

COUNTRY ROADS BY CATERHAM

It may not come with all the mod cons, but that's exactly the point of a Caterham Seven. This car is made for pure driving pleasure. Giselle Whiteaker goes for a spin.



"Where exactly does our luggage go?" asks my mother Judy, frowning at the rear end of the Caterham Seven we're taking away for the weekend. Peering over her shoulder I have to admit that there's not a whole lot of space to spare. But then most classic car enthusiasts probably don't roll up with suitcases packed for onward travel. "You can take me to the station and I'll catch a train," she says, gesturing dismissively. It's clearly time for me to put my foot down. "I'm not going alone. We can repack. You can have most of the space. Look," I say beseechingly, wedging my day pack tightly into a corner of the space and implying there's room for so much more. Sighing

loudly Judy acquiesces and resigns herself to packing only the essentials.

Giving the car the once over, I have to admit that it's a bit of a novelty. It looks like a slightly bigger version of one of those high-quality die-cut model cars that collectors slaver over. It's very close to the ground and it doesn't seem right that I'm going to be allowed out on the roads in the prettily-hued blue open-topped machine.

"Will this be okay to take on the motorway?" I somewhat naively ask the young man fondling the keys as he gives me an assessing glance. In one short sentence

I've given away the fact that I know very little about cars. A real enthusiast would know all about Caterham's involvement in Formula One racing, and their purchase of the Seven design in the 1970s after Lotus discontinued the model. They'd know that the Caterham Seven is widely regarded as one of the iconic sports cars of the 20th century. They'd also be aware that under that long-nosed bonnet is a rip-roaring super-compact, three-cylinder turbocharged Suzuki 660cc engine and that the Seven's high performance is achieved through its light weight and low mass. It might look like a toy car, but it certainly doesn't drive like one.



With Judy busy treating our luggage as a jigsaw puzzle that will fit together if it's packed just so, I sink into the leather adjustable driver's seat and rest my hands on the steering wheel. The first thing that becomes apparent is that as well as the lightweight chassis and bodywork, the low mass is achieved through leaving out anything that's not essential. This baby weighs less than 500 kilogrammes and has no radio, no cruise control, no airbags and no sat nav – nor to my consternation, anywhere to plug a sat nav in. The lighter port is conspicuously absent. The roof is rolled up in a canvas pouch attached to the boot cover and the light canvas doors push

open onto the side of the bonnet with the flick of a finger, a few press studs fastening them back down into door position. This is taking motoring back to the basics – you, an engine, and the open road.

Judy is still frowning as she clambers into the passenger seat and tosses my handbag down by her feet. We buckle up and I nudge the motor into first, easing off the clutch. We roll smoothly out of the car yard and onto the road, drawing admiring glances from pedestrians and regular-car drivers alike. A quick stop to buy an old-school paper map and we're on our way.

By the time we hit the motorway a small issue has come to my attention. The open-top/long hair combination is not working in my favour. Wrapping a scarf around my head to pull my hair away from my face and popping on a pair of oversized sunglasses I really feel like I'm taking a step back in time. The roar of the engine is ringing in my ears, drowning out Judy's low muttering and the sun is warming my face. This is turning out to be fun after all.

An hour or so later, we pull in for coffee. The parking attendant's eyes widen in delight and he rushes to the side of the vehicle. "Amazing car," he breathes, clearly

awe-struck. As we maneuver out of the low bucket seats – no mean feat – a family sedan pulls in. The rear passenger window slides down and two young faces pop out, mouths agape. “I like your car,” says the girl. “I’d rather be in yours,” Judy retorts, although I can see the corners of her mouth starting to twitch upwards.

Getting into the car seems easier the second time. Perhaps it’s a case of practice makes perfect. Settled into our seats we edge back out into the traffic. It’s time to put the

Seven through its paces in the environment that best suits – winding country roads. This is what this car is made for. She handles the road well, skimming the corners, the mass-free acceleration quite astounding, backing up the claims of a rapid 0-60mph in 6.5 seconds.

The ride is firm and the small steering wheel tugs at your fingers while the engine shouts at you, but tug back, or give the accelerator a little bit of growl, and the Seven reacts immediately with a change in direction or a surge of power. This is not a car made

for commuting. This is a car made for sheer weekend-driving enjoyment. Winding along curving roads fringed by the verdant British countryside, even Judy has a smile on her dial by the time we pull in to our country hotel.

Nonchalantly flipping open the doors, and clambering out of the vehicle I give it an affectionate pat on the nose and look up to the skies. There’s not a cloud to be seen which bodes well for tomorrow. I can’t wait to get the Caterham back on the road where it belongs.

The Caterham Seven comes in component form for self-assembly with an average build-time for a novice of 60 – 70 hours. All you’ll need are some basic tools, a little patience and a splash of fuel. Alternatively you can pay extra to have it arrive fully-built. If you want to give it a trial run, Sevens are available for hire. We recommend getting out on the B-roads to ensure maximum driving pleasure. See: uk.caterhamcars.com for details.

