

DOUBLE DISTILLED

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Switchback road,
brand new Lotus.
Where do I sign?

When one lightweight, mid-engined sportscar isn't enough...

By Alex Cox

No manufacturer has a model range like Lotus. Ferrari and Lamborghini supply haute-couture with cars that are faster but less agile. Pagani and Bugatti, in their pursuit of shock and awe, make cars that are both more powerful and more intimidating. Porsche has an SUV on its books.

Lotus does pure, undiluted driving pleasure. Does that come with concessions? Absolutely. There are no cup-holders in a Lotus Evora, There are no heated seats in a Lotus Exige. And there are no memory seats in a Lotus Elise. None are needed.

If the Elise was the original cocky teenager that set modern Lotus on the road to driving-zen, the Exige represented the wild-child 20-something who got experimental haircuts and a tattoo. Now we have the Evora, the 30-something who got a gym-membership, a black turtle-neck and their own office. It's the same person, just in different guises and I've been given a day with a brand new test car and some mountain roads to see just how the little car from Norfolk grew up.

The location of those mountain roads is America's Pacific North-West. An invitation

from Lotus's Seattle dealership, to try the new Evora in new territory proves impossible to resist. Before diving into the car I start with a quick drive in a 2007 Exige S to get reacquainted with the Lotus brand of petrol-headonism and to provide a benchmark.

You don't get cockpit tinsel in an Exige. You get three small knurled dials for the heating and ventilation, the occasional LED-topped pimple controlling headlights and electric windows and a stereo. You adjust the wing-mirrors by sticking your hand out of the window. None of this matters of course because above

5000 rpm the Exige experiences a small psychotic episode. Give the accelerator a hefty shove in second and the sound from behind you changes from hornet to screaming buzz-saw. As the rev counter touches 6000, the addictive shove of G-force strengthens. As it touches 7500 there's a lunatic whistle from the supercharger and a small red light illuminates in your peripheral vision to tell you that the Exige is ready to do it all over again in 3rd. This is 220 forced induction horsepower in 915 kilos. It's the wonderful, violent, deftly balanced little car that I remember. Time to switch to the Evora.

Within 5 minutes of the start of my drive I'm sitting in the rain at a freeway on-ramp watching a blue on white 2009 Mustang GT next to me light up its tires. Watching big V8 muscle break traction and then fishtail down through the spray on to the road below is always good entertainment. It also provides a demonstration of an alternate route to 200 bhp/ton. The 1.5 ton Ford uses a 4.6 litre, 300 hp V8, the 1.3 ton Lotus a 3.5 litre 276 hp 'six. The Mustang has the edge on noise, but I'm headed to Lotus territory.

My destination is the Summit at Snoqualmie about 40 miles east of Seattle. It's a ski resort in winter but I've received a tip that the area offers the right setting for exercising a Lotus and a quick check on Google Earth shows a promisingly twisty route just off the interstate. There's short freeway schlep to get there so, sat in the Evora at 60 mph in the rain, there's time to take stock.

Now, a Lotus Exige is no more designed as a freeway commuter than an F-15 Strike Eagle is

designed to take you and your family on holiday to Hawaii. The Evora however is different. In sixth gear, there's a muted drone from the engine at the 70 mph legal limit. Conversation doesn't require raised voices and road surface imperfections are confidently

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absorbed. The Toyota engine provides useful torque when needed. It won't snap your head back in the higher gears but overtaking is easy and drama free.

From the driver's seat the Evora dials back the highly-strung energy of the Exige and there's even a nod towards gadgetry. To the right of the dials is a neat red digital schematic of the car showing tyre pressures and vital fluid temperatures. To the left a graphic shows the fuel tank level. Compared with the Exige's cockpit, the slice of leather running across the dash, colour-matched to the seats, is almost decadent. It's red leather in the car I'm driving, lending the impression that the instruments are set into a red-lipped mouth ahead of the driver. If it's what you want, the Evora can be as demanding as watching ESPN with a mug of warm milk.

And yet...as you drive, the Lotus begins a stealthy campaign to corrupt your calmer driving instincts. The steering wheel is small and always communicating. The Evora isn't nervous, it's just acutely transparent. The wheel occasionally writhes



They grow up so fast...

gently in your hands as the car explores a camber change before returning obediently to its original path. The gearlever sprouts from a central island and presents an aluminium sphere a perfect hand-drop away from the steering wheel. In fact, the positioning in 4th and 6th is so good that you feel the Evora constantly goading you to let your palm fall the bare inches to the right and find the lower gears.

40 miles of temptation later my exit appears, I pull off the freeway and stop. The narrow road ahead is deserted. It snakes downhill from where I sit, bounded by huge boulders and, after a couple of hairpins, disappears from sight into a pine forest complete with tourist-brochure ribbons of mist.

Time to learn more. Compared with the Exige the gear change has a longer throw and a more metallic feel. There's a reassuring weight to the controls, heavier than the smaller car's, though not actually heavy. This, together with the slightly larger dimensions mean that it's initially not quite as easily placed as the Exige. But to hold the the steering wheel is to mainline uncut information from the road beneath the wheels. The road's damp with mist and the camber changes constantly but the Evora's ability to deploy most of its power without getting twitchy means that confidence grows fast. After three or four miles of an increasingly wide grin I turn around and make a return pass.

Pushing harder on the run up the hill, it's true that a little of the explosive acceleration of the Exige has been sacrificed. The Evora nonetheless should manage 0-60 in 4.9 seconds and go on to 160 mph and it does so making a more cultured sound. There's more bass than the 1.8 'four can manage so the Evora growls where the the Exige wails. The supercharger whine has gone, instead the Evora provides the occasional, well mannered pop on the overrun. Close to the top of the road again and around a corner the shrapnel of a small rock-fall covers my half of the road. An abrupt swerve troubles the Lotus not at all, it darts around the debris with insouciance.

Parked for a moment next to a resting lime green snow plough, a man with a parka and black labrador delays getting into his truck to shout, "What's that car? Is it a Lotus?"

"Evora", I reply. He gives up on the truck and comes over. "How much is it?" "Around 86 thousand dollars". He whistles. "Man I'd love to have one of these. Guess I'll have to keep fixing the ski-lifts a little longer."

It's certainly a handsome car. Ultimately for me the styling loses a little of the delicacy of the smaller cars. Hard to avoid perhaps, but there's a slight heaviness about the rear haunches that introduces a hint of awkwardness for me. That said, it stands up

On either side the wings slope down towards the centre-line and a single wiper wiper sweeps across the screen. At traffic lights the heat wash from the front radiators makes the view head dance gently. There's a hint of the Le Mans prototype here.

well against the 911 in my opinion. In the dark metallic grey of this car, the Evora has a well calculated predatory air about it.

As I head back into Seattle, kids, imprisoned in the third row of people carriers, do literal double-takes and proceed to ignore Spongebob Squarepants on their TV screens as the Evora appears next to them. Their parents up front nudge each other and point.

Lotuses all share a certain otherworldliness on the road, heightened amongst pick-ups and SUVs. There's a sense that a Lotus on the freeway, like roller-skating at a funeral, is technically possible but somehow, shocking. It's not that the cars are ill at ease in that setting, just that alongside giant Ford F350s, Grand Cherokees and Crown Victorias, their looks suggest you recently arrived from a parallel dimension.

This sense of drama is likely to be a little reduced in the UK, where a Lotus is a more familiar sight. But in any market, behind the wheel, it's easy to be seduced by the Evora. The bonnet drops out of sight, leaving the road apparently disappearing a foot ahead of your toes. On either side the wings slope down towards the centre-line and a single wiper sweeps across the screen. At traffic lights the heat wash from the front radiators makes the view ahead dance gently. As with the smaller cars, there's a hint of the Le Mans Prototype here.

It's a confident car the Evora, unafraid to retain the DNA of the Elise and Exige as it moves up a weight division. That it manages the transition successfully is undoubted and welcome, the 911 has too long been untroubled in its niche. Its price and perhaps the perceived lack of glamour in its Toyota-sourced engine will give some pause for thought. But for those who care about the sum of the complete package, the balance of power, feel and response, the Evora represents a company at the top of its game.