



Used Lotus Elise Buyers Guide

A Lotus Elise is one of the ultimate driver's cars. Find the right one and you'll have a superb sports car with handling and performance that's hard to beat, combined with pretty reasonable running costs.

Like any used car, there are areas to be aware of when trying to find the 'right' car and this guide will hopefully help to steer you in the right direction.

Much of what is written here about the Elise is also relevant to the Exige, but be aware the Exiges are slightly more hard core and likely to have seen greater amounts of track use.

Many different versions of the Lotus Elise have been produced and it can get confusing choosing between them. Some are little more than styling exercises, whereas others offer real differences. But basically the choice, some of which will be defined by budget, comes down to version (S1, S2 or S3 Elise), engine type (Rover or Toyota) and horsepower.

If you'd like more information on the different model types, then the following websites provide plenty of information:

www.elises.co.uk/models

http://wiki.seloc.org/a/Elise_model_history

Turning now to the areas you should be considering to maximise your chances of finding a good Elise rather than a bad one.

Body and paintwork

Has the car had paint repairs, if it has, ask why? The front clamshell is prone to stone-chipping, so respraying to remove stone chips is fine. If you suspect a respray is due to accident damage, you'll need to convince yourself that the repairs have been done properly.

Check underneath the front edge of the front clamshell – they can be prone to damage on speed bumps and low kerbs. Normally cosmetic rather than major problems.

Door shuts and body panel gaps should all be pretty even.

Check for slight variations in paint shade on the different panels – can be a sign of respray work, but also the way the light reflects off the various panels can mean at first glance they look a different shade when in fact they're not...

Chassis

The chassis is of a bonded aluminium construction – light, rigid and very strong. It doesn't though lend itself to repairs, so accident damage to the chassis is invariably problematic.

Brakes, steering and suspension

Elises can be noisy to drive with lots of bangs and clanks and rattles. The S1 Elises with standard specification Koni shock absorbers (red in colour) can be particularly noisy. You'll need to take a view whether a noise is 'normal' or something needing further investigation.

Brake pads can rattle around or 'click' when braking. Not a major problem, but can be a little disconcerting.

Wheel bearings on S1 Elises won't last forever, but the later Elises have a different design of wheel bearing with much better longevity.

There's plenty that can wear in Lotus suspension and steering and brakes – ball joints, steering rack, wishbone bushes, shock absorbers, etc. Many owners don't notice as the car handles so well and even a Lotus with well worn components still handles and feels much better than 'regular' cars. Assume that something will need replacing. When buying a used Lotus for the showroom, we work on the basis that we may have to spend £250 - £500 attending to 'minor' worn items in these sort of areas.

Engine

A minority of Rover engined cars will experience head gasket problems. Check for signs of head gasket failure, e.g. oil in the coolant expansion tank, or signs of 'mayonnaise' (caused by water emulsifying the oil) when you remove the oil filler cap.

If a previous owner has replaced the head gasket on a Rover engined car, satisfy yourself it's been done properly by a specialist. We know a head gasket can be replaced for £500 or so, but we charge around £1,500 to do the job and always check/overhaul the cylinder head as needed and fit the upgraded components recommended by Lotus. Put it this way, we've never had one of our cars come back with a second head gasket failure, but have seen on several occasions that the cheap repairs done elsewhere don't stand the test of time!

Rover engines need to have cambelts replaced every 4 years (early service books said every 6 years, but Lotus subsequently revised this) and if it needs doing, budget around £350. Don't take any chances on old cambelts, as if they break you're looking at some expensive engine repairs...

Toyota engines are pretty much bullet proof, and assuming they've been looked after and serviced correctly, problems are rare. They have chain driven camshafts, so no cambelts to worry about.

Cooling system

Check for radiator leaks – it's quite expensive to replace radiators as the front clamshell has to be removed and refitted. Many owners replace the original radiators which have plastic end caps (which don't always have great longevity) with upgraded and longer lasting all aluminium radiators.

It's particularly important on Rover engined cars (with their potential weakness of the head gasket) that the coolant level is not allowed to run low. However, some cars will find their own level when it comes to coolant quantity in the expansion tank, e.g. if they're filled up to the maximum level, then coolant is spat out until a lower level is reached. Normally this is not something to be worried about – it's just a strange quirk of the cars!

Heating and air conditioning

On the S1 Elises, the heater and blower fan tend not to be overly effective, but don't normally cause problems.

On S2 & S3 Elises check that the blower fan is working at all 3 speeds and the temperature control is working correctly. Any problems here probably means that water has got into the working components which are situated under the front clamshell. Repair and replacement means removing the front clamshell – time-consuming and hence quite expensive.

Air conditioning, if fitted, can improve demisting significantly in winter. It's not the most powerful of air con systems you'll ever come across, but do check that it's working. If it's not, it could be a simple 're-gas' will sort the problem, but it could also be corrosion in the pipework which has caused the refrigerant to leak out. If it's the latter, then assume an expensive repair in terms of both parts and labour.

Weather equipment

S1 Elises are virtually guaranteed to have leaky roofs – invariably where the front top corner of the side windows contact with the hood. Some cars are dreadful, others are acceptable. Playing around with window and door adjustment can help but it's a fiddly old process.

S2 Elise soft tops come in 2 versions, 'long tail' on the earlier cars and 'short tail' on the later cars. Both are significantly better than the S1 soft tops, and normally the short tail S2 soft tops are pretty much totally weatherproof. S3 Elises have the short tail soft top.

Hard tops are an option on all versions of the Elise. The S1 hard tops may leak in the same areas as the soft top, particularly if it's an aftermarket hard top rather than an original one. S2 & S3 hard tops should be good. Both types of hard top can add £500 to a car's value.

Exhausts

S1 Elises originally had mild steel exhausts which corroded badly over time. You'll probably find that an aftermarket stainless steel system has been fitted, so problem solved.

A lot of cars, even the later ones, have had aftermarket exhausts fitted, usually in an attempt to obtain a better sounding exhaust note. There are also some ambitious claims made for extra horsepower from aftermarket exhaust – significant power increases are rare.

Some owners will remove the catalytic convertors and fit a 'cat bypass pipe' instead in an attempt to release more horsepower. Make sure if buying such a car, the owner does supply the 'cat' as it won't pass an MOT without it and to buy a replacement will be expensive. Whether the hassle of removing and refitting cats for MOT purposes, let alone the legality of running a car without a cat, is worth the 3 – 5 bhp that might be gained is questionable...

The Toyota engine Elises are quite sensitive to the exhaust generating the right amount of 'back pressure' and some aftermarket exhaust systems fail to do this. This can cause the odd running problem or the engine warning (MIL) light coming on.

If you're planning to use your Elise for track days, be aware that some aftermarket exhausts are too loud for some circuits.

Track day use

Many Elises have been used on track days, and occasional ones, provided the car has been properly maintained and looked after, shouldn't be a problem or a reason for putting you off a car if everything else about it looks right. Unless it's a single owner car, and the owner can assure you to the contrary, it's probably best to assume that an Elise will have seen a track at some point in its life.

We have come across the occasional car where the engine which has suffered from oil starvation during track days and has unwelcome (expensive!) rattles. This is down to owner error and lack of care rather than any shortcomings with the engines. So check carefully for unusual engine noises on cars that are used regularly for track days.

Upgrades

There are lots of upgrades that can be done to Elises and there are quite a number of suppliers of good quality upgrades and accessories.

Upgrading a car is a personal thing, and some will be seen to be positive, whilst others may spoil a car in a future buyer's eyes. We're happy with the following on our own sales cars: exhausts, induction kits, uprated dampers and springs, Lotus Factory approved and supplied engine upgrades, e.g. superchargers on cars with the Toyota 2ZZ engine or the 135 Sport upgrade on Rover engined cars.

If an engine has been upgraded, make sure it's a recognized and properly tested package and everything is designed to work together and not cause 'conflicts'. Also ensure that a car is still OK from an MOT point of view – some upgrades may produce a lot of power but can cause emission problems and resultant MOT fails.

Interior

The high sills on the Elises (slightly lower on the S2/S3 than the S1 Elises) means that the sill covers and also seat edges can wear quite badly over time. Easy enough to retrim and we do a lot of this in our Trimshop, but costs can mount up.

Service history

Always have a look at a car's history. It will give you a picture of how the car has been looked after, what has been done and possibly what might need doing in the future.

Elises should be serviced annually or every 9,000 miles, whichever comes first.

Prior to February 2020, Lotus stated that Rover engined cars should have A, B & C services whilst Toyota engined cars should have 'Annual' services with additional items (e.g. air filter or spark plugs) at specified time or mileage intervals. From February 2020, Lotus introduced a new range of services – A, B, C, D, E & F – for both Rover and Toyota engined cars.

At the risk of generalising, Elises that have been serviced by garages which are not Lotus specialists, tend to decline in quality over time as not all service items or worn items are picked up on and corrected. If we buy such cars for our showroom, we invariably find it takes us a bit of extra work and expense, to get them up to the standards required.

Other checks, valuing cars, and where to buy

We think it's always worth carrying out a check with HPI, or a similar company, to ensure a car doesn't have a 'hidden past' – certainly we do it for all the cars we take into our showroom. HPI checks should flag up if the car has been written off by an insurance company or is on finance (if you buy a car with outstanding finance on it, then it legally remains the property of the finance company until the finance is paid off...).

Valuing an Elise is not a clear cut exercise and the mainstream buyer's guides, e.g. Glasses, are often inaccurate. We'll trawl the websites such as Autotrader, Pistonheads and eBay when we want to obtain a feel for 'market' prices. Interestingly, we quite often find that Elises advertised privately are priced higher than they would be through a Lotus specialist!

At the risk of stating the obvious, the following factors will affect the value of an Elise:

- Age
- Model
- Mileage
- Overall condition
- Accessories
- Service history
- Time of year (the cars tend to be cheaper in winter)
- Dealer or private sale (the latter should be cheaper!)

If you're wondering about the pros and cons of buying privately or through a dealer, or whether a dealer is doing everything they should, then hopefully the list of what we do for our used Elises will help put things into perspective. This is as follows:

- Very thorough initial check over and assessment of a car – mechanical, structural and condition. This typically takes us around 3 hours.
- Remedy problems identified by this check
- Full valet
- Carry out an HPI check
- Offer test drives on our insurance
- Service the car before sale
- Provide a new MOT
- Provide a warranty
- Help with finance or insurance recommendations if required
- Offer a part exchange service if required
- Arrange delivery if needed (extra cost)
- Give as much advice (hopefully objective!) as you would like on Lotus ownership

We are always happy to give advice about Elises, be it buying, selling, servicing or upgrades to an existing car. So if you are in any doubt, or need any help, please contact us.

Contacting us

If you would like to chat to us about buying an Elise, or any aspect of Lotus ownership, then the best people to talk with are Phil Benfield or John Bellenger. Our contact details are:

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