

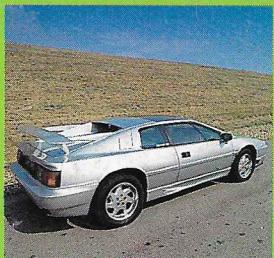
EVERY WEEK £1.25

16 OCTOBER 1991

AUTOCAR & Motor

MOTOR SHOW Full Guide

We drive the 1992 models



New
Lotus Esprit



New
Honda Civic



New
BMW Touring



Plus Peugeot 106
takes on Metro



Esprit joins the 'user friendly' brigade

In response to customer complaints, Lotus has revamped the Esprit to improve cabin space and rearward visibility. David Vivian reports

ONE OF THE POTENTIAL advantages of being a low-volume car maker is that you know who your customers are.

And if they don't like something, they tell you about it. Lotus knows this because its customers had plenty to say

about Britain's only mid-engined supercar, the Esprit.

They complained that they had difficulty getting in and out because the doors didn't open wide enough, and that the shortage of headroom militated against finding a comfortable driving position. With such a mean rear window and a tail spoiler plonked bang in the line of vision, they couldn't see out the back, either. Some even complained that the car understeered too much at speed.

Lotus listened, of course, but no one would have thought any the worse of the company if it hadn't reacted. After all, mid-engined supercars aren't

contractually obliged to be practical and the Esprit was by no means as uninhabitable as some. Old-school doctrine on the subject stubbornly suggests that at no cost should supercars be 'easy'.

Exotics such as the Lamborghini Countach championed this cause by being so uncomfortable, hard to see out of, noisy and tiring to drive that the sense of achievement to be had from moving the car between A and B was surpassed only by the relief at getting out.

But attitudes are changing. Even Porsche — maker of the sports car with the most unfathomable control layout in the world, the 911 — realised that a few morsels of user-friendliness wouldn't go amiss in the Carrera 2, while the Countach's successor, the Diablo, is virtually a reformed character. And when Lamborghini starts to make an ergonomically convincing car, it's time to send the old nonsense about "conquering the car to achieve a deeper



New rear wing dramatically improves rearward visibility

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Longitudinal, mid, rear-wheel drive

Capacity 2174cc, 4cyls in line

Bore 95.3mm **Stroke** 76.2mm

Compression ratio 8.0:1

Head/block al alloy/al alloy

Valve gear dohc, 4 valves per cylinder

Fuel and ignition electronic multi-point fuel injection

Max power 264bhp (197kW) at 6500rpm **Max torque** 261lb ft (354Nm) at 3900rpm

GEARBOX

Five-speed manual

Ratios 1st 3.36, 2nd 2.05, 3rd 1.38, 4th 1.03, 5th 0.82

Final drive ratio 3.89:1

SUSPENSION

Front independent, by upper and lower wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **Rear** independent, by upper and lower transverse links with box section trailing radius arms, coil springs

STEERING

Rack and pinion, 3 turns lock to lock

BRAKES

Front 10.2ins vent discs

Rear 10.8ins outboard discs

WHEELS AND TYRES

Cast alloy 7J x 15 (front), 8.5J x 16 (rear), 215/50 ZR15 (front), 245/50 ZR16 (rear) Goodyear Eagle

DIMENSIONS

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Length | 170.5 ins |
| Width | 73.2 ins |
| Height | 45.3 ins |
| Wheelbase | 96.0 ins |

PERFORMANCE (claimed)

| | |
|--------------|---------|
| 0-60mph | 4.7secs |
| Top speed | 165mph |
| PRICE | £48,260 |



Driver gets more room in which to operate



Extra cabin space, wider seats are welcome



264bhp 2.2-litre four is as potent as ever

level of understanding and satisfaction" back to the heartland of macho inadequacy from whence it sprang.

The clever thing about Lotus's revisions to the 264bhp, 165mph, £48,260 Esprit SE is that, on the outside at least, they look like fanciful, free-wheeling injections of stylistic drama, administered to 'juice up' the Esprit's image with scant regard for anything other than acquiring the aesthetic clout to upstage passing Ferraris.

From whichever angle you approach it, there is nothing subtle about the new rear spoiler. It makes that which adorned the rump of the original Sierra Cosworth look like an extra coat of paint. The important thing, however, is that it's high enough to clear the new, glassless 'open back' tailgate with its extravagantly louvred engine cover. Now there's just a vertical pane of glass between the rear-view mirror and the outside world. Rearward visibility has been

improved by several hundred per cent — albeit from a level where it barely existed at all.

Lotus designer and aerodynamicist Richard Hill claims there's more to the massive wing than a better view: "Removal of the glassback and raising the rear wing was necessary to obtain unobstructed rear mirror vision. In doing this, the longitudinal position and wing attitude have been set to maximise stability with the minimum drag penalty. This has been complemented by the addition of a rubber front lip spoiler, which allows a neutral lift performance to be achieved. The upshot is less lift at the front and, therefore, a reduced tendency to understeer and an improvement in top speed from 163 to 165mph.

"The design of the tailgate has also been carefully developed to ensure maximum engine bay airflow for cooling. It provides a 'zoned' airflow pattern which prevents hot air from the turbo and exhaust manifold heating up other sensitive components."

Less obvious but even more extensive is the repackaging of the cabin. The bottom line is an additional 5.6ins of headroom, 1.6ins more legroom and up to 3.2ins more clearance between seat and steering wheel. A new rear bulkhead extends the cabin length by 1.2ins and a new pedal box with revised geometry gives shorter pedal actions. By making the centre tunnel narrower, Lotus has been able to make the seats wider for the benefit of broader beams. Long torsos get a better deal, too, a removable cushion in the squab effectively liberating more headroom by lowering the seating position.

Many would say that, in relation to the road surface, the seating position was pretty low already. But getting in and out has been made easier by doors that open 15deg wider — that's 9ins measured at the back of the door. It's one of those things you wouldn't necessarily notice unless someone told you. The improvements don't register straight away; instead, there's a slow realisation that you're not being driven mad by the old problems. Having an unimpeded view straight back is the best news of all, but not having your hairstyle compressed by the roof lining is almost as good. As

promised, the pedals feel firmer and more positive and the reshaped seats are certainly comfortable and supportive, but for my amply padded 5ft 8ins frame the driving position still isn't quite right, the steering wheel being a bit of a stretch with the seat set correctly for the pedals.

On Millbrook's tortuous handling circuit, it was impossible to determine whether the new SE understeered less than its predecessor, as claimed by Lotus, but it still understeered too much in the tighter turns, making it hard to apply the prodigious power of the charge-cooled 2.2-litre four early enough out of corners.

The point about the Esprit SE is that it has so much performance, you seldom need to press hard. The styling changes promise an excitement that, during my time with the car, I never really found. That doesn't stop it from being a better car than before, or more desirable. Never mind the understeer, feel the thrust. ■



Aerodynamic tweaks reduce the tendency to understeer