

THINKING ALOUD

In his book *Why Men Fight*, Bertrand Russell says men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth. If this is true, then someone should have told Lexus, says **RICHARD WEBB**.



'THOUGHT is subversive and revolutionary, thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habits. Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man,' wrote philosopher and political activist, Bertrand Russell.

It is this very freedom that conceived the new ES. Making bold choices requires confidence and a willingness to stake a claim; things that genuinely move us don't arise from the familiar. They're born of courageous contradictions, and Lexus seems to have embraced paradoxes and polarity to create a more spacious, quieter and safer car with sharpened performance, loads of safety technology and a craftsmanship seldom found in this class.

The seventh-generation Lexus ES is ambitious too. The range includes the ES 300h, with its new fourth-generation self-charging hybrid drive system that delivers exceptional fuel efficiency, responsive performance and minimal emissions for a mid-size luxury saloon.

ON THE DRIVE

I took the ES for a spirited drive through country

lanes and over fast, sweeping roads. The chassis set-up creates a sense of comforting predictability, but with quick responses to my every input. ES chief test driver Yoshiaki Ito elaborated: 'We want every kind of driver to feel a sense of complete control – a level of comfort beyond merely delivering a smooth ride.' Sharp and well-mannered, it is an engaging car to drive as it slices through bends with agility and poise.

Inside, the starting point for chief designer Yasuo Kajino's was the Lexus Future Interior concept that blends a driver-centric cockpit with a spacious and comfortable area for the front passenger. A connected space comes with a navigation system viewed on a generous 12.3-inch multimedia display and second-generation Remote Touch controller. Voice recognition includes a mobile assistant via a contactless smartphone. The ES has comparable legroom in the rear to the flagship LS.

I expect a Lexus to be whisper-quiet, and the ES obliges by rolling along with stealth-like imperceptibility. The

petrol engine component of the hybrid drivetrain does reveal itself if you mash the accelerator but it is still quiet, very quiet.

ON THE APPEAL

Braking is smooth, and acceleration direct and linear, gathering progress in a more immediate way. The main point of hybrids is to become more efficient, and the new ES 300h reluctantly consumes petrol at the rate of just 4.6 litres per 100km on average.

What many buyers will find most appealing about the new ES is the way it looks. Its resemblance to the LS at the front gives way to seductive flares at the rear. Taut, crisp edges give the flanks an organic, athletic look, while a lower roofline helps to create a sportier stance for the car, giving it a huge amount of presence on the road.

The driving experience matches the sharp new styling without compromising the comfort that people expect of an ES and preserves the luxury lifestyle experience Lexus has pursued relentlessly. All of this has not been achieved by accident, but by a uniquely Japanese way of thinking. ■ lexus.co.za