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Lotus 340R

Lotus gave us the Elise - the best driver's car in the world. Now T3 steps up to take its outrageous new 340R for a spin

There will always be those who take things to extremes: maniacs who bungy-jump off the edge of Niagra Falls; Ironmen competitors who swim for 12 hours, cycle for two days then run for three weeks; Americans... And those tragic individuals still 'larging it' to dark techno on a Sunday afternoon, having been in the same club since Thursday.

Minnow car maker, Lotus, has decided to join these ranks of mentalists with its most radical vision of a stripped-down, featherweight sports car yet. The Lotus 340R is a concept so utterly uncompromising in its quest for brilliant performance - on both the road and the weighing scales - that it takes the extreme road racer to, well, new extremes.

First let's take a look at the facts. The reason it's called 340R is that it was intended to have a power-to-weight ratio of 340bhp per tonne, even though the production version actually misses its 500kg target weight by some 175 kg. Perhaps to justify its otherwise nonsensical badging, Lotus is to build only 340 examples of the car, and all of them have already been snapped up at a mere £35,000 a shot.

Its styling is incomparable; there's no roof, no doors, and only the most rudimentary body panels. Nothing on the road looks as downright wrathful, its exposed-component appearance capable of provoking both deep admiration and supreme horror, but never, ever ambivalence. If you crave attention, this Lotus is your new best friend.

But then there's reality. Trundle the 340R through the city in a bid to prop up your flagging ego, and it'll be your worst enemy. Strapped tightly inside as you are, the heat that seeps in from both the engine (behind) and the radiator (up front) becomes stifling, while the unsavoury fumes that accompany it can leave you feeling a tad nauseous. It's like that Japanese game

Summary

COST	£35000
COMPANY	Lotus
CONTACT	Local dealer
WEBSITE	www.lotuscars.co.uk
REVIEWED IN	Issue 50

PICTURES



KEY FEATURES

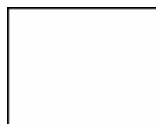
177bhp mid-engined, rear-wheel-drive roadster, based heavily on the phenomenally successful Elise, power-to-weight ratio of 262bhp per ton, advanced body materials combine strength with lightness, WC engine also used in Rovers, MGs and Caterhams, 0-60 mph in 4.7 seconds, top speed 131 mph, basic cabin features race-harness, a few dials, a wheel, and very little else

VERDICT

Caterham's Seven still has the edge for performance, but unique styling and rarity are 340R's trump cards



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T3 RATING



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Lotus 340R

There's another aspect of urban life that the Lotus is unhappy with. At anything below 2,000 rpm, the highly tuned 177bhp 1.8-litre Rover VVC engine is temperamental and surly. It doesn't want to play, and sometimes threatens to stall, even when supposedly left to idle. So some deliberate slipping of the clutch is needed to pull away in a dignified manner.

On the motorway, the Lotus is also hard work. It's the sheer, unrelenting nature of the 340R that grinds you down, your head tickled by the wind, ears savaged by the sonorous exhaust note and hands exposed to the cold. During my time with the Lotus I tried to use it as a touring car by doing 600 miles in two days, mostly on the three-laned highway. When it was all over and I hauled myself out of the cabin I must've looked like Willem Dafoe at the end of Platoon. This car had reduced me to a gibbering wreck.

Okay, that's the end of the bad news. Let's not be too unfair. Lotus never pretended for a second that the 340R had even a whiff of practicality about it. The Elise, on which the 340R is based, has a boot of sorts, a radio and a heater. Hell, it even has some sort of sound-deadening. The 340R has none of these things and makes no apology for its inadequacies, because it's a machine designed solely to stimulate that area of your brain marked 'driving pleasure'. Find the right road, on the right day in the right weather, and there's little else to touch this Lotus. And that includes any Ferrari, Porsche, or Impreza Evo-Skyline thing.

What propels the 340R into a stratosphere of sports car greatness is its absolute purity. Not in the bullshit 'this car's got good breeding' type way, but in its sheer clarity of purpose. In its mission to be as light as possible, the 340R does without power steering, brake assistance and ABS, leaving the driver to put in far more effort than the car. The result is electric-sensitivity to your inputs - move the wheel a fraction and the car does too, stamp on the reigns and you feel as if you're physically stopping the car, Fred Flintstone-style.

The engine is just as responsive, too. Tread on the

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pedal in any of the first four gears, pushing the needle towards its 9,000 rpm limit, and you'll find yourself pulsating forwards as the 340R greedily eats up the road. Open up this baby and the raspy exhaust tones burst into song as the engine continues its relentless pursuit to unleash the 340R's unadulterated power.

T3 RATING

With specially designed Yokohama tyres, the 340R's grip borders on the heroic. Try going back around the same corner, increasing speed each time, and you'll be scaring yourself witless by the time you hear the first squeal of rubber. If you're careless you might be able to get the back to kick out in true Bullitt fashion, but even then the razor-sharp steering will enable you to get immediately back on track.

There's a catch, though. Remember in Gremlins, when all those cute Gizmos became salivating, vile monsters once they'd come into contact with water? The 340R has a similar Jekyll and Hyde character flaw: its semi-slick tyres that are so tenacious in the dry have all the adhesion of a bar of soap covered in baby oil when asked to cope with sodden asphalt. When it rains, it's better to just admit defeat and seek shelter.

And that sums the Lotus up, really. It's a completely impractical car for frustrated track drivers to take out on a sunny day when the BMW M5 has become tiresome. A toy for grown-ups who haven't yet grown up. A draconian sports car for those who believe that the Elise is too soft and namby-pamby.

Let's face it, there aren't many people like that around, so it's just as well not many 340Rs are being built. But for those select few, at least one journey a year will be something truly special.



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