

DRIVING THE GT WORLD'S  
*Best-Kept Secret*

*JRD ups the ante with the Panoz Esperante RSr.* BY JAN MORGAN



**I**N A DISTANT AND ROMANTIC PAST, the production of racing cars and road cars went hand in hand. Race victories brought the recognition necessary to sell road cars and make money, so that the manufacturers could pursue the fickle mistress of competition. Jaguar, Aston Martin, Maserati, Ferrari, Porsche, and Lotus all sold race-inspired road cars that were, of course, desirable but of secondary



importance to their next Le Mans or GP effort.

Danny Panoz, president of Panoz Auto Development, had just learned to write his name at about the time he saw his first Jaguar XKE, and he immediately fell under its spell. "I couldn't help myself, I had to touch it," he explains, and he wrote his name in the dust on the nose of the car. It was at that moment that he knew his purpose in life.



*Buttoned up for business, the JRD Panoz Esperante RSE has a fixed top to further improve rigidity and handling. Enormous Brembo brakes and blocked-out alloys only hint at the power that lurks under the hood.*

MAIN IMAGE: IAN VORSIAN

## Best-Kept Secret

In 1989, Panoz began hand-building a minimalist V-8-powered roadster, which some might even call "cute." In 1997, he revised the design with an innovative aluminum space frame chassis, called the AIV (Aluminum Intensive Vehicle) Roadster. Fast, responsive, nimble, and visceral, it possessed a quality of fit, finish, and advanced engineering unknown to this genre of sporting lightweight road cars.

Acknowledging that his small roadster had limited appeal, Panoz introduced the Esperante in 1999. A traditional grand touring car, it was reminiscent of the Ferrari California and Mercedes 300 SL of the 1960s. In true GT tradition, the Esperante is a powerful and competent road car that offers a high level of refinement and craftsmanship. Imagine the quiet comfort and security of a Mercedes SL, with the quick synapses and aggressive nature of an early 911.

But to establish themselves as credible, successful sports cars need a romantic competition heritage. In 1997, Danny's father, Don Panoz, with no previous interest or experience in motorsport competition, established Panoz Motorsport, entering its first endurance racing Panoz prototype at Le Mans. Although the team has yet to win outright at Le Mans, success was immediate, with a string of victories by Panoz-built racers in both domestic and international race series such as the American Le Mans Series championship, the Trans-Am championship, and the Indy 500, with Target/Chip Ganassi using the Panoz-produced g-force chassis. In the last racing season, Panoz was the only manufacturer in the American Le Mans Series to defeat the Audi Factory juggernaut, winning two races.



*Fine leather, carbon fiber, and aluminum make for comfortable work.*

This success has brought worldwide demand for Panoz engineering services and complete competition cars. Within a short period of time, Panoz has become the largest producer of professional and amateur racecars in the world.

Of course, this race engineering transfers plenty of residual DNA to today's Panoz Esperante road car. Hand-built and drawing on the experience gained through the earlier Roadster production, the Esperante is a two-seat cabriolet powered by Ford's hand-assembled 4.6-liter, aluminum-block dohc V-8 of 320 hp attached to a rugged Tremec 5-speed gearbox. Advancing the AIV concept used on the original Roadster, the Esperante employs a unique



*A very tasteful GT indeed: The tidy ducktail spoiler and minute RSR script are two clues that this Panoz has something special up its sleeve.*

modular aluminum, carbon fiber, and steel chassis and an independent suspension system utilizing a competition-derived rocker- and coil-over shock arrangement.

Historically, many fine GT cars have aluminum bodies. Panoz clothes the Esperante in Superform process aluminum body panels rather than the plastic sheet-molded panels found in most other limited-production cars. This combination of modular chassis and aluminum body makes for an extremely rigid and extraordinarily safe structure that, unlike most other exotics, is simple to repair.

Racing heritage and advanced engineering have given the Panoz another advantage. Where other exotic roadsters and coupes have become heavier, Panoz has built a lighter, stronger, safer, better-riding car that, given its light weight, is more fun to drive.

Of course, real GT cars have fine interior accommodations, so the Panoz has soft, hand-stitched leather covering the instrument panel, dash, and every other interior surface. The instrument panel and console have accents in a choice of color, in wood or carbon fiber, and the seats are comfortable and supportive for long drives. Real-world practicality is offered with a trunk designed to carry the requisite pair of golf bags.

The convertible top is electric and provides a tight, dry, and quiet environment. It folds into the body, eliminating the heavy, tall top stack found on Jaguars and Aston Martins. The cockpit and windshield aerodynamics are so well thought out that at 80 mph, a normal conversation can be had with the top down and the side windows raised, and no wind deflector is necessary. The exhaust system gives a fine rendition of exotic dohc V-8 ear candy when the throttle is pressed, yet it is as quiet as a luxury coupe when shifted into top gear.

The end result is a lightweight but superstrong roadster possessing daily driver reliability, minimal service requirements, excellent road manners, high-quality fit and finish, and a zero-to-60 time of less than five seconds. Combine this with a cornering power of .92 *g* and you have a real sporting alternative to the (all too common) Porsche, Jaguar, or Mercedes convertibles.

The second version of the Esperante is the David Brabham Edition coupe, named after the race-winning Panoz Le Mans prototype driver. This version is a bit more powerful, with a 400-hp supercharged and after-cooled Mustang Cobra engine and 6-speed T56 Tremec transmission. A more sporting Esperante, it is built as a GT coupe to benefit the handling with further increased chassis rigidity. The body is revised, with a small ducktail spoiler and new lower sills to accommodate wider wheels and tires. The interior gets carbon fiber trim and sport seats to reflect the car's more aggressive intent. Larger Brembo brakes are fitted to match the increased performance. The revised

suspension features David Brabham's own calibrations to give a slightly firmer ride, with chassis response tuned to suit a more demanding driver.

The DB Edition may have the best ride and handling combination of any performance car available. It is smooth and quiet on the freeways of Los Angeles, quick through the canyons, and suitable for weekend open racetrack events. My evaluation on Georgia's back roads and on the demanding Road Atlanta racetrack found the Brabham a willing partner on both venues.



*Under-hood accoutrements are a plumber's dream, but don't get sucked in.*

Since the Esperante is hand-built, those who prefer a sportier ride can have it. Need a specific pedal setup for heel and toe? Just ask. Color? Provide a sample and Panoz will comply. Of course, factory delivery is available, along with a tour of the production line, high-performance driving courses at the Panoz Racing School located at nearby Road Atlanta, and accommodations at the Château Élan Winery and Resort. Bring your golf clubs.

As if the Esperante and Brabham Edition were not enough, into this mix add the Panoz Esperante RSr from Johan Ragnarsson of JRD. To simply say that Johan builds custom cars for musicians, pro athletes, and celebrities would be to diminish his efforts as a tuner and custom car builder. His work involves fabrication of custom metal body panels, special interiors, and more powerful drivetrains and suspensions. Johan was responsible for the original bodywork on the prototype Panoz Esperante and has fabricated special panels and body parts for Rennspeed in Germany and RENNTECH, the well-known Florida Mercedes-Benz tuner shop.

"The job of the tuner is to improve the car," says Johan, and his approach to the already well-designed Panoz shows that he understands what constitutes improvement.

Starting with the stiffer Panoz coupe body style as used on the Brabham, JRD has installed a custom-built

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A Panoz family portrait: JRD Esperante RSr (in red) and David Brabham Edition coupe flanked by "standard" Esperante convertibles.

5.2-liter version of the standard-issue 4.6-liter dohc aluminum Ford V-8, equipped with a very large Paxton gear-drive supercharger supplying 9 pounds' boost through an after-cooler the size of a studio apartment. Combined with improved cylinder heads, lightweight flywheel and heavy-duty clutch assembly, the net result is a power output of 600 bhp and quarter-mile times in the high 11- to low 12-second range.

This is not your average fire-breathing, small-displacement, blown V-8. It is a very well-developed, high-output engine that burbles around town smoothly and unobtrusively.

The dohc engine is as smooth and quiet as its Cobra Mustang cousin, with far more bottom end torque due to the additional displacement. It is easy to drive, with a very light clutch pedal offering smooth, progressive engagement. Daily driving would never offer a hint of what is under the hood. Heavy traffic or slogging along behind a slow truck on one's favorite mountain road does not stress this engine. It cruises parking spaces in first or second gear, throttle closed, devoid of bucking or other untoward behavior. Throttle response is excellent, the benefit of a lightened flywheel mass and a fine progressive throttle linkage.

However, those with an ear for high performance will notice the soft blower whine in the background and the occasional "slurping" sound from the blower pressure bypass. But these are the sounds of power, and we would miss them if they were not there.

Once the road opens up, this engine changes character. Roll into the throttle and the initial acceleration is strong, pulling the nose up and driving the rear tires into the pavement. Past 4,000 rpm, this impressive rush turns into a reasonable simulation of a *Star Wars* jump to light speed. The eyeball-flattening experience continues through second, third, and fourth gears, with linear acceleration until the driver exceeds the comfort level, or runs out of road.

To put this performance into perspective, the Panoz Esperante RSr weighs 300 pounds less than a Viper and

carries about 100 more horsepower. Compared with a Porsche Turbo, the difference is more pronounced: the Panoz carries about 500 pounds less weight and 175 more hp. Although wheel spin can be a problem at the drag strip, any reasonably skilled owner can expect 12-second quarter-mile times without exercising the speed-shifting skills of a top-line pro-stock drag racer.

JRD has done a little work on the suspension, exhaust, and seats to improve long-range comfort. The Recaro seats are among the most comfortable and supportive sport seats available, with a full range of power adjustments and the obligatory competition shoulder harness slots for high-speed open track events. The exhaust system maintains the fabulous Panoz dohc music, devoid of fatiguing low-frequency rumble. The suspension has been calibrated to maintain the Esperante's exceptional ride and handling while harnessing a 600-hp engine: firm, well composed, and not upset by expansion joints or Botts Dots. Panoz JRD drivers will never be pounded or pummeled in this car. Even in the tightest canyons, the car exhibits poise, with a crisp turn-in, little roll, and a neutral balance.

JRD has performed the consummate tuner's magic of increasing the power and performance without compromising any of the Panoz's virtues. Of course, JRD fits other custom modifications as well: sound systems, advanced navigation systems, or—if you insist—an automatic transmission.

The Panoz Esperante RSr is a fine alternative to the mass-marketed GTs built by the major manufacturers. It is beautifully constructed and richly appointed, and it has the performance and racing heritage to place it among the world's best GT cars. The standard Panoz Esperante has an MSRP of \$88,950, and the David Brabham Edition is \$119,950. JRD's 600-hp Esperante RSr shown here, equipped with all available options, is \$145,000. ☐

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