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The 2010 Lexus IS Convertible Is Two Cars in One

Bonus: A brief history of the automobile.

Arriving just in time for summer, Lexus introduces the new IS convertible models. You say you're more of a coupe person than a convertible person? Well, Lexus has a new car for you, too – the new IS convertible with its retractable hardtop *up*.

In an age when cell phones take pictures and pocket cameras make movies, having a car that does two things seems, well...*normal*. In the 60s and 70s, the idea of a car with a pickup truck bed seemed like a good idea. Not much call for those today, though.

A coupe that turns into a convertible, now that's, well...*expected!* You might have noticed that more and more convertibles are using folding hardtops rather than soft-tops. Worldwide, hardtop convertibles have been outnumbering the soft-top varieties for several years now, and for good reason – they just make more sense, especially to folks who have never owned a convertible.

To many people – possibly you - there's something strangely off-putting about driving a car with a "soft" top. You might wonder about safety. You might worry about vandalism, and you might get a shiver just thinking about potential drafts in winter or leaks in heavy rain. Many other people share those exact thoughts.



So, if hardtop convertibles are such a great idea, why did it take so long to offer them? A brief, but entertaining history lesson is in order.

Early cars had no tops. If it rained, you got wet – although, in those early cars, getting wet was probably the least of your worries. The first car tops kept off the rain, but had flimsy zip-up "side curtains" for windows. You didn't get as wet, but winter driving was no picnic. Next came steel roofs and rollup windows while "convertibles" had soft tops that went down and, finally, real rollup windows. You might call that the split in the evolutionary tree.

Of course, that was still years before Packard, a luxury brand no longer with us, invented air conditioning for cars in 1939. It would take another 30 years before "A/C" was installed in more than half the cars sold in America. For many buyers, a convertible was the best bet for looking cool, if not staying cool.

Now, here's where it gets a little confusing. In the late 1940s, carmakers introduced a new body style called the "hardtop convertible." That was just marketing-speak *because it*

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Two Cars in One

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It's Finally Here

Tom On Top

wasn't a convertible at all. It resembled a convertible with its top raised because there was no center pillar – just open side glass. The public called them "hardtops," and, through the early 1970s, most coupes used that popular style.

Things went off on a bit of a tangent in 1957 when Ford introduced the Skyliner, a convertible with a retractable folding steel top. This was the first mass-produced car with a power-retractable folding hardtop – although French carmaker Peugeot had offered something similar in the 1930s, but built just a few hundred.

Ford did better, selling nearly 50,000 "retractables" over a three-year run including one to President Dwight Eisenhower. Some might look back at that Skyliner and think, "They were ahead of their time." Too bad that the fairly crude technology of the day made the tops leaky and creaky and slow to open and close.

Flash forward to the dawn of the 21st century when Lexus offered the first retractable hardtop in the premium-luxury segment, the SC 430. No more leaky-creaky, just the open-air joy of a convertible and the snug, luxurious comfort of a Lexus coupe – in the same car.

Now, Lexus brings that expertise to a more accessible segment. The 2010 IS convertible starts at \$38,490 for the IS 250C and \$43,940 for the IS 350C with its more potent 306-hp 3.5-liter V6. For comparison, the 2009 BMW 3 Series hardtop convertible *starts* at \$44,550.

The new IS convertible is a honey with a three-panel aluminum roof that opens in just 20 seconds and a comfortable backseat. Lexus tested the roof seals in hurricane-like conditions, so the IS can go through an automatic carwash without a drop of water coming through. The trunk can take two golf bags with the top up and one with the top down.

Why just drive a convertible when you can drive a piece of history? The Lexus IS C awaits.

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