

Making the best full-size luxury flagship choice

Our motor expert Mark Gallivan analyses four of the best luxury flagship cars on the market to help you make the best choice.

Scott Fitzgerald put it best when describing the rich – “The rich are different to you and me.” So too are the cars they’re likely to own. Odds are they will forgo a Royce or a Bentley. For them a luxury flagship from a mainstream brand will do just fine. After all, they didn’t get rich by squandering their money, now did they?

Nowadays wealth is trickier to spot. Not so their cars. I’ve picked four luxury flagships that do eighty-five per cent of what a Royce does, without paying three times for that last percentile of isolation and Peninsula Hotel Suite comfort.

Each of these cars are a monument to the very best a manufacturer can do. The pinnacle of A to B travel with an empirical promise that the experience will always be fabulous.

The Lexus LS from €112,940

Like to hazard a guess how many Lexus LS cars were sold in Ireland during the first six months of 2019? Five. And last year it was nineteen. Now in its fifth generation, the LS is the limo that, like the mad grandmother in the attic, nobody talks about. Last year I tested the Lexus LS 500h for a week and still remember how soft and comfortable the front seats were. I liked that it wasn't an obvious German car and how clever the powertrain was. The 3.5-litre's engine is paired with an electric motor, it delivered hybrid power to the car's portly 2,725kg weight. In theory, it should have worked well.

But the on-off sensation of a petrol engine kicking-in over 20km/h left me disappointed. It never glided as well as the BMW 7 Series, let alone the Mercedes S-Class. A shame as the Lexus LS comes loaded with lots of expensive standard equipment and it will be supremely reliable. Things go wrong when you witness the base price. At €112,940, it is too expensive in this company. Nevertheless, the Lexus LS is a surprisingly charming car and it soothed my passengers on every drive.

You'll like: Stunning interior, OCD-precise construction and interior comfort.

You'll grumble: High entry-level price. Looks take time to be appreciated. Hybrid engine lacks proper smoothness transitioning from electric to petrol.

2019 Audi A8 from €100,560

It was quite a return to form for the Audi A8 last year. After the disappointment of the previous D4 generation that always felt fidgety on the road, the latest generation was a massive leap forward. Not only that it managed the unthinkable and bypassed the Mercedes S-Class in a few areas such as interior acoustic and subjectively the smoothness of the car's ride. It seems Audi packed about as much technology as it could into the new A8. There are optional advance safety features like Level 4 autonomy that, while intriguing to talk about, you actually cannot legally use any of it yet.

You'll like: Anonymous looks will find favour with many, quieter at cruise than an S-Class, stunning cabin and best-of-breed technology.

You'll grumble: Dual infotainment screens obstinate and tricky to use on the go, never as comfy in the back as an S-Class.

2019 BMW 7 Series from €97,035 (pictured in main image)

Poor BMW. The thing is about its biggest rival Mercedes is when people think about the pinnacle of the Benz line-up, it's always the S-Class they begin nattering about. But for BMW the accepted pinnacle is their biggest seller – it's the 3 Series. And up to this year, the 3 left a bit to be desired. Sharp enough to drive, good enough to look at, the 3 Series was pegged as being "just good enough". Not so in 2019. The latest 3 Series is here, I've tested it, and it's a very strong contender for the Irish Car of the Year. A toweringly brilliant car. Then there's the new 8 Series – the new luxury flagship that frankly blew me away with its sheer desirability, fun, economy and stunning looks. In 840d guise, I'd choose it over the far more expensive Mercedes S-Class Coupe, or the Aston Martin DB11 or the Bentley Continental GT in a heartbeat. That's some achievement by BMW.

And now there's a new BMW 7 Series. Having tested the old 7 Series in Hybrid petrol guise, it was one of my favourite limos to drive. Agile, comfy but never as isolating as an S-Class or the A7, the 7 Series beguiled me. Like a guilty pleasure the BMW 7 Series is a big-hearted car and of all the contenders here, the one I got on best with. How we all get accustomed to a huge gawping new grill remains to be seen. You'll need to see in the flesh to decide.

You'll like: The 7 Series is and always has been a great limo for drivers, exceptional iDrive management system and sharper looking than the S-Class.

You'll grumble: Exterior is ugly. The smaller 5 Series is almost as good in certain variants.

2019 Mercedes S-Class from €109,165

Like the school jackass that sails through secondary school without seeming to care and pulls straight A's come final year, the Mercedes S-Class is the car rivals like to hate. They would like the S-Class to go on a long foreign holiday, contract something rare and go right ahead and die.

In the first six months of 2019, an impressive 31 brand new S-Class saloons have been sold. That equates €3,274,950 being invested at the very least by Irish buyers in the S-Class. And out of those 31 cars, 25 were bought in Dublin. After a mid-term facelift with more tech and comfort, the S-Class is simply the very best in translating the messages smooth progress from here to there. The S-Class is almost uncatchable but the Audi A8 is chomping hard at the S-Class's supremacy. For now, the big Benz is your top choice in limo land.

You'll like: Smooth, cocooning, caresses the weary traveler and a brilliant image.

You'll grumble: Nowhere near as fun to drive as the A8 or 7 Series, interior starting to looking dated.

Written by Mark Gallivan

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