



The Everyday Sports Car

What happens when a company known for making Ferrari-slaying track stars with all the creature comforts of a refugee camp builds a coupe with a luxurious interior and a backseat? You get the Lotus Evora.

LOTUS HAS A NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE. IT FERVENTLY believes that the best cars weigh the least, a fact borne out by physics — shaving pounds allows a car to stop quicker, accelerate faster, and handle more sharply. As a result, for the past six years its showrooms have sold only the minimalist Elise and Exige. Astoundingly nimble and relatively inexpensive, yes, but practical they're not: If you've never seen an Elise's interior, throw a yoga mat into a steel trash can and climb inside. Yet here comes the new Lotus Evora, engineered to provide nine-tenths the performance of its brethren while also offering cruise control, an optional automatic transmission, and — heresy! — backseats. By the British company's standards, this is an Escalade. But by the Porsche 911's standards, this is serious competition.

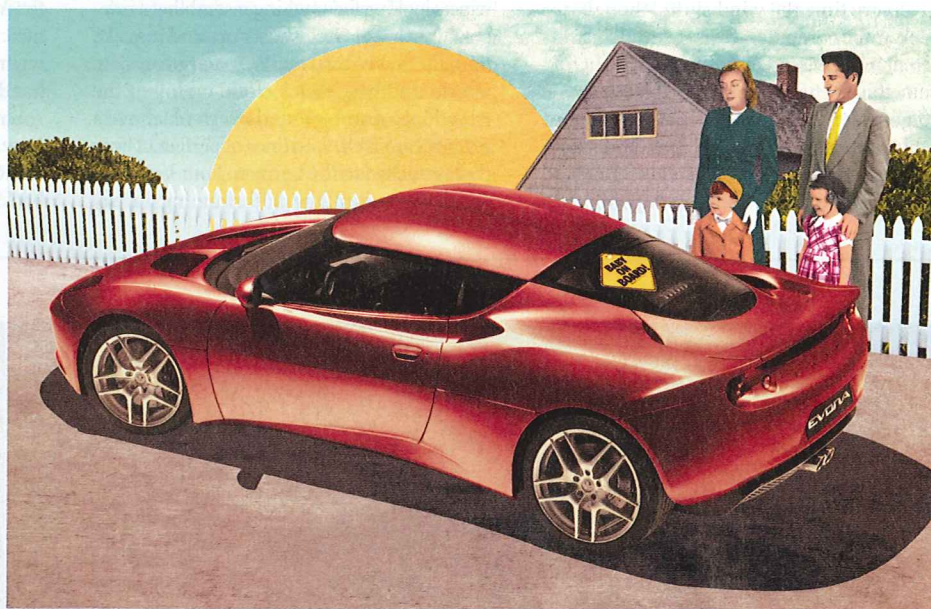
The backseats sparked my grand plan to investigate the dualism of the Evora's personality by ripping around the Road Atlanta racetrack with four people in the car. One problem: "Seat" is a misleading descriptor for these leather-upholstered mini-fridges. The bottom cushion is relatively high and the roofline rakishly low, which means there's nowhere to put your head. And because the front seat-backs can touch the rear seats, there's nowhere to put your legs, either. The Lotus PR guy explains that they're intended for small children and luggage, but I'm persistent. I cram four helmeted adult males into the Evora, but the two unlucky souls in back are turned sideways, doubled over, with their knees to their chests, which keeps them from wearing seat belts. Track safety officials take issue with human projectiles, so I have to kick them out.

That means it's just me and a track instructor in the car as I surgically dissect turns seven and eight before bombing down the back straightaway at Road Atlanta. The speedometer touches 125 mph, and I stand on the brakes, the decelerating Evora pulling enough G's to strain my neck muscles. At this point I'm thinking how thankful I am that in 1996 Road Atlanta built the track over the old Gravity Cavity, a gully at the end of the straight that was known to break cars and cause incontinence in drivers. But what I'm *not* thinking, as the gravel trap rushes at me, is, "Wow, this reminds me of a Camry."

Indeed, the 276-horsepower V-6 nestled behind me also powers tens

of thousands of unremarkable Toyotas that qualify as exciting only when their throttles stick open. Bolt it into a mid-engine, flyweight Lotus, however, and the engine grows a pair. That is, so long as you opt for the \$1,500 sports-ratio transmission. With the stock gear box, the Evora goes narcoleptic after third gear.

But saying that a Lotus handles well on a track is like saying that Carlos Mencia isn't funny: It's obvious. More enlightening, if less exciting, was my time driving to the track. Georgia may have some gorgeously curvy back roads, but Atlanta is a gnarled tangle of divided



highways and stop-and-go sprawl. Where the spartan Elise or Exige would have you gazing enviously at luxurious Corollas and Cobalts with their automatic transmissions and audible stereos, the Evora feels downright homey. The "premium package" interior is worth all \$1,990, wrapping everything from dash to door sill in buttery Muirhead leather. The center stack and its buttons are real aluminum, not painted plastic. And it's quiet.

With the Evora, Lotus has realized that livability does not automatically compromise credibility. Because the reality of car ownership is that you're very rarely striving for lap records at Road Atlanta. You're sitting in traffic, fiddling with the radio. You're driving on bombed-out streets last repaved when *Dynasty* was on prime time. Or you're taking a weekend road trip and slaying some corners en route. The Evora excels in all of those roles. And if you get it on a track, you'll find your stomach in your throat. It'll make you giddy, the Evora. As long as you're not in the backseat. ■

SPEC CHECK

PRICE: \$75,000

ENGINE:
276-horsepower,
3.5-liter V-6

0-60: 4.9 seconds

TOP SPEED:
162 mph



FROM TOP: MICHAEL WARREN; COURTESY, LOTUS

The New High-Performance Breakfast

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