

First Drive: 2010 Lotus Evora delivers performance, civility and little concession

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In a move that would have impressed Harry Houdini, Lotus has made one thousand pounds of vehicle mass seemingly disappear – yet we still know it's there. We're high in the mountains above San Diego, challenging corners in the 2010 Lotus Evora, and the larger and more luxurious two-plus-two is emulating the moves of its lightweight race-ready Elise and Exige siblings.

What gives the Evora its supernatural powers? How does the all-new Evora fit into the Lotus lineup? And, most importantly, is this the first Lotus you can park in your garage without having to explain it to the neighbors? Find out after the jump.

Lotus has become synonymous with lightweight, no-frills sports cars thanks to its ass-kicking Elise roadster and Exige coupe – arguably two of the world's best driver's cars. Yet, despite their impressiveness on the track, the Elise and Exige are about as practical as a gutted Spec Miata when it comes to daily drivers.

In an effort to put more sophistication on the menu, and capture a larger market share, Lotus has rolled out its first all-new car in 15 years. Like the Elise and Exige, the Evora is a lightweight, aluminum-chassis, mid-engine sports car that puts a premium on driving dynamics. But unlike its smaller, harder siblings, the Evora offers more interior space, a host of luxury amenities, two-plus-two seating and a six-cylinder powerplant.

The chassis of the Evora is manufactured by Lotus Lightweight Structures Limited in Worcester, United Kingdom, as three main components. The main chassis – an extruded and bonded aluminum safety monocoque tub – is where the passengers and fuel tank reside. In front of that is an all-aluminum subframe containing the front suspension, cooling system and steering rack (it's bolted to the main chassis for easy repair). The rear subframe is galvanized steel and contains the rear suspension, engine and gearbox (likewise bolted to the back of main chassis). The whole assembly weighs just over 440 pounds and is more than twice as stiff as the chassis in the Elise, says Lotus. All body panels are composite, either bolted or bonded to the chassis depending on location. The curb weight comes in around 3,000 pounds with 39 percent of the mass over the front wheels and the other 61 percent hovering over the rear, nearly mirroring the weight distribution of the unflappable Elise and Exige. And just like the Elise/Exige twins, the Evora is packing a Japanese-sourced powerplant mounted amidships.

It's a Toyota 2GR-FE 3.5-liter V6 – the same engine fitted to the pedestrian Lexus RX 350, Toyota Camry and Toyota Sienna – is equipped with ToMoCo's Dual VVT-i variable valve timing, putting out 268 horsepower in standard guise. Lotus adds its own engine management software to bump output to 276 hp and 258 pound-feet of torque, while increasing the redline to 7,000 RPM. The engine sits transversely in the middle of the chassis, tilted just slightly rearward for better packaging.

For now the sole gearbox is an Aisin EA60 six-speed manual, also sourced from Toyota. Lotus pulls out the range of overdrive gears (third through sixth) and replaces them with closer, custom ratios to suit the Evora. Customers may choose from either a standard-ratio 'box, or a sport-ratio transmission with shorter gearing, and for those who don't like to row their own, hold out for a six-speed automatic that's set to arrive in the near future.

The suspension is comprised of lightweight forged aluminum wishbones fitted with Eibach springs and Bilstein shocks on all four corners. Mounted to each wheel hub are oversized ventilated disc brakes (13.77-inch in front and 13.07-inch rear rotors in the rear) sporting AP Racing four-piston calipers. If you

option up for the "Sport Package," ventilated rotors with cross-drilled units are available. The standard tire package is staggered in both tire width and wheel size, with the Evora kitted out with 18-inch alloys up front (225/40Z R18) and 19-inch alloys in the rear (255/35Z R19).

The base price for the Lotus Evora is \$72,990 for the "2+0" (two-seat) version and \$73,500 for the "2+2" model. Lotus also offers three optional bundled packages. A "Premium Package" (\$1,990) delivers interior accent lighting, upgraded interior trim and more extensive use of premium leathers and colors. The "Technology Package" (\$2,995) includes an Alpine multimedia infotainment system designed around a seven-inch WVGA touch-sensitive screen. It also includes Bluetooth phone connectivity, satellite navigation, a tire pressure monitoring system (TPMS), cruise control and rear parking sensors. The "Sport Upgrade Pack" (\$1,275) fits the Evora with a more aggressive diffuser, titanium exhaust tailpipe, cross-drilled brake discs, engine oil cooler and a switchable ECU with sports mode that provides a sharper throttle response, increased redline and a traction control setting tuned for aggressive driving. Stand-alone options include just electric power-folding mirrors (\$450), reverse camera (\$495), forged alloy wheels (\$2,125), sport-ratio gearbox (\$1,500) and an equalizer system for the Alpine audio package (\$495).

Our test car was a "2+2" model loaded up like a shopper during the holidays. Our eyes never saw an actual dealer sticker, but our guess is that the blue metallic tester would set you back about \$84,000. In all honesty, we'd choose an Evora "2+2" with only the Sport Pack and sport-ratio gearbox and walk out of the showroom at \$76,275 (for comparison, the Porsche Cayman S starts at \$61,500 and a bare-bones Porsche 911 begins at \$77,800).

Standing next to the world's only mid-engine 2+2 sports car currently in production, the Evora is bigger than it looks in pictures – much larger than the diminutive, hard-top Exige. By the tape, the Evora comes in at 170.9-inches long with a 101.4-inch wheelbase, while the smaller Exige is 149.5-inches in length sporting a 90.6-inch wheelbase. Despite all of its aluminum, the Evora is roughly the same weight and size as a Porsche Cayman S – one of its closest mid-engine competitors.

Unlike the Exige coupe, a sports car that requires acrobatic ability to enter, our six-foot two-inch frame slid easily behind the flat-bottom forged magnesium wheel of the Evora. With the seat moved forward a few clicks (yes, forward), and the steering wheel tilted and telescoped just right, our body was comfortable in the standard two-way adjustable Recaro bucket seats. There is no "dead pedal" per se – blame the left-front wheel's slight intrusion into the cockpit – so our left foot hung out awkwardly over, on or under the clutch pedal. Rearward visibility is dismal, providing a clear view of the engine cover in the rear-view mirror, but a reverse camera is included and the generously sized exterior mirrors offer a clear shot of the flanks and the surrounding traffic on each side.

Yes, there is a back seat, which Lotus says can accommodate a five-foot-tall adult. We weren't about to try. You won't either.

Twist the key (no push-button start here) and the 3.5-liter V6 springs to life and settles to a muted purr. The clutch is light and the lever throws a bit longer than we prefer, but it isn't harder to operate than a Toyota Corolla. After backing gingerly out of our parking space (thank you Mr. Reverse Camera), we drop into first gear and drive about a mile down the road.

Then it hits us hard – a sucker-punch to the face.

We drive countless cars around here. Nearly all of them, from cargo vans to exotics, take time to get acquainted with as mannerisms are absorbed, character traits are learned and faults either annoy or are overlooked. After a few hours, days or even a week, we forge judgments and opinions about vehicles and then decide if we like it. The Lotus Evora, in striking contrast, isn't one of "them."

You "get" the Evora immediately – or it goes completely over your head.

Recovering from the welcomed blow, we've got a grin on our kisser rivaling the Mazdaspeed3 within the

first block. We lock the doors, snug our belt, and head for the open road in the mountains just east of San Diego.

Familiar with the Elise and Exige, both minimalist sports cars that joyously drive like oversized go-karts, we expected the power-assisted steering and extra half-ton of curb weight on the Evora to muffle the fun like a bout of asthma at a harmonica convention. Not going to happen, says the Lotus engineering team. It takes but a few turns to realize that the Evora drives with a springing lightness that defies any preconceived notions. Maybe the tires are filled with helium?

Fling the Evora into a corner above your comfort level and it responds to minute steering inputs like a well-trained Labrador retriever. Without hesitation, it loyally delivers everything asked of it and not one degree more.

Mile after mile, corner after corner, we smiled, giggled, laughed and tears of joy rolled down our cheeks (bring tissue on your test drive). We felt invincible – the same way we do when piloting the Elise and Exige.

All credit is directed towards the chassis and a very accurate steering system teamed with what may be the world's best suspension tuning. Any vehicle that boasts a cornering grip in excess of 1g (as the Evora does) typically rides in washboard fashion. Not in this case. Through some secret black art – and without the use of electronically-controlled dampers – the Evora corners perfectly flat, yet absorbs pavement breaks and cow crossing grates without drama. The suspension on the Evora is unequalled – perfectly compliant and beautifully composed.

Lotus boasts that the Evora's brakes are "fade free." While we never had a chance to victimize them on the track, they continued to stop short at any request and seemed to get better as we heated them up. The transmission's ratios are a perfect spread with the sport gearing (don't even consider the taller "standard" gearbox), but we did feel the throws were a bit long for such an agile sports car. Furthermore, while it's easy to shift when just poking around, the clutch prefers a full, foot-to-the-floor engagement, otherwise you'll be grinding gears or chattering your way through traffic. But don't rush things and you're rewarded with clean, smooth shifts that inspire just as much confidence as the exemplary suspension.

We consider the Evora quick on its toes, but not particularly fast. The torque-rich 3.5-liter six pulls cheerfully from all positions on the tachometer and it seemed to relish spinning to the right side of the dial – surprising for a mill pilfered from the Toyota parts bin. We only found ourselves yearning for more power on the straight, or in the taller gears while on the highway. Before you challenge that Subaru STI to a drag race at the light, keep in mind that most of the Evora's competition will outrun its claimed 0-60 time of 4.9 seconds (top speed is a drag-limited 162 mph). Bet on a forced-induction model in the future, as the chassis could easily handle more power.

In the big picture, our enthusiast-tuned taste buds say the new Lotus is one of the most enjoyable sports cars we have ever driven – standing only behind its Elise and Exige siblings when forced to get in line. Baring our soul, we'll even go so far as to say the Evora is more fun to drive than the benchmark Porsche Cayman S. Or a 911. Yeah, we said it.

But, would we choose the Lotus over a Porsche?

While the Evora leaps and bounds more civilized, comfortable and well-rounded than anything we've seen from Lotus in recent memory (we'd gladly drive it 1,000 miles in a day), it still seems to stop short of filling that critical second slot in our own driveway. Like most limited-production sport cars, the Evora still feels too special to weather the road salt, bug guts and bird excrement that pummel our daily drivers.

Nevertheless, the all-new coupe is a remarkably more compatible mate than its aging predecessors, delivering 98% of the performance while tripling the convenience and amenities. While both the Elise/Exige are frisky cars you date, the Evora is exceptional enough to wed. And for the masses that dream of putting a Lotus in the garage, the all-new Evora is the answer to their prayers.