active Suspension (\$7645), which interacts with the road in a way that



keeps the car within the suspension's sweet spot. In past tests, both of these versions behaved impressively. Unfortunately, neither option was available to us. Still, we need to be careful in extrapolating the past, because the rear-steering feature is deleted from the Touring option as

of this model year. The Q's muscle loss is clearly intentional.

In this base version, the slippery leather on the seats always worked against our sense of control. The bucket's contour is properly shaped for cruising, but even there the slick surface is off-putting.

The Q45 is the big guy of this group, two inches longer than the second-longest (Jaguar) and a foot beyond the compact Mercedes. Trunk room and rear-seat room are about average for the class. Rear passengers will find the bottoms of the front seats tight on their toes.

The big V-8 remains as satisfying as it always has been. While it didn't top the charts in any tests other than street start, its sound and midrange thrust are particularly fine, and the 146-mph top speed will keep you ahead of any carjacker that doesn't catch you at a traffic light.

This Q45's small controls are not handy. The seats move with a series of door-mounted rocker switches that require full attention to operate. Controls for the front windows are neatly placed high on the door armrests, a long way from the rear-window controls on the

center console.

For now, this standard-suspension Q45 finds itself in an awkward position: no longer the intriguing nonconformist, yet not quite effortlessly mainstream either. For now we say, "Drive the optional suspensions and call us in the morning."

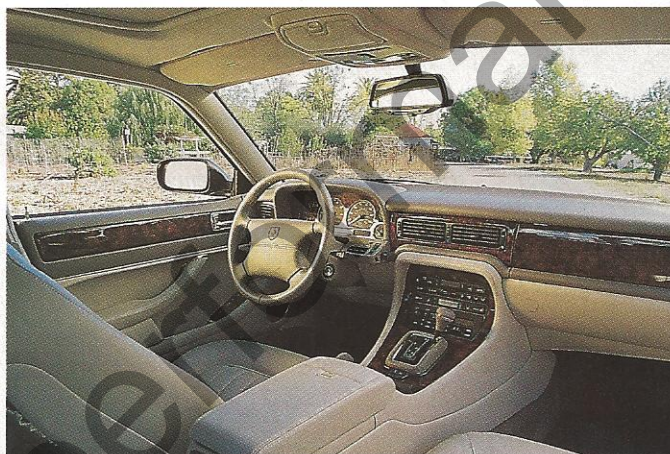


Jaguar XJ6

Highs: High style, worth the price just for the driver's-eye view out over the artfully sculptured hood.

Lows: Tight cockpit, limited rear-seat space, engine no match for the V-8s.

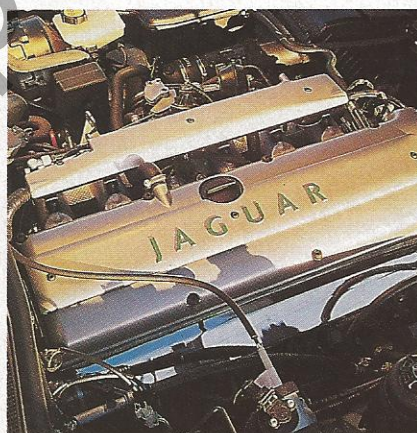
The Verdict: There'll always be an England.



Fourth Place Jaguar XJ6

When you unroll 60 large for an automobile, it ought to haul your temporal self down the road like precious cargo and lift your spirits above the moon. All of the candidates here score high marks on the former, but the way this Jaguar frames your view of the distance, then delivers it to you on a tray formed by its artfully sculptured hood, is an aesthetic treat the others can't match. The shiny mascot leads, crouched beyond the sheetmetal horizon, so low and purposeful you see hardly more than its head and powerful shoulders. Off to the sides, the brows curving over each headlight remind that a Jaguar is not another sterile exercise in aerodynamic efficiency. This is a *motorcar*, and its arrival should gladden hearts and vanquish gloom.

Jaguar's newly reshaped XJ6 is, first



and last, about style. And no one can deny its success. It's not, however, about interior space. Its roofline is 2.6 to 3.4 inches lower than the others, and it's narrower than all but the Mercedes. The front is snugly compartmented—one person on

each side of the prominent tunnel. In back, knee and head room are ungenerous. The car's tapering tail makes the trunk small, too. The luxury of this car is in the wood and leather appointments, not in the available space.

This four-door is not about performance either, although it does surprisingly well, given that its 3980cc in-line six has the lowest output of the group (245 hp at 4700 rpm). Credit the happy partnership with its four-speed automatic, which seems always ready with just-in-time downshifts whenever a burst of acceleration is needed. Working together, this power team kept the Jag ahead of the much more powerful BMW to 60 mph (8.1 seconds vs. 8.4) and pulled to a top speed of 139 mph—12 mph above the two German cars, which were held back by governors.

Unlike the V-8s of the other cars, which seem to make no sound until called upon for full or nearly full power, the Jaguar's six hums a low and soothing note on the interstate.

Jaguar partisans watch anxiously these days, wondering if Ford, owner since 1990, will fumble away the Jaguarness that makes this brand so unlike all others. Not so far, we say. We do notice a Detroit-style sunglasses compartment overhead now, and in a compulsive

quest to organize, the central-locking button has been grouped with, and therefore lost in, an array of similarly shaped buttons in the center of the dash. But the wood and leather are at least as fine as before. Some small controls, such as those for the power seats, are vastly more logical and convenient. Ford stepped up to the tooling bill necessary to restyle the exterior skin, to bring back the headlight brows that had been discontinued and to add a seductive curve to the trunk lid.

The XJ6 has gained neatly crafted subtleties, too. To open the trunk from outside, a press of the cat face above the license plate triggers an electric release. And as the lid rises, hidden gas struts slow its upward swing to a stately halt as it reaches the top of its travel. And we're happy *not* to report any electrical problems of the sort that plagued last month's prototype XJR.

Work remains to be done, however.

BMW 740i

Highs: Plush interior, lush freeway ride, and hushed V-8 add up to lavish transit.

Lows: Heavy on gimmicks, particularly in the electronic manipulation of the five-speed automatic.

The Verdict: BMW veers off in the Lexus direction with mixed results.



This car has a nervousness as speeds approach 100 mph, in crosswinds or on uneven blacktops, that makes its path less straight than the others. It feels like deflection steer, perhaps the unintended by-product of suspension-isolation rubber.

Still, this is easily the best Jaguar ever, with stylistic refinements that can only

draw more admirers to the fold.

Third Place BMW 740i

This all-new sedan elicited wholly unexpected responses from the testing jury. The BMW partisans among us liked it less than they had expected—less, even,

than the car it replaces in some respects (steering feel, for one), while those who take a show-me approach to BMWs became smiling converts by the second day of driving.

The difference between these two polarized opinions has to do with what we expect of a \$60,000 four-door and what we

C/D Test Results		acceleration, sec							top speed, mph	braking, 70-0 mph, ft	
		0-60 mph	0-100 mph	0-120 mph	1/4-mile	street start, 5-60 mph	top gear, 30-50 mph	top gear, 50-70 mph			
	BMW 740i	8.4	20.6	35.5	16.6 @ 90 mph	8.6	4.0	4.8	127 (governed)	181	
	INFINITI Q45	7.8	20.0	32.0	16.1 @ 91 mph	7.7	4.3	4.7	143 (drag limited)	187	
	JAGUAR XJ6	8.1	21.3	39.0	16.3 @ 88 mph	8.2	3.6	4.8	139 (drag limited)	189	
	LEXUS LS400	7.8	18.9	28.4	15.8 @ 92 mph	8.5	3.9	4.6	156 (drag limited)	182	
	MERCEDES-BENZ E420	7.3	18.2	27.8	15.7 @ 93 mph	7.8	3.3	4.5	127 (governed)	185	
	TEST AVERAGE	7.9	19.8	32.5	16.1 @ 91 mph	8.2	3.8	4.7	138	185	

Vital Statistics

	price, base/ as tested	engine	SAE net power/torque	transmission/ gear ratios:1/ maximum test speed, mph/ axle ratio:1	curb weight, lb	weight distribution, % F/R
BMW 740i	\$60,952/ \$66,837	DOHC 32-valve V-8, 243 cu in (3982cc), aluminum block and heads, Bosch Motronic HFM engine-control system with port fuel injection	282 bhp @ 5800 rpm 295 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm	5-speed automatic/ 3.55, 2.24, 1.54, 1.00, 0.79 44, 69, 101, 127, 127/ 3.15:1	4270	50.5/49.5
INFINITI Q45	\$54,880/ \$57,025	DOHC 32-valve V-8, 274 cu in (4494cc), aluminum block and heads, ECCS engine-control system with port fuel injection	278 bhp @ 6000 rpm 292 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm	4-speed automatic/ 2.57, 1.48, 1.00, 0.69/ 57, 98, 143, 143/ 3.54	4080	57.4/42.6
JAGUAR XJ6	\$56,178/ \$61,788	DOHC 24-valve 6-in-line, 243 cu in (3980cc), aluminum block and head, Lucas engine-control system with port fuel injection	245 bhp @ 4700 rpm 289 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm	4-speed automatic/ 2.48, 1.48, 1.00, 0.73/ 47, 79, 117, 139/ 3.58:1	4020	52.7/47.3
LEXUS LS400	\$53,593/ \$57,828	DOHC 32-valve V-8, 243 cu in (3969cc), aluminum block and heads, Toyota engine-control system with port fuel injection	260 bhp @ 5300 rpm/ 270 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm	4-speed automatic/ 2.80, 1.53, 1.00, 0.71/ 47, 86, 131, 156/ 3.62	3760	53.7/46.3
MERCEDES- BENZ E420	\$55,018/ \$55,130	DOHC 32-valve V-8, 256 cu in (4196cc), aluminum block and heads, Bosch LH-Jetronic engine-control system with port fuel injection	275 bhp @ 5700 rpm/ 295 lb-ft @ 3900 rpm	4-speed automatic/ 3.87, 2.25, 1.44, 1.00/ 50, 86, 134, 127/ 2.24	3740	54.0/46.0



expect of a BMW. This car is overtly luxurious in its poshly appointed interior, silent and sleeky ride, and Sharper Image presentation of electrickery. Some of us think those are the essential pleasures that separate 60-grand cars from 30-grand cars. The other opinion holds that BMWs are for blurring the fence posts, and any softening

(mph). The BMW's cornering grip tops the charts at 0.79 g, but the dynamic capability of the suspension loses that advantage to the degree that in the emergency lane-change test, this car barely stays ahead of the last-place Jaguar. Our ratings scatter when it comes to the subjective details of steering response and high-speed confi-

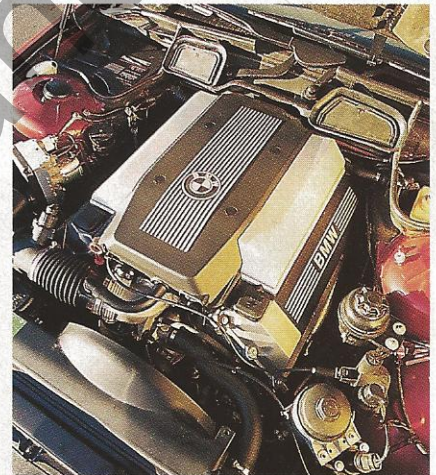
dence. The BMW partisans want more steering effort, more athletic feel. The luxury advocates think it's just fine the way it is. (For those who expect unanimity on these ratings, let us remind that Olympic judges rarely agree either.)

As a device for speed and g-forces, this 740i does not excel. It's too heavy, weighing 190 pounds more than the Infiniti (second heaviest) and 510 pounds more than the similarly luxurious Lexus. That weight impairs performance. All of the other V-8s generally outrun this BMW (in top speed, the Mercedes' governor holds to the same 127

dence. The BMW partisans want more steering effort, more athletic feel. The luxury advocates think it's just fine the way it is. (For those who expect unanimity on these ratings, let us remind that Olympic judges rarely agree either.)

Comfort seekers will rank this car very close to the new Lexus. In rear-seat room and comfort, they are closely matched and clearly better than the others. For the driver, the BMW offers a seat with true have-it-your-way hospitality. It has all the normal adjustments plus a lumbar support that can be tailored for both firmness and height. The front seatback has power articulation so that the angle of its upper portion can be set independently of its lower half, a nice trick that aids shoulder support. When you get all of these shapes just right, your personal setting can be saved in one of three memory positions.

This willingness to conform to your



roadholding, 300-ft skidpad, g	emergency lane change, mph	interior sound level, dBA				fuel economy, mpg		
		idle	full throttle	70-mph cruising	70-mph coasting	EPA city	EPA highway	C/D 700- mile trip
0.79	54.7	46	72	67	67	16	24	17
0.69	55.5	43	72	69	69	17	22	16
0.74	54.2	44	74	69	68	17	24	17
0.74	56.3	41	70	69	68	19	25	18
0.73	57.1	40	71	68	68	18	24	19
0.74	55.6	43	72	68	68	17	24	17

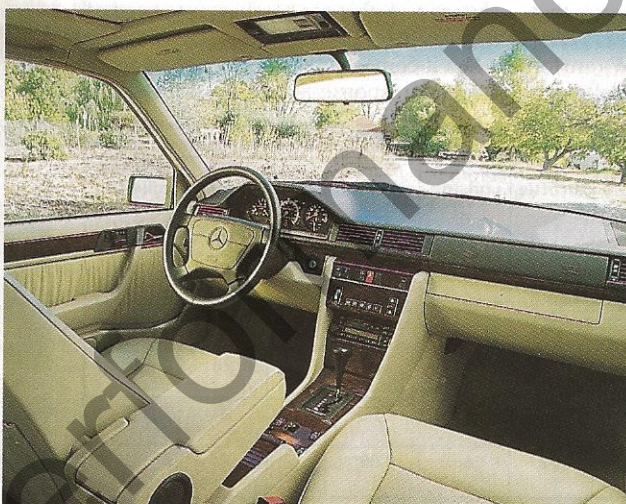
dimensions, in				fuel tank, gal	interior volume, cu ft			suspension		brakes, F/R	tires
wheel- base	length	width	height		front	rear	trunk	front	rear		
115.4	196.2	73.3	56.5	22.5	53	47	13	ind, strut located by 1 leading link, and 1 lateral link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, 1 control arm and 2 lateral links per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/ disc; anti-lock control	Michelin MXV4, 235/60HR-16
113.4	199.8	71.9	56.3	22.5	57	39	15	ind, unequal length control arms with a two-piece hub, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind; 1 diagonal link, 2 lateral links and 1 control arm per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar	vented disc/ disc; anti-lock control	Dunlop SP Sport D80 V4, P215/65VR-15
113.0	197.8	70.8	53.1	23.1	51	41	11	ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, 1 control arm and 1 fixed-length half-shaft per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/ vented disc; anti-lock control	Pirelli P4000E, 225/60ZR-16
112.2	196.7	72.0	55.7	22.5	57	45	14	ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind; 1 trailing link, 2 lateral links, and 1 control arm per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar	vented disc/ vented disc; anti-lock control	Bridgestone Turanza, 225/60VR-16
110.2	187.2	68.5	56.3	18.5	50	40	15	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, 2 lateral links and 3 diagonal links per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/ vented disc; anti-lock control	Pirelli P600, 195/65HR-15

Mercedes-Benz E420

Highs: Raw power, lots of raw power, and a sinewy chassis.

Lows: Five years behind the others in conveniences—to unlock the doors, you still need a key.

The Verdict: Potent, but with all the luxury you'd expect of Nordic Track.



Second Place Mercedes-Benz E420

Every quality our more aggressive drivers missed in the BMW they found in this car. It's tremendously, extravagantly, lustily powerful—0 to 60 mph in 7.3 seconds, 15.7 seconds and 93 mph in the quarter-mile. On the highway, a step on the pedal causes the automatic transmission to instantly bang down a gear, then the 4.2-liter V-8 engine takes it from there, heading for the horizon with an impatience that surely raises eyebrows among the cultured classes. Naturally,

we all like this part a lot.

Mercedes cars typically have a trusty feel in the twisties, and here it's heightened by compact dimensions and light weight—far less weight than all but the almost equally light Lexus.

The hedonists, though, were thoroughly unimpressed. This is a *little* car, close to ten inches shorter than the average of the others, more than two inches narrower than the Jaguar (second slimmest), and almost five inches narrower than the BMW. Except for power and price, it's just not in the same class. The interior is solemn, with thin padding over its structural bones. Luxurious little details—locking and unlocking by key-fob magic, adjustable lumbar support, sunroof, auto-dimming mirror—are simply not included for \$55,130. This is the only car in the group without cupholders.

The interior space is narrow and tall. Headroom is plentiful. The seats are well shaped and rather upright, which yields

intervention. Microswitches in the accelerator linkage trigger downshifts in the five-speed automatic—they feel unnatural. A quick dip of the accelerator causes the power to fade up like some fancy stereo. Automatic upshifts at full power are so heavily manipulated that the engine note sounds as if a real driver is lifting off the gas to shift a five-speed. All of this processing gets in the way of the real-car flavor that's made BMW famous. Yet when we want intervention enough to tug the gear selector (which initiates the sporty shift program), the difference is hardly noticeable.

For now, we think the hedonists will like this 740i better than will the hot-blooded types, and the hedonists will like it a lot.

anatomy is just one aspect of a wonderfully hedonistic interior. The contrasting doeskin and fawn-colored leathers, trimmed in furniture-grade wood-grain, suggest the opulence of a private train car. All of the contours on the dash and wheel are familiar BMW, but the execution is far warmer and more inviting than BMW (or Mercedes) have done in the past.

Both the performance and the luxury partisans do agree about many aspects of this new 740i. For example, there's too little automation in the climate-control system—the driver must manually turn on the compressor and regulate fan speed.

And in the powertrain operation, where there should be simple mechanical harmonies, we get instead blatant electronic

Rear-Seat Accommodations		with 2 passengers		with 3 passengers	
		comfort	space	comfort	space
	BMW 740i	10	10	6	8
	INFINITI Q45	6	8	2	2
	JAGUAR XJ6	6	6	4	2
	LEXUS LS400	10	10	6	6
	MERCEDES-BENZ E420	8	10	4	4
Subjective ratings in both categories were assigned by five editors on a 1-to-10 scale (10 being best).					

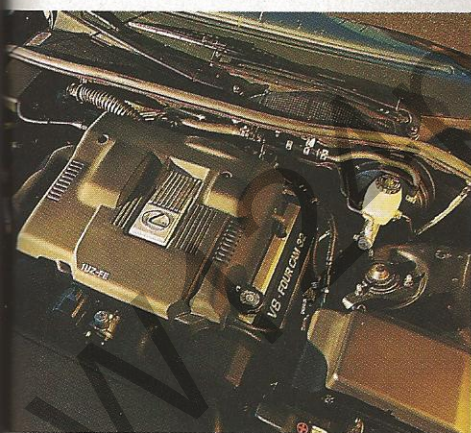


Lexus LS400

Highs: Amazing performance, amazing fuel economy, amazing back seat, amazing list of amazements.

Lows: Amazing lack of soul.

The Verdict: Good, really amazingly good, but we keep reaching for the ketchup.



stand out. The brakes, too, are firm, like well-conditioned muscles. There's a machine here, a well-oiled machine, though it's not notably eager to please. In metro traffic, the steering is lethargic, and the dated transmission resists downshifting until you press deep into the power, at which time it bangs a downshift and gives a hearty lunge forward. There's not a trace of flab in this definition of exclusive motoring, nothing but a sinewy stride over the road, surefooted on any surface.

What we're describing here is not the usual flavor of luxury, but *driving* is not the same as meekly easing down the highway, either.

First Place Lexus LS400

This newly redone Lexus earns respect more than affection, but the respect flows in such torrents that placing it anywhere but atop the heap is out of the question. The superb engineering that brought instant prestige to the original LS400 is completely surpassed here. Considering its fine accommodations, this car is very light—only 3760 pounds, a mere 20 pounds heavier than the ten-inches-shorter Mercedes. Yet the interior space is tremendous. Lengthening the wheelbase by 1.4 inches (with no change in overall length)

adequate, though by no means luxurious, kneeroom in back. Three-across seating in back is marginally more comfortable than in the Jaguar but, again, not luxurious. The trunk is large, thanks in part to the high tail.

The no-frills starkness of this car has a certain charm if only because it lets the raw power and connected-to-the-road handling

FIRST-CLASS

has brought real stretch-out room to the rear seat. Headroom is generous, too. Five of almost any size will be happy passengers in this car.

Keeping the weight low has brought excellent performance. This car runs just a tick behind the Mercedes in every test but top speed, where it easily outruns all the others (156 mph). Again, the engineers' attention to details—aerodynamics this time—tells the story: the Cd is just 0.28, best in the class. That attention results in performance *and* fuel economy. The LS400 tops the EPA ratings for this group, at 19 mpg city, 25 highway. In our driving, the Mercedes squeaked out 1 mpg more, 19 vs. 18 for the Lexus.

We find driving this car to be uninvolved, but in a way that is a compliment. It means there are no idiosyncrasies or intrusions to be noticed. Steering response is quick and correct, the brakes take up intuitively, the throttle is not jumpy, the suspension is taut rather than floaty, and the path is maintained down the interstate with little tending required of the driver. There's simply nothing to get in the way of untroubled motoring. The wind passes over the exterior shape with only a whisper. The engine, even at full power, makes just a sweetly textured purr. Small-bump harshness is surprisingly apparent if you look for it, but the impacts are so silent you may not notice. Silence envelopes this car like a blanket.

The small details inside the LS400 work beautifully too. There's a center visor over the mirror, mounted so that it swivels in any direction you choose. The seat's pneumatic lumbar support adjusts quickly—there's none of the tedious waiting for undersize compressors and orifices to do their jobs. The remote-lock fob is powerful yet tiny in your pocket. The transmission pattern is perfect for gear changes on the fly, with solid stops at both ends of the 2-3 and 3-4 shifts.

Still, we keep wondering, does perfection have to be so antiseptic? The dash is so perfectly organized that it seems too simple. There are no intrusions into the driver's space, which after a time makes the car seem standoffish and distant. The contours everywhere are so smoothly

formed that they hardly catch the eye and are quickly forgotten once we leave the car. The same is true of the exterior: the impressively low Cd says it's more pleasing to the wind, but to the eye it lacks the shapely flair of the old, less perfect model.

Now you understand the testers' agony,

and why days in the seats of the very best four-doors that man has ever created never quite draw to a blissful conclusion. This new Lexus is a high-water mark of automotive engineering. But, doggone it, if they were doing it this well, why did they stop short of compelling?



Editors' Ratings

	engine	transmission	brakes	handling	ride	ergonomics	comfort	luxury features	value	styling	fun to drive	OVERALL RATING*
BMW 740i	9	8	9	9	9	8	9	10	7	9	8	87
INFINITI Q45	9	8	8	6	7	7	8	8	7	7	7	77
JAGUAR XJ6	7	8	8	7	9	7	8	8	7	9	8	83
LEXUS LS400	9	9	9	8	8	9	9	8	9	7	8	90
MERCEDES-BENZ E420	9	9	9	9	9	8	8	6	9	7	9	88

HOW IT WORKS: Editors rate vehicles from 1 to 10 (10 being best) in each category, then scores are collected and averaged, resulting in the numbers shown above.

*The Overall Rating is not the total of those numbers. Rather, it is an independent judgment (on a 1-to-100 scale) that includes other factors—even personal preferences—not easily categorized.