

Tesla Roadster: a skeptic converted

- [Laura Burstein](#)



[Tesla Motors](#) CEO Martin Eberhard was in Los Angeles today to give members of the Motor Press Guild the story behind the making of its cars. For the past couple of years, the Bay Area-based company has gotten oodles of press coverage, much of it on the merits of its technology. But until this afternoon I wasn't entirely convinced. First, some background:

A year ago, I stood on Peter Hay hill at the Concours d'Elegance in Pebble Beach with a rather prominent car designer. Not too far in the distance, hordes of spectators gathered around a pair of sleek, sporty little roadsters.

As a gearhead, tech enthusiast, and former Silicon Valley resident, I'd already heard the buzz about the \$100k electric sports car built on a Lotus Elise chassis. But it was the first time I'd seen the car in person, and I wasn't the only one who was staring. Those cars, parked in the lush grass near the Lodge, were stealing the show from much more powerful automotive heavyweights. Sure, the cars looked good. But could the company last? I'd seen too many dot-com sob stories in the 1990s to believe in fairy tales.

I asked the aforementioned designer what he thought of it all. He shrugged his shoulders and said he was sure some people would buy the roadster, but at the end of the day, electric cars were not practical, long-term solutions. Besides, he added, all those batteries would go into a landfill at some point, trading one environmental problem for another.

In the months that followed, I kept an eye on the media circus surrounding the small automotive startup, but remained skeptical about Tesla's ability to change the world.

Boy, was I wrong.

Here are some things I learned about the Tesla Roadster today:

- The car, while based on the Lotus Elise, was almost entirely redesigned for Tesla. Only the front end of the Elise chassis was kept in the retooling. So my racing buddies and I apologize for snickering when the car won the Gold International Design Excellence Award. Although, to be fair, the designer is Barney Hatt, principal designer for the Lotus Design Studio, so Lotus should still share some credit.
- The door sill in the Tesla Roadster was lowered considerably from that of the Elise, to make the car easier to get in and out of. To compensate for the height difference, the side rails had to be made much stiffer and stronger. Even though Tesla's version has lost that sitting-in-the-bathtub feeling, it's still fun to watch tall, middle-aged men struggle to extract themselves, one leg at a time, from the tiny cockpit. (Here's a hint, guys: Swing both of your legs over the sill at the same time, then push yourself out. I gave someone a demonstration in the parking lot after the meeting.)
- The Tesla has custom headlights. They're really expensive.
- The lithium ion battery pack used in the roadster is estimated to have a lifespan of about 100,000 miles. Not only that, Tesla has partnered with a recycling company that will shred and re-appropriate those battery components when they've given up the ghost. Eberhard also explained that a liquid cooling pack in the car keeps the batteries at room temperature for maximum performance (unlike the average laptop battery that only lasts a couple of years, thanks to its proximity to a scorching hot processor).
- The Tesla Roadster redlines at 13,500 RPM. Dyno testing took the engine up to 18,000 RPM. That's almost on par with Formula One cars. Bernie Ecclestone, are you paying attention?

So, I realize this stuff is hardly breaking news. With Tesla securing \$45 million in Series D funding back in May, it's obvious that the Important People already had faith in this fledgling venture. I was just late to the party. I was quite pleased to discover that Tesla really is doing its best to make a positive contribution within the automotive industry.

One major problem still exists, however: How I'm going to afford one.

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