

Ecstasy-to-drive Lotus Evora leaves one question: Take a check?

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It's not easy to make a veteran auto writer weep with need. But the Evora does it, taking the modern Lotus design and making it elegant and a bit roomier. It's a slice of heaven that slides.

Every time I write about a high-performance sports car, I'm guaranteed to get letters from readers to this effect: "How can you possibly glorify the Badminton Dual-Cowl 87B? No one needs a car that goes 200 mph, costs \$300,000 and gets five miles per gallon. With all that's going on in the world [climate change, war in the Middle East, balance of trade etc.]. For shame. For shame!"

All right, then. I present to you perhaps the most fun available on four wheels: The 2010 Lotus Evora. No, not fun. Joy. Inexpressible, diamond-showering, running-naked-through-a-field-of-virgins ecstasy. Handling perfection. This is transit gloria, and it is sick.

In my career as an automotive journalist, I've never written these words: I am going to buy one.

Oh, and it gets about 30 mpg.

A ruptured fire hydrant of pleasurable endorphins, the Evora is the first all-new car from Lotus -- a small sports-car company in Hethel, England -- since it was reborn with the Lotus Elise in 1995. The company goes back to the 1950s and founder Colin Chapman, whose guiding principle in fast cars was extreme lightness. Lightness cures what ails sports cars like Lourdes cures scabies. All other things being equal, lighter cars change direction more quickly (less mass, therefore a lower moment of inertia). Likewise, lighter cars have better cornering grip (the vehicle's weight doesn't overwhelm the tires). A lighter car accelerates harder and stops more quickly. Meanwhile, all the stresses on the components are reduced -- the tires, brakes, suspension and gearbox. It's one big, beautiful, positive spiral.

Lotus' feathery, carbide-clawed sports cars (all under 1 ton) are superb driving machines, famous for their easy compromise between road holding and what is actually a pretty survivable -- if not exactly supple -- ride quality. It's not surprising that when electric carmaker Tesla went looking for a platform upon which to build its Roadster, it came to Hethel. On board an EV, where every amp counts, lightness is nonpareil.

And yet I've never been tempted to own a Lotus. Why? Because even my masochism has its limits. The mid-engine Elise and its many variants are absurdly tiny and impractical cars (9 inches shorter than a Mazda MX-5 Miata) that one enters much the way dressing enters the backside of a Thanksgiving turkey. The doors are small and low to the ground, and there's this prodigiously tall and wide door sill -- part of the car's aluminum structure -- that you have to shimmy over before you land, gratefully if gracelessly, in the car's Recaro racing buckets. As for storage space, there is exactly none.

Meanwhile, Lotuses offer cockpits with sailplane-like amenities -- bare aluminum, runty carpets, cheesy aftermarket sound systems and an overall malign indifference to sound-deadening and passenger sanity. You want to make those Al Qaeda low-lifes talk? Make them commute in a Lotus Exige S for a week. They will sing like Pavarotti.

The Evora takes all the guiding design principles of modern Lotus cars and writes them bigger and in more elegant script: the bonded/riveted aluminum monocoque chassis (weighing a mere 441 pounds in the Evora and providing torsional stiffness 1.5 times that of the Ferrari F430); transverse mid-engine layout, here hosting a reprogrammed 3.5-liter, 276-hp V-6 sourced from Toyota; and a supreme commitment to light weight (3,046 pounds).

The Evora is, first of all, a 2 plus 2, which is to say there are back seats, of a sort. Call them Romulans,

for these tiny squares of upholstery reject all human life. Like the seats in the Porsche 911, they're good for parcel storage and, of course, improved insurance rates. In any event, the Evora is vastly easier to get into and out of -- the doors are larger and the threshold is lower and narrower -- and the cockpit practically echoes with spaciousness compared with the Elise.

And yet, this is still, comparatively, a small stunt plane of a car. The Evora (170.9 inches) is 4.3 inches shorter than a 911 on a wheelbase (101.4) that is 9 inches longer.

Second, the Evora has a properly designed, great-looking cockpit fully skinned with French-stitched Muirhead leather.

Here's the biggest surprise. The cockpit is exquisite, full of honest materials -- real metal as opposed to aluminized plastic -- and a terrific layout. The instrument cluster features flanking LCD info screens, and in the center stack is an optional (and proper) touch-screen navi. I particularly appreciate the brushed-aluminum switchgear, which Lotus makes for itself. It would have been easy for Lotus to borrow some switchgear from, say, Ford of Europe and call it good. Lotus didn't, and it's a testament to the company's commitment to character and authenticity.

Ultimately, though, it's the driving that sells this car, and the Evora -- like Lotuses all the way to the Dark Ages -- has that irresistible and ineffable quality, a perfect liveliness, a sweet and yar personality, an intentionality such that the car does precisely what you want it to do exactly when you want it to -- maybe a nanosecond before. It has something to do with having the car's center of mass situated right at the driver's inner ear, the vestibular nerve endings of balance. It helps also that your keister is flying over the asphalt at an altitude of about 4 inches.

The Evora's lightly assisted power rack-and-pinion steering isn't quite as darty as it is in the Exige S, but still, to find a steering wheel more connected to the ground you'd have to climb into a Formula Ford.

The biggest difference between Lotuses and other cars is that Lotuses love to slide: Bend them into a corner at high speed, give the suspension a millisecond to compress and just hang on. The Evora arcs along in a perfectly peaceful, drama-free four-wheel drift. Lotus might as well have a patent on this feeling. Exiting a tight hairpin, you can get on the gas hard -- the traction control system offers minimal interference -- and the car swivels with heavenly, progressive power-on oversteer, gaining degrees of crossed-up heroism until you breathe the throttle. Bang the rev limiter, slam the gear. Ya-freakin'-hoo. It's like corner-carving on skis in fresh powder. My God, that's fun.

I would like to know by what mechanism this heritage handling is conveyed to Lotuses, generation after generation. I mean, it's all the same stuff that's in other sports cars, right? Forged aluminum A-arms, front and rear, Eibach springs and Bilstein dampers, steel hub carriers and anti-roll bars, 19-inch Pirelli P Zeros. Where's the reservoir that holds the tire-sliding fairy dust?

Other great things: The tweaked Toyota V-6 stuffed under the rear glass is smooth, powerful (276 hp) and torquey (258 pound-feet of torque, almost all of which is available above 1,800 rpm), and yet for all its Japanese precision and efficiency, it still sounds as raunchy as a live sex show. Zero to 60 is under five seconds -- quick, but this is not a drag racer. In corner-to-corner dog fighting, the Evora feels plenty horsy.

The exterior is, well, judge for yourself, but I think it's amazing -- the pinched, Coke-bottle fuselage, the visor-like glass greenhouse, the heady mid-engine exotic proportions stroked with aero lightning.

Lotus says it will build only 2,000 Evoras a year, which will make the cars rarer than, say, a Ferrari 458 Italia. The MSRP currently stands at \$73,500, with deliveries beginning in March. The Evora offers an epic amount of style, exclusivity and performance for the price of a BMW executive saloon.

Not-so-great things: The build quality on the high-mileage pre-production car I tested was miserable. The rear hatch wouldn't close. Body seams were only close enough for jazz. The linkage on the six-speed

manual transmission was thrashed and errant. There was a glitch in the engine-control programming that made the car stumble badly in first gear. A faulty temperature sensor caused the car to intermittently go into rev-limiting "limp-home" mode. And the brake pedal (AP Racing discs) was as grabby as a drunken Shriner.

Lotus has designed a fantastic car. It remains to be seen whether the company can actually build it.

Is a Porsche Cayman S quicker and faster? Yeah, probably, a little, if you judge things so parlously as to measure your life in tenths of a second. The Evora is a connoisseur's car, a driver's shibboleth and secret code, a prime number of a machine that is indivisible by anything other than itself.

I want one. A lot.

<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-neil22-2010jan22,0,5548499.story>