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2009 Lexus LX Sumptuous luxury that goes anywhere.

Overview

The Lexus LX 570 is a true luxury vehicle first and foremost, with advanced safety, comfort and quality features. It's also a big, heavy vehicle that can tow big loads, haul heavy cargo, and transport people and gear across great distances in comfort. It uses the same heavy-duty frame and stout powertrain as the Toyota Land Cruiser.

Like the Land Cruiser, the Lexus LX 570 is designed for extraordinary versatility and an unusual combination of utility and luxury. But with the Lexus, luxury comes first.

Designed for a different kind of use, the LX offers a number of qualities and features that the Land Cruiser does not offer. These include technological advances such as wide-view parking monitors, adaptive front headlights, and an active damping suspension control system. A Mark Levinson audio system is also a Lexus exclusive, and the interior is built using a higher level of materials and finish.

The Land Cruiser is better equipped for rigorous off-road use; the LX 570, although also highly capable, is aimed more at the luxury car owner who occasionally needs guaranteed control on a snowy road leading to a ski resort, or safe traction on the graded dirt road leading to a ranch house or mountain fishing lodge. Either one of them will go just about anywhere. The ability to haul boats or horse trailers up to 8,500 pounds makes the LX 570 the most capable SUV offered by Lexus. Safety features are on a par with the best luxury sedans.

Especially relaxing to drive on long trips, the Lexus LX is also equipped with a brace of thoughtful features to make around-town driving and parking more convenient.

Like the Land Cruiser, the LX was thoroughly redesigned for 2008. The 2009 Lexus LX is unchanged, except for a new Luxury Package that adds semi-aniline leather seats, Bubinga wood trim, a console-mounted cool box for beverages, and new Smart Card keyless entry (an advance over the standard Smart Access system). The Luxury Package also includes a new Liquid Graphite finish for the LX 570's standard 20-inch wheels.

The Lexus LX competes with the Cadillac Escalade, Range Rover, and Mercedes-Benz GL550. The group is similar in many ways, with similar operational characteristics, but the LX (like the Mercedes) focuses more on torque than the Cadillac or Range Rover do. Torque is that force that you feel when accelerating from a standstill or up a still hill and it's especially important when towing a trailer or negotiating rugged terrain. Powered by a 5.7-liter V8, the LX makes most of this power early in the rev range.

Model Lineup

The 2009 Lexus LX comes as one model, the LX 570 (\$75,705). The standard package includes leather upholstery; woodgrain interior accents; 20-inch wheels; power rear door and tailgate; Class 4 towing hitch; moonroof; heated power outside mirrors; roof rack; programmable garage door opener; 115V outlet in rear cargo area; power door locks with anti-lock-out feature; Smart Access keyless entry and starting; 14-way power driver seat with three-position memory; 12-way power front passenger seat; and heated front seats. The standard audio system is Lexus Premium Audio, which includes a digital AM/FM tuner; in-dash 6CD changer that supports MP3 and other digital files; MP3/WMA iPod input plug; digital sound processing (DSP) with seven-channel, 312-watt output; nine speakers; and automatic sound leveling.

The Luxury Package (\$1,200) upgrades to semi-aniline leather, Bubinga wood trim, a cool box for beverages, Smart Card keyless entry and starting, and Liquid Graphite finish for the wheels. A DVD rear-seat entertainment system (\$1,990) requires the 19-speaker, 450-watt Mark Levinson Surround Sound audio (\$3,300). Also available are a pre-collision system (\$2,850); Lexus Link road assistance (\$900); Intuitive Park Assist (\$1,000) that includes wide-view front and side monitors; and climate-controlled front seats with heated second-row seats (\$890).

Safety features include 10 airbags, anti-rollover dynamics; tire pressure monitor system; active traction control (A-TRAC); vehicle stability control (VSC); rain-sensing wipers; adaptive front lighting (AFS); brake assist; hill-start assist control (HAC); multi-terrain anti-lock braking system (ABS); and electronic brake-force distribution (EBD). The optional Pre-Collision System (PCS) is packaged with adaptive cruise control.

Walkaround

The 2009 Lexus LX 570 is visibly wider and taller-looking than the previous-generation LX 470, which it replaced after 2007. The design theme deliberately combines powerful, utilitarian design cues with smooth, sophisticated elements to create a balanced tension between the two.

The taller hood line, broad mirrors, pronounced wheel arches and wide stance combine to suggest a more muscular character. From the side, smooth convex side panels and flowing sheetmetal integrate the running boards. A bold front grille, mounted at headlamp-level, emphasizes size and strength, and minimizes the bumper, which flows smoothly around the wheelwells. Combination head and tail light clusters are used to emphasize state-of-the-art technical qualities, which include adaptive front lights and high-intensity LED tail lights. Use of chrome as an accent is selective and restrained.

To our eye, the package looks bigger than it is, and more sophisticated, without being garish. In actual fact, the LX is almost exactly the same size, or maybe a tad more compact, than its European competitor, the Range Rover. While not as distinctive as the Range Rover, the Lexus design strikes us as clean and timeless in a uniquely Japanese way.

The LX has become a technology showcase for Lexus. It is the first Lexus to offer a wide-view front and side monitor system for hard-to-see areas, and incorporates the relatively new Adaptive

Radar Cruise Control and Pre-Collision System. Cameras are located inside the grille and below the right-hand side view mirror, and the radar antenna is located behind the Lexus emblem in the front grille.

All Lexus vehicles are assembled in Japan. The LX is assembled at the Yoshiwara plant, which was revised and revamped to produce the 570. Engines are produced at the Tahara manufacturing facility, where the LS sedans are produced. In all, the finished vehicles are inspected three times, testing for such qualities as quietness, steering wheel feel, color matching and door sound accuracy.

Interior Features

The cabin of the Lexus LX reflects Japanese ideas of simplicity, strict attention to detail, and functionality as a form of luxury.

There are two standard leather colors to choose from: Dark Gray or Cashmere, both with medium-brown walnut trim. We're told the wood is California Walnut. Certainly, the detail work on the leather, trim panels and dash area is in keeping with Lexus standards. Stitching on the seats is conspicuously uniform and stands up to focused inspection. Chrome accents on the dash are used judiciously. The Luxury Package upgrades to semi-aniline leather, which is a dye process that has the benefit of consistent color characteristics, and Bubinga wood on the steering wheel, shift knob, and rear seat center console lid.

Features and controls consistent with high-end luxury sedans are built into the cockpit area, which is designed with a minimum of clutter. This is partly accomplished by mounting the phone, navigation, and audio controls on the steering wheel, as well as controls for the information display that selects trip information.

The instrument panel is built around two large brightly lit dial gauges, speedometer and tachometer. Between the two are four smaller dials for fuel, coolant temperature, voltage, and oil pressure. An information display box, activated from the steering wheel, can show outside temperature, current mpg, mpg since refueling, cruise range, miles driven since start, and tire pressures. The display also shows height setting and warning messages as they apply. Again, visual simplicity is achieved, remarkably so, given how much information the instruments convey.

The front seats are roomy, supportive and widely adjustable. The driver's seat adjusts 14 ways, and the passenger seat 12 ways, including lumbar support. The center console lids function as armrests, and can be extended to work with different driving positions. Taller drivers will appreciate that front leg room is a priority. There is almost 43 inches of legroom at the front, with generous shoulder and hip room. Even with the moonroof, headroom exceeds 38 inches for the first two rows. One test driver in our group, who is six feet, eight inches tall, asked for just a tad more head room. For drivers any shorter than that, we'll wager there is ample space.

Smart Access keyless entry unlocks all 5 doors when the driver touches a door or tailgate. So long as the key fob is somewhere on your person, Bluetooth proximity sensors unlock the car

automatically. The optional Smart Card (included in the new Luxury Package) is literally a wallet card that does essentially the same thing as the Smart Access key fob, allowing you to unlock and start the vehicle as long as you have it with you.

Built into the interior are 10 airbags as standard equipment. Front-seat occupants are protected by two-stage main airbags, two side airbags, and two knee airbags. A roll-sensing curtain airbag is designed to protect all three rows, and the second-row passengers also have separate seat-mounted side airbags. Standard child seat latches are incorporated in the second row. All eight seats throughout the cabin have three-point seatbelt systems. Another Lexus safety system, active headrests, is standard on the front seats. In the event of a rear-end collision, the headrests automatically tilt forward to limit the chance of whiplash injuries.

Like a lot of large SUVs, entry into the cabin does require a big first step. We tended to use the sturdy grab handles to swing up and into the front. Third-row entry is made easier by use of a touch-and-tumble seat on the right side. It's still a bit of a crawl for adults to move into the back, but the rear seating area is surprisingly accommodating, at least for two adults. There are seatbelts and headrests for three, but in real life, the third row will seat three adults best if the middle passenger likes to cuddle.

Two- and three-zone climate control systems are common in large cars and SUVs these days, but the Lexus LX has separate climate controls for four zones, so people in the first and second rows can dial in their own air flow volume and temperature. To further increase precision in interior microclimates, there are a total of 28 vents distributing air flow. The blower has seven levels, and a micro dust and pollen filter conditions the incoming air.

The navigation system was new with last year's re-design. The screen is powered by the fifth-generation satellite-based operating system, which offers English, French and Spanish language audio and display. The navigation systems from Toyota and Lexus have recently been among the best.

XM traffic radio, which selects the least crowded route to a destination, is included in the standard audio system. The Mark Levinson option provides an upgrade equal to any automotive audio we know of; Mark Levinson systems are among the cleanest sounding available. A hard drive disc offers 30 gigabytes for music storage, playable through 19 speakers that, combined, generate true surround sound. The system is compelling and memorable. Anyone with doubts about potential for sound quality in an SUV should bring their favorite DVD, get in the LX, and turn it up.

The LX is versatile enough to carry people, or cargo, or a mix of both. The bias is toward carrying people, and keeping them comfortable. But for those occasions when bulky cargo is the order of the day, the rear seats fold out of the way to create 83.1 cubic feet of cargo area. The rear hatch opens using the key fob; the tailgate opens manually via a lever on the top of the tailgate. Cargo lift height is about average for a vehicle of this size. For groceries or other everyday uses, the 15-cubic-foot area behind the third row is sufficient. The third-row seats split 50/50 and stow against the side of the cabin, creating 41 cubic feet. Although that arrangement supplies less room, we like folding away the seats better than removing them altogether, which is

the drill on some competing vehicles. Removing heavy seats is not a fun job for anyone, and having loose seats kicking around the garage, taking up space and getting in harm's way is a nuisance.

Driving Impressions

On the move, the Lexus LX 570 is smooth, quiet and untroubled. The higher seating position permits long-range forward visibility, keeping occupants and passengers above the flow of ordinary traffic, and eye-ball-to-eyeball with full-size trucks. The commanding view, combined with the lack of noise and vibration, combine to create the sensation of a protected cabin, and a sense of well being.



The LX moves out readily at part throttle, creating the sensation of power in reserve. The engine is an advanced 5.7-liter V8 shared with the Tundra pickup truck and Land Cruiser SUV. It's built for torque, and it produces a lot of it, 403 pound-feet, early in the rev range. More than 90 percent of the torque is available before 2200 rpm, so most of the time the engine is loafing along with very low effort, which adds to the quiet, untroubled manner the LX conveys on the move. This ability to provide power without revving the engine as high gives the LX a different character than the Cadillac Escalade or Land Rover Range Rover, both of which produce their peak torque at higher rpm.

The six-speed transmission has a very low first gear, complementing the engine's torque with enhanced mechanical leverage. The net effect is more power at low speeds. That low first gear is useful when creeping over rough terrain or when pulling a boat up a slippery boat ramp. For higher speeds, the six-speed offers two overdrive gears (fifth and sixth), with a sixth-gear ratio of just 0.588. This very tall cruising gear allows for quiet, effortless cruising and greater fuel efficiency. At 2000 rpm, our test unit indicated a speed of 72 mph. At speeds over 75 mph we were able to detect some wind noise coming from the mirrors, but thanks to careful noise isolation work, the powertrain is not the source of noise or vibration until much higher speeds are demanded.

Top speed is electronically limited to 137 mph. As you might expect with a four-wheel-drive of this considerable heft, the LX remains composed and relaxed even at speeds well beyond the recommended norm on America's superhighways. In bad weather, the LX really comes into its own, with a Torsen limited-slip center differential biasing torque to maximize traction.

Drawing from its Land Cruiser heritage, the LX has the guts of a true 4x4. The four-wheel-drive system has four modes, actuated by a toggle switch on the center console. It's possible to lock the center differential in high range or low range, or leave it open in either range. Normally, most people will be operating in the unlocked, high range mode, which should deliver the best mileage. When there are patches of ice or water on the road, locking the center differential helps maintain grip as individual wheels encounter slippery surfaces. When the going gets really bad, such as an ice storm or if deep mud blocks the path, locking the center differential and using low range would supply maximum balance to move forward without getting stuck.

The Lexus LX does not offer a locking differential in either axle, relying instead on electronic traction control (A-TRAC) to prevent wheelspin. Our considerable experience with A-TRAC is that it provides enhanced traction and off-road capability sufficient for any unplanned event, and then some. The one trick the Land Cruiser has that the Lexus does not have is its Kinetic Dynamic Suspension System (KDSS), with variable-rate anti-roll bars that allow greater articulation in extreme conditions; so the Toyota may be better suited for those who expect to use their SUV as an off-road vehicle. But it has to be really creepy-crawly rugged for this advantage to come in. Both the Lexus and the Toyota have multi-terrain ABS, which works at low speeds on-road or off, a great feature because it improves braking performance on gravel roads.

Crawl Control is designed for use on steep downhill trails when control is the highest priority. It holds back the vehicle (using ABS-related technology), making sure the speed is appropriate to the steepness of the terrain, so all the driver has to do is keep his or her feet off the pedals and steer; the system helps keep the vehicle going down the hill straight, so the rear doesn't start coming around and you don't end up sliding down the hill sideways until you're stopped by a tree or a rock. This could also be used when coming down a steep hill, such as a driveway or side street, in icy conditions. Both the Lexus and the Toyota come with Crawl Control.

The Lexus LX suspension supplies a mix of ride quality and cornering capability consistent with other large, multi-passenger luxury vehicles. Some vehicles in this class use air bag suspensions, but in the LX coil springs are used on all four corners, supplemented by an active variable damping system (AVS) that controls body pitch and dive. The combination is effective (and you can't get it on a Land Cruiser). We noticed the LX squats very little upon hard acceleration, the front stays level when we got on the brakes, and in general, the vehicle stayed composed during spirited driving.

The level of suspension damping is selectable. It's possible to select Sport, Normal, and Comfort damping via a switch on the dash, which allowed us to tune ride quality depending on the road surface. We preferred Comfort for highway driving and for driving around the neighborhood and around town. We switched to Sport when faced with a mountain road with a lot of side-to-side transitions. We found the difference between Normal and Comfort relatively small, but the difference between Sport and Comfort was definitely discernable.

Parking and maneuvering a big SUV can be challenging at times. Parking for the LX driver is made easier by its low-effort steering at slow speeds. Driver visibility is challenged, however. From the driver's seat of the LX, we found the hood to be tall visually, making it hard to keep track of the right front corner. Rear visibility, meanwhile, is compromised by headrests and sheer height. Fortunately, clever electronic systems come to the aid of the driver.

One such system uses wide-angle cameras located in the front grille and passenger-side mirror to give the driver an enhanced view along the front and side of the vehicle by projecting images of these blind spots on a split-screen display. Another system uses ultrasonic sensors to warn of contact with objects around the front, rear and corners of the vehicle when parking. We found that operating these parking aids simultaneously was tremendously beneficial in tight quarters, making parking easier, quicker and safer. They all work together intuitively, though the driver needs to exercise care and patience when using them.

Powerful brakes help slow this big SUV safely down from high speeds. They include large ventilated disc rotors with multi-piston calipers, enhanced by numerous active safety systems. These include Brake Assist (shortening stopping distances in emergencies), all-terrain ABS, and Electronic Brake Force Distribution to balance braking on slippery surfaces. The all-terrain ABS is particularly helpful in reducing stopping distances on gravel roads and we consider this an excellent feature.

We towed an 8,500-pound trailer for an hour or so with the LX 570 and found the engine and transmission had no trouble hauling the load up hills, as we expected. The downhill side is often the bigger challenge, as both brakes and transmission are part of what it takes to maintain control. We found that the transmission will downshift on its own, from sixth to fifth gear then to fourth gear, to enhance engine braking and fuel economy. The uphill/downhill shift logic seems flawless, responding to very slight tip-of-the-toe throttle inputs. But for those times when manual control seems called for, there is a sequential shift mode that gives the driver this control.

All Lexus vehicles offer a Pre-Collision System (PCS), available on the LX as an option. (It's integrated with the optional Dynamic Radar Control.) Though pricey, PCS is an innovative safety system that is enabled by the use of radar. With the Pre-Collision System, the car's radar can determine if a crash is unavoidable. If that ever becomes the case, the system tightens up the seatbelts, increases brake sensitivity and applies maximum braking force when the driver touches the brake. By reducing the speed at impact, and positioning the occupants, PCS allows all the other built-in safety systems to work better. According to Lexus engineers, scrubbing off just a little speed at the last second can be enough to save lives. While you don't want to crash at 35 mph, it's far better than crashing at 55 mph.

Summary

The Lexus LX 570 offers luxury, exceptional capability off road, towing power, and Lexus build quality.

John Stewart filed this report to NewCarTestDrive.com after driving the LX 570 along the coastal and inland roads around the greater San Diego area.



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