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The Caterham Super 7 is the purest and most honest street car I've ever driven

By Preston Lerner
Photography: Andrew Yeadon

My girlfriend is accustomed to having exotic and obscure cars materialize in our driveway. But she doesn't know what to make of the tiny, impossibly low-slung kazoo-on-wheels that thunders to a stop in front of our house and improbably disgorges not one but two full-size human beings. "It looks," she says uncertainly, "like a toy." Caterham Cars technical director Jez Coates thinks this over while stretching his limbs after two hours of slogging through rush-hour traffic. "Actually," he says, "it is."

The Caterham CSR260—the first of the new CSRs to arrive in the States—is a roadworthy plaything designed for the sole purpose of making even the most ham-fisted driver feel like two-time world champion driver Jimmy Clark. As such, it's the latest and greatest iteration of the bare-bones Lotus Seven conceived in 1957 by Clark's mentor, Colin Chapman. With 260 hp conveying a scant 1315 pounds, the CSR reportedly scats from 0 to 60 mph in a mere 3.1 seconds. And that, Coates tells me, handing me the keys, is where the fun begins. With the spindly top laboriously unsnapped and stowed in the trunk, I climb—literally—into the confining cockpit with straight legs splayed on either side of the Momo steering wheel and lever myself carefully into the seat. Sighting down the long, louvered hood—painted in a rich French blue, with a headlight orb adorning each aluminum flank and otherwise open wheels dressed with cycle fenders—I find myself thinking that this is the modern British take on the classic Bugatti Type 35. Part thoroughbred racer, part sports car, and all engineering marvel, the Bugatti set the standard for dual-purpose design. How, I wonder, will the CSR260 measure up against that lofty yardstick?

I crank the ignition and whack the throttle, and the Cosworth-tuned engine—a 2.3-liter Ford Duratec in-line four—sends a full-throated bellow out the side pipe. "It's all warmed up, so you can give it the full chocolates," Coates tells me. I'm not sure what that means, but I suspect it's an invitation to dump the racing-style clutch and indulge my heretofore sublimated Nigel Mansell fantasies.

Urban sprawl and insurance liability have long since killed off most of the SoCal circuits. Today, Willow Springs, located in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles, is the only one of the old tracks that's still around. It opened in 1953, just as Colin Chapman was creating his first production car in a London suburb. Four years later, the so-called Lotus Mark VI morphed into the giant-killer that we now know as the Lotus Seven, and, one way or another, it's been in production ever since.

Like Enzo Ferrari, Chapman never had much time for street cars. But even though he treated the Lotus Seven like an unwanted stepchild, others fell in love with the ugly duckling. Future Sebring inner John Morton bought a hot-rod Super Seven with twin Weber carburetors in 1963 for \$3265, drove it to Riverside to watch the inaugural Motor Trend 500 stock-car race, then entered it in his first road race at Pomona. "Of all the fabulous cars that I've raced, that's the only one I think I'd really like to own," Morton says. "It's not too practical here in L.A., but there was just something about it. It felt like a race car is supposed to feel."

Of course, this isn't much by supercar standards. But the CSR can do things that most supercars can't, no matter how expensive or fast they are. Put a Ferrari production car on a race circuit and it feels significantly less capable than even a crude race car. But Caterham earns one-quarter of its revenue from motorsports, and many of the cars that aren't raced, *per se*, are track-day regulars. So we figured the CSR would "do the business" at Willow Springs, as the Brits like to say. And we were right.

The Caterham is the purest and most honest street car I've ever driven. Period. No power steering. No power brakes. No drive-by-wire. Just a direct connection between you and the contact patch. The responses to steering, throttle, brake, and gearshift inputs are so nearly instantaneous that they verge on the telepathic. And I can see exactly what's happening, at least at the front end of the car, as the wheels turn and judder. The Caterham is so brutally quick that it takes a few minutes before I can keep my foot planted on the gas pedal long enough to wind out the Cossie to redline. At 7500 rpm in fourth gear, the combination of wind howl, induction hiss, exhaust snarl, and adrenaline rush creates an intoxicating testosterone cocktail. And when I lift the throttle to snatch fifth, the momentary silence is punctuated by a staccato bark-engine overrun and the rotary throttle snapping shut—that's almost loud enough to pass for artillery fire.



But the aural delights of the Caterham are merely icing on the cake. The real selling point of the CSR is formula car-style performance. Old-school formula-car performance, that is: No ground effects on this baby, just oodles of tire grip, which translates into the kind of cornering any enthusiast can enjoy. The handling is balanced and vice-free, so you can provoke understeer or oversteer as circumstances warrant. All things being equal, we'll take oversteer, thank you. With such wide, sticky rear tires (9 x 15 inches, compared with 6.5 x 15 inches at the front), the tail is easily controlled with judicious applications of steering and throttle. The car reminds me of a shifter kart, except that it doesn't beat me up. It's remarkably compliant, in fact, and this lack of race-car stiffness is a major reason why it's so forgiving.

I leave Willow Springs with a giant smile on my face. Sadly, it's dissolved into a grimace by the time I reach Riverside, two hours south. To my dismay, I discover that the last vestiges of Riverside International Raceway have recently been graded into oblivion during the construction of a shopping mall. But the really bad news is that I've now got to fold my aching body back into the Caterham for another hour on the interstate.

The CSR isn't built for long-distance highway travel. Although the ride quality falls short of punishing, I'd strongly discourage using the car for emergency surgery. The otherwise comfy seats move fore and aft, but the rake is fixed, which can be—and was for me—a real pain. Speaking of driver discomforts, there's no dead pedal for your left foot, and your right thigh gets a good grilling from the aluminum transmission tunnel. The snap-shut side curtains can't be raised or lowered like conventional windows, so you're either freezing or sweltering. Sweat is streaming down my chest by the time I hit Palm Springs. Mind you, the Caterham is perfectly content in traffic as long as you don't mind your nose being at the same level as the lug nuts of passing eighteen-wheelers. (Integrated roll bar notwithstanding, it's best not to think about the consequences of any accidents.) But while wearing the four-point harness, I can't wriggle out of the sweater and overcoat I'd donned earlier during the colder part of the trip. Hence the internal heat wave.



There's no radio, of course, or air-conditioning. The turn signals are operated with a toggle switch on the minimalist dash. (For conventional steering-column stalks, choose the optional interior package.) The CSR260 will run you about \$67,000. Caterham USA plans to start offering cars with detuned Duratecs for about half that price. Still, I'm starting to think that this is an awful lot of money to spend on a car that's so thoroughly unsuited to the exigencies of everyday motoring. Caterham USA plans to start offering cars with detuned Duratecs for about half that price. Still, I'm starting to think that this is an awful lot of money to spend on a car that's so thoroughly unsuited to the exigencies of everyday transportation. Then again, the Caterham would have been par for the course back in the '50s, when virtually every big name in American road racing competed at Palm Springs. The program for the March 1955 races includes a rookie listed as "Dean, James." entered in a Porsche. In one respect, the racetrack is still there: Races were contested on a circuit cobbled together from runways and taxiways at the local airport. But aside from a short stretch of pavement just south of there, I can't find any signs of the original racecourse.

Fortunately, Palm Springs still has one treasure to offer road-racing fans—Highway 74, a twisty up-and-down two-lane featuring spectacular vistas and challenging corners in equal measure. I experiment briefly with ditching the side curtains. Not a good idea: The turbulence is so fierce that I can hardly breathe. But with the side curtains back in place, the Caterham is nothing short of spectacular. It carves around hairpins, blasts through sweepers, and gobbles up straightaways, always feeling perfectly planted and making the exhilarating noises you expect from a racing car. And that, in the end, is the most impressive feature of the CSR: It makes you feel like a hero even if you're just a wanker. The beauty of the car is that you can sneak up on its prodigious limits without scaring yourself silly, which is something you can't say about most supercars. Sure, a Z06 has a higher top speed, but going ten-tenths in one isn't a job for the faint-hearted. The Caterham, by way of contrast, isn't always threatening to kill you, and long before you're on the verge of wrecking it, you can sense the chassis politely suggesting that you slow down and start behaving yourself.

Bottom line? The CSR260 isn't a car for going from point A to point B unless one of them is a racetrack. But if you're looking for something that will reconnect you to the visceral thrill of spirited motoring, whether on two-lane twisties or during a track day event, then life doesn't get any better than being in the cramped cockpit of a Caterham.

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