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great to drive and a thoroughly satisfying ownership experience, but public perception that the original IS was a rather underpowered wannabe 3 series was tricky to overcome.

The latest model, priced from £22,445, looks set to rectify some of those shortcomings. The big news from the Lexus stand at the 2005 Geneva Show was that a diesel engine would at last be mounted under the bonnet of an IS. One of the busiest exhibitors at a show packed with new product launches, Lexus could be rightly proud of the amount of attention the new IS was attracting. Buried beneath throngs of photographers, the latest IS has to be one of the most photogenic cars ever seen in the compact executive class. If the amount of digital images captured could be converted into sales, the IS would probably outstrip BMW's latest 3 Series by two or three to one.

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Much of this is attributed to what Lexus calls its L-Finesse design philosophy. Car designers have justly developed a reputation for taking themselves rather seriously and it's not hard to see why when L-Finesse is described as being composed of three fundamental elements, Incisive Simplicity, Intriguing Elegance and Seamless Anticipation. Translated from PR speak, L-Finesse is a way of clothing the car in sheet metal that looks as if it has been shrink wrapped onto the car's frame. The end result is a very taut, muscular looking car with origami-sharp swage lines and very painstakingly finished detailing. Bigger than its predecessor by 90mm in length and 75mm in width, the latest IS looks sportier and unapologetically Japanese. Try imagining this car wearing an Audi or Saab badge. It's quite impossible.

One of the key design elements of the old IS - the chronograph style instruments - has been dropped in favour of a more conventional fascia. This means that although the quality and ergonomic excellence of the latest IS interior is virtually beyond reproach, there's now no longer a signature styling point to really catch the eye. The side air vents at first seem a little oddly positioned, but Lexus attribute this to the principle of 'Hazushi' - to 'shift out of phase'. This expresses the notion of something that is part of the whole but, at the same time, retaining its independence. A strong and independent air vent must be a happy air vent.

One complaint levelled at the old IS was the rather tight rear quarters and the addition of another 60mm to the new car's wheelbase has done much to solve this problem. Consult the specification sheet and it becomes apparent that in one fell swoop, the IS has gone from being one of the meanest in terms of rear knee room to the top of the class. One area that was rarely questioned was equipment provision and the latest car nails home its advantage yet further. You could be listening to CDs on four speakers in your BMW, or six if you're feeling a little flush when it comes to ticking the options boxes. The IS features 13 speakers as standard and a six CD autochanger that will handle MP3 and WMA files. How's that for a crushing advantage?

Two engines are offered, Lexus learning their lesson from the original IS launch. The petrol engine is a beefy 2.5-litre V6 which combines a stoichiometric direct injection system with dual VVT-i valve timing. This means that torque and power are spread widely across the rev range. You'll get 202bhp out of this engine and a torque figure of 184lb/ft at 3,800rpm. Mated to either a six-speed manual box or a six-speed auto that features paddle shift control, this engine is more powerful than direct equivalents from any of its rivals. ▶