



FORCING THE MATTER

Like the Exige's supercharged power, but not its fixed top or lack of rearward vision? Lotus has answered your prayers with the Elise SC.

by JEFF GLENN photography courtesy LOTUS

Any day spent in a Lotus can't be half bad, and when it happens to be a more powerful iteration of the loveable Elise, could there be anything not to like? Doubtful, unless you expect loads of luggage space and an interior that insulates you from the road. Lotus brought us to the mountains northeast of San Diego, to try the new Elise SCs on a meandering ribbon of pavement all mapped out for us.

The Elise is a favorite among the staff at SCI partly because it's modern (it starts, runs

and passes all of the regulations imposed on cars today), but mostly because it's still diminutive in size and weight, just like many of the older sports cars we love so dearly. The "SC" following the Elise name stands for supercharged; it's the main character of this story, but there are a couple of other differences worth mentioning.

The SC rides on handsome new cast-aluminum wheels—6 x 16-inch front, 8 x 17-inch rear—both a half-inch wider than the standard

Elise's. These are shod with Yokohama Advan Neova tires in the same size as the naturally aspirated car: 175/55ZR16 front and 225/45ZR17 rear. In the rear, the SC swaps the standard car's dual exhaust tips for a single large-diameter one. In addition, a more prominent rear spoiler has been grafted onto the rear decklid. Both models are the same on the inside, but all Elises now feature gauges with black backgrounds and a new dash material called Senosoft that looks more upmarket.

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Stepping right into the meat of the matter, the Elise SC's Toyota-sourced 1.8-liter 4-cylinder is combined with a Lotus-designed Eaton M-45 bolt-on blower. The result is a boost in horsepower from 190 to 218; torque rises from 133 lb-ft to 153. Though these gains may seem modest, on such a light car the added output is really noticeable, especially the additional kick of torque. Because of the added twist, Lotus was able to adjust the variable valve timing to kick in at 4,000 rpm instead of way up at 6,200 rpm, making for much stronger mid-range response without power dropping off severely at high revs. So for street driving, you don't have to row the gearbox as much, and on twisting roads, corners can be taken in a higher gear than the with the base Elise.

The Elise SC definitely shoves us back into the seat harder than the Elise, but not quite as hard as the Exige S 240. Thanks to an intercooler—the SC does without one—the Exige engine makes 240 horsepower and 170 lb-ft of torque. The SC sprints to 60 mph in just 4.4 seconds, down from 4.9 for its naturally aspi-

rated sibling. While it can't match the Exige S 240's 4.0-second run, the SC's rearview mirror isn't blocked by an intercooler.

The SC's fly-by-wire throttle response mapping isn't as aggressive as the Exige's—nor is its supercharger as gravelly sounding—which makes for smoother takeoffs on the street, but the engine still pulls quickly to redline. The “intelligent shift lights” stand out on the tachometer as they blink from left to right, then all three at once as you approach the limit. The “intelligence” comes from the way they compensate for the rate at which the motor is approaching the 8,000-rpm rev limit in different gears. In first gear, the lights start coming on about 2,000 rpm before the actual limit, whereas when the engine is spooling up more slowly in fourth, the lights start coming on just 400 rpm before the cutoff.

The SC's standard suspension is one of the best street performance setups we've experienced. In traditional Lotus form, it doesn't rattle the stuffing out of the occu-

pants. Actually, it's surprisingly soft—not wallowy, just compliant. Another benefit of the street-biased damping is the fact the car remained rattle-free over bumpy roads. A Sport Pack-equipped Elise we drove a few years ago squeaked and rattled over bumps.

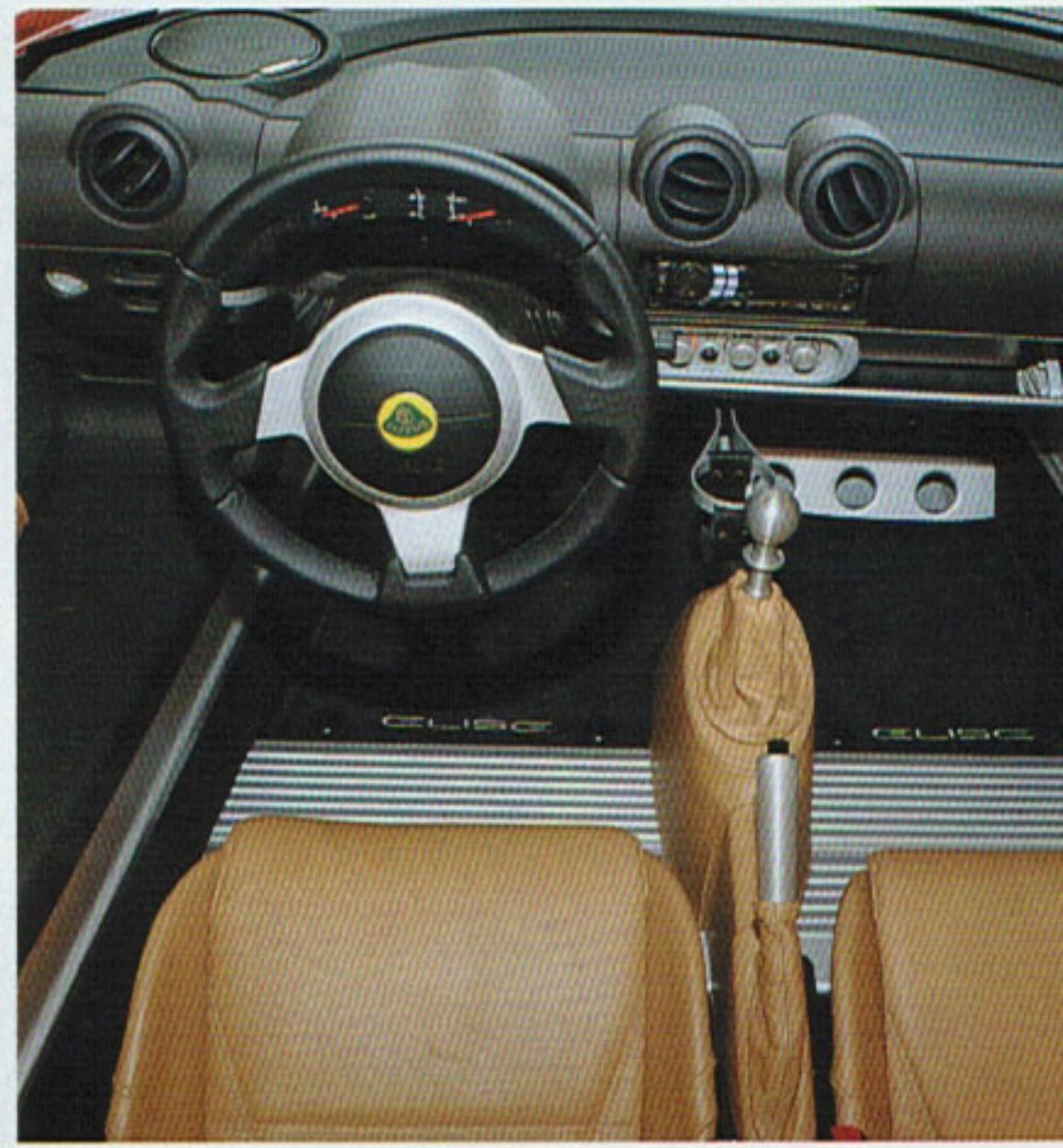
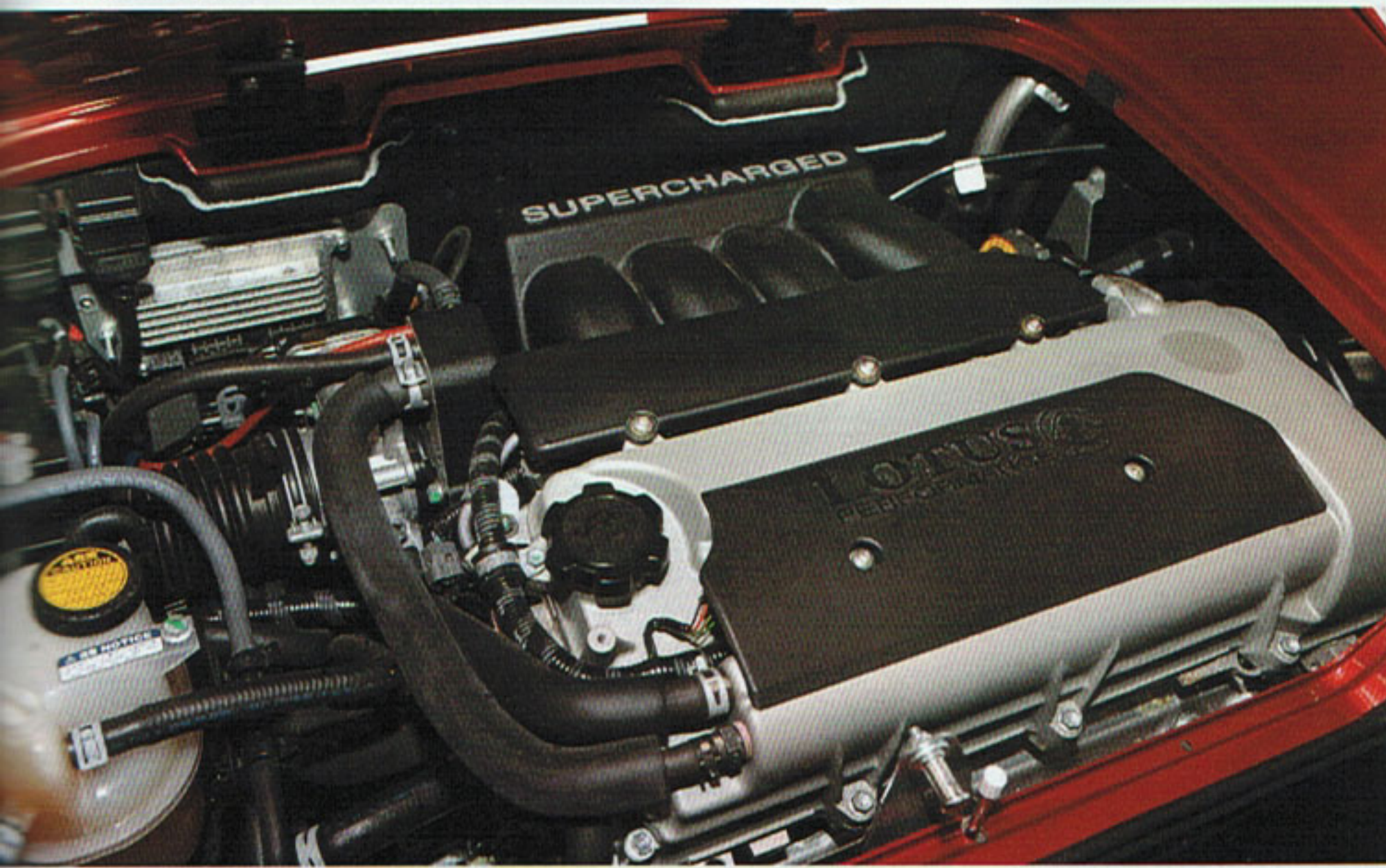
The tires don't have the grip of the track-ready gumballs on the Exige, which in many ways is a blessing for the street. Lotus engineer Dave Minter explained the street tuning of the tire and suspension combination: “We have to throw grip away at the front. We hate to do it, but with 60 percent of the weight at the rear, it takes a lot of camber back there to keep it in line, and we play with the tire compound, sidewall stiffness and size, too. The sidewall stiffness is an integral part of our spring package.”

During Elise's life cycle, Lotus engineers have backed off on front tire width; the first-

Below: Glued on rear spoiler looks, well, tacky—such is the price of model differentiation.

Opposite, top right: Unique wheels are another SC tipoff. Right: Non-intercooled blown four.





generation examples had wider front tires, which made them a little twitchy. When the suspension geometry was increased at the front, the cars would turn in too well, resulting in oversteer.

The last Elise we drove had sticky Yokohama Advan 048s, which gave the car ridiculously high limits. On the street, we felt like we were breaking the law big time if we worked the car hard. The SC's Advan Neovas lower grip just a notch, making the car more enjoyable to push on backroads. That said, it's still bloody quick through the corners and has the same neutral balance and easy-to-catch flickability we've come to love in the Elise.



2009 Lotus Elise SC

ENGINE	Supercharged 1.8-liter DOHC inline-4
POWER (bhp)	218 @ 7800 rpm
TORQUE (lb-ft)	153 @ 5500 rpm
TRANSMISSION	6-speed manual
WEIGHT (pounds)	2026
0-60 MPH (sec.)	4.4
FUEL ECONOMY (city/highway mpg)	20/26
BASE PRICE	\$54,500

Not surprisingly, the Sport Pack-equipped Elise feels a little more focused and sharper. Its ride is slightly firmer and more road texture comes through the steering wheel. Steering effort is ever-so-slightly lighter. The turn-in rate is equally quicker, which results in a hair less understeer. The limit of adhesion is a smidgen higher, but the Sport Package-equipped SC breaks loose with a little more authority, and while still easy to catch, requires quicker hands for gathering it back up smoothly. We noticed a slight dash squeak, likely due to the increased damping resistance, but nothing alarming.

Playing with the traction control is fun. It's not a yaw-sensing lifesaver, just a clever strategy to help put the power down. With it turned off, throttle-on sliding is possible when the suspension is loaded.

As with the latest Exige, the Elise's shift action has improved thanks to a change in the supplier of the shift-linkage parts. The 6-speed is tighter and less vague than before. The unchanged brakes are just as confidence-inspiring and fade-free as before, even with the added speed.

With an MSRP of \$54,500, the SC commands an \$8,230 premium over the normally aspirated Elise. By no means has the Elise SC made the standard Elise obsolete; the normally aspirated car is plenty quick, rewarding to run hard, and probably keeps the character of the Elise more in tune with the small-engined Elites and Sevens of the late '50s and early '60s. That said, the Elise SC offers a compelling combination of stronger performance and more relaxed cruising. For existing Elise owners who feel like they've missed the torque boat, Lotus is working on a bolt-on supercharger that can be retrofitted to earlier cars. ●

The Elise SC can be ordered with two option groups, the \$1,600 Touring Pack and the \$2,600 Sport Pack. (The Track Pack is now reserved for the Exige line.) The former adds driving lights, ProBax seats, leather upholstery (seats, door panels, center console) and full carpeting. Lotus also adds extra sound-deadening material on the bulkhead between the engine and cockpit, as well as the spots where the rear subframe is bolted to the central aluminum monocoque. The Touring Pack also includes an iPod connection and a lightweight cupholder.

The new Sport Pack places lighter forged alloys and specially valved Bilstein shock absorbers at all four corners. Interestingly, the rear rims are a half-inch narrower than the standard cast wheels. The combination

of light rims, cloth instead of leather upholstery and a little less sound deadening drop some 18 pounds from the SC Touring's 2,026-pound curb weight. Though its dampers are valved for higher performance, the Sport Pack-equipped SC rides on the same springs. It also includes twin oil coolers for the engine, and features traction control that pulls spark and fuel from the mix when slip is detected and can be disabled by a button on the console.

Lotus will reluctantly fit a limited-slip differential for \$1,790, but unless you're a frequent autocrosser, the engineers agree that the car works better without it. Lotus used to offer a weight-saving AC delete option, but it was too much hassle on the assembly line considering that only three customers ordered it last year.

THE ELISE SC OFFERS A COMPELLING COMBINATION OF STRONGER PERFORMANCE AND MORE RELAXED CRUISING.