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LOTUS

## Esprit SE

Improvements to the Esprit's interior make it easier to live with, but a new wing spoils its looks

THERE ARE SOUND AERODYNAMIC reasons why the 1992 model year Esprit's rear spoiler now sits atop stilts tall enough to keep a Papua New Guinean's hut dry through the monsoon season. But that doesn't stop it looking daft. Aesthetically it's as appropriate as a satellite dish on the dome of St Paul's; it's the sort of addition you'd expect to see on a Romford Capri, not on the rump of a slick, mid-engined supercar. It's enough to put Prince Charles into one of his carbuncle moods. And quite right, too.

With a touch of the *Everything we do is driven by you*, Lotus claims the changes to the Esprit, which henceforth will be available only as one model, were customer inspired. This rings true for the extensive cockpit revisions, but I wonder how many customers grumbled about the 140mph-plus stability and high-speed handling at, top-balance, which the wing is said to improve. Enough to warrant this cerblight on the hind-quarters?

The reason the wing is mounted slightly on a pair of stilettos, is to push it hand-up into 'clean' airflow where it can operate most effectively. In conjunction with a small rubber (more lumpyscrape-friendly than glassfibre) a tad on the front airdam, the wing improves the drag co-efficient to hand-Cd 0.33, cuts front-axle lift to additional most zero (thus balancing the strong rear), and pushes the top speed balance up by 2mph, to 165mph. The state of nearly zero lift reduces understeer at big speeds.

There are other, more subtle, performance changes. The glass panel over the engine bay which spanned 15 is, the buttresses is gone, and the engine cover has new vents to improve cooling. Badging is new, range too, but otherwise all is as before. The same is true of the mechanicals - there are no changes to the engine or suspension.

The cabin has undergone some fundamental reworking, though you won't spot the difference at a glance. Extra cabin space and

greater comfort were the goals. Change number one is that you can actually get into the car without kicking the door trims, thanks to doors which open wider by 15 degrees. The rear bulkhead is redesigned to create an extra 1.4in of cockpit length, the transmission tunnel is lower and narrower, and the pedal box revised to give more space in the footwell and shorter yet lighter pedal travel.

Seats are new - wider, with bigger side bolsters. They're also lower than before, to improve headroom and steering wheel clearance. A removable cushion gives taller drivers an even better chance to avoid contact with the glass sunroof - lofty Lotus MD Kimberley must have spent a bit of time in an Esprit recently. The naff heating and air-con controls - which looked as if they'd been lifted from inside a 1950s fridge - are replaced on the centre console by some more contemporary (and tasteful) knobs and graphics, which have the further advantage of occupying less space.

The Esprit's cocoon cockpit always looked more inviting than it actually was, but these latest mods give it the convenience to go with the leather-wrapped chic. There are still a couple of gripes - bad reflections in the windscreen, and, despite the removal of the glass above the engine cover and the out-of-eyeline elevation of the wing, slit-like rearward visibility - but you can now spend long

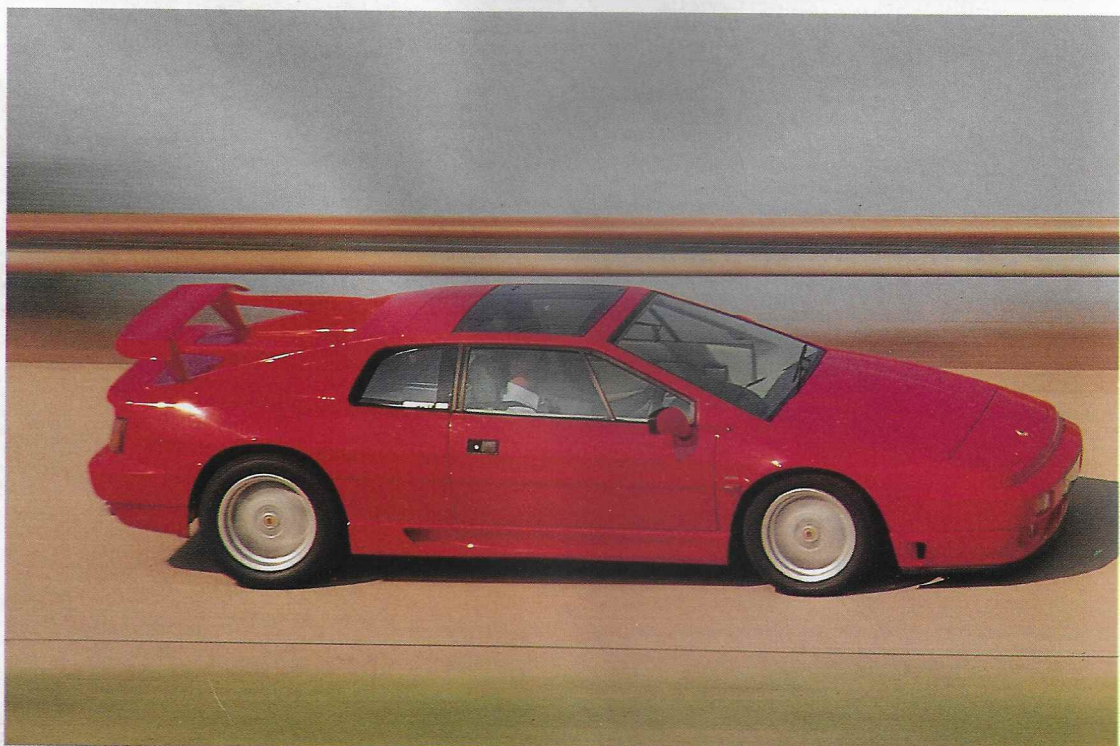
periods behind the wheel without feeling imprisoned or compromised. It would be nice, though, if Lotus could at last dump the Austin Maxi column stalks and door handles, for something more suitable from the GM parts bin. Its argument against doing this is the cost of homologating the new bits, but the £48,260 Esprit deserves it.

To drive, it's pretty much the same old Esprit, except considerably more polished than the last one we tested for our supercar comparison, *All Together, CAR*, October 1990. The new car's handling is better balanced, staying neutral when pushed beyond the frontier of its grip, and tending towards understeer only in the tighter corners. Subjectively, the

steering feels a little lighter than before, probably because you're now physically better positioned in relation to the wheel.

What the Esprit needs now is an extra pair of cylinders (it's unlikely ever to get an eight, though Lotus was working on one). There's no criticising the current turbocharged four for want of power (264bhp) or performance (165mph, 4.7sec 0-60), but in the company the Esprit mixes in, it's short of refinement. Lotus has the technology in its anti-noise and noise synthesis systems to cover up the harshness and create all the right sounds, but wouldn't you rather have the real thing?

by Brett Fraser



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDY CHRISTODOLO

Wing reduces front-axle lift and high-speed understeer. Inside, bulkhead is moved, doors open wider and tunnel is lower. Powertrain remains the same