

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Sleeping Beauty №13: Lotus Europa](#)



When Colin Chapman moved his Lotus company from cramped premises just north of London to a big new factory in the wide-open spaces of deepest East Anglia, the remarkable Europa was one of his most important big new projects.

Announced at the end of 1966, the **Europa** was the world's first mass-produced mid-engined car. It was designed and put into production in six months flat. The **Lotus** backbone chassis theme was retained but adapted to accept the Renault four-cylinder T16 engine and gearbox.

The aerodynamics were way ahead of mainstream auto industry thinking, the flow of air through the radiator, heating and ventilation systems an integral part of the wind-cheating shape. So pure was the thinking that even the windows could not be opened in early models. The Cd was just 0.29, an unbelievably good figure in those days. The first **Europas** had only 78bhp to push them along but the low drag and light weight made them reasonably quick.

For the whole of the first year, the 36 French Lotus dealers were given exclusive rights to sell **Europas**, all of which were then left-hand drive. British buyers had to wait until early summer in 1969 for a right-hand drive **Europa**. That model was in **Series 2** form with most of the early bugs sorted out. The **Renault** engine was giving 82bhp by then. Enthusiasts were in awe of the handling and roadholding but thought the car cramped, spartan and underpowered.

All that was put right during 1971 when the **Europa** was given a complete redesign under **Mike Kimberley**, who had just been recruited from **Jaguar**. This was no facelift. Everything was changed: apart from getting the **Lotus-Ford Twin Cam** engine, the chassis was more rigid, the suspension geometry changed, reliability was radically improved and it was restyled inside and out. **Kimberley**, a tall man, also ensured that at last the Europa cockpit could accommodate taller drivers.

The sleeping beauty is the last of the line, the **Europa Special** of late 1972 which had a five-speed gearbox and the **126bhp Big Valve** version of the **Twin Cam** engine. Most collectable of all would be one of the **John Player Special** commemorative models, painted black and finished with very smart gold coach lines. Still a real lightweight car at just 740kg, the engine was a delight and the Europa Special felt like the nearest thing yet to a road-legal race car.

Fancy some mid-engined, East Anglian action? Have a look in the [Classic Driver car database](#) to see what's available.

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