

TEST DRIVE: LEXUS RC F

Toyota's luxe arm takes aim at the sports coupe with market-driven focus, but does it pay off?

Jan Tegler
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As our week with **Lexus' new RC-F** (the maker's de facto replacement for its IS-F sports sedan) drew to an agreeable close, we were having some difficulty neatly summing up the sports coupe the Japanese luxury brand has launched into a fiercely competitive segment dominated by BMW's M3/M4.

But while loading groceries into the boot of the 467 horsepower two-door at our local market – it hit us. The RC F is a market-driven machine, designed by Lexus to appeal to the broadest swath of those looking for accessible performance combined with a dash of practicality, comfort and a uniquely Japanese interpretation of style.

That's a difficult mission and while the RC F succeeds in some areas, it falls short in others. A high point is the coupe's 5.0 litre V8. In an era when so many manufacturers are turning to smaller displacement turbocharged engines to meet power and efficiency targets, Lexus differentiates the RC F from the competition (including the M4) by sticking with a naturally-aspirated eight cylinder unit.



The 527 Nm of torque produced by the engine is available across a generous portion of its rpm-range. Just put your foot down and let the RC F's eight-speed automatic transmission with "sport-direct-shift" work out how to deliver the thrust. Runs to 100 km/h take about 4.5 seconds.

It's easy enough but not particularly satisfying. Throttle modulation is odd and the fact that this sporting two-door is not offered with a manual transmission gives clear indication that Lexus did not intend to create a razor sharp driver's car. Driving the RC F is like hitting the "easy-button", a softer, less focused experience than wheeling its Audi, Mercedes and BMW rivals.

Oddly, "soft" also applies to the RC F's ventilated disc brakes. They stop this heavy machine well but the top of the brake pedal is weirdly mushy. Overall, the chassis underpinning the coupe is good, providing secure handling until it nears its dynamic limit where understeer becomes prominent. Standard Michelin Pilot Super Sport tires deserve credit as well, providing grip that would be lacking otherwise.



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Like most contemporary automobiles, the RC F suffers from poor steering feedback but the car's real Achilles heel is its weight. The coupe weighs 181 kilograms (1,852 total) more than the M4. Carrying that flab around penalises every aspect of the Lexus' performance.

The bold two-door's appearance is a polarising subject. If cartoon-influenced, techno-Japanese styling appeals to your eyes, you'll be pleased by the busy-looking creases and bulges of the car. If not, consider another competitor.

Inside, the RC F has a similarly tech-y feel. A high centre console with an optional touch-pad for controlling navigation, entertainment and climate functions (we preferred the buttons provided for the same operations) is modern but encased in cheap-feeling plastic. The instrument cluster facing the driver is dominated by a large tachometer that morphs with selected driving modes (eco, normal, sport, and sport plus) in a manner reminiscent of Lexus' LFA supercar.



Deep, leather-trimmed bucket seats surround driver and passenger, providing good support during cornering and adequate comfort on longer drives. The rear seats are useable but best employed on shorter trips.

On the highway, the RC F cruises effortlessly and it's in this more commonplace realm where the car works best. That's in keeping with the fundamental design philosophy of this sporting coupe.

The RC-F is easy to drive, easy to build speed with and easy to manoeuvre below its limits – a forgiving GT car that doesn't aim to be the outright performer in its segment. Time will tell if its market-driven ingredients are a recipe for success.



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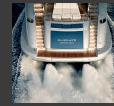
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