



AT LAST THE ELISE GETS THE MORE POWERFUL VVC K-SERIES ENGINE AND BECOMES THE EVOCATIVELY

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[ROAD TEST]  
LOTUS ELISE SPRINT



# Lotus Elise

NAMED ELISE SPRINT. RIGHT ENGINE, RIGHT NAME, RIGHT COLOUR, EVEN. WE PUT IT TO THE EVO TEST

# SPRINT

[ ROAD TEST ]  
LOTUS ELISE SPRINT



**E**lise Sprint. It's got a ring to it, don't you think? Conjures up memories of the Elan Sprint, the big-valve, big-hearted version of the nimble little '60s roadster that most people reckon was the one to have. Thirty years on, history seems set to repeat itself, though it's not bigger valves but VVC – sophisticated variable control of the valves – that gives the Elise Sprint its performance hike.

The Sprint looks the part in its new lime-green paint (another echo of the old Elan Sprint), and Elise fans will spot some fresh, defining details: six-spoke, Esprit-style alloys and a new bolt-on rear wing which shadows the lip moulded into the tail of the standard car. The faired-in headlamps make a return too, and with the optional hard-top the overall effect is

**'THE SPRINT IS THE REAL DEAL, A 143BHP, PRODUCTION LINE-BUILT VERSION, COMPLETE WITH THE DESIRABLE CLOSE-RATIO GEARBOX'**

surprisingly strong, evoking the stance and look of the short-lived GT1 class Elise racer.

We've been kept waiting a long time for a more potent Elise. You'd think that dropping the VVC K-series motor into the back of the Elise was little more than the work of an afternoon. It's a fraction taller, requiring a new engine cover with a 'power bulge', but otherwise physically the same lump, so why has it taken so long to productionise the Sprint?

Early in the Elise's life, Rover couldn't make enough VVC engines to satisfy its own demands, but Lotus's explanation is that it has spent its time fine-tuning the set-up of its new model. Elise handling is a sensitive subject at Hethel these days, which we'll come to in a moment.

There is another uprated Elise, the 135 Sport, but almost all of the 50 built by the factory to exploit the SVA regulations have been sold. So if you want 135bhp now, you'll be buying a box full of shiny bits to fit.

The Sprint is the real deal, a 143bhp, production line-built version that comes complete with the desirable close-ratio gearbox, some small suspension tweaks and a number of other refinements. It's not cheap: at £26,590 it's a heady £5465 more than the standard car, and that's without the metallic paint and hard-top. Mind you, fitting a new 118bhp Elise with the 135 kit and the close-ratio gears costs £26,060, so the Sprint looks relatively good value, and has the cachet of being a new, official model.

How to spot an Elise Sprint: from the front, the headlamp fairings give it away; from behind, look for the extra rear wing attached to the moulded lip of the tail. You may even spot a small power bulge in the engine cover. Oh yes, and there's a badge that says 'Elise Sprint'



## Performance

We've performance-tested half a dozen Elises in the last few months, including three after-market tuned cars with claimed outputs of between 140 and 160bhp, and two cars with Lotus's 135bhp kit. The 135 with the close-ratio gearbox was quickest, so it would be reasonable to expect the 143bhp Sprint to raise the stakes even further.

Upping the power from 118 to 143bhp at 7000rpm lifts the power-to-weight ratio from 158 to 189bhp per ton, so you'd expect to feel the difference the first time you nail the throttle. As well as increasing power, VVC variable valve timing is designed to enhance the low- and mid-range torque of the 1.8-litre Rover K-series. Although peak torque doesn't appear to be much higher than the stock unit – 128lb ft at 4500rpm versus 122 at 3000 – the VVC curve is higher and flatter, promising a more linear delivery.

There's a slight weight penalty for this trick

technology, about 15lb, and overall the Sprint tips the scales at 32lb more than the regular car. Not enough to affect its go. There are wider rear tyres too, but they have a lower aspect ratio which keeps the rolling radius, and thus the gearing, almost the same.

In the close-ratio gearbox, first and second gears are a fraction longer than standard and fifth is made slightly shorter, the idea being to stack them closer so that, every time you shift up, the revs drop by only 1000rpm to keep the engine right on the boil.

That longer first gear didn't harm the getaway, and we saw 60mph come up in an impressive 5.5secs – against 6.1 for the standard car – with 100 reeled off in just 16.2secs, about four seconds quicker. So far so good, but we had an idea the Sprint's in-gear times weren't going to eclipse those of the 135 with the same gearbox. This wasn't due to the finely honed perception of a



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>> PERFORMANCE ELISE SPRINT

MAX SPEED 133MPH manufacturer's figure

STANDING START (SECS)

0-30mph	1.8
0-40mph	2.7
0-50mph	4.1
0-60mph	5.5
0-70mph	7.5
0-80mph	9.6
0-90mph	12.7
0-100mph	16.2
SS 1/4 mile (secs/mph)	14.3/94
0-100-0mph	21.1

3RD/4TH/5TH GEAR ACCELERATION (SECS)

20-40mph	4.3/5.7/7.9
30-50mph	4.2/5.3/7.6
40-60mph	4.2/5.2/7.4
50-70mph	4.0/5.4/7.8
60-80mph	4.3/5.5/8.1
70-90mph	5.0/6.1/8.2
80-100mph	—/7.0/8.9

TED (Time Exposed to Danger — time taken to overtake a standard articulated truck travelling at a constant 45mph) 5.0

BRAKE TESTS

Stopping distance to standstill (dry surface)	
30mph	35ft
50mph	84ft
70mph	174ft
Test fuel cons. (mpg)	n/a
EC combined (mpg)	38.7
Track conditions	dry
Wind speed	12mph
Temperature	2 C



professional road tester but because Lotus had shown us the in-gear figures they'd recorded one-up. Over every increment the Sprint was slower than the 135 we tested last month.

Worse still, the figures we recorded (two-up) for the Sprint were slower than Lotus's own. Indeed, by our measurements the Sprint is a whisker slower than the standard 118bhp car in third and fourth, which are the stock ratios retained in the close ratio cluster. It's quicker in the shorter fifth, as you'd expect, which is small consolation. Oh dear. Norfolk egg/face interface scenario.

The VVC engine really should show more mid-range punch, but the car we tested appears to have no more than the 118bhp version. This situation isn't without precedent; there's a similar conundrum with the VVC and non-VVC MGE.

Unlike the tuners' cars we tested in the February edition, the Sprint doesn't sacrifice the bottom end for top-end fizz, but when you consider how much you're paying for the VVC engine, you've a right to expect more. More than the 135 kit, for starters.

Don't write off the Sprint just yet, though. It feels much more eager than the standard car because, like the tuners' cars, when you get to

Above: VVC version of 1.8-litre K-series gives 143bhp at 7000rpm and 128lb ft at 4500. Performance figures are a tad disappointing, but top-end vigour is much improved

the point where the standard motor fades, the VVC gets into its stride.

Twist the key and the K-series comes alive with the humble, ordinary-sounding idle of the standard engine. If you sat in front of a Rover 200vi with your back to the number-plate you'd hear the same four-cylinder thrum and the sizzle and ticking of valve-train and injectors. There's a bit more character to the VVC's note when you plant the throttle, a deeper beat in the mid-range that suggests more pace, and it's always a delight to feel the lack of inertia you get with a light car.

Throttle response is crisp and clean and the delivery very consistent up to 6000rpm, at which point an extra kick sends the rev-counter needle happily beyond peak power at 7000rpm and into the limiter at 7400. In the standard car you always feel you're simply gathering momentum, but the Sprint feels eager. Grab the next gear and the ratios ensure that you fall slap-bang into the sweet-spot again. The shift itself is neat and quite precise, if lacking the polish that makes you want to change gear just for the hell of it.

**'AT 6000RPM AN EXTRA KICK SENDS THE REV-COUNTER HAPPILY BEYOND PEAK POWER AT 7000RPM AND INTO THE LIMITER AT 7400'**



### Handling, ride and brakes

The details of how and why the Elise Sprint is different to the standard model are important but let's not forget what a uniquely engaging experience the Elise delivers. If this was the first version you'd ever driven it would charm you with its innate lightness and responsiveness, impress you with its sensitivity and communication, and wow you with its effortless bump-absorption and wonderfully progressive, non-assisted brakes. Basically, you'd know within a few hundred yards that the Elise was special, like no other car you'd driven before.

These qualities are founded in its light but rigid adhesive-bonded aluminium tub, which weighs just 150lb. Fully-furnished and road-ready, the Elise weighs ten times that – much more than a Caterham Seven – but in the grand scheme the Elise is a lightweight car, and feels it.

There has been some criticism of its handling at the limit, however. Like most mid-engined cars the Elise can fall into oversteer that's hard to recover, and not always through excessive power. You have to feel some sympathy for the Lotus engineers; ten years ago they make the Elan, arguably the world's most competent and capable front-drive sports car, ▶

Sprint ushers in more comfy Elise seats (above) though you still need rubber joints to gain access with the hard-top or hood in place. Hard-top makes the Elise more of an all-weather car

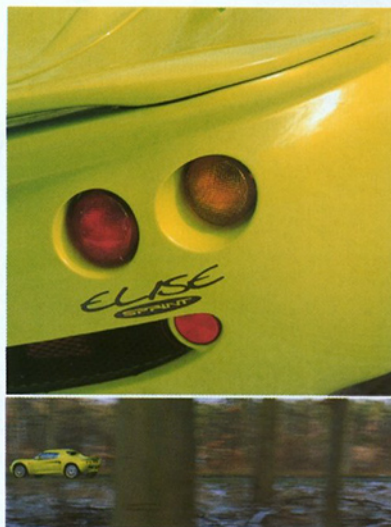


## [ ROAD TEST ] LOTUS ELISE SPRINT

SPECIFICATION		ELISE SPRINT
Engine	In-line four	
Location	Mid, transverse	
Displacement	1796cc	
Bore x stroke	80.0mm x 89.3mm	
Compression ratio	10.5 to one	
Cylinder block	Aluminium alloy	
Cylinder head	Aluminium alloy, dohc, 4 valves per cyl, variable valve timing	
Fuel and ignition	Multipoint fuel injection and ignition	
Max power	143bhp @ 7000rpm	
Max torque	128lb ft @ 4500rpm	
Transmission	Five-speed manual, rear drive	
Front suspension	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	
Rear suspension	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	
Steering	Rack and pinion	
Brakes	Cross-drilled discs, fronts vented	
Wheels	5.5x15 front, 7.5x16 rear, alloy	
Tyres	185/55 ZR15 front, 225/45 ZR16 rear Pirelli P Zero	
Fuel tank capacity	8.8gal/40 litres	
Weight (kerb/test)	1698lb/2028lb	
Power-to-weight	183bhp/ton (kerb) 158bhp/ton (test)	
Basic price	£26,590	
Airbag/pass	na/na	
Driving lamps	standard	
Leather seats	£595	
Metallic paint	£695	
Hard-top	£1275	
Price as tested	£29,155	
Insurance group	20	

**EVO** RATING ★★★★★

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and some complain that it's uninvolved, like watching it on telly. So they come back with the Elise, a touchy-feely, rear-drive, faintly retro sports car and get complaints that it's a bit tricky at the limit.

The chassis of the more powerful Sprint is subtly but significantly different to the regular Elise. Same double wishbones all round, same springs, dampers and anti-roll bars too, but fatter (225/45 in lieu of 205/50) and specially-developed rear tyres, a 12mm wider rear track, and revised bump-steer geometry. Plus a new rear wing that develops 50lb of downforce at 100mph. Sounds like they've tied the tail down tighter, don't you think?

The Sprint seems somehow weightier. The steering is a little heavier than before and the rear seems more solid, more firmly composed. Out of the first wet T-junction with a bit too much power, the tail slides cleanly, unhurriedly, and arcs back into line neatly. Nice. It's different at a quick road pace, though. There's still oodles of feedback filtering through to the wheel rim and when you commit the Sprint to a damp corner, there's that distinct lightness at the wheel that tells you you've found the limit of grip. In most rear-drivers a whiff of a lift and a stab of throttle would edge the tail out, but not this Elise: the balance is resolutely set to understeer in the wet.

This doesn't stop you enjoying the fluid poise and the quick-witted steering response, and on bone-dry roads the Sprint corners hard and fast. There's never enough power to poke the tail at the hedgerow but the Elise encourages a pure, precise cornering style anyhow. The surprise is that even at the test track the Sprint had to be severely provoked to hang on opposite lock around a damp circle.

Momentum oversteer, where inertia breaks grip, is another matter. The Sprint feels less edgy than the regular car through very fast kinks but it's still not 100 per cent inspiring. Test your suspicion that you're close to the best speed the car can manage and the rear will peel away in confirmation. Not the most comfortable sensation, but recoverable if you don't bottle out of the throttle entirely. You'd have to watch for it on a race track but it's not a situation you're likely to encounter on the road, so in this respect the Sprint's chassis set-up succeeds.

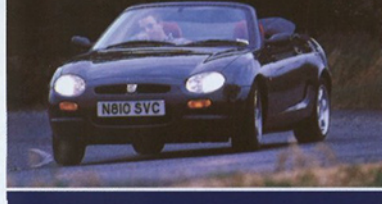
### At the wheel

Getting into the Elise with the hood up or the hard-top in place remains a test of suppleness, especially for six-footers who have to back themselves in over the tall, wide sill like an octopus fitting through a small hole.

Once there, though, the fine driving position is enhanced by re-sculpted, more comfortable seats. The nakedness of the cockpit is as appealing as ever, the expanses of matt silver aluminium reinforcing the Elise's lightweight philosophy. The carbonfibre-look fascia cappings aren't convincing though, and the (optional) radio fitted to the test car looks out of place and doesn't sound too good in these surroundings. Noise levels are acceptable, though the engine sounds busier at an 80mph cruise because of the lower fifth gear ratio.

Anyone who's wrestled to get the longbow-like carbonfibre hood tensioners behind the seats will appreciate the re-designed boot, which is now wide enough to swallow them.

## The Rivals



### CATERHAM 21 SUPERSPORT

Not as raw as the Seven on which it's based, but not as dynamically polished or as technically interesting as an Elise. Tuned 1.6-litre K-series is gutsy.  
**Price** £25,495 **Spec** in-line four, 1588cc, 138bhp, 115lb ft 0-60 6.8secs **Max speed** 131mph  
**EVO** Rating ★★

### LOTUS ELISE

One of the great driving experiences. Superbly rounded package lacks only a decent engine note and a bit more top-end vigour. With the 135 kit and close-ratio box out-sprints the Sprint for the same money.  
**Price** £21,125 **Spec** in-line four, 1796cc, 118bhp, 122lb ft 0-60 6.1secs **Max speed** 126mph  
**EVO** Rating ★★★★★

### MAZDA MX-5 1.8iS

Simple rear-drive sports car that makes the very best of what it's got. Fun and easy to live with. The best mass-market sports car you can buy. Great value, too.  
**Price** £18,805 **Spec** in-line four, 1839cc, 138bhp, 120lb ft 0-60 7.4secs **Max speed** 123mph  
**EVO** Rating ★★★★★

### MGF 1.8i VVC

The mid-engined MG is an involving drive and has a sweet engine but it looks expensive beside the MX-5 and doesn't feel as finely honed. Still looks pert, even though it's due for an up-date.  
**Price** £20,570 **Spec** in-line four, 1796cc, 143bhp, 128lb ft 0-60 7.5secs **Max speed** 126mph  
**EVO** Rating ★★





## VERDICT

Were we expecting too much of the Elise Sprint? We don't think so. Lotus has taken its time installing the VVC K-series engine and close-ratio gearbox, and tuning the handling. It charges £5500 more for the package, so it should be special.

The suspension tuning certainly makes the Elise less tail-happy but less adjustable, too. All-out it's quicker than the standard car, no question. At precisely the point where the original fades, the Sprint powers on to 7000rpm, and every up-shift drops you straight back onto a swell of urge that drives it forward again. However, unless you're prepared to go to the limiter, it's no quicker than the standard Elise.

Fact is, Lotus's own 135bhp kit – which looks expensive – is considerably more effective. It completely up-stages the 143bhp VVC, being vastly more rapid, even without the accompaniment of the close-ratio gearbox.

Sadly, the Sprint isn't the car we've been waiting for. Despite the cachet of its name and the fact that it's a line-built model, in our view it fails to live up to its promise. Shame, that.

**evo** Rating ★★☆☆

