

# 2010 Lotus Evora: First Drive

Move over Porsche Cayman, the Lotus Evora has arrived

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Lotus might just be the most undervalued and underappreciated automaker on the planet. Sure hard core track enthusiasts and auto buffs know of cars like the Elise and Exige that deliver almost unimaginably good handling; but without a vehicle that has genuine mainstream appeal, the only time you're likely to hear mention of the British brand is if you run across a club racer track junkie or are watching a program on the history of motorsports. That is, until now.

The Evora is the new flagship model from Lotus and represents an important step in the history of the brand. In fact, in many ways it reminds us of some earlier Porsche models, offering an exceptionally raw driving experience, in a mostly refined package, but with a few eccentricities.

Weighing just a touch over 3,000 lbs, it needs just 276-hp from a mid-mounted V6 engine in order to hit 60 mph in just 4.9 seconds – making it a perfect rival to Porsche's Cayman. But in so many other ways, it's not like a Cayman at all.

Lotus would tell you that it's because the Evora is technically a 2+2 and the only mid-engined 2+2 in the world. That's somewhat misleading, however, as the rear seats are about as useful as the ones in a Mini.

The real reasons include the car's looks, its bespoke characteristics and its less-than-polished engineering traits – some of which are drawbacks, but many of which just add to the car's unique character.

## ALL THE LOOKS OF A TRUE EXOTIC

First off, there's the design. It's stunning. Yes there's a definite resemblance to the smaller Elise and Exige, but the Evora wouldn't look out of place parked between a Ferrari and a Lamborghini – try saying that about a Cayman. It's longer and wider, based off an all-new Versatile Vehicle Architecture that Lotus intends to use for other future models.

During the launch we were surprised to come across more than a few folks who knew this was the "new Lotus." Still, one woman commented that she liked our Ferrari. The Lotus engineers cringed at the reference, but the designers must be beaming. It's been a long, long time since anyone confused a Lotus with a Ferrari.

## COCKPIT IS BESPOKE AND BEAUTIFUL

Inside the bespoke nature of the car is immediately obvious, as are the efforts to add luxury and improve overall comfort. Sure it's easier (not easy, just easier) to get into than an Elise; the hydraulic power steering makes it livable for daily driving and the seats are a bit wider, softer and more comfortable, but the biggest step forward for Lotus comes with the abundance of leather and aluminum – with the brushed metal on the dash and center console looking more like something you'd find in a Bentley or Aston Martin.

As nice as the individual parts are, the assembly lacks roboticized uniformity. Still, the Evora combines some laser-red screens next to the main gauges to deliver a real exotic car feel, with a Spartan luxury in the Premium Package that combines the excessive simplicity of, say, a BMW, with a minimalist interpretation of British luxury.

Lotus also offers a \$2,995 Technology Package with goodies like a 7-inch touch screen with navigation and backup camera, as well as rear parking sensors and an upgraded audio system to further spice things up. The parking aids should be a popular option with rear visibility minimal at best.

What we'd rather see are items like a push-button ignition and one-touch auto up-down windows.

### **ADDED QUIRKS, LESS THAN PERFECT GEARBOX**

The car's limited production also reveals traits like a transmission and rear end where you can often hear the cogs swapping and parts moving – especially at low speed when taking off from a stop. Again, this is the type of thing that adds to the Evora's character rather than detracting from its refinement. We're reminded of similar traits from exotic Italian autos from the not too distant past.

One complaint we do have is with the gearbox – something we've long considered a weak link in past Lotus vehicles. During our stint behind the wheel we often found that it was easy to hit a gate. In general, the clutch pedal travel is quite long and requires full engagement while shift throws are longer than expected.

Currently Lotus only offers a six-speed manual, but promises an automatic is set for next year.

### **MUST HAVES: CLOSE RATIO TRANSMISSION AND SPORT PACKAGE**

As it stands, the tranny, like the engine itself, is initially a Toyota unit. Both a standard gear ratio and a sports gear ratio are offered, with the sports model costing an additional \$1,500 – but well worth it. In fact, the Lotus execs we talked to were considering dropping the standard tranny altogether as only one buyer had opted for it. Most surprising is news that the shorter gearing delivers the best fuel economy with a rating of 18/27 mpg (city/highway).

Your best bet is to also upgrade to the \$1,275 Sport Package. While it does include some rather mundane features the real reason is the Sport button on the dash. Push it and the throttle response becomes more immediate, the traction control allows for added slip and the maximum rpm increases from 6800 rpm to 7200 rpm.

### **A TOYOTA ENGINE, BUT SURE DOESN'T FEEL LIKE IT**

Behind the wheel and powering along the twisty Sunrise Highway outside San Diego it's hard to believe this is essentially the same engine found in the Toyota Camry. Many will immediately discount the Evora for this, but you can't deny the advantages of having a reliable Toyota engine.

Unchanged internally, the Toyota V6 gets a few extra ponies thanks to a less restrictive exhaust system. It's not quite as loud as we'd like, but once warmed up it seems to sing a little more. For enthusiasts, Lotus does offer an upgraded exhaust system.

Without the weight of a mid-sized sedan to lug around the liberated 3.5-liter mated to the sports ratio transmission surprised us by not only delivering good power at low rpm (even in higher gears), but it also really screams up top with power that just keeps on coming. Sure we'd like an extra 100-hp for the straights, but that's not really what this car, or any Lotus for that matter, is about.

### **GRIP, GRIP AND MORE GRIP**

Blasting from corner to corner, the Evora begs for revs and offers an unreal amount of grip. Not once did the tires complain during our day behind the wheel, with no understeer or oversteer – just the continuous taunting of the chassis and Pirelli tires telling us we're not up to the task of discovering the full potential of the Evora. And on the street, we'll admit as much, not wanting to fully test the limits of 1.25 gs of lateral grip.

Helping to deliver all that traction is an electronic differential lock. Providing essentially the same result as a limited slip differential, the EDL uses the stability control program to reduce power to the inside wheel to avoid wheel slip.

With no body lean to speak of, what might be so amazing about the Evora is how comfortable the ride is – something Lotus engineers attribute to an excellent platform that isn't burdened by excessive weight. As for weight distribution, it's the same as the Elise at 39/61 front to rear, which is well off the supposedly perfect 50/50 balance, but there's no denying it's the ideal setup here.

### **HYDRAULIC STEERING GREAT AROUND TOWN; WON'T WEAR YOU DOWN AT THE TRACK**

The steering is a genuine treat. It's ultra precise and feels even better with the optional light-weight forged wheels. It's also not overly heavy allowing the Evora to be driven with finesse.

One fault we found, however, is that the tires tend to follow the ruts in the road quite a bit, often tugging the wheel and the car in different directions.

Like the steering, the brakes are equally responsive and Lotus claims a 60-0 mph stopping distance of just 100 feet – which essentially bests everything on the market. The 4-piston front calipers and 13.8-inch rotors are designed to resist fade even under the most aggressive driving. Lotus admits they are overkill, hinting that they'd be ideal even on a heavier version of the car (convertible or supercharged model perhaps).

Unfortunately the fourth pedal, the dead pedal, is absent. That might not seem important, except that you're left with a decision: either put your foot flat on the ground, hold it just above the clutch or tuck it underneath – none of which are ideal.

### **AN EXOTIC FOR LESS**

Sure it might not have 500-hp and it's not German or Italian, but the Brits have always had a way of making others nervous when they put together a solid sports car – and the Evora is it. Sticking to the brand philosophy of performance through light weight the Evora offers unmatched performance, style and originality with a few typically British quirks for \$73,500 – although a newly announced 2+0 model goes for \$72,990. The \$1,500 close ratio transmission and \$1,250 Sport Package are musts and we also recommend the Premium Package with some stunning leather options rather than just the factory black.

### **THE VERDICT**

Stacking up directly with the Cayman, Lotus is also hoping to take the battle to 911 buyers who are seeking more originality, style and the sort of raw driving experience that Porsche built its empire on. So far it seems to be working, with Lotus reporting that the majority of initial sales are conquests from other brands and not just Elise or Exige owners moving up the Lotus ladder.

Yes the Evora represents a new level of daily drivability for Lotus, but it's still a few quirks short of being mainstream.

Still, as a more-civilized car the Evora is certain to attract a broader audience, sell well and build brand recognition for Lotus, putting the small British sports car maker on the road to bigger and even better things. If it all pans out, we're likely to look back on the Evora as the car that changed Lotus.