

A Trek from the Big Apple to the Little Apple...and Beyond!

It seemed so simple...fly in to just north of New York City, aka the Big Apple, pick up the Elan Plus 2S I had bought and drive her home. In March. To Colorado Springs. What could possibly go wrong? Well as it turns out, several things. Some were disclosed by the seller, some not; some just a small irritation, some far more critical. Here's what happened.

When I negotiated purchase of the car, the seller had disclosed that there were several electrical things that weren't working all the time as the car had sat and many of the grounds probably had corroded. But, he assured me, the big stuff - headlights, turn signals, windows, tail and brake lights - all that was working. And the seller had told me that the brakes had a long pedal travel but then stopped really well. I had a Lotus Limited member who owns a Plus 2 check the car out for me and he assured me that the seller's disclosures were accurate. He said it was a solid driver level car. So I bought the car figuring I would only have one or two minor problems like small electrical glitches. I would plan to only drive during daylight, leave plenty of room in front of me, and hope for the best. After all, it was only 1,800 miles away from home.

I was picked up at the White Plains airport by the seller in the Plus2 and after stuffing my gear in the back seat area, proceeded to put on my seat belt. That's where I encountered unanticipated Problem 1: The passenger seat belt wouldn't pull out of the retractor. I was only going about five miles and then there would be no passenger until I got her home and could address that. On the ride to the seller's house, the car seemed eager and responsive and rode very well. I was hopeful.

After handling the sale paperwork at the seller's house, getting a tour of same and loading all the spare parts and accessories into the boot, I got my first drive in my new Plus 2. I was to back her out of the garage - between a car parked directly behind me in the drive and a huge tree opposite alongside the driveway. It was very dark, and I was unfamiliar with all the controls. I felt like a rookie without a license trying to drive a stick shift for the first time...too many revs, too much clutch slipping, turning too much one way then the other. It was not pretty. But, I did get her backed onto the street and waited to follow the seller to my motel for the night, another six miles away. He led as if I were completely inept or incapable of maintaining a reasonable speed, a perception he no doubt picked up by watching my reversing act, but by doing so he made it impossible to find the rhythm of the car and controls. Struggling along at a slow pace, one thing became apparent right away; Problem 2...the brakes were not at all right. The brakes indeed had a long pedal travel but then locked on with a vengeance. I was afraid of being rear ended in traffic. We made it to the motel and I parked the car to wait until daylight to see what the issue might be. We went to dinner and had a lovely discussion (chicken parm you taste so good!), then he took me back to the motel and, totally knackered, I went straight to sleep. The Plus 2 waited.

When I awoke and went down to the car, I found about two inches of snow covering everything. Then came Problem 3: The car would not start, cranking slowly and never catching. I was in a parking spot that faced downhill and couldn't back out. I should have known better! With all my old Lotus cars, I try to leave a way to bump start, just in case. After what seemed like an eternity I decided to give it a rest and clean the snow off her. Of course I had no snow brush so I walked back to see if the front desk had one and they did. After a brushing, I turned the key and it finally coughed once so I tried again and got two sputters, then a few tries later three and a hint of ignition. At long last, it fired and ran quite roughly. I warmed it as best I could until it finally smoothed a bit. Snow was still falling so I wanted to get moving as soon as possible. Now I had but 1,800 miles to go with snow falling, unfamiliar roads and grabbing brakes.

My plan was to drive to my sister's home in Pennsylvania, but I was really concerned about the brakes so instead I drove to a shop where a friend works, Ragtops & Roadsters, where I hoped a wiser and better equipped person might assist. Indeed, Dave had a couple of his guys see if they could solve the brake grabbing. I suspected that the pedal travel took too long to build boost and then it came on all at once. They suggested eliminating the vacuum brake boosters from the circuit. They disconnected the vacuum line to the boosters, leaving the hydraulic part alone, and I gave the car a try. Much better! While it took far more leg pressure to actuate the brakes, it was very proportional, that is, light pressure gave light braking while more pressure added braking in a very linear fashion. Problem 2 solved...at least temporarily. Then I headed to RD Enterprises, who had a silencer for my Elan that I could take back with me and save shipping. Ray gave me a proper Lotus shift knob to replace the crummy, ugly Nissan Sentra looking rubber thing that was on the car at pick up. Problem 4 solved. Things were definitely looking up. After a lovely dinner and spending the night we did the morning chores then went to the reception at the Lotus event at Kyle Kaulback's Lotus Barn. I followed Ray over in his beautiful Lotus Cortina and noted I was doing a lot more steering than he seemed to be doing. Still I was able to keep up so I put that on the "watch" list. At the event someone pointed out that one of the fog lights was loose. I got three of Kyle's valuable washers and tightened everything up and solved Problem 5. After a lovely visit with all the Lotus folks, on to my sister's house I went.

I had been warned by the seller that the left rear tire seemed to lose a bit of air each day. Starting out the next morning, sure enough I found it down on pressure so I aired it up, filled the gas tank and hit the PA Turnpike. Two things became clear over the next couple of hundred miles...the tires needed balancing and Pennsylvania, despite high gas taxes and usurious toll fees, (\$26.75 for only 175 miles. Yikes!) doesn't spend nearly enough on its road maintenance. The roughness of the road was part of the problem but the tires were also part. Since it was Sunday and I was in uncharted territory I soldiered on to Indianapolis where I spent the night, then presented myself at Discount Tire Monday morning before they even opened. When they did open, the guy in charge told me they would not balance my tires because the manufacturing code said that three were made in 2004 and the left rear, the one that was soft, was made in 1996. I am sure the seller never knew this but I was stuck with Problem 6, which I thought I solved with a new set of tires.

I was on my way about 9 AM so the delay was not too painful. The new tires were better, but not by as much as I had expected. Fighting a crosswind all morning I was worn by 10:30 so I stopped at McDonald's for a walkabout and a Coke. After my break, I went to back the Elan out of the parking space, pulled up on the shift lever to bypass the reverse lockout as usual and the lever came right off in my hand! Welcome, Problem 7. I managed to solve it by prying up the console and putting the lever collar back on the bolt that it was supposed to be on, but without the missing retaining nut. While I was now able to shift, I could not pull up on the lever so I would not have reverse for the rest of the trip. Sigh.

Onward I pressed and as the weather worsened to heavy rain squalls, I was gatoring all over the road, tracking left when the wind lessened then back to the right whenever a gust hit. After a while the rain lessened but the car kept ricocheting back and forth seemingly unwilling to track straight. Well the new tires weren't enough to fix the problem, so I began to think of alignment as the answer to Problem 6 (continued). Or was this Problem 8? Passing through St. Louis, I took a likely exit where there were a number of car dealers, thinking that one might have an alignment bay, but first, I had a higher priority...lunch. Pulling into a fast food parking lot, I noticed a place adjacent called Auto World, a NAPA Auto Care center and tire dealer. I thought I'd check with them before getting food. It was then I met Barry who turned out to be my Guardian Angel, but at first he was just a guy at the tire shop. It turns out that Barry is the owner of Auto World and a real car guy. He had sent both his alignment guys to lunch, but took pity on my plight of wanting to get westward and took on the job himself. Lucky for me! I drove the car onto the rack and went to get lunch. About a half hour later, upon my return Barry told me how lucky I was to have stopped when I did. Upon inspecting the front end, he found the real problem 8...all the tie rod end jam nuts were loose and the right one was about three threads from coming apart! Who knows what would have happened if it had, but the wheels would not have been pointing the same way at 70 miles per hour.

Having no specifications to put into his sophisticated computer alignment machine for a 45 year old Lotus, Barry suggested using early Miata specs, as it is a front engine rear wheel drive car of about the same size and weight. It sounded good to me so that is what he did. After tightening all the front suspension and steering hardware, he went to work and the alignment was corrected from its previous 1.25 degrees of total toe in, to a proper 0.25 degrees total toe in. With about five times as much toe in as it should have...no wonder it was gatoring! We also lowered the tire pressure. It turns out that the tire shop had put 32 pounds all around so the tires were too hard by half as the recommended pressure is 22 front, 26 rear. From that point on, all the way to my night's destination near Manhattan, KS, aka the "Little Apple" I was finally at peace with the car and my purchase. From there to Colorado Springs was a simple cruise...as if I were in an ordinary and modern car.

After a few weeks of fettling things that don't even rise to the level of "Problem", like the loose door latch, the rear parcel shelf that wasn't attached (when I stopped, the fold down rear seatback yanked the parcel shelf right off its perch) the missing air horns and finding a Wipac map light

on eBay that made the dash look complete, I decided to address the grabbing brakes. I reattached the vacuum line to the servos and went for a cautious drive through the back streets of my neighborhood. It seemed better so I ventured further afield. The pedal had a long travel as before but the suddenness of the braking seemed lessened. At a stoplight, I pumped the pedal a few times, the pedal firmed up and the travel was less. So I gave it a really hard push to see if the pedal would stay firm with less slop. It was a very hard pedal for a nanosecond and then went straight to the floor. Welcome, Problem 9.

I thought I had blown out a wheel cylinder with too much pressure, so I carefully drove home without brakes. Luckily, it was mostly uphill to my house with only a couple of stoplights which made it easy to use the gears and moderate speed to manage the task. I don't feel qualified to rebuild a braking system and I fully intended to remove the awful servos after this experience so I made an appointment with Tom Beauchamp at Beauchamp Racing and Restoration. Tom is an excellent fabricator who said he could remove the servos, clean up the plumbing by rerouting new lines and rebuild the calipers. Now my only problem was to get the car to his shop which lies 7 ½ miles away and some 600 vertical feet down mountain below my house, across several major intersections and with typically unpredictable city traffic.

I considered three options: A) Have it picked up by a flatbed. B) Tow it over on my little open trailer, or C) Drive it over without brakes. Of course, I chose "C" because option A would cost \$150, while option B would mean picking up my trailer from storage plus trying to load it downhill with no car brakes to stop from running right through the front of the trailer into the tow vehicle. My logic was that with my long suffering wife running interference with the X5, plenty of space between us, and using the gears I could navigate the known crunch points. With only one "close call" we got the car to Tom and I began the three day wait for the repair. Within an hour Tom called to tell me the rear calipers were both fine, but that the steel wrapped flexible brake hose on the left rear had actually been cut clean through by the rotor acting just like a meat slicer at a butcher shop. Whoever had installed the lines had not allowed enough clearance. The right rear line was nearly cut through as well. This actually made the repair easier with new flex lines carefully routed instead of a full caliper repair. I asked Tom to fully "nut and bolt" the car as he used to do after every race with my race car years ago. He found and corrected a bunch of stuff. Now all is well.

All this story does is remind me that the purchase of any old car is only the beginning of the adventure, regardless of how well cared for it seems, and that the old saw about LOTUS standing for Lots Of Trouble - Usually Serious, is simply wrong. It really stands for something much more romantic...Lots Of Trepidation, Usually Survivable. Thanks to folks like Barry and Tom.