

Lotus Elise

The superb Elise is the car credited with kick-starting a renaissance at Lotus. How on earth can it be improved, wonders Mike Orford

Imagine being set the unenviable brief to improve the Lotus Elise. Those poor chaps at Hethel's HQ would probably have preferred to split the atom with a knife or attempt to make Frank Bruno the next Prime Minister, rather than tinker with the best-handling British sports car of recent memory.

But tinker is what they had to do, as a new threat from Vauxhall had arrived. Yes, you read right - Vauxhall. The new VX220, its first sports car in ages, was heralded as an Elise-beater on its launch late last year, thanks to a winning combination of futuristic styling, punchy performance and unbelievable handling. Lotus can claim credit for the latter, as the VX220 is based on the chassis of the Elise and is built at a dedicated plant at Lotus on behalf of Vauxhall. But despite the fact that Lotus is indirectly making money out of the hot-Vaux, it didn't want its own runaway-success model to suffer as a consequence. Enter the new, improved Elise.

The most glaring difference between the old and new version is a radical change in But while the bared-teeth front is pretty unique, there's only one clear source of inspiration for that back end, and it comes from a small town called Maranello in Northern Italy. Just check out those Ferrari-esque tail lights to see what we mean.

Overall, the Elise has a more commanding presence than before, and has no trouble turning pedestrian heads as it darts about city streets. One of the best aspects of its new look is that it accentuates the rear-wheel-drive layout of the car, with greater 'muscle' over the rear haunches lending a predatory, ready-to-pounce posture. Sounds like bullshit I know, but wait until you see it on the road and you'll understand.

It's not just about styling though. The roof has been improved for easier removal and storage in the boot (though it still let in a few drops of water during the torrential rain that occurred during our test). Also, the ridiculously wide door sills have been narrowed slightly and the fibreglass panels are thinner, lighter and more solidly constructed. Inside, the distinctive race-style Stack instruments are now contained within a new housing and emit a sort of chillout-room blue glow at night.

You never forget your first drive in an Elise. Clamber in through the laughably narrow aperture - a reason in itself to ditch the roof whenever possible - and settle into the snug, barely adjustable racing-style bucket seat. It doesn't feel immediately comfortable, but after several hours at the wheel you realise that the driving position is absolutely spot on. In front of you is a pretty, suede-covered steering wheel, while down below are aluminium pedals hovering above the exposed aluminium floor. Although basic, the appearance is sporty and well finished.

Start up that Rover K series engine and you just won't believe that this noisy growl can possibly come from the same power plant that propels legions of dull, refined 45s and 75s along the nation's motorways. But Lotus has stripped out any sort of soundproofing, in its place adding oodles of character and an honest, mechanical feel. The throttle, too, is crisp and responsive.

Now stir that gear lever and let up the stiff, competition-style clutch. If you're manoeuvring your way out of town, you'll rapidly begin to realise that the Elise is not a car that relishes traffic jams. It's temperamental at low revs, and has not only a heavy clutch but also a brake pedal that could pass as a weight machine at the gym. And as if to make matters worse, visibility out the back is barely any better than that from a Sherman tank.

Any comparisons with tanks evaporate as soon as you hit the open road, though. Floor the right foot and the car takes off, rushing towards the red line like Linford Christie on speed. This is joined by screaming and wailing from the engine at the rear that erupts into a frenzy at 7,000rpm. It's not a delicious sound like you'd get from a V6 or V8, but it's infectious in its urgency. And, as speeds rise above 70 mph (What? No not me officer...) there's more wind noise than at a prune lovers' convention and, somewhere in the symphony, a deep roar from the low profile tyres. Whatever the Elise is, you wouldn't call it quiet.

But boy, does it handle. Around bends the Elise is king, with superb poise, direct, quick steering with unmatched communication and hardly a trace of body roll. Mid-corner bumps don't do much to upset its composure while grip from the 16- and 17-inch tyres is strong. Even when the Lotus is pushed beyond its adhesive limits, the car is still brilliant, both understeering and oversteering

naturally. Either way, in the hands of a relatively experienced driver it's amazingly controllable and an easy car to hold a power slide in. It makes something like an MGF feel like a bouncy castle on wheels in comparison. So, the guys from Lotus have met their near-impossible brief. The new Elise is not only better than its predecessor, but it's easily the greatest-handling sports car you can buy - period.

Revised version of '90s legend, aluminium chassis tub for strength and safety, new styling inspired by 340R, 1.8-litre 120bhp Rover, K series engine, top speed: 125 mph, 0-60 mph in 5.7 seconds

Verdict: Probably the purest sports car on sale today. Eclipses its rivals for sheer driving thrills

Overall: ★★★★★

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