

# Seven Heaven

Over 60 years ago, Colin Chapman, ostensibly with a push from Hazel, gave us the Lotus Seven. After four editions of the idea, Chapman in 1972 had no further use for the thing so he sold the rights to Graham Nearn of Caterham Cars his primary sales agent. Graham Nearn, after selling the then current S4 version which looked like a beach buggy for a bit, went back to the S3 version. Then he nurtured it until its latest owners, led by Ansar Ali, took it over in 2005. It seemed a fitting idea to take the Caterham Superlight R 400 and compare it to my 1968 Lotus Seven S3 to see where the similarities and differences were, separated by forty years of constant development. Today I made seven different Seven discoveries about this fascinating throwaway idea for which Chapman had no use, now brought to its fullest fruition.

- 1. It is less kit car and all of a piece.** Until the Esprit, Lotus had a history of creating new ideas that never got fully developed, as the works was always onto the next new thing. Caterham, on the other hand has taken a page from Porsche and finessed and fettled for 35 years on the same theme. Their Superlight R400 is absolutely true to the DNA and character of the early Seven, but bursting at the seams with improvements. There is nothing on the R400 that is not required for two people to go have fun. It is still a dual purpose machine which will be as at home on the track as on a twisty two lane road. And it still catches my eye. Other folk's eyes too. The looks Ben Wofford and I got on a nice warm March day were priceless –so many different versions of the double take that I stopped counting. Or maybe it was the grins on our faces as we zipped through traffic on the way to the foothill canyon we were planning on strafing.
- 2. It is faster, way faster.** At a comfortable lope, in other words about 50% faster than the traffic norms, the R 400 doesn't seem that quick. This is a reflection on how good the original S3 is rather than panning the R 400. But when I had the chance to run up a freeway on ramp, I got the difference in spades...this thing is faster than a crotch rocket! I know because I caught one of those going up the on ramp that wouldn't get out of my way. OK, maybe he wasn't aware that it was a contest, but I still blew by him once we hit the four lane; that never would have happened with my S3. The factory spec is 210 BHP for 0-60 in 3.8 sec. if you hit the rev limiter on each shift. And it keeps on pulling, too. While 90 is a tough maximum to reach in the S3, the R 400 has a factory top speed of 140 which I have no reason to doubt. I briefly touched an indicated 100 and it was still pulling strongly. It is way cool to dust off a Corvette or Porsche with ease in this tiny car!
- 3. It rides better, way better.** While the old bum is less sensitive to rotational input than it used to be, it is far more sensitive to comfort. This car has a deDion rear suspension that is far more forgiving over frost heaves and ruts. It's actually smooth! Ben was following in my S3 and as I smoothly rounded a very fast bend with a lateral bump in the middle, I thought "I would have jumped sideways six inches in my car over that." So I looked in the mirror behind me and sure enough

- the S3 took a sideways leap that required a bit of opposite lock from Ben. A day at the track will leave you wanting more instead of wanting the ibuprofen.
- 4. It is precise and more direct.** I once rode with a stunt pilot who could roll his plane in 45 degree increments with absolute precision until he completed a full 360. I feel the same way about the R 400. It just changes direction NOW. There is none of the loosey goosey rubber bushing or chassis flex that the S3 has. If I put wider low profile tires on my S3 it still wouldn't deliver the absolute grip or direct feel the R 400 displays. This precision is an enormous confidence builder when canyon carving as we did.
  - 5. It corners better with less bump steer.** Because the steering is so fast, Ben says he has to remind those who have not been in a Seven before to feed in steering change carefully. Of course I have tens of thousands of miles in my S3, so I was just cocky enough to have too much input into the first real turn. The good news is that the car is easy to modulate and doesn't get upset by roughness and bumps, and, of course, sticks like flypaper. It makes even me look good.
  - 6. It has the same cockpit and footwell feel.** One thing hasn't changed though; the footwell still requires racing shoes, ballet shoes or sox. Here is where the DNA is most obvious to the driver. There is just enough room to heel and toe the pedals if you have size 10 feet or smaller. Luckily, I do. But I don't have the slim hips that fit the R 400 carbon fiber seat. The phrase 10 pounds in a five pound bag, comes to mind (the SV models do offer 10 pound capacity in the cockpit and foot well). Once ensconced however, I was located so well it was easy to feel like I was in a race car. All good quick cars keep the driver's trunk well located so the driving becomes the focus. The absence of the seat form makes the bare padding of the S3 a bit more accommodating, just a bit less supportive. The R 400 is also available with cloth or leather bucket seats which give more hip room, but sacrifice the "locked in place" feel of the composite seats.
  - 7. It has bug eyes.** The look of the two cars side by side reveals the most obvious difference: the European Union headlight height requirements. (Say that fast three times!) If this bugs you like it does me, Ben says that an individual can solve the problem with a different bracket. Since this is primarily a daytime use vehicle, I guess I would endorse that very enlightened, illuminated approach.

So, what is the verdict? Firstly, I must admit to an extreme bias toward the simple dynamic elegance of the original. Having said that, it seems the lads at Caterham have kept the best and updated the rest. It is amazing enough that this 60 year old design can post the numbers that it does, yet what is more amazing is that it is just as fun to drive at a more sedate pace. Then, when they least suspect it, Superlight R 400 jumps out of the phone booth, cape flying, and leaps tall Porsches in a couple of gears.

As for me? I'd have to take the lights completely off so I couldn't street register it. The bus service stinks out here so I need my driver's license to get anywhere, and I'd lose it within weeks if I had this car.