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Lexus LS430: high technology, understated looks, inclusive prices

By Neil Winton

LONDON, November 4, Graphic News: Luxury cars must be awash with all the latest gizmos, and the new Lexus LS430 won't disappoint technology lovers.

The satellite navigation system responds to verbal commands, and will also factor in the latest traffic reports when working out the best route.

The car uses Ericsson's Bluetooth technology, a short-range radio system which links telephones, computers and other devices like laptops and personal organisers. Bluetooth allows mobile phones carried by LS430 passengers to be automatically linked to the car's verbal command phone system.

The LS430 has Adaptive Front Lighting, which swivels the headlights to broaden the beam through curves to greatly improve visibility in potentially dangerous night driving. However, the system doesn't match BMW's latest advance, which links the headlights to satellite navigation and increases lighting at dangerous junctions.

The car has 10 air bags, including knee protectors for the front passengers. The satellite navigation system becomes a TV screen when reversing, to project an image from a camera mounted in the rear number plate to show the driver where the car is going. The doors are shut by electric motors. The rear seats will massage you. The front seats will warm or cool you, as required.

Unfortunately, the car's most impressive new innovation, a Pre-Collision System (PCS), is currently only available in Japan because of worries about its legal implications. PCS uses radar to warn if a collision is imminent by first tightening the occupants' seat belts, then applying the brakes gradually, and finally making sure maximum braking pressure is attained when the driver hits the brakes. Lexus is delaying the introduction of PCS into Europe and North America until it is sure that it will be immune from law suits from drivers seeking to blame the car for not doing enough to avoid crashes.

The styling of the latest Lexus flagship has been modernised, but it retains those understated, conservative looks which have served Toyota's luxury brand well since its first appearance in 1989. Critics say that the styling looks bland and bloated, but Lexus reckons it has been successful not least because of its subdued looks. Lexus eschews the ostentation of "other" brands, which it doesn't name, but of course are Mercedes, BMW, Jaguar, and Audi from Europe, and Lincoln and Cadillac in the U.S.

The LS430 is powered by a new 4.3 litre, 32-valve, V8 engine that develops 278 bhp, and sports a new six-speed automatic gearbox, which also switches into sequential manual mode. The car is at its best quietly and quickly eating up the miles on highways. But if you floor the drive-by-wire accelerator, the response is instant and the high-pitched howl from the front reminds you that this is a very impressive motor.

Improvements including a new air-sprung, adjustable suspension, mean that the LS430 now handles just as well as the European competition. Lexus has retained its hallmark policy of including features in the base price for which its rivals charge extra, including satellite navigation, Adaptive Front Lighting, sun-roof, extra air bags, and parking sensors.

Lexus has won over new buyers because of its winning performance in consumer surveys like the J.D.Power reports, particularly in its biggest market, the U.S. But sales won't be helped in Europe by the lack of a diesel engine, which Lexus says will be available in about two years time.

Competition – Mercedes S class, BMW 7 series, Audi A8, Jaguar XJ.

Verdict -- understated luxury of the highest class; but still seems to some to have a bland, almost barge-like appearance. European sales won't accelerate until diesel engines arrive.

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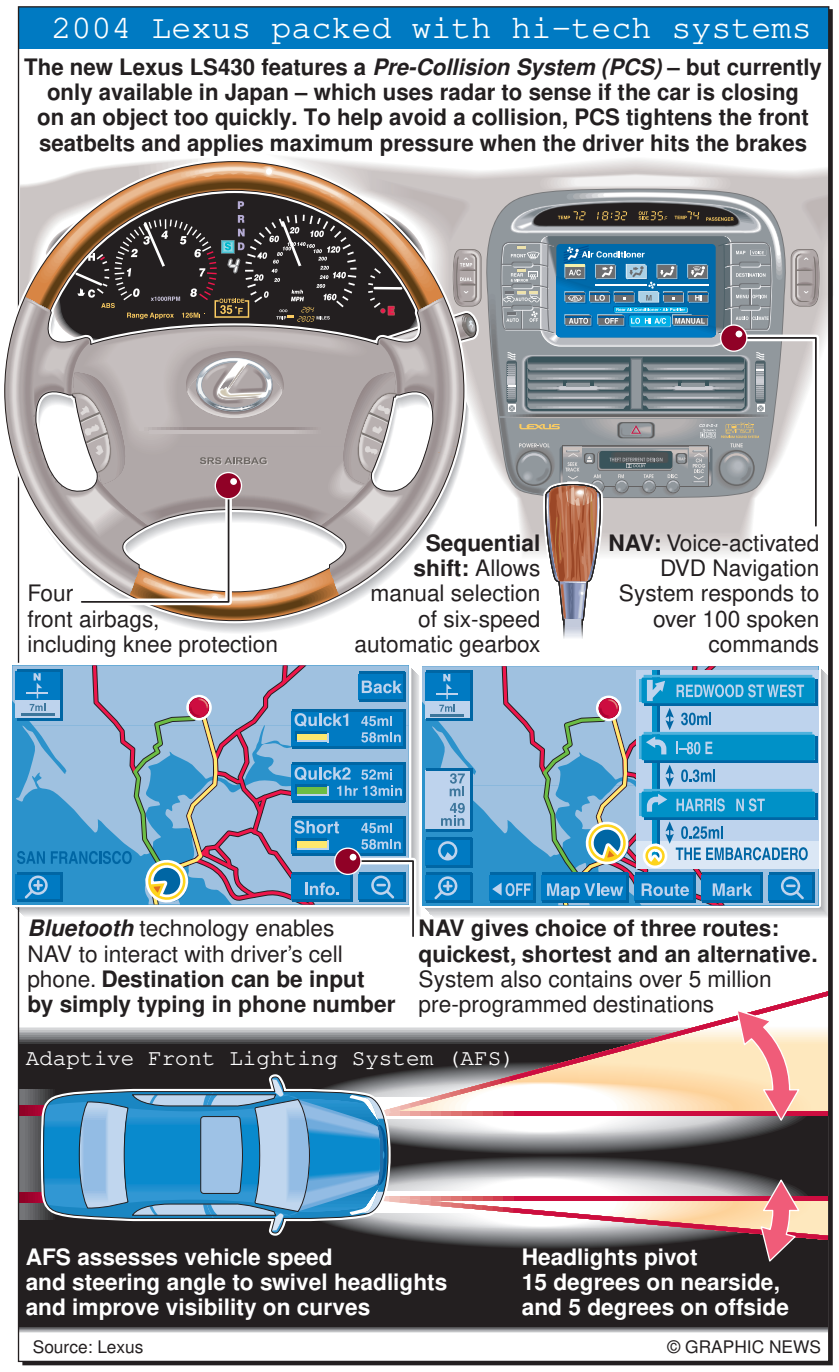

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