



Blue is green

Toyota's luxury car division introduced its first SUV hybrid to South Africa last year. The petrol engine in the Lexus RX400h gets a little help from two electric motors. Dieter Losskarn turned green for a couple of days.



'It's the closest you can get to organic, rainforest-saving and free-range motoring.'

For a petrolhead, it is the strangest feeling to 'start' an engine and hear nothing. No roaring, no rumbling, no bubbling – nothing but serene quietness. After turning the key and holding it for a sec, an illuminated display saying 'Ready' appears in the dash, prompting you to shift the automatic gear lever to 'D' – and the vehicle moves, completely silently.

It's great fun in car parks, where you scare the living daylights out of unsuspecting passers-by. 'Your car is rolling,' they screamed when the mid-size SUV approached in a stealthy



kind of way. 'Yes, I know,' I'd grin as I passed them soundlessly.

Driving an environmentally friendly hybrid is a completely different experience. You get into this Al Gore-y, planet-saving mood. It's the same feeling as when you separate your garbage, switch your geyser off or flush your toilet with different quantities of water for number one and two. It's the closest you can get to organic, rainforest-saving and free-range motoring – until you accelerate too hard and the petrol engine kicks in. That's the inconvenient truth about hybrids: they still do use fossil fuels, albeit less than other vehicles of the same size.

It's green credentials have been the main reason for the huge success of the Lexus RX hybrid in the United States since its introduction in 2005.

It outsold all other conventional SUVs in its class. There is a huge perception difference between Europe and the States regarding 'green' cars. Whereas the Yanks don't believe in oil-burners at all ('that greasy stuff is just for trucks') and accept only hybrids and electric vehicles as environmentally friendly, in Europe clean, particle-filtered, fuel-efficient diesels are gaining ground.

Thanks to the oil price shock in 2008 and the economic crisis, all the big car manufacturers are experimenting with electric cars, hybrids and diesels. Audi even mounted a large, V12 turbo-diesel in its R8 super sports car which, despite its enormous power, only consumes about 10 litres/100km. Audi has won the 24-hour Le Mans endurance race twice in a diesel-powered car.

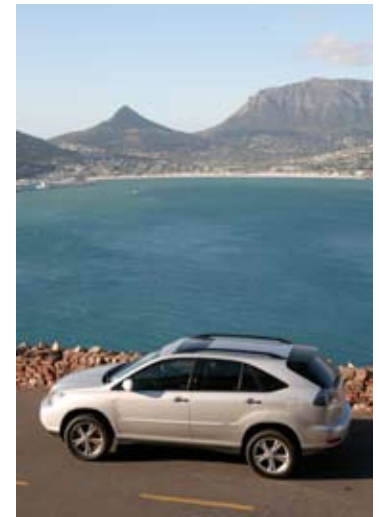
Mercedes, on the other hand, banks on clever technology termed 'blue efficiency', featuring improved aerodynamics, lightweight construction, new tyres and drive technology to save fuel. Even Porsche announced a Cayenne hybrid, a green 911 and – notwithstanding its previous denials – produced a fuel-efficient diesel version of their Cayenne, Porsche's first oil-burner since its famous 1950s red farm tractors.

But back to our 'performance hybrid' with LHD, which in this case doesn't stand for left-hand drive, but for Lexus hybrid-drive technology.

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It's a technical term for combining both electric energy and petrol performance. The RX400h has a 3,3-litre V6 engine and two electric motors, which together generate about the same power as a conventional V8.

The electric motor that runs the vehicle from standstill generates instantaneous acceleration which, combined with the petrol engine,



RIGHT: The new hybrid and the sea – it's all about conserving nature.
BELOW: The colourful power meter in the dash can be rather distracting.



OPPOSITE: Lexus hybrid drivers are making a strong political statement by paying R66 000 for the 'h' behind the 'RX400'.

pushes the vehicle in 7,3 seconds to 100 km/h.

When braking, the car captures kinetic energy normally lost as heat during the deceleration process. Both the electric energy from the regenerative braking system and the hybrid-drive generator system and the hybrid-drive generator powers the two electric motors and is stored in the nickel-metal-hydride battery under the rear seats for later use. The battery comes with a warranty of five years.

The RX400 hybrid looks, acts, feels and handles like a regular Lexus RX350. It has the same styling popular with Lexus customers and offers typical Lexus luxury. What's different is the slightly distracting power meter in the display screen and the hybrid badging: blue extensions to the headlights and rear combination lights. The power meter tells you exactly which engine is in use at any



The Lexus luxury cruise is equally at ease on the open road and visiting the Cape Winelands.

moment and how much electric energy is generated and stored. Arrows move back and forth – it's all very colourful, if a little distracting.

Compared to other SUVs, it feels slightly less stable, especially in quick, winding sections. It definitely has more body-roll in bends than, let's say a Merc ML or BMW X5. Nevertheless, the vehicle is very safe, featuring all the driving aids you can think of,

from vehicle dynamic integrated management (VDIM) which controls braking and steering, via electronic traction control (TRC), to vehicle stability control (VSC). Seven airbags are generously distributed in all the strategically important corners of the car.

In the best luxury SUV tradition, the Lexus is obviously not a serious off-roader, but doesn't mind the odd gravel road. However, it does particularly well on sandy stretches.

Transmission is a continuously variable one, resulting in no perceptible automatic gear shifts, just an uninterrupted acceleration process. The other advantages of the CVT are that it's less expensive, less complicated than a regular automatic gearbox, easier to build and it gives you better fuel efficiency.

Typical for the Lexus brand, there are few options available, as almost everything is included in the base price. Stuff like tinted glass for the rear passengers, rain-sensing wipers, a rear-view camera for reversing, adaptive front-lighting, an electrically operated tailgate, daytime running lights and a great sound system with 11 speakers, to name just a few.

The voice activation sounded tempting, however, I am not sure whether it was my German accent but the 'lady' didn't understand a word I was saying.



Plush interior: Lexus customers expect nothing less than superior materials. Note the placement of the power meter in the dash.

So would I buy one? Well, the sixth-generation Toyota/Lexus hybrid is technically magnificent, no doubt about it. But it is also about 60-grand more expensive than a regular RX. Considering the difference in fuel consumption, which is about five to six litres/100km between the hybrid and a regular SUV, you'll have to drive about 200 000 kilometres to save money on fuel.

So right now, you still pay to be green, but if you've got the cash, it is a great way of making a political statement. Personally, I'm actually quite conscious about conserving the environment, but I am not sure I'll be able to change from being a petrolhead to an electrohead in the near future.

Next month: A double Merc pack – we drive the smooth SUV ML500 and the surprisingly agile Vito V6 people carrier.

The low-down

Lexus RX 400h

Price: R661 000.

Engine: 3,3-litre V6 petrol: 155 kW/208 hp; front electric motor: 123 kW/165 hp; rear electric motor: 50 kW/67 hp

Power: max system output 200 kW/268 hp

Torque: petrol engine 288 Nm; front electric motor 333 Nm; rear electric motor 130 Nm

Transmission: continuously variable transmission (CVT)

0–100 km/h: 7,3 sec.

Top speed: 200 km/h

Consumption/100 km: 10 litres (average consumption on 650 km trip)

Fuel tank: 65 litres

Range: 650 km

Weight: 2 000 kg

For a similar amount of money

(R661 000), you could buy:

Lexus RX350 XE R607 300

Mercedes ML320 CDI R650 000

BMW X5 3,0 sd Steptronic R652 500

BMW X6 xDrive 35i R680 000

VW Touareg 4,2 V8 Tiptronic R647 500

Porsche Cayenne Tiptronic R595 000

Audi Q7 4,2 FSI Tiptronic R681 500

For more information: www.lexus.co.za

Wheels etc

Black empowerment

In the best Henry Ford tradition – he once said his cars could be any colour, as long as they were black – Harley-Davidson recently produced some black custom bikes. Even the most affordable entry-level Hog, the cute 883 Sportster, wears black in its 2009 Iron edition. If you want a little more body mass, you'll have to go for the satin-black Fat Bob, with its characteristic double headlights. It's part of the Dyna range, the most affordable of the 'big' Harleys. The darkest of them all is the blacked-out V-Rod named the Night Hawk. It is low, fast and furious – and murderously uncomfortable for passengers. Web www.harley-davidson.com.



Quattro-phenia

Driving the agile 1,9-litre turbocharged four-cylinder, 200 kW Audi TTS Coupe (R527 500) was a more-than-welcome counter activity to my regular 4x4 and SUV experiences. Despite a top speed of 250 km/h (governed) and an acceleration of about six seconds from 0–100 km/h, it enjoys an efficient 8 litres/100 km on average. It emitted an

amazing, eager sound from its exhausts while performing those numbers. It's the ideal entry-level sporty Audi for those who can't immediately make funds available for the R8. Since you can fit golf bags and wine cases in the boot of the TTS, it somehow still qualifies as a *Getaway* car. (If you read this, I did succeed in convincing the editor.) Web www.audi.co.za.

Stuck



This is what happens if you do not check the depth of the water you are playing in. Driving the course at Jim Fouché Holiday Resort at the Vaal Dam, we ended up with two wheels that had no traction and a diff lock that didn't work. We had to wait for the tractor from the next farm to tow us out. It cost me my pride and R200 for the tractor driver. My wife says this is the reason one particular insurance company insures only women.

Marius Marx, Benoni.

If you have photographs of a 4x4 getting stuck, e-mail them to wheels@getaway.co.za or post them to Getaway Wheels, PO Box 180, Howard Place, 7450 Cape Town. You could win a Nissan Securetech recovery kit worth R1 500, comprising a recovery kit bag, nine-metre kinetic energy snatch recovery strap, five-metre pull/winch extension recovery strap, two alloy recovery bow shackles, leather gloves, key ring and Offroad Tactix instruction DVD and manual.



Beemer biking in Europe

Karoo Biking, a BMW-endorsed Cape Town-based travel company that organises motorcycle tours and rentals in Southern Africa, has extended its footprint to Europe. Its 11-day tour astride top-of-the-range BMW motorcycles starts in Munich, the land of picturesque castles and the Oktoberfest, through Germany, Switzerland, Italy and France. The tour has been scheduled for the European summer, taking in hairpin bends through the lush Alps and heady, single-lane dirt roads etched into the cliffs of Corsica centuries ago. The price of E3200 a person includes eight overnight stays at three- and four-star hotels, rental of a BMW motorcycle, a tour guide on his bike, two Corsica ferry rides (Genova to Bastia return), luggage transport and meals. Contact Karoo Biking, cell 082-533 6655, web www.karoo-biking.com.

