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Ultimatum

NEW 3 BATTLES TOP RIVALS



M-B C250



AUDI A4



BUICK REGAL GS

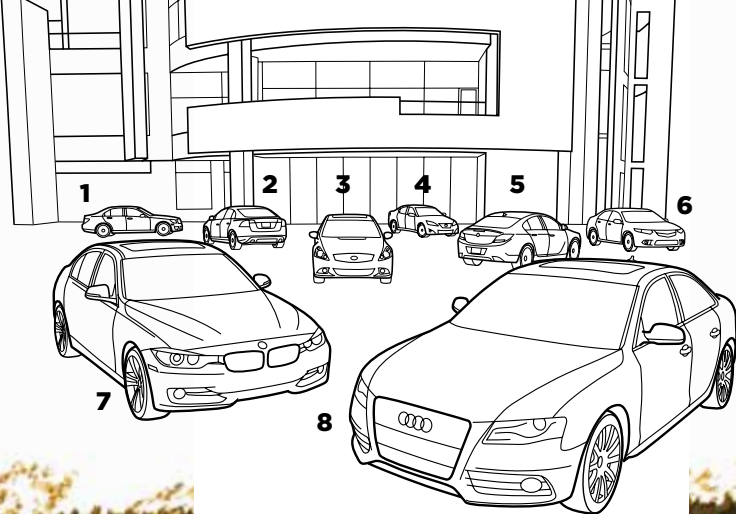
PLUS LEXUS, INFINITI, ACURA, AND VOLVO

FIRST TEST 2012 PRIUS C 1000 MPH ON LAND MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

**(Cover Story)
Comparison**



**THE MORE
THINGS
CHANGE...**



- 1 Mercedes-Benz C250
- 2 Volvo S60 T5
- 3 Infiniti G25
- 4 Lexus IS 250
- 5 Buick Regal GS
- 6 Acura TSX V-6
- 7 BMW 328i
- 8 Audi A4 2.0 Quattro

IN THE CAR WORLD,

a new BMW 3 Series is a big deal. BMW created the small sport sedan class in 1975 with the original E21 3, and even before that with the iconic 2002. Along with the Mercedes-Benz 190E, the segment really arrived in 1982 with the launch of the much-heralded and often imitated, though never quite duplicated, E30 3 Series. That car proved a near-perfect mixture of engine, transmission, and chassis that the competition and BMW have been trying to mimic for years, with varying degrees of success.

But 30 years is a long time, and the automotive scene is very different from when the E30 launched. Back in the early '80s, Acura, Infiniti, and Lexus didn't exist; Audi was selling AWD Volkswagens; Buick was terminally ill; and Volvos were but a chromosome away from farm equipment. Only Mercedes was anywhere near its current market position, technically and in terms of status. There have been three generations of 3 Series (E36, E46, and E90/91/92/93) between the 1980s classic and this new sixth-generation car, dubbed the F30. Each of those previous cars represented varying degrees of goodness, but the competition hasn't exactly been resting on its laurels. In fact, back in August 2007, we loudly declared "The King Is Dead!" and handed the 3 Series' crown off to the Infiniti G37.

This new 3 Series, then, shows up saddled with great expectations. So great, in fact, that we assembled seven competitors eager to knock the would-be king off his presumptive throne. While some of the sedans follow the 3 Series' winning recipe (front engine, RWD), several are front drive, and the Audi gets mojo directed to all four wheels. Our task was twofold: to determine just how good the new BMW 3 Series is and see how the sport sedan competition measures up. Frankly, I'm rather shocked by the results. **Jonny Lieberman**

● Words **Motor Trend Staff**
● Photographs **Julia LaPalme** ● Illustration **Paul Laguette**

EIGHT CONTENDERS VIE FOR SPORT SEDAN SUPREMACY

(Cover Story)

YOU WANT TO COMPETE WITH WHOM?

8TH PLACE Buick Regal GS

Wait, the underdog American, armed with the most potent engine, Brembo brakes, and 20-inch wheels came in last place, behind the dated and underpowered Infiniti? Yes, we know—it just doesn't sound right. We had high hopes for this sportiest of slushbox Buicks, what with the aforementioned performance goodies. But when the votes were cast, eighth was as high as this Gran Sport could reach. For those wondering, if we'd instead included the regular Regal Turbo, Mike Febbo may have shot it.

Like the BMW the Buick uses a direct-injected 2.0-liter turbo four. Yet unlike the 328i, the Regal pumps out a prodigious 270 horses (second only to the TSX) and a tops-in-test 295 lb-ft. Unfortunately, that output advantage didn't translate to the track, where the six-speed-auto GS was 0.6 second slower from 0 to 60 (6.2 seconds) and 0.8 second tardier through the quarter mile (15.0 seconds at 93.1 mph) than the dragstrip champ eight-speed 328i. So, it's not quicker, but perhaps it's more fuel-efficient? Nope. Per the EPA's fuel-economy test, the BMW ekes out 24/36 mpg city/highway to the Buick's 20/32. Moreover, our observed fuel economy placed the 328i (16.8 mpg) mid-pack and the Regal dead last (14.6), a full 2.0 mpg behind the A4, the second-thirstiest vehicle.

Speaking of the all-wheel-drive Audi, it actually weighs less than the 3748-pound Buick, the—yep—heaviest of the bunch. What's up with the corpulence? We're not entirely sure, but we surmise some of it comes from the Regal's polished dubs and Pirelli PZero tires, a \$700 option that did very little to dampen the often harsh ride. That said, the wheel/tire package, along with the GS' Brembos and front HiPer strut/rear multilink suspension, did deliver impressive 60-0 braking (108 feet), lateral acceleration (0.89 g), and figure eight (26.1 seconds at 0.67 g) numbers. Still, over our curvy test loop, we were unimpressed with the Regal's nervous handling dynamics,





POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS		2012 Buick Regal GS
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, FWD	
ENGINE TYPE	Turbocharged I-4, aluminum block/head	
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl	
DISPLACEMENT	122.4 cu in/1998 cc	
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.2:1	
POWER (SAE NET)	270 hp @ 5300 rpm	
TORQUE (SAE NET)	295 lb-ft @ 2400 rpm	
REDLINE	6500 rpm	
WEIGHT TO POWER	13.9 lb/hp	
TRANSMISSION	6-speed automatic	
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.33:1/2.30:1	
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Struts, coil springs, adj shocks, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs, adj shocks, anti-roll bar	
STEERING RATIO	15.2:1	
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.6	
BRAKES, F;R	14.0-in vented disc; 12.4-in vented disc, ABS	
WHEELS	8.5 x 20-in, cast aluminum	
TIRES	255/35ZR20 97Y Pirelli PZero	
DIMENSIONS		
WHEELBASE	107.8 in	
TRACK, F/R	62.4/62.5 in	
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	190.2 x 73.1 x 58.0 in	
TURNING CIRCLE	37.4 ft	
CURB WEIGHT	3748 lb	
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	60/40%	
SEATING CAPACITY	5	
HEADROOM, F/R	38.8/36.8 in	
LEGROOM, F/R	42.1/37.3 in	
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	56.7/54.4 in	
CARGO VOLUME	14.3 cu ft	
TEST DATA		
ACCELERATION TO MPH		
0-30	2.2 sec	
0-40	3.4	
0-50	4.7	
0-60	6.2	
0-70	8.7	
0-80	11.1	
0-90	13.9	
0-100	17.4	
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.3	
QUARTER MILE	15.0 sec @ 93.1 mph	
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	108 ft	
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.89 g (avg)	
MT FIGURE EIGHT	26.1 sec @ 0.67 g (avg)	
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1700 rpm	
CONSUMER INFO		
BASE PRICE	\$35,720	
PRICE AS TESTED	\$38,565	
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes	
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain	
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi	
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	5 yrs/100,000 mi	
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	5 yrs/100,000 mi	
FUEL CAPACITY	18.5 gal	
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	20/32 mpg	
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	169/105 kW-hrs/100 mi	
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.81 lb/mi	
MT FUEL ECONOMY	14.6 mpg	
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium	

noticeable turbo lag, and frustrating transmission, which lacked shift paddles and continually told us, "Shift Denied!"

At \$38,565 (\$35,720 base), the Regal GS resides in the economical half of the group, yet includes navigation (\$1145), power sunroof (\$1000), leather interior, satellite radio, Bluetooth, push-button start, and dual-zone auto A/C. But the lack of a backup camera, especially given the

high rear shelf, seems an oversight. And please, please, lose the gaudy chrome inserts in the steering wheel and around the gearshift. As the most powerful entry—not to mention one of the newest—the Regal needed to be more than an apparent strong value with flash. It needed to live up to its brawny specs and bulldog looks. As its finish illustrates, it didn't. **Ron Kiino**



(Cover Story)

LATE TO THE PARTY, STILL

7TH PLACE 2012 Infiniti G25

There are two ways of arriving late to a party. One, make a grand entrance and act like you have something to offer that was missing prior to your arrival. Two, bring a gift—maybe chips and salsa or a few adult beverages—to mask the offense of your tardiness. The Infiniti G25 was certainly late to the party. And instead of adding some spice into the entry-lux dance floor, it showed up in last year's clothes, half-asleep. And it brought Zima.

In this comparison, the G25 was simply outclassed. The combination of an anemic drivetrain, dated exterior styling, and an interior that looks at least a generation old landed the G25 in seventh place, a finishing position that was debated for over an hour before we decided the Infiniti was slightly better than the Buick.

The biggest complaints revolved around the Infiniti's seven-speed automatic transmission. The car was never in the right gear coming out of a turn, and sport mode did little to correct the problem. The only time the sport setting did anything was in the constant, tight sweepers of Decker Canyon, when it was unnecessary. The tranny would downshift one or more gears for no apparent reason, each time letting out a spooky wail from the relatively gutless 2.5-liter V6. Listening to the engine carry on got really old really fast. And if you want to get anywhere in a semi-hurry, you've got to ring the scrawny V6's neck.

Equally unloved was the bland, low-rent interior. Infiniti failed to achieve the bare minimum level of quality required for a luxury car by employing cheap beige plastic. As the G25 is offered with neither a manual transmission nor the steering wheel-mounted paddle shifters available on the G37, Infiniti clearly isn't going for sporty, either. The lack of athleticism was all too obvious in testing, with the G25 posting the slowest 0-60 time of the group at 7.5 seconds and the slowest quarter-mile time of 15.7 seconds at 90.8 mph.

The Infiniti does have some redeeming qualities. Based on Nissan's FM (front-mid) architecture, the entry-level G is a competent handler, with most editors reporting sharp turn-in and generally good





POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS	2012 Infiniti G25
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, RWD
ENGINE TYPE	60-deg V-6, aluminum block/heads
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
DISPLACEMENT	152.3 cu in/2496 cc
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.3:1
POWER (SAE NET)	218 hp @ 6400 rpm
TORQUE (SAE NET)	187 lb-ft @ 4800 rpm
REDLINE	7500 rpm
WEIGHT TO POWER	16.2 lb/hp
TRANSMISSION	7-speed automatic
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.36:1/2.60:1
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar
STEERING RATIO	16.4:1
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	3.1
BRAKES, F;R	12.6-in vented disc; 12.1-in vented disc, ABS
WHEELS	7.5 x 17-in, cast aluminum
TIRES	225/55R17 95V M+S Goodyear Eagle RS-A
DIMENSIONS	
WHEELBASE	112.2 in
TRACK, F/R	59.8/60.2 in
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	187.9 x 69.8 x 57.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	35.4 ft
CURB WEIGHT	3528 lb
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	53/47%
SEATING CAPACITY	5
HEADROOM, F/R	39.1/37.2 in
LEGROOM, F/R	43.9/34.7 in
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	55.6/55.2 in
CARGO VOLUME	13.5 cu ft
TEST DATA	
ACCELERATION TO MPH	
0-30	2.7 sec
0-40	4.1
0-50	5.6
0-60	7.5
0-70	9.7
0-80	12.2
0-90	15.5
0-100	19.1
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.8
QUARTER MILE	15.7 sec @ 90.8 mph
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	118 ft
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.89 g (avg)
MT FIGURE EIGHT	26.5 sec @ 0.65 g (avg)
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	2000 rpm
CONSUMER INFO	
BASE PRICE	\$33,495
PRICE AS TESTED	\$35,995
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/60,000 mi
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	6 yrs/70,000 mi
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	4 yrs/unlimited
FUEL CAPACITY	20.0 gal
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	20/29 mpg
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	169/116 kW-hrs/100 mi
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.83 lb/mi
MT FUEL ECONOMY	17.6 mpg
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium

steering feel. That's the inherent benefit of RWD, and most likely the only reason the Infiniti got shelved above the Buick. This fact would've carried more weight had the stability control not been so invasive, cutting power through turns and sapping the fun out of an otherwise agile car. The Infiniti does get some credit for having the second-best observed fuel economy of the group, seeing an average of 17.6

mpg in our abusive hands.

Despite decent handling and relatively good gas mileage, the G25 proved to be one of the two major disappointments of this test. Here's hoping Infiniti follows the lead of other automakers and gives the next-gen G a turbo-four with a much smarter transmission. Until then, the G25 is seriously outclassed by the major players gathered here. **Alex Nishimoto**



(Cover Story)

PSEUDO-EUROPEAN CAR OFFENDS NONE

6TH PLACE 2012 Acura TSX V-6

No offense—though I'm sure somebody out there will take issue—but this comparison felt the most right to me during one particular driving loop where it was just the European contenders briskly hustling through the twists and turns. The Japanese and American half of the pack had been separated by a red light. And then some. Yes, it's cliché, but it takes some big talent to be taken seriously in the sport sedan realm.

If the Acura TSX—known to the *cognoscenti* in these parts as a derivation of the European-spec Honda Accord—can take one triumph to heart, it's that no editor stepped out shaking his head, saying, "It's just awful" or "It doesn't belong here." (See eighth place.) In fact, the TSX proved a cautionary tale in automotive what-ifs. What if its transmission had more than five speeds? What if it had better tires and brakes? What if its ride quality were better sorted? To elaborate, let's open our notebooks. "Still has a few drops of that old Honda magic, but not nearly enough," remarked Lieberman. "Engine zings and it basically feels like a big Honda Fit, which isn't bad, but it's definitely let down a bit by the transmission," wrote Febbo. "If the TSX had the BMW's brakes and the Benz's tires, it would've easily been a top-four car. If..." postulated Kiino.

No doubt the most impressive naturally aspirated engine of the bunch, the TSX's aurally pleasurable 3.5-liter V6 won over most of us. Its exhaust note was described as "deep and bellowing" by Nishimoto. With a comparison-topping 280 horsepower paired with 235mm-wide rubber, the front-drive TSX was third-quickest from 0-60 mph and in the quarter mile (6.0 seconds and 14.5 seconds, respectively), but last in maximum lateral g (0.82) and on the figure eight (0.3 second off the Volvo S60 T5, the next closest). Quick steering helps generate aggressive turn-in, but drivers were then left with a chassis worthy of considerably more grip.





When the going was easy, the sporty but busy ride and plentiful road and wind noise wore us down. The cluttered center stack and low-resolution navigation screen also drew ire, though the interior material selection and color coordination is solid. The TSX is well-equipped, but after a while we started to question the \$39,335 as-tested price.

It's serious coinage any way you cut it, and the gap in dynamics from sixth to first is tremendous. Of course, it's easy for us to nitpick what needs fixing—we're not the ones spending our money on product development. But for the same purchase price, there definitely are five better sport sedans from which to choose. **Benson Kong**



POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS		2012 Acura TSX V-6
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, FWD	
ENGINE TYPE	60-deg V-6, aluminum block/heads	
VALVETRAIN	SOHC, 4 valves/cyl	
DISPLACEMENT	211.8 cu in/3471 cc	
COMPRESSION RATIO	11.2:1	
POWER (SAE NET)	280 hp @ 6200 rpm	
TORQUE (SAE NET)	254 lb-ft @ 5000 rpm	
REDLINE	6800 rpm	
WEIGHT TO POWER	13.0 lb/hp	
TRANSMISSION	5-speed automatic	
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	4.31:1/2.12:1	
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	
STEERING RATIO	13.5:1	
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.5	
BRAKES, F;R	11.8-in vented disc; 11.1-in disc, ABS	
WHEELS	8.0 x 18-in, cast aluminum	
TIRES	235/45R18 94V Michelin Pilot HX MXM4	
DIMENSIONS		
WHEELBASE	106.4 in	
TRACK, F/R	62.2/62.2 in	
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	185.6 x 72.4 x 56.7 in	
TURNING CIRCLE	38.1 ft	
CURB WEIGHT	3641 lb	
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	62/38%	
SEATING CAPACITY	5	
HEADROOM, F/R	37.6/37.0 in	
LEGROOM, F/R	42.4/34.3 in	
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	57.8/56.1	
CARGO VOLUME	14.0 cu ft	
TEST DATA		
ACCELERATION TO MPH		
0-30	2.3 sec	
0-40	3.2	
0-50	4.6	
0-60	6.0	
0-70	7.6	
0-80	10.0	
0-90	12.4	
0-100	15.1	
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	2.9	
QUARTER MILE	14.5 sec @ 98.0 mph	
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	126 ft	
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.82 g (avg)	
MT FIGURE EIGHT	27.1 sec @ 0.64 g (avg)	
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1700 rpm	
CONSUMER INFO		
BASE PRICE	\$36,235	
PRICE AS TESTED	\$39,335	
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes	
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain	
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi	
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	6 yrs/70,000 mi	
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	4 yrs/50,000 mi	
FUEL CAPACITY	18.5 gal	
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	19/28 mpg	
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	177/120 kW-hrs/100 mi	
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.87 lb/mi	
MT FUEL ECONOMY	16.8 mpg	
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium	

(Cover Story)

OLD? WHO YOU CALLING OLD?

5TH PLACE 2011 Lexus IS 250 F-Sport

The Lexus IS 250 was the very definition of an underdog when it knocked on the door of our little entry-level luxury-car party. Having made its production debut at the 2005 (think White Sox winning the World Series) New York auto show, the second-generation IS can't help but look, feel, and seem a little dated. Its 204 horsepower and 185 lb-ft are light for a modern small-displacement turbocharged four-cylinder motor, let alone the 2.5-liter V6 the IS 250 has stashed under its hood. The six-speed automatic used to be state-of-the-art with its sport mode and paddle shifters, but today half the cars in this comparison have seven- and eight-speed gearboxes. So where does that leave a nearly seven-year-old sport sedan?

Surprisingly, solidly mid-pack is the answer. Truth is, especially compared with the older-by-a-year Infiniti G, the Lexus still feels like it's a viable purchase. Our impressions were no doubt bolstered by our tester's optional F-Sport package. With its unique sport seats, leather-covered steering wheel, firmer suspension, 18-inch wheels, and grippy Bridgestones, the IS seemed to punch above its weight in the smiles-per-mile category. "Lexus has the bones of a good sport sedan here," said Evans. "The chassis is solid and composed, the handling is good, and it grips well."

We were also impressed with its style. The interior is trimmed out nicely, with the comfy Alcantara-covered, big-bolstered seats holding occupants in place on the twistier stretch of our drive loop. With the exception of the somewhat plasticky, dated center stack, the majority of the interior "still feels luxurious and upscale," to quote Kiino. The exterior design has fared equally well over time, due in part to a mid-cycle refresh a couple years back, and still manages to be eye-catching (especially in F-Sport trim). Adds Lieberman, "Compared with





POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS	2011 Lexus IS 250
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, RWD
ENGINE TYPE	60-deg V-6, aluminum block/heads
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
DISPLACEMENT	152.5 cu in/2499 cc
COMPRESSION RATIO	12.0:1
POWER (SAE NET)	204 hp @ 6400 rpm
TORQUE (SAE NET)	185 lb-ft @ 4800 rpm
REDLINE	6600 rpm
WEIGHT TO POWER	17.2 lb/hp
TRANSMISSION	6-speed automatic
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.91:1/2.28:1
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar
STEERING RATIO	13.4:1
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.9
BRAKES, F;R	11.7-in vented disc; 11.5-in vented disc, ABS
WHEELS	8.0 x 18-in, cast aluminum
TIRES	225/40R18 88Y; 255/40R18 95Y Bridgestone Turanza ER33
DIMENSIONS	
WHEELBASE	107.5 in
TRACK, F/R	60.4/60.0 in
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	180.3 x 70.9 x 56.1 in
TURNING CIRCLE	33.5 ft
CURB WEIGHT	3501 lb
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	52/48%
SEATING CAPACITY	5
HEADROOM, F/R	37.2/36.7 in
LEGROOM, F/R	43.9/30.6 in
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	54.4/52.7 in
CARGO VOLUME	13.0 cu ft
TEST DATA	
ACCELERATION TO MPH	
0-30	2.4 sec
0-40	3.9
0-50	5.5
0-60	7.2
0-70	9.8
0-80	12.5
0-90	15.8
0-100	-
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.8
QUARTER MILE	15.6 sec @ 89.6 mph
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	114 ft
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.91 g (avg)
MT FIGURE EIGHT	26.2 sec @ 0.66 g (avg)
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1900 rpm
CONSUMER INFO	
BASE PRICE	\$34,470
PRICE AS TESTED	\$41,214
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain, front knee
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	6 yrs/70,000 mi
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	4 yrs/unlimited
FUEL CAPACITY	17.1 gal
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	21/30 mpg
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	160/112 kW-hrs/100 mi
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.80 lb/mi
MT FUEL ECONOMY	17.1 mpg
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium

that new squished-spindle Lexus snout, this thing is gorgeous."

Complaints? We had a few, and most concerned the most outdated part of the car: the powertrain. While the V-6 revs out smoothly enough, it is underpowered among its competitive set. We wished for at least another 50 lb-ft of torque to help push the relatively light IS along. We also

found the shift paddles less responsive than those in most of the competition. Rear seat room wasn't impressive, and the \$41,214 as-tested price seemed steep, considering the car's age. That said, we know there's a new IS in the works. If it builds on the lessons Lexus should have learned from this iteration, we can't wait to drive it. **Rory Jurnecka**



(Cover Story)

THE SAFE BET

4TH PLACE 2012 Audi A4 Quattro

Quattro—Audi's brand name for all-wheel drive—has defined the Ingolstadt-based manufacturer's identity for the last 30 years. Some may question the value of sending power to all four wheels on such relatively low-horsepower vehicles, but in the twistiest sections of our test loop, the difference immediately became apparent. The A4, with its wide powerband from the direct-injection 2.0-liter turbo I-4, shot from corner to corner with grip the other cars couldn't hope to achieve. Well, save for one from Bavaria.

The unanimous complaint among the judges was Audi's beige/gray interior. Even the biggest four-ring fans in our group (hi, Mom!) remarked that this color should never be allowed to leave the factory. While design and ergonomics were praised, wrapping everything in that cheap-looking khaki faux leather makes it look too much like a Frankfurt taxi. The steering wheel seemed to suffer the most from the cheap material, and its function was a point of contention. While most of the manufacturers in this comparison augment steering feel by piping powertrain vibration into the steering system (alarmingly so in the case of the Mercedes), Audi isolates the NVH and lets the front tires do all the talking. Feelings on steering feel were split right down the middle, with some celebrating the sharp responses and others proclaiming the car devoid of soul. However you look at it, the Audi was the second-heaviest car in the comparison at 3710 pounds and still managed to tie the 3480-pound BMW for first place around the figure eight. Again, grip.

In acceleration runs, the Audi put in a strong second-place showing behind the BMW coming in just two-tenths of a second behind it to 60 mph (5.8 seconds) and in the quarter mile. Clearly, the sixth most-powerful car in the field gets the most out of its 211 horses. On the street, the Audi felt mid-pack in accelerative oomph, maybe because of the extra weight from the brand-defining AWD hardware, though the new and lightened A6 shows that Audi is capable of making an AWD car that's





2012 Audi A4 2.0 Quattro	
POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS	
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, AWD
ENGINE TYPE	Turbocharged I-4, iron block/alum head
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
DISPLACEMENT	121.1 cu in/1984 cc
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.6:1
POWER (SAE NET)	211 hp @ 4300 rpm
TORQUE (SAE NET)	258 lb-ft @ 1500 rpm
REDLINE	6800 rpm
WEIGHT TO POWER	17.6 lb/hp
TRANSMISSION	8-speed automatic
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	2.85:1/1.90:1
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar
STEERING RATIO	16.3:1
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.9
BRAKES, F;R	12.6-in vented disc; 11.8-in disc, ABS
WHEELS	8.0 x 18-in, cast aluminum
TIRES	245/40R18 99Y Pirelli Cinturato P7
DIMENSIONS	
WHEELBASE	110.6 in
TRACK, F/R	61.6/61.1 in
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	185.2 x 71.9 x 56.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	37.7 ft
CURB WEIGHT	3710 lb
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	55/45%
SEATING CAPACITY	5
HEADROOM, F/R	38.6/37.5 in
LEGROOM, F/R	41.3/35.2 in
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	55.5/54.3 in
CARGO VOLUME	12.4 cu ft
TEST DATA	
ACCELERATION TO MPH	
0-30	1.9 sec
0-40	2.9
0-50	4.2
0-60	5.8
0-70	7.8
0-80	10.1
0-90	12.9
0-100	16.5
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.2
QUARTER MILE	14.4 sec @ 94.5 mph
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	113 ft
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.91 g (avg)
MT FIGURE EIGHT	25.9 sec @ 0.69 g (avg)
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1600 rpm
CONSUMER INFO	
BASE PRICE	\$34,175
PRICE AS TESTED	\$43,075
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	4 yrs/unlimited
FUEL CAPACITY	16.9 gal
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	21/29 mpg
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	160/116 kW-hrs/100 mi
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.81 lb/mi
MT FUEL ECONOMY	16.6 mpg
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium

lighter than the 2WD competition. Also, what's up with the awful wind noise?

The A4 is scheduled for an update in 2013 with new exterior styling details and a rash of interior changes including new materials, steering wheel, and different color offerings. If buyers must have a 2012, spend \$1250 on the prestige trim level to get upgraded leather and more

supportive seats, 19-inch wheels with wider tires, a firmer suspension, and more aggressive front and rear fascias. Though that would, of course, bump the second-highest as-tested price even higher. The A4 is an aging car but still a good choice, especially for buyers who require all-weather performance.

Mike Febbo



(Cover Story)

A VERY GOOD CAR—JUST NOT GREAT

3RD PLACE Mercedes-Benz C250

Well, this is awkward. The mighty Mercedes-Benz finishes third, behind a Volvo? How'd that happen? Well, let me tell you.

Here are the problems we had with our Sport-packaged C250. First and foremost, these seats do not belong in anything associated with the word "Sport." The bottoms are hard, and as flat as the plains east of Denver, while the seatbacks offer just enough side bolstering to remind you how sporty they aren't. Nearly as bad is the boost lag, with the little 1.8-liter turbo-four wholly unequipped to handle the Benz's weight until boost comes in around 3000 rpm. The transmission, meanwhile, is slow to react and doesn't keep the engine on boost even in Sport mode, and the side-to-side manual shifting won no fans. The steering was too light and lacking in feedback, and the design inside and out is conservative bordering on boring.

So that's why the Mercedes is in third. But why is it ahead of the Audi, Acura, Lexus, Infiniti, and Buick? Because it drives better than any of them. Once the turbo-four is boiling, the C250 feels much quicker than its 6.9-second 0-60-mph time suggests. The chassis is rock solid and nigh unflappable. It's a bit disconcerting when the body rolls over hard on turn-in, even though you know in the back of your mind it's going to settle in on the suspension and bite hard at the road. Once it does, the Benz is neutrally balanced, hard to upset, and stuck tight to the asphalt. Better transitions and better seats would help immensely.

The Mercedes also made a strong case for itself in value. Say what?! Yup, at \$41,570, our lightly optioned tester landed





2012 Mercedes-Benz C250	
POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS	
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, RWD
ENGINE TYPE	Turbocharged I-4, aluminum block/head
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
DISPLACEMENT	109.6 cu in/1796 cc
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.3:1
POWER (SAE NET)	201 hp @ 5500 rpm
TORQUE (SAE NET)	229 lb-ft @ 2200 rpm
REDLINE	6300 rpm
WEIGHT TO POWER	17.0 lb/hp
TRANSMISSION	7-speed automatic
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.07:1/2.24:1
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar
STEERING RATIO	14.5:1
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.7
BRAKES, F;R	11.6-in vented, drilled disc; 11.8-in vented disc, ABS
WHEELS	7.5 x 18-in; 8.5 x 18-in, cast aluminum
TIRES	225/40ZR18 92Y; 255/35ZR18 94Y Continental ContiSportContact 3
DIMENSIONS	
WHEELBASE	108.7 in
TRACK, F/R	60.4/59.6 in
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	180.8 x 69.7 x 56.3 in
TURNING CIRCLE	35.3 ft
CURB WEIGHT	3421 lb
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	53/47%
SEATING CAPACITY	5
HEADROOM, F/R	37.1/36.9 in
LEGROOM, F/R	41.7/33.4 in
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	54.7/55.0 in
CARGO VOLUME	12.4 cu ft
TEST DATA	
ACCELERATION TO MPH	
0-30	2.1 sec
0-40	3.5
0-50	5.0
0-60	6.9
0-70	9.0
0-80	11.8
0-90	14.8
0-100	18.4
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.8
QUARTER MILE	15.2 sec @ 91.2 mph
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	106 ft
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.89 g (avg)
MT FIGURE EIGHT	26.4 sec @ 0.65 g (avg)
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1900 rpm
CONSUMER INFO	
BASE PRICE	\$35,675
PRICE AS TESTED	\$41,570
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain, driver knee
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	Unlimited/unlimited
FUEL CAPACITY	17.4 gal
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	21/31 mpg
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	160/109 kW-hrs/100 mi
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.79 lb/mi
MT FUEL ECONOMY	17.7 mpg
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium

mid-pack in pricing while still offering such niceties as satellite radio and navigation. Of course, start spec'ing it up like the BMW and you can easily push this car into \$50,000 territory. As it stood, though, the Mercedes offered one of the best driving experiences at a reasonable price. It was even the fuel economy winner at 17.7 mpg observed. By the end

of our test, everyone liked the C250, but no one loved it. It's a competent handler, a solid ride, a real luxury car, and it has pedigree. Still, there were two other cars that did it at least a little better. Besides, Mercedes is hard at work on a new C-Class, and you can bet a third-place finish simply won't be tolerated.

Scott Evans



(Cover Story)

SWEDISH CINDERELLA

2ND PLACE Volvo S60 T5

The Mayan prophecy didn't arrive early. Illicit drugs were not consumed. A lofty amount of Chinese yuan hasn't been left in our collective (nonexistent) coffer. Ladies and gents: We are still as surprised as you are at this very moment. We've known for a long time just how very good the turbo I-6, AWD S60 is, but this was our first crack at the FWD, transverse inline-five, and, well, we're surprised.

The Volvo S60 T5 had a lot of things going for it that aren't necessarily related to safety. First, there is that stunning coupelike Swedish body with clean, composed, and well-executed accents. The physique can hardly be called svelte, but it is well-proportioned and ideally sorted for five-passenger hauling. More important, it's different. Refreshingly so. Our particular tester's looks benefited from optional bright silver sport front and rear bumpers. Over the multi-day test the design received nary a complaint.

Much like its metal panels, the cabin's no-nonsense black/silver/tan innards were penned with simplicity and attractiveness in mind. The space proved extremely comfortable and nearly concert-hall quiet, not to mention highly usable with ample storage, cupholders galore, and a straightforward multimedia system. A few labeled the plain cockpit too "stripped" and "not premium enough," but in the end, it did what it set out to do—and did it well. We especially took a liking to the front seats, which are supple enough for long highway hauls and supportive enough for aggressive runs on desolate zigzag paths. Not often do our posteriors sit in such magnificent thrones in an entry-level model. The fact that they were fabric instead of real or fake cowhide was also appreciated.

Those aforesaid aggressive runs revealed a solid 3500-pound platform that liked to dance. It wasn't the quickest on our track with its relatively skinny 215/50R17 Michelin Primacy rubber (the thinnest of the bunch), nor did it carve canyons with a surgical skill of a certain Bavarian. In all honesty, the





nose-heavy car that some called “a tank” and “a heifer” plowed at its limits on tight, complicated corners. But it was controllable, and, most important, extremely fun. Granted, long sweepers were where this Volvo truly shone. The smooth, peppery 2.5-liter five-cylinder and its six-speed automatic doled out consistent power and thrills whatever the

situation, and was one of the most fuel efficient at 17.5 mpg observed.

The S60 won our hearts with its ability to take the high-stress runs we dealt it in its competent, confident stride. When it comes time to go home, it coddles you. It sips fuel penuriously. And it looks damn sexy. Yup, this is one special Swede.

Nate Martinez



POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS		2012 Volvo S60 T5
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, FWD	
ENGINE TYPE	Turbocharged I-5, iron block/aluminum head	
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl	
DISPLACEMENT	153.8 cu in/2521 cc	
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.0:1	
POWER (SAE NET)	250 hp @ 5500 rpm	
TORQUE (SAE NET)	266 lb-ft @ 1800 rpm	
REDLINE	6500 rpm	
WEIGHT TO POWER	14.1 lb/hp	
TRANSMISSION	6-speed automatic	
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.20:1/2.21:1	
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar	
STEERING RATIO	15.0:1	
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.7	
BRAKES, F;R	11.8-in vented disc; 11.9-in disc, ABS	
WHEELS	7.0 x 17-in, cast aluminum	
TIRES	215/50R17 95V Michelin Primacy MXM4	
DIMENSIONS		
WHEELBASE	109.3 in	
TRACK, F/R	62.1/62.0 in	
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	182.2 x 73.4 x 58.4 in	
TURNING CIRCLE	37.1 ft	
CURB WEIGHT	3514 lb	
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	62/38%	
SEATING CAPACITY	5	
HEADROOM, F/R	38.3/37.4 in	
LEGROOM, F/R	41.9/33.5 in	
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	57.0/55.2 in	
CARGO VOLUME	12.0 cu ft	
TEST DATA		
ACCELERATION TO MPH		
0-30	2.2 sec	
0-40	3.3	
0-50	4.7	
0-60	6.2	
0-70	8.1	
0-80	10.4	
0-90	13.0	
0-100	16.3	
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.2	
QUARTER MILE	14.7 sec @ 95.4 mph	
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	120 ft	
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.85 g (avg)	
MT FIGURE EIGHT	26.8 sec @ 0.64 g (avg)	
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1800 rpm	
CONSUMER INFO		
BASE PRICE	\$32,175	
PRICE AS TESTED	\$34,505	
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes	
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain	
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi	
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi	
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	4 yrs/unlimited	
FUEL CAPACITY	17.8 gal	
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	20/30 mpg	
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	169/112 kW-hrs/100 mi	
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.82 lb/mi	
MT FUEL ECONOMY	17.5 mpg	
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded regular	

(Cover Story)

THAT'S FIRST PLACE WITH A COMPETITION-KILLING BULLET

1ST PLACE BMW 328i Sport Line

I want to talk about the big albatross hanging around the new 328i's neck right up front: price. This car rings the bell to the tune of \$50,560, by far the highest as-tested price of the competition. Shock! Horror! You all will cancel your subscriptions en masse, or say stuff like, "Of course the most expensive car won, get a brain, moran," etc. However, the Bimmer came straight from the U.S. launch of the 3 Series loaded with every option possible. Using BMW's online configurator, you can spec out a mechanically identical 328i Sport Line for \$41,095 that would have beat up and choked out the competition just like the one in our test did.

As mentioned, we sat around screaming at each other for over an hour trying to determine if the Buick was in fact a lamer duck than the Infiniti. We spent all of three minutes declaring the BMW best in test and best in class. This is not just a win for the 328i—it's a massacre. A slaughter. Doomsday. Armageddon. I say this with a straight face: There is no competition. Not only was the BMW's first-place finish never in question, I can't remember a comparison test with such lopsided results. We had a hard time finding bad things to say. Aside from the as-tested price (see above!), the worst anyone could come up with is that the new 2.0-liter twin-scroll I-4 sounds like a diesel. But, as Evans logs, "That's hardly a complaint," and you only hear the *clatter-clatter-clatter* at idle. Let's call it the sound of efficiency.

The BMW was the fastest car here (0-60 mph in 5.6 seconds and through the quarter in 14.2 at 97.8 mph), beating even the AWD Audi. The 328i rode the best, had the best steering and transmission, is the only car here with start/stop technology, gets a class-leading 36 mpg highway, has the best-laid-out interior, is the most comfortable, has an unbelievable nav screen, and, to top it all off, has the biggest back seat. Ultimately—and this cuts right through the heart of the sport sedan segment—the BMW was without question the most fun to drive.

A sampling from our notebooks. Kiino: "Does everything well. The epitome of a luxury sport sedan." Evans: "What a car.





2012 BMW 328i	
POWERTRAIN/CHASSIS	
DRIVETRAIN LAYOUT	Front engine, RWD
ENGINE TYPE	Turbocharged I-4, aluminum block/head
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 4 valves/cyl
DISPLACEMENT	121.9 cu in/1997 cc
COMPRESSION RATIO	10.0:1
POWER (SAE NET)	240 hp @ 5000 rpm
TORQUE (SAE NET)	255 lb-ft @ 1250 rpm
REDLINE	7000 rpm
WEIGHT TO POWER	14.5 lb/hp
TRANSMISSION	8-speed automatic
AXLE/FINAL-DRIVE RATIO	3.15:1/2.10:1
SUSPENSION, FRONT; REAR	Struts, coil springs, adj shocks, anti-roll bar; multilink, coil springs, adj shocks, anti-roll bar
STEERING RATIO	15.0:1
TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK	2.8
BRAKES, F;R	12.3-in vented disc; 11.8-in vented disc, ABS
WHEELS	8.0 x 18-in, cast aluminum
TIRES	225/45R18 91Y Goodyear Efficient Grip
DIMENSIONS	
WHEELBASE	110.6 in
TRACK, F/R	60.3/61.9 in
LENGTH X WIDTH X HEIGHT	182.5 x 71.3 x 56.3
TURNING CIRCLE	37.1 ft
CURB WEIGHT	3480 lb
WEIGHT DIST, F/R	50/50%
SEATING CAPACITY	5
HEADROOM, F/R	40.3/37.7 in
LEGROOM, F/R	42.0/35.1 in
SHOULDER ROOM, F/R	55.1/55.1 in
CARGO VOLUME	17.0 cu ft
TEST DATA	
ACCELERATION TO MPH	
0-30	1.9 sec
0-40	2.9
0-50	4.1
0-60	5.6
0-70	7.4
0-80	9.5
0-90	12.0
0-100	14.9
PASSING, 45-65 MPH	3.0
QUARTER MILE	14.2 sec @ 97.8 mph
BRAKING, 60-0 MPH	107 ft
LATERAL ACCELERATION	0.90 g (avg)
MT FIGURE EIGHT	25.9 sec @ 0.69 g (avg)
TOP-GEAR REVS @ 60 MPH	1750 rpm
CONSUMER INFO	
BASE PRICE	\$35,795
PRICE AS TESTED	\$50,560
STABILITY/TRACTION CONTROL	Yes/yes
AIRBAGS	Dual front, front side, f/r curtain, front knee
BASIC WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
POWERTRAIN WARRANTY	4 yrs/50,000 mi
ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE	4 yrs/unlimited
FUEL CAPACITY	15.8 gal
EPA CITY/HWY ECON	24/36 mpg
ENERGY CONS, CITY/HWY	140/94 kW-hrs/100 mi
CO2 EMISSIONS	0.69 lb/mi
MT FUEL ECONOMY	16.8 mpg
RECOMMENDED FUEL	Unleaded premium

There really isn't anything this car does wrong," Jurnecka: "Last week I was telling a buddy that there isn't a single new BMW I'd even consider buying. I was wrong. I'd buy this car." Martinez: "Seriously, where's the M badge?" Nishimoto: "BMW does what it does best with this new 328, and thus the bar is raised yet again." And from me, "They picked the appellation F30 for

a reason. Like the E30, the new 328i is the ideal blend of engine, transmission, and chassis.' Folks, I'm awed.

In full, glaring, retina-searing contrast, this BMW wins this competition because it does everything better than the rest. For now, all the competition can do is head back to their drawing boards. Like I said before, I'm shocked. **Jonny Lieberman**

