

FIRST DRIVE



PHOTOS BY JEFF ALLEN

ONE COULD CALL it the zombie of the automobile nether world: The car you see on these pages has made climbing out of its grave a habit. When it made its debut in 1989, the Lotus Elan excited the public with its wedgy aerodynamic shape and head-snapping performance. However, because the roadster was powered by an Isuzu engine, and had a price tag of \$39,040, it was condemned to the gallows after only two years in the marketplace.

Rest in peace, Elan.

But not so fast. Bugatti, which purchased Lotus in 1993, discovered a number of unused Isuzu engines stockpiled in the Lotus warehouse, so it decided to resurrect the Elan, if only for a brief time. Still, there were few takers; therefore, the Elan was once again discontinued (and in its place came the incomparable Elise). What seemed the final nail in the Elan coffin came when the Malaysian company, Proton, purchased Lotus and announced that it had no intention of bringing back the sporty 2-seater.

Well, guess what? It's back. A couple of years ago, we received reports of an Elan

sighting in South Korea, this time wearing a Kia badge. We discovered later that South Korea's second-largest car company had purchased the rights to build and sell the car (sans its Isuzu engine and gearbox) in its home market. The Kia Elan, powered by a normally aspirated 4-banger, met with reasonable success. Would the car come to America? "No way," was the response from Kia.

That was then. In November of last year,

Kia Elan

The once-Lotus roadster turned Korean citizen eyes the U.S. market

BY SAM MITANI

Kia was hit hard by a financial snafu that left it on the brink of bankruptcy. Ultimately the government stepped in and took a 37-percent stake in the company. But things went from bad to catastrophic when the South Korean economy collapsed. Despite assistance from the International Monetary Fund, the country's economic woes continue, and Korea's citizens are far from ready to plop down \$30,000 (add another \$10,000 for taxes) for a sports car. Kia has now

found itself with a lot full of Elans with no place to go... except perhaps to America.

Kia Motors America President Greg Warner disclosed that there is a good chance the Elan will be coming to the U.S. as early as model year 2000. And he hinted that it will be significantly more affordable than the Lotus version.

"We've always expressed an interest to in marketing the Elan here, but the price was too high then. Now there's a recognition in our administration that having a sports car in the Kia lineup would significantly strengthen our image," Warner said. "The key issue is pricing. The basic feeling is that if we could price the Elan underneath the Mazda Miata and keep it exclusive—say, a volume of about 100 to 150 units a month—it would serve ideally as our image car."

Well, image may indeed be everything, but we wanted to know how much of the sportiness of the previous Elan remained, especially if it has its sights set on the Miata. Kia's answer: "Here's the key."

My last experience behind the steering wheel of the Elan, then by Lotus, was in March, 1992. I remember the car be-

■ Despite what the label on the plenum says, the Elan could use more power.



ing a zippy, capable handler that was a bit rough around the edges: a few minor rattles here and there, with a powerplant that, though powerful, was, in a word, unrefined. And after a full day of driving around town in the Kia Elan, I discovered that not much has changed over five years.

Visually, the Kia Elan is essentially identical to the Lotus version, the only difference being a redesigned taillight cluster that now features round individual brake and signal lights and the Kia badge on the hood and trunklid. Also, the alloy wheels are made in-house. Inside, the steering wheel and adjoining turn-signal and windshield-wiper stalks are new and improved. However, not nearly as impressive is the aft section of the center console that looks and feels noticeably cheaper than before. That said, most

everything else in the cabin has remained intact—everything from the dash controls to the door panel trim.

Powering the Kia roadster is the 1.8-liter dohc inline-4 found in the Sephia that comes mated to a 5-speed manual gearbox. Both horsepower and torque figures are down compared with the previous Elan's turbocharged Isuzu powerplant (151 bhp to 162 bhp and 137 lb.-ft of torque to 148, respectively); therefore, you'd be correct to assume that the Elan doesn't exactly jump off the line and snap your head back. The engine has very little torque down low—only when the tachometer needle brushes past the 4,000-rpm mark does the car seem to hit its stride—and it whines below 3,000 rpm, while at 5,000 and above, it becomes quite buzzy. At the track, we recorded a

zero-to-60-mph time of 8.7 seconds—a full 2.0 sec. slower than the Lotus version and about a half-second behind the Miata.

The one thing the Elan still does well is handle. The Kia Elan stays duly composed during high-speed corners and sharp turns, and torque steer is virtually absent. Despite being front-wheel drive, the Elan's near-neutral balance is extremely consistent and predictable, thanks mainly to the Lotus-designed front suspension that uses a cast-aluminum subframe called a "raft." With quite-rigid bushings on the front A-arms yet softer ones between the raft and the chassis, handling precision is maintained without undue harshness (see Road Test of the Lotus Elan SE, April 1991). Although the new Elan's ride height has been increased about a half-inch, body roll is

largely kept in check and ride quality is surprisingly smooth. (Warner says that the Elan's ride height would most likely return to its previous setting if sold in the States.) The tires on this non-U.S. version are disappointing—the Korean-manufactured Ventus Hankooks are 205/55R-15Vs whose grip is marginal at best, and they howl in disapproval during any spirited cornering.

Company officials are still unsure if Kia can use the Elan nomenclature here, so it may have a different moniker. But Kia does know the importance of establishing a price competitive with that of the Miata. I've heard through the rumor mill that a figure of \$19,995 is being considered. If that is the case, look for the Elan to make an impact in the mid-price roadster segment and perhaps finally enjoy a fruitful existence. 

■ Inside and out, Kia has left the Elan virtually untouched. New on the outside are Kia-designed 15-in. alloy wheels and a redesigned taillight cluster. The interior sports several new switches, as well as a new steering wheel, which is improved in both appearance and feel. And even after all these years, the Peter Stevens-penned body attracts plenty of attention on public roads.



SPECIFICATIONS

Curb weight	2355 lb
Wheelbase	88.6 in.
Track, f/r	58.5 in./58.5 in.
Length	152.8 in.
Width	68.2 in.
Height	50.0 in.

ENGINE & DRIVETRAIN

Engine	dohc 4-valve/cyl inline-4
Bore x stroke	81.0 x 87.0 mm
Displacement	1793 cc
Horsepower (SAE)	151 bhp @ 6250 rpm
Torque	137 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm
Fuel delivery	elect. multipoint
Transmission	5-speed manual

CHASSIS & BODY

Layout	front engine/front drive
Brake system, f/r	vented discs/discs
Wheels	cast alloy, 15 x 6 1/2
Tires	Ventus Hankook, 205/55R-15 87V
Steering type	rack & pinion, power assist
Suspension, f/r	upper & lower A-arms, "raft," coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar/upper lateral links, lower A-arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar

PERFORMANCE

0-60 mph	8.7 seconds
0-1320 ft (1/4 mile)	16.4 sec @ 85.4 mph
Braking from 60 mph	145 ft
Speed thru 700-ft slalom	61.5 mph