

JRD

Panoz Esperante RSr

Supercharged power at a supercharged price.

BY BARRY WINFIELD

Johan Ragnarsson is a man on a mission. He wants his company, JRD Tuning (for Johan Ragnarsson Design), to be associated with Panoz Auto Development in the way Dinan is with BMW or RENNtech with Mercedes-Benz. You know, the tuner that automatically comes to mind.

It's not surprising, really, because Ragnarsson once worked as a metal-fabrication subcontractor for RENNtech, where he evidently learned a great deal about the aftermarket tuner business. Perhaps the greatest deal of all is that well-heeled financiers, sports stars, and entertainers will drop ungodly amounts of money on customized high-end cars.

Example: the JRD Panoz Esperante RSr, fitted with a supercharged and enlarged 5.2-liter Ford V-8, which claims to put out 600 horsepower. It retails at \$148,650. That little sum includes the \$89,500 cost of a stock 2003 Panoz Esperante coupe, as one might hope it would.

Plus you get a recalibrated engine-control computer, stainless headers and exhaust, a high-performance clutch, a six-speed gearbox with a 3.55:1 limited-slip final drive, Brembo brakes, a vented hood, Eibach springs, adjustable Penske shocks, and 18-inch wheels and tires.

Still got some cash to spare? Then consider these additional items: A

trunklid spoiler. A carbon-fiber front splitter. Xenon headlights. An Alpine swing-face head-unit stereo with a 12-disc changer. Recaro sport seats in black leather and Alcantara. Leather-wrapped A-pillar trim and sun visors. Alcantara door inserts. Carbon-fiber brake ducts, engine cover, and slam panel.

Feeling better? Good, because that will kick up the bottom line a tad, to \$169,400. Hello!? That's about twice the price of the stock car, itself hardly a screaming bargain. Still, the JRD RSr boasts nearly twice the horsepower, which is just what you need for cruising the gold-paved streets of upscale America. And although this 600-hp car outruns the more plebeian 320-hp standard Panoz, it doesn't do it by an equivalent margin.

In a three-car comparison test we published in July 2001 ("Antebellum Belles"), a stock Panoz Esperante roadster was clocked through the quarter-mile at 13.7 seconds at 104 mph. The JRD car ran 12.5 seconds at 118 mph. The stock car hit 60 mph in 4.9 seconds, while the JRD car took 4.3. It isn't that much of a difference, but you have to remember that 600 horsepower running through 285/30ZR-18 rear tires simply can't project a 3560-pound car down the road in *half the time* it took the 320-hp





stock vehicle to cover the same territory. The laws of physics don't work like that. There's also the fact that centrifugal superchargers of the kind fitted to the RSr are most efficient at high rotational speeds. Even if the car *does* make 600 horsepower, it only does so at one point in the engine's speed range. It feels hellishly strong, to be sure, but you're only in that range for a short time on the drag strip before the tach demands a shift.

That's another thing. The six-speed in the JRD Esperante shifts deliberately rather than fluently, adding precious 10ths to the elapsed time. Here's a case in point: Ragnarsson tells us that a change of rear-tire size—which avoids a gearshift just before 100 mph in the 0-to-100 sprint—dropped the time from our observed 9.5 seconds to 8.7 seconds in JRD's later tests. That's 0.8 second, perhaps half of which could be attributed to the extra shift.

That should be a comfort to someone looking at the stub of a \$169,400 check, don't you think? Not that affluent car buyers are known to be compulsive drag racers, but it is nice to know *someone* ran the numbers to confirm the wisdom of your purchase.

Other than its elevated power output, the JRD Panoz Esperante RSr remains the quirky two-seater warmly described in that July 2001 comparison as having "style, exclusivity, and impeccable driving manners." Except that its new suspension calibrations have made the car harder-riding—and maybe harder to read from the driver's seat, too.

We found the car an obstinate under-steerer on the skidpad, where—strangely—it pushed more turning right than when turning left and generated almost exactly the same amount of grip as the stock car. A short stint on the Streets of Willow course in Southern California left impressions of a car so tightly tied down that its responses at the limit of adhesion were wiggly in nature. Perhaps the chassis was tuned at Road Atlanta, the car's home track in Georgia.

Our RSr wore the Esperante's new fixed hardtop, and a solid piece it turned out to be. Even if the 600 horses are transitory, or only a claim, you'll feel more secure under a hard cover. And although the ergonomics remain slightly funky, the level of workmanship on both the original fabric and the aftermarket components appears to be of a high caliber.

Panoz cars have a genuine racing heritage, and the Esperante incorporates some intelligent fabrication and assembly techniques. The car is a real exotic rarity. By extension, the JRD Esperante RSr is even rarer, even more esoteric in nature. That ought to make it a blue-chip collectible. Unless the JRD exercise is just a case of gilding the lily. You decide. ●

JRD Tuning, 1101 Highway 124, Hoschton, Georgia 30548; 404-213-3908.

JRD PANOZ ESPERANTE RSr

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger, 2-door coupe

Price as tested: \$169,400 (base price*, \$148,650)

Engine type: supercharged and intercooled DOHC 30-valve V-8, aluminum block and heads, Ford engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement	318 cu in, 5219cc
Power (mi's claim)	600 bhp @ 6800 rpm
Torque (mi's claim)	510 lb-ft @ 4800 rpm
Transmission	6-speed manual
Wheelbase	106.0 in
Length	176.3 in
Curb weight	3560 lb
Zero to 60 mph	4.3 sec
Zero to 100 mph	9.5 sec
Zero to 150 mph	21.5 sec
Street start, 0-60 mph	4.8 sec
Standing 1/4-mile	12.5 sec @ 118 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	187 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.88 g
Fuel economy, city driving (est)	14 mpg

*Base price includes all performance-enhancing options.