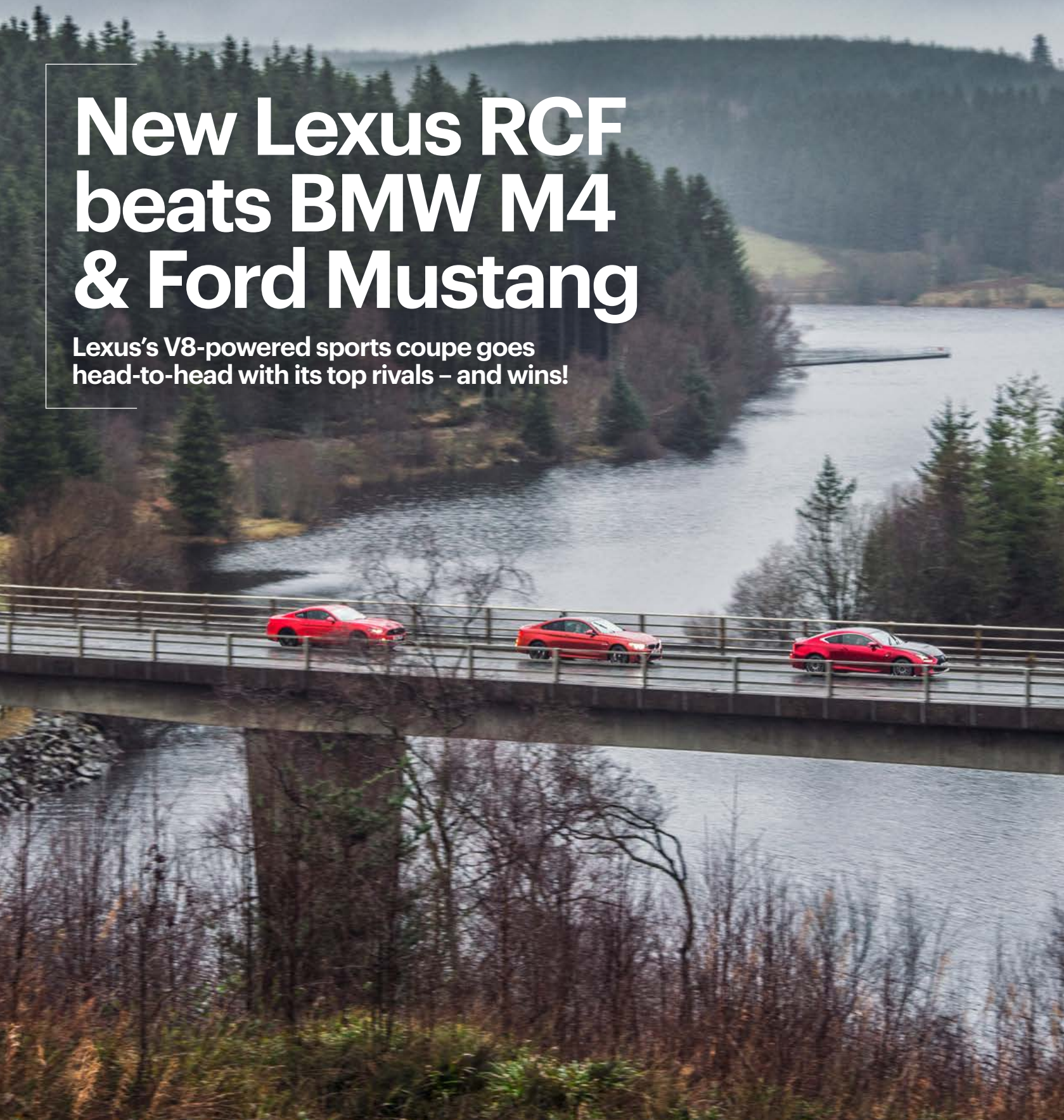


# car

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# New Lexus RCF beats BMW M4 & Ford Mustang

Lexus's V8-powered sports coupe goes  
head-to-head with its top rivals – and wins!







GIANT TEST

# WAR OF THE WORLDS

Talk about a clash of ideologies; BMW's trick, turbocharged M4 takes on two naturally-aspirated V8 rivals, the Lexus RCF and Ford's £32k – £32k! – Mustang GT

Words Ben Barry | Photography Richard Pardon




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**HERE ARE 3743** miles between Ford's Flat Rock, Michigan assembly plant and Southampton docks. It's a trip our Ford Mustang test car completed only yesterday, rolling off the boat and blinking straight into a bleak British winter. There, people with indecipherable accents took it quickly to Essex to park between half-size cars with

Coke-bottle engine displacements.

Still, at least driving on the left won't phase it: this Mustang is right-hand drive. It makes it something of an automotive milestone, because while Ford has built the original pony car for 52 years, it's taken until now for it to give the passenger seat a steering wheel. It's like Elvis touching down at Prestwick airport in 1960, then deciding he'd hang about for the foreseeable.

A few hours from now the Mustang will be duelling against the BMW M4 and Lexus RC F Carbon in Kielder Forest on the Scottish borders, headlights flashing over greasy roads, stability control disabled, 19-inch rear rubber gripping and slipping through kinks and over crests, V8 flaring to the redline in a bluster of mechanical violence.

I'm not sure that's the normal running-in procedure, but it's essential behaviour to discover if a US muscle car costing half the price can beat the best from Europe and Japan. In at the deep end? At least it's got 200 miles of run-up before taking the plunge.

Open the Mustang's driver's door and you squidge into broad leather chairs positioned low down that balance the comfort first impressions you'd expect with a degree of lateral support you probably didn't. The Mustang's interior seems to have been wrought on the same kind of scale as a Utah salt flat, but its wide-open expanses are punctuated by appealing

retro details: ribbed stitching on the door cards, metal-look veneer on the dash, all of it complemented by black viper stripes that relieve the vast plateau of power dome stretching beyond the dash. It's all quite likeable, but it does create a slightly truck-like XL ambience.

Brits can choose from V8s or fours, manuals or autos, fastbacks or convertibles, but the majority of punters have spec'd red V8 manual fastbacks, just like ours.

Press the starter button and there's no mistaking we've got the 5.0-litre V8 under the bonnet: it pulses with a subterranean *wub-a-wub-wub* that evokes McQueen patiently biding time on a stake-out, and rocks the body when you stab the throttle. If you've got understanding neighbours, you can even select the Line Lock function: it tips all the brake balance forwards, so you can pin the nose to the ground with a quick press of the brakes, then jump on the throttle and 'warm the tyres' – Ford's words – on your driveway for 15 seconds. Not right now, Bill.

Ease down the clutch, slot that manual gearshift forwards, noticing that the short lever and its truncated throw already feels like a Hurst short-shifter conversion, that the big steering wheel's spokes are too chunky to grip at quarter-to-three, that the throttle travel is long but responds eagerly.

With the nose pointed towards Newcastle, initial impressions hit hard and fast. There's notable off-centre precision from the first millimetre of steering movement, and I like the fizz of texture and the weighting too, especially in Comfort. Likewise, the brake pedal has taut tension and tactile, reassuring feedback. You'd file the Mustang under bit-slower-than-I-thought rather than all-out rapid, but the tailpipe thunder at full chat makes it *sound* fast, and the seismic crack of a gearshift certainly snares your attention, even if it is hard to finesse for newbies.

The suspension – struts up front, multi-link rear for the ▶

It pulses with a subterranean *wub-a-wub* that evokes McQueen biding time on a stake-out









**Go all-inclusive**

Mustang gets generous standard equipment, but Shaker Pro pack – satellite-navigation and uprated stereo system with sub in boot – is one of few options at £795. Nav a little clunky, but has full UK mapping



▶ From left, toggles control 1) Normal, Sport, Race and Snow/Wet driving modes 2) three steering levels, and 3) traction settings – press the third toggle quickly to disable traction control, hold it for longer to also disable stability control

**Ain't no redneck**

Old-school vibe isn't tech-free: instruments can display air/fuel ratio, cylinder-head temp and inlet air temp. Select Line Lock, press and release brakes, then accelerate and the front brakes hold while the rear tyres spin for 15sec

the noise and the interactivity is more than sufficient recompense. And, come on, working an engine is the point.

Early next morning, the roads are still glistening wet, the rain reduced to a lighter spray. I head out in the M4, overtaking the logging trucks and dodging the standing water until the road starts to buck and weave and climb above lush evergreens.

Of all the rivals, the M4 is the pre-test favourite. It looks squat and muscly in a purposeful kind of way, the driver's seat is low-set and cradles you securely, and the double-stitched leather and gorgeous fillets of carbonfibre in our car convey the deepest sense of quality. In terms of showroom appeal, as a thing to brag you own, an M4 presses all the right buttons.

But when I attended the M4 launch nearly two years ago I was underwhelmed by its 3.0-litre turbocharged straight-six. I'm hoping that more familiarity with downsized turbo engines since then, and just more exposure to the M4, will remedy that.

So I climb in, almost willing myself to like the BMW. And there is much to like: the steering jinks quickly with slop-free responses, weighting up meatily off-centre, even in Comfort mode. Adaptive suspension smothers bumps far more ably than the Lexus, and with great body control, yet there's little to be feared from switching to Sport and upping that control still further; only Sport Plus dials out all the compliance. The dual-clutch gearbox is the slickest transmission on test, subtly slipping through ratios in Auto like a bass drum tapping out four-four beats, delivering more visceral clunks of engagement when you click on the paddleshifters. Want to stop like you've driven head-on into those logging trucks? You'll need our £6k carbon-ceramic brakes, which pin the nose to a stop.

I'd driven the Mustang over the twisting roads that run like tributaries towards Kielder Water, and in the wet and

with the stability control fully engaged I'd fully wound on a quarter turn of lock through a fast, third-gear right-hander. It was a wake-up call; the Ford's limits are low, its electronics Obama liberal.

The M4 is much more conservative, with both far more purchase from the front and rear tyres, and less slack in the stability control. It's a much more sophisticated chassis. But I can't stop coming back to the conclusion that the M4 is a great car castrated by a bad engine, despite my liking the turbo-charged 1-series M, F10 M5 and M235i.

Dip into the accelerator and the M4 quickly hauls forward, but there's also a little lag before the turbos kick. When they do, a surplus of performance washes over the power delivery, a greasy fat gob of torque that detracts from the throttle's precision and encourages you to short-shift like you're steering a gutsy six-cylinder turbodiesel. The stats say the M4 delivers its full power impressively 200rpm beyond the Lexus at 7300rpm, but it also delivers it from 5500rpm and the truth is you can see that redline but somehow never get there, like chasing the end of the rainbow. That the M4 sounds gravelly and compression-ignition bassy only adds to the disappointment.

When a switch to turbo performance engines became inevitable, we feared for throttle response, exhaust noise, ▶

**KEY TECH: BMW M4**  
**The M4's diet plan**

The M4 is some 183kg lighter than the Lexus RCF Carbon, and no heavier than the E46 M3 that launched in 2000, despite larger dimensions. A carbon roof saves 6.5kg compared with a steel equivalent, the bootlid 5kg, the under-bonnet strut brace 1.5kg. There's even a one-piece carbon propshaft, which doubles cost compared with the last M3, but saves 5kg. Aluminium also features, erm, heavily, including the bonnet and the forged suspension components, which provide the M4 with its wider track versus a 4-series and increased stiffness.



**You have control**

BMW infotainment is the best here. Rotary iDrive controller is supplemented by short-cut buttons these days. Works well, and the top of the controller is a touch pad, so you can scrawl sat-nav addresses with your finger



▶ Standard manual and optional (£2645) dual-clutch semi-auto available. Press the DCT's three-stage Drive Logic controller and choose from three settings from slow and soft to hard and fast changes

**Sweet memory**

Instead of setting adaptive dampers, steering weight, throttle response and stability control settings every time (all to right of gearstick), store two sets of preferences in the M1 and M2 buttons on steering wheel: one for cruising, one for hooning



**Time to hit the mode**

Drive Mode Select allows driver to switch between Snow, Eco, Normal, Sport S and Sport S+. Modes tweak air-con, steering weight, throttle response, gearbox mapping and traction control, and adapt the TFT dash display to suit



▶ Remote Touch pad gives control over infotainment system, as displayed on central screen, including sat-nav, audio and car functions. More intuitive than earlier systems, it features haptic feedback, so the pad tingles as you scroll over functions

**Vector selector**

Optional on standard RCF, Carbon model gets Torque Vectoring Diff as standard, which uses multi-plate clutches to vector torque across rear axle. Press a button to switch between Standard, Slalom and Track





2nd

Looks good, sounds incredible and the 'Stang's only a small loan more expensive than a GT86. But as a sports coupe it feels more blank canvas than finished article

1st

Baffled? Don't be, the maths are compelling: Nissan GT-R styling and tech + previous-gen V8 M3 bombast and exuberance = winner

3rd

Hugely desirable and effortlessly fast but – and it's a big one – the turbo six is really hard to fall for. No charm, no goosebumps, no thanks

↑ Sadly for the Mustang, this isn't merely an automotive beauty contest

linear power delivery and the precision of controlling a sliding pair of rear tyres with little blips of throttle. Everyone else – Porsche, Ferrari, AMG – has largely confounded our expectations, but the M4 is, for me, the realisation of those fears. What's happened to rip-snorting induction, to those metallic rasps from the exhaust? To that seemingly endless surge of linear performance and a sky-high redline that made you whoop when you almost clipped it? All gone.

Of course, it's worse in these streaming wet conditions, where the spikes of torque and a lively rear-drive chassis struggle to happily co-exist – an M4 is much more controllable in the dry – but give me a last-gen V8, any day. Or a Mustang. Or an RCF.

I jump back in the Mustang and take it deep into the more challenging roads that flick left and right below the Kielder dam. It's huge fun, the compliant suspension not proving the undoing I thought it might. Interesting too to see how the Mustang puts its power down in the wet. Mostly it copes very well, especially in a straight line, where you can really let the V8 loose. But as soon as you start overlapping throttle and steering, you need to be very quick: the Mustang slips into oversteer like the P Zeros have accepted a bung to not even attempt to save it. This might be unwanted at times, but the plus is a linear slip into sideways action, not a fight. Dial into it and you start adding throttle, and soon you've got an armful of lock and some old-school muscle-car thunder ripping out of the exhausts. Amazing.

The M4 is technically better, and it's certainly much faster, but the Mustang shows up its German rival's lack of character and engagement; you warm to it where the M4 can leave you cold.

The Mustang is far from foible-free: I've got better at smoothing the gearshifts, but the brake and throttle are too distant for effective heel-and-toe, which would help knock the rough edges off those shifts. And when you really start flinging it onto the lockstops, the body can lurch about: it's crucial to make progressive and confident applications of throttle, not nervy stabs.

The Mustang is almost unbelievable value, the undisputed bang-for-buck king, but it also feels like a starting point: I'd love to drive a GT350, something with a stiffer chassis and more power and, who knows, the auto might even be a better bet.

No, after two days' driving I'm coming to a conclusion that even I didn't expect: nothing ticks all the boxes quite like the Lexus. The RCF's gearbox can't compete with the M4's techno masterpiece, it could be lighter and it could be cheaper, but I find it seriously engaging. It feels like a big decision that'll probably get me laughed out of the office, so I take it out again, the rain now torrential and streaming off the cambers. And if anything I start to enjoy it more, the way you can unleash every last drop of torque on wet roads with the stability control disengaged – Expert mode, says the dash! – the way you can play with the rear traction with that awesomely precise throttle and tactile steering.

Think of the RCF as the place where a Nissan GT-R and a last-gen BMW M3 crossover and you're somewhere close; the crazy Gundam-robot-like Japanese design, the barking V8, the frisky but perfectly balanced chassis, all of it feeds into a package that feels unique yet somehow déjà vu.

And when I get to pick which car I want to drive home, I don't think twice about jumping in the Lexus. It's the best of an imperfect bunch, but that doesn't mean I don't desperately want to own one all the same.

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KEY TECH: MUSTANG  
Four or eight?



V8 or inline four in your Mustang doesn't take much thinking about, does it? The (65kg heavier) V8 is £4k dearer, a second quicker to 62mph (4.8sec plays 5.8) and 10mph faster (155mph to the four's 145mph). Thanks to the four's turbo the two aren't miles apart on torque (the V8 peaks at 391lb ft; the four 320lb ft) but the eight's power advantage is clear; 415bhp to 310bhp. Economy? If you care, the four's for you: 35.3mpg and 179g/km CO2 versus the V8's 20.9mpg and 299g/km CO2.

Ford Mustang GT

Price (as tested) | £33,995 (£35,580)

**Transmission**  
Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

**Engine**  
4951cc 32v V8

**Suspension**  
MacPherson strut front, multi-link rear



Made of Steel, aluminium

Lexus RCF Carbon

Price (as tested) | £67,995 (£69,915)

**Transmission**  
Eight-speed auto, rear-wheel drive

**Engine**  
4969cc 32v V8

**Suspension**  
Double wishbone front; multi-link rear



Made of Steel, composite

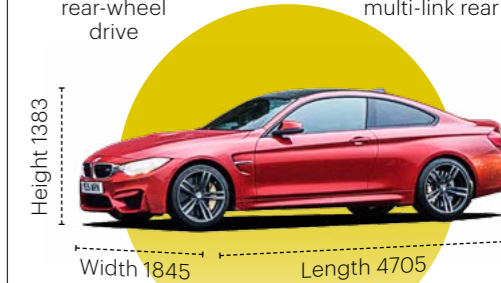
BMW M4

Price (as tested) | £56,965 (£73,910)

**Transmission**  
Seven-speed dual-clutch, rear-wheel drive

**Engine**  
2979cc 24v twin-turbo six-cylinder

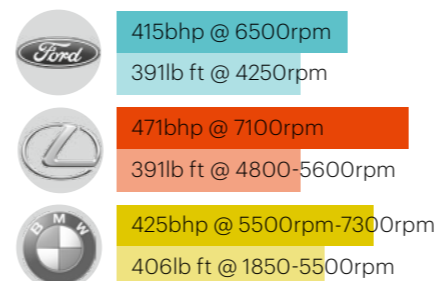
**Suspension**  
MacPherson strut front; multi-link rear



Made of Steel, aluminium, composite

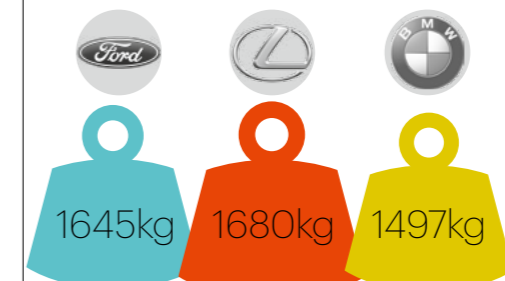
Power & torque

We say: Lexus has previous with great sports car engines: RCF's is a diamond



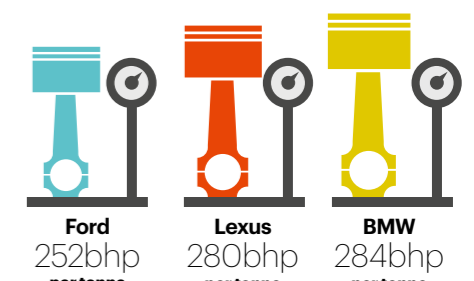
Weight

We say: Weight advantage ensures Munich is right on the pace



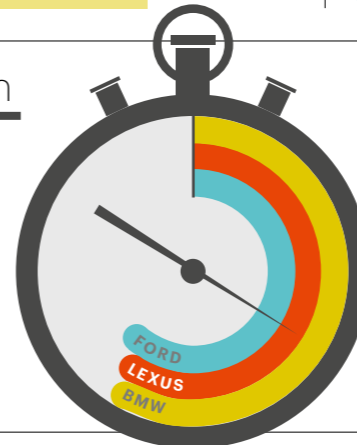
Power-to-weight

We say: And that, kids, is why the Mustang doesn't feel all that fast



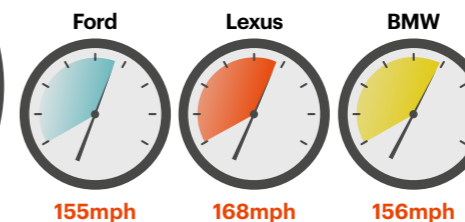
0-62mph

We say: Lightweight, torquey M4 thumps the others to 62mph  
Ford 4.8sec  
Lexus 4.5sec  
BMW 4.1sec



Top speed

We say: Flat-out the Ford presumably switches to gallons per mile



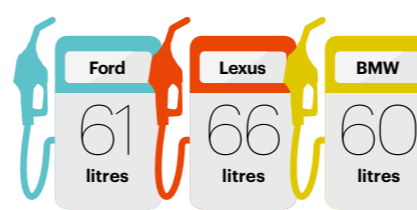
Official & test mpg

We say: The payoff for the BMW's dearth of charm is relative economy...



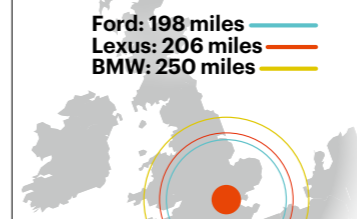
Fuel tank

We say: V8 Ford tank just half a (US) gallon bigger than the EcoBoost's



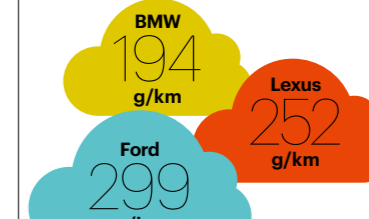
Range

We say: Go easy on the gas for big gains in the Ford and Lexus



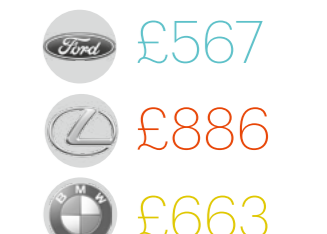
CO2

We say: That feelgood V8 soundtrack comes at a price



Lease rates

We say: RCF £699 a month with Lexus, with a £16,402.90 deposit





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