

WHEN EXTRAORDINARY ISN'T ENOUGH

JOHAN RAGNARSSON SPECIALIZES IN PANOZ TUNING



"OUR CUSTOMERS AREN'T LIKE the typical Ferrari and Rolls-Royce customers," said Johan Ragnarsson. "In this town, you can see those coming and going."

"This town" was Beverly Hills and "our customers" were those discerning individuals who buy Panoz Esperantes. And not just any Panoz Esperantes. If it takes a Panoz Esperante to stand out in Beverly Hills, it takes a JRD Panoz Esperante to get as much respect at stoplights as at valet parking.

Ragnarsson owns JRD, which stands for Johan Ragnarsson Designs. The company's name is on the side of the Panoz building on Highway 124 in sunny Hoschton, Georgia. JRD specializes in tuning, yep, Panoz automobiles, which makes sense given the two companies' shared address. Who knew anyone specialized in tuning Panoz anything! It's not like you see the things every day.

And it's not like the stock Esperante is any slouch, either: a Panoz-tuned Ford 4.6-liter V8; 320 hp and 317 lb-ft of torque; Tremec five-speed, limited-slip differential, modular extruded aluminum chassis, aluminum body panels; 3200-pound curb weight; 0 to 60 in five seconds; quarter-mile in 13.7 at 103.5 mph, and 0.92 g on the skidpad.

But that's not enough, is it, because maybe you heard some guy in the next gated community down the road, the one, unlike yours, that is situated around a golf course, also has an Esperante and he's been talking smack. You heard this from



JRD PANOZ ESPERANTE RSr COUPE

ON SALE: Now **AS-TESTED PRICE:** \$169,400
POWERTRAIN: 5.2-liter, 600-hp, 510-lb-ft supercharged V8; rwd, six-speed manual
CURB WEIGHT: 3450 pounds **0 TO 80 MPH:** 4.1 seconds (mfr.)

reliable sources and whoooooo, that burns you up, man, so you get on the phone and you dial (404) 213-3908 and demand to speak directly with Johan himself and you don't take no for an answer.

Johan calms you down and walks you through your options. You can spank the smack-talker a little, or you can spank him a lot. You have choices. For \$3,800 you can get an extra 15 hp via an under-drive pulley kit, stainless headers and down pipe and computer recalibration. For \$7,450 you can get 30 more hp by adding exhaust and high-lift cams.

That might be enough until you hear



there's an entire Panoz Esperante club forming in your town and they're all talking smack about you and planning on renting out the local drag strip and road course for some "club racing," but you know they're all going to try to blow your doors off in front of your girlfriend! So you skip over the 80- and 150-hp upgrades and just drop-ship your Panoz straight to Johan with your American Express card duct-taped to the dashboard and you tell Johan to "Just go to town, man! Just go to town!" And then you curl up on the garage floor in the fetal position for about two weeks or a month or how ever long it takes and finally Johan calls and tells you your car is done and man is it ever.

What you would get at that point is exactly what we drove that day we met Ragnarsson at Symbolic Motor Cars' showroom at Wilshire and La Cienega in Beverly Hills. The Esperante RSr Coupe has a supercharged, intercooled, ported and polished 5.2-liter 32-valve V8 with stainless-steel headers and exhausts, a high-performance clutch, six-speed transmission and heavy-duty limited-slip diff. With Brembo 14-inch cross-drilled discs (13 inches in back) with four-piston calipers, it stops just as well as it goes, and with Penske adjustable shocks and Eibach springs it'll pull big numbers on the skidpad and through the streets. We took it to Mulholland and cut loose. It was fun, big fun, but also very manageable. The clutch was nicely weighted and didn't take an Eric Heiden thigh to operate. The steering was light, the shifter was about as easy to use as a Mustang's, and when the road opened up that thing just flew.

If only it didn't cost \$169,400. That's with the carbon fiber cosmetic trim stuff, 12-disc CD player, Alcantara-trimmed A-pillar, and all that in addition to all the power and performance stuff, too.

But what cost victory, eh?

—MARK VAUGHN