

The Lexus LC 500h hybrid—an art deco interior and two transmissions

Enlarge / The dramatic styling of the Lexus LC makes it stand out on the road.

Jonathan Gitlin

reader comments

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The SUV and crossover remains ascendent, and few automotive body styles have fallen by the wayside like the coupe. As BMW's head designer told Ars last year, "People were prepared to make all these compromises because it was cool. And today, people still want to be cool, but they feel that perhaps those compromises are not cool."

But rather than vibes, let's put the problem in context: in 1992, Lexus sold nearly 28,000 SC coupes. The best year for the SC430—its replacement and the last car factory-fitted with a cassette player—was about half that volume. But in 2023, it's lucky to sell more than 100 LC coupes nationwide each month. Those who take the plunge will find dramatic styling inside and out, and in the case of this LC 500h, a rather intriguing hybrid powertrain.

The LC has been on sale for years—Ars first sampled one in 2018—but until now, we'd never spent more than a day with swoopy coupé and minimal time with the hybrid version.

Enlarge / 21-inch wheels come with the dynamic handling pack.
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Under that long hood, you'll find a 3.5 L Atkinson cycle V6 with variable valve timing that generates 295 hp (220 kW) and 258 lb-ft (350 Nm). There are a pair of electric motors, but only one of these sends power to the rear wheels—the other charges the hybrid system's lithium-ion traction battery. The total output from V6 and electric motor working together is 354 hp (264 kW) and 369 lb-ft (500 Nm).

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So far, that's all pretty normal for a hybrid. Things start to get a bit weirder from there, though. Mated to the engine, there's an electronically controlled continuously variable transmission and planetary gearset. The eCVT has six virtual gear ratios—yes, this defeats the point of a CVT, but that's

just how the world works. But before the driveshaft heads back to the rear wheels, there's a second transmission, which is a conventional four-speed automatic.

In practice, that gives you 10 gears, which you can control manually via the wonderfully tactile metal paddles behind the steering wheel. But truth be told, that doesn't really suit the nature of the car—instead, leave it in D and let Lexus' AI pick your ratios for you. It can be a slightly strange experience as the two transmissions shuffle up or down and engine revs change to accommodate, all while you progress forward.

Enlarge / Lexus says there's AI controlling the transmissions, and I can believe it.

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Lexus says that the LC 500h can operate at up to 87 mph (140 km) on electric power alone, but like other hybrids from Lexus and Toyota, whether or not the engine fires is almost entirely down to the car's electronic brain, even if you've pressed the EV button on the center console.

Being very gentle with your right foot helps keep it in electric mode at low speeds, but the 4,420 lb (2,005 kg) curb weight is substantial, and the V6 joining in helps you get away from a standstill at more than a walking pace. Performance is good but not staggering—hitting 60 mph from a standstill will take 4.7 seconds, and the LC 500h is electronically limited to 155 mph (250 km/h).

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Our test LC 500h was fitted with the dynamic handling package (\$6,850) that added rear-wheel steering, a torque-sensing limited-slip differential, variable-ratio steering, and 21-inch wheels, as well as the Alcantara sports seats. That said, the driving experience is more GT than sportscar, but none the worse for that. The car sits low and the ride is on the firmer side of still-comfortable, but it cruises in a cossetting manner. Over the course of a week, I couldn't quite match the combined EPA estimate of 29 mpg, sadly.

Enlarge / You really could just spend hours in here touching everything.

The interior is more dramatically styled than the LC 500h's exterior. Lexus' Takumi master craftspeople evidently put in a lot of effort, and it shows. It's an extremely tactile interior; the contrast between the suede and smooth leather on door cards and the cold metal door handles is a treat for one's fingertips.

The main instrument panel has a neat party trick, too. In the center is a digital tachometer, reminiscent of the one in the Lexus LFA supercar. (Lexus first used a digital tach on that car because its V10 engine apparently revved too quickly for a conventional gauge. At least, that was the story at the time.) Push one of the buttons on the multifunction steering wheel, and the gauge slides over an inch or so to the right within

the instrument binnacle, uncovering another part of the display which shows you information like tire pressures or your fuel mileage or the state of the driver assists.

I have fewer nice things to say about the infotainment system. It has a pleasant-looking user interface on the 10.3-inch screen and has Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, but you have to interact with everything via a trackpad, which isn't the best input device in a moving car.

None of this comes especially cheap, but prices are competitive for this kind of luxury flagship coupe, starting at \$102,350.

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