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✧ Lotus Exige S2

The new Exige is one of the must-drive cars of the year, and this is the moment of truth

If you're not excited at the prospect of the rebirth of Lotus's wonderful Exige, then you're reading the wrong magazine. In many ways it's the ultimate *evo* car incarnate: light, stiff, nimble and blessed with the sort of feedback and agility that only the most special cars possess.

The S2 Exige takes the new Toyota-engined Elise 111R as its basis and ups the quotient of grip, braking stability, body control and sheer thrills to a level

that makes you dizzy with adrenalin and forces you to attack your own personal outer limits to exploit it. Rumours of the Exige going soft – one of the options is a Touring Pack that includes full carpet, electric windows and sun visors, and then there's the more useable boot and the more tractable engine – have been much exaggerated.

Let's cut to the chase. The S2 is a worthy successor to the iconic original: a car of stunning ability that rewards no

matter how talented the person behind the wheel. It's one of the most exciting cars I've driven in a long time.

However, it's a wonder that the new Exige exists at all. Lotus freely admits that it couldn't give the original car away when it was launched back in 2000. Exiges remained anchored to forecourts across the country, and even when the price dropped from £33,995 to £29,995 sales remained disappointing at best.

As recently as 18 months ago, Lotus denied any plans to develop another Exige. Fortunately the desire within Hethel to push the boundaries of the Elise concept to its limit was too strong to get bogged down by sales forecasts.

So 12 months ago (after many hours tinkering and covert development) the

✧ Lotus Exige S1 v S2

The new Exige is a fantastic car, but more fun than the hardcore original? We find out

Park new Exige next to old and you'll probably yearn for the original. The S1 bristles with intent and screams its track credentials. The new car is perhaps more cohesive but nowhere near as aggressive. Lotus has deliberately tried to form stronger visual links between new Exige and the Elise 111R on which it's based, but in the process some of the drama of the earlier car has been lost (that's not all; the S1's claimed 100kg of downforce at 100mph is down to 41kg in the S2).

Start each car up and the divide widens. The S1's K-series VHPD engine is loud and ticks over lumpily, hinting at the high state of tune; the Toyota unit hums with none of the menace. Winning

over early Exige owners won't be easy.

Lotus faced a similar predicament when the original Elise was replaced by the svelte S2, and has learnt that chasing fiercely loyal owners of the early cars is pointless.

The new Exige will inevitably entice some owners to trade up but it must appeal to a wider audience. The Toyota engine helps massively here. Compared with the K-series it's a model of good manners, happy to potter through town or sit in traffic that would have the VHPD coughing and spluttering. The Touring Pack is also designed with the slightly less committed owner in mind.

But Lotus is ready to face accusations that the Exige has gone soft and has huge confidence in the new car. When



we said we were bringing an original car along for a comparison, they didn't bat an eyelid. Dynamically the original Exige is still a paragon, but the new car is decisively better in a number of ways.

Gavan Kershaw worked on the chassis set-up for four months and strived for more front grip, better resistance to roll and a more forgiving nature when the lofty limits are breached. It scores in every area but you'll particularly notice the tighter body control, which gives the

new Exige its unflappable stability, and the crisper steering response and immense front-end grip. This incredibly stable platform is enough to overturn the weight advantage of the old car (780kg v 875kg). And the increase in mechanical grip more than makes up for any loss of downforce.

The Toyota engine feels marginally stronger than the K-series too, although it's really only at high speeds that its advantage begins to tell. S1 owner Mark Cary even commented on how similar the new car sounded when it's wound up above 6200rpm.

Add a sweet six-speed 'box (a huge improvement over the truculent five-speeder in the old car) and brakes that have more feel once you're into the meat of their operating range (as in the 111R they are initially hampered by a dead centimetre or two of pedal travel) and it all adds up to the irresistible conclusion that Lotus has improved upon one of the best cars it has ever built. You can't ask for much more than that, can you?

Jethro Bovingdon

