

This past weekend, I was afforded the opportunity to closely examine what is without a doubt the finest Pantera I have ever driven, by a fairly great margin, and undoubtedly one of the best I have ever even seen. In the interest of transparency, I feel compelled to share that I have known the owner, and this car, for the past five years, and have even spent a day replacing its steering rack in my own garage. However I pride myself on my objectivity, and can assure the reader that my existing friendship with the owner and familiarity with the car in no way will influence my analysis.

I first encountered this car in the fall of 2006, which it was in the hands of its prior owner. I was the publisher of the quarterly magazine of the Pantera Owners Club of America, and featured this car as the centerfold car in the 2006 No. 4 issue. I don't ever recall meeting the owner or seeing the car in person, but I communicated with the owner and together we were able to generate a compelling story (I should point out that just today I discovered I made a HUGE error in the article, accidentally publishing a photo of the left front suspension of the Qvale Mangusta Trans Am race car in place of the desired photo of the left front suspension of this car).

The guys at Fantasy Junction have elsewhere done a good job of describing the car's various features and history; I will concentrate on my own analysis of it.

The most striking thing about the car is the level of detailing it's been subjected to. Everything over, under and inside the car is Just So, with care and attention shown in places that really, truly don't matter. This also means that where it does matter, similar efforts have been expended to make any particular part of it as good as it could possibly be, rather than just making it as good as it *needs* to be.

The first thing that strikes me is the quality of the paint. This car actually lived on cinder blocks underneath a tarp for 18 years, sitting alongside a house in the southern California desert, wearing an Earl Schieb-quality blue paint job before it was purchased and fully restored by Mike Mayberry. For those unfamiliar with that name, he owned a Lincoln-Mercury dealership in Hollywood, and over the years has become the world's leading purveyor of used Panteras, having sold an astonishing number exceeding 400 examples! While some merely passed through his hands between seller and buyer, others like this one were subjected to complete restorations.

The article in the magazine goes into great detail about the efforts taken to paint this car. They were well beyond what one might expect of a production automobile, and instead were firmly in insane street rod territory. I can only imagine what it might cost to replicate such a paint job today, but surely it would be many, many tens of thousands of dollars.

Happily, the paint has aged extremely well. There is no suggestion anywhere that the work was done 25+ years ago. Thankfully, the base color is a 1999 Ford Laser Red (with some metal flake added) so it is at least theoretically repeatable should the need ever

arise. About the only flaws I could discover were some very minor marks right at the front of the hood; they were so insignificant that they might even have been small bug remnants. Otherwise, it's flawless.

(I spoke to Mayberry about this car recently and he remembered it well, even after all these years, saying it was among the very finest he ever built).

The wheels are Pantera East replicas of the original Campagnolo wheels, sized 16x8 front and 17x11 rear, fitted with Pirelli Pzero tires.

The car retains all of its original glass; all is in great shape. The chrome is fantastic as well.

One thing that many Panteras suffer from is an ill-fitting windshield surround. It's difficult to get the chrome trim to sit properly against the body in the corners (my own car suffers from this), but this car's appearance is beyond perfection in this regard.

The stock taillights have been replaced with the extremely desirable and expensive so-called "Group 4" taillights; they are so-named supposedly because the factory FIA Group 4 race cars were equipped with them (although originally they had standard lights). They are actually shared with the European market Alfa Romeo 1750 Berlina.

Cibie Z-beam halogen headlights are fitted as well.

The front turn signals are normally conventional bulbs with amber lenses; this car has clear lenses with amber bulbs.

A nice detail is the polished stainless steel inner fender liners.

The interior lives up to the exterior in all regards. Although at first glance, it appears to be stock, in fact the naugahyde has been replaced with fine leather throughout, accented with wood-like details, including on the shifter surround and the top of the ashtray. New carpets were made at the same time. While there are many different aftermarket seats found in Panteras these days (with more or less success), these are especially excellent. They are sourced from the European-market-only 25th Anniversary Edition Mazda MX-5 (Miata). They are much nicer than standard Miata seats, and in fact much nicer than any that were sold in North America; these had to be imported from Europe before being comprehensively reupholstered. This is just one of many examples of the level of dedication shown by the team that rebuilt the car most recently.

There is provision for powering and hanging a radar detector immediately underneath the rear view mirror.

The turn signal switch felt terrific (often with age the hold-down function fails) but initially the turn signals were inoperative. As an experiment I cycled the hazard light switch, as the turn signals all route through it. The hazard lights worked fine, and the

switch turned off appropriately (sometimes they get stuck on), and after that the turn signals worked perfectly.

There are some very minor nits to pick. The courtesy light switch was assembled backwards from the factory. Normally it is off when rolled to the left, and on when centered. This one is off when centered and on when rolled to the right, indicating that the switch face was installed upside down. Oddly, the headlight and blower fan switch are the 1971 style, with generic symbols, while the courtesy switch has the word COURTESY instead of the associated symbol. If one was terribly concerned, it would be a simple thing to just install a 1971-style switch which would both correct the mechanical and the aesthetic considerations.

The bottom switch is normally blank; this one has been fitted with a home-made label saying "AUXILARY FAN SWITCH". This car at one time had a third radiator fan installed, and there is a third fan relay up front with a similar label, but the fan itself has been removed (it's completely unnecessary) although the electrical pigtail dangles in front of the radiator should one decide to fit another one.

While inside the car, I conducted a test of all the exterior lighting. The right side headlight works fine, but the left side is extremely dim in low beam and completely extinguished in high beam, which suggests a simple ground issue. (This will almost assuredly be rectified before the sale). The turn signals, brake lights and side marker lights all work fine.

At first I thought the A/C condenser fan was stuck on as it was running whenever the ignition is on, and the switch on the dash felt a bit gritty. I subsequently learned that the 'off' detent is very stiff and I simply wasn't turning it hard enough to the left to actually switch the A/C off. Fortunately a replacement factory switch has been sourced, and the new owner can change it out if he feels it is necessary as it will go with the car.

(I confess I forgot to test the air conditioning system for proper function, and also didn't test the heater; manual shutoff valves are positioned inside the engine bay to isolate all hot water from the heater matrix unless and until it is desired).

I then put the car on a lift and went to poke around underneath it. It only has a few hundred miles on it since it was restored, but you would never be able to tell from looking at it—it appears as if it just rolled out of the shop. Once again, the level of detailing underneath is just astounding. Rather than painting everything black, as is the norm, various contrasting colors are used for different systems. The suspension A-arms are silver, the Precision Proformance chassis stiffening kit is bright red along with the removable parking brake crossmember, the water pipes are polished stainless steel, etc.

None of this matters from a functional perspective, but it just shows an extra level of care and attention to detail.

Stainless steel jacking plates have been screwed to the underside of the chassis in the forward corners (just aft of the front wheels) with a third one running horizontally at the very rear, centered underneath the gearbox. The water hoses each have double hose clamps. A drain petcock has been fitted to one of the water pipes, making it easy to fully drain the cooling system (always a challenge with a Pantera as the water takes a tortured path from the radiator up front, down and through the center of the car and then up to the engine).

The swaybars are retained on the A-arms using Sphereballs, which are nylon heim-style joints which provide for much smoother articulation than the standard rubber bushings which simply distort under suspension movement. The inner swaybar mounts have been replaced with polished billet aluminum ones in the front, and a three-piece billet decorative bracket from IPSCO at the rear.

The stock coilover units have been replaced with an aftermarket setup that I confess I find impossible to identify (I haven't bothered going through all the receipts to try to figure it out). They appear unlike any units I've ever seen on a Pantera. It's possible that they are utterly conventional Aldan units which have been dressed up with billet collars over the threads at the bottom. They are single-adjustable.

The aftermarket Spicer driveshafts and the swaybars have both been chromed.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the effort extended elsewhere in the car, the brakes are completely stock. Some people claim that the stock brakes are inadequate, but they are simply wrong. What they are instead trying to say is that *their* stock brakes were inadequate, due to one or more malfunctions in the system, and rather than simply repairing them, they chose to replace them with Wilwood etc. These stock brakes have instead been completely overhauled, and painted red in keeping with the multicolor theme. (They work perfectly).

An advantage of retaining the original brakes is that the original 15-inch wheels could easily be retrofitted to the car if the owner so desired.

The most significant fear when buying a Pantera is the threat of rust. These cars were known for being susceptible to rust, and given the monocoque design, rust can be catastrophic. Thankfully, this car spent almost all of its life, both when it was being driven and when it was parked for 18 years, in dry, desert climates, and it is rock-solid. Huge drain holes have been added at the bottom of the vertical tubes where water and dirt often mix, turn to mud, and rot the chassis from the inside out. There are no such fears here. This car is as solid as a bank vault.

The ZF gearbox has been detailed with chrome acorn nuts in place of the conventional nuts. The level of detailing is almost absurd—there are circular springs retaining the ball joint boots to the ball joints, and these were removed and painted red (they are often rusty, even on the nicest cars).

There is a minor but noticeable engine oil leak from the oil pan. I don't feel it's important enough to be a concern (it doesn't put down any drops on the ground, but there were a few drops visible on the pan, and the shift linkage was well-lubricated in the area of the leak from blowby oil). Personally I would leave it alone, but if one wanted to address it, thankfully both the parking brake lever mount and the rear chassis crossmember are removable so the pan can be removed and the gasket replaced without the need for removing the engine from the car (which is the normal requirement). There is a minor leak from the ZF gearbox as well, which is common to virtually all of them. I suspect the gearbox has been filled with synthetic oil rather than my preferred dinosaur-based oil, and synthetic oil has a reputation for leaking more readily.

Moving on to the engine bay, and the detailing just doesn't quit. The removable fiberglass trunk has been fitted with an aquatic-style tonneau cover with a central zipper, which helps ensure the contents are kept isolated from any dirt or grime that might otherwise try to intrude.

Rather than coating the engine bay with exterior paint, which makes it pretty but also renders the trunk useless because the paint would immediately be damaged, the engine bay has been covered with an extremely thick and solid bedliner. It seems especially robust, as though one could drop tools on it all day long without marking it in any way.

The ZF gearbox, which is normally simply cast aluminum, has instead been treated to a very glossy paint job, which renders it much easier to clean. A custom pad has been fabricated and affixed to the top left rear corner to support the underside of the trunk and prevent it from rubbing on the gearbox when heavily laden.

The chassis stiffening kits underneath the car are painted red, but the two pieces in the front and rear trunk are chromed.

Felt liners have been applied to the cavities under the decklid, as an aesthetic touch; they might also provide sound-deadening qualities. Curiously, a small badge which was created decades ago by the Swedish DeTomaso Club fits perfectly in what is otherwise a minor indentation in the very center of the underside of the decklid, and one has been fitted here—again reflecting the attention to detail.

The water bottles along with the mounting bracket have been replaced with polished stainless steel variants, and there are polished stainless steel covers for the firewall and the gas tank. These are primarily for show, but do have notable heat-reflecting benefits and also serve as a second layer of insulation between the engine bay and the driving compartment.

You can read the details of the engine in Fantasy Junction's description of the car. Naturally it looks fantastic.

In what I consider a very odd decision, the ANSA European GTS model mufflers have been completely gutted inside. All the internals, as well as the resonators inside the

chrome tips, have been removed, meaning that this car effectively has no mufflers at all and instead is running straight pipe.

The front trunk has been subjected to the same level of attention as the rest of the car. The cooling system is unquestionably the finest on the market, created for Pantera Performance Center by Ron Davis Racing Radiators. Sold as a complete package with a pair of sucker fans, it just flat-out works. This car can sit in traffic all day long on a Phoenix summer day and the temperature will remain rock-steady.

The brake master cylinder has been replaced with one from Precision Performance; my understanding is that it's a step-bore affair sourced from 1980s GM vans. The clutch master cylinder is a strange thing that I have never seen before and I have no idea what it is.

I started the car several times and moved it around within the shop and in the street, but didn't actually drive it this day. However, I put around 50 miles on it when I replaced the steering rack two years ago, and even though I've driven many dozens of Panteras since then, the memories of that drive stand out such that I feel qualified to issue a driving review.

The car starts with a guttural, menacing bellow from the exhaust. It doesn't sound like a typical Pantera, simply because there are no mufflers. The empty muffler cans clearly must be doing something, because it's not quite as loud as some Pantera race cars I've heard which literally had nothing but straight pipe. But it's certainly among the loudest Panteras I've ever experienced, outside the car. Surprisingly, because the noise is all behind you, it's not nearly as bad as one might expect from inside the car, sounding only moderately louder than what one would normally encounter.

As long as you're on good terms with your neighbors, it could probably be left alone; were one to be concerned about it, either these muffler cans could be cut open and a simply Y-pipe of perforated tubing and stainless steel muffler packing material could be introduced (which is what I've done on my own Pantera, with great effect), or replacement mufflers could be procured.

Clutch effort is very average by Pantera standards, being neither overly stiff nor soft. The stock clutch hydraulics in the rear have been replaced by a McLeod internal hydraulic throwout bearing. I have one of these in my own car, and they work fantastic, with the caveat that once they fail (mine conked out after 25 years), the gearbox needs to be removed to effect repairs. (Having said that, McLeod took my old unit and completely rebuilt it and updated it to the latest greatest design, and returned it, all for free). Shifter action is unremarkable, meaning that it works just fine.

Selecting reverse is easily accomplished and I backed out of the garage, then set off.

The Schroth four-point harnesses keep one feeling secure and are very easy to manage, and the seats are very comfortable and more supportive than their appearance

would suggest. The Momo steering wheel is very comfortable to hold and just the right diameter.

This car is equipped with an electronic power steering system by EZ Power Steering in Holland. As a matter of principle I have always abhorred power steering conversions on Panteras; I drove one of the first one on the market 30 years ago and it was simply awful, feeling like an old Cadillac Fleetwood. So I was predisposed to hate the setup in this car, and was absolutely shocked to discover how nice it is. There is an adjustable rheostat tucked under the dash that allows one to dial in more or less assist. When I drove it, it was set on a very modest level, such that it was helpful at parking lot speeds and completely unnoticeable when underway.

(Actually, a more accurate way to describe it would be to say that when the car is underway, it feels like it has the stock-sized, skinny tires, which resulted in sublime steering; the trend towards much larger aftermarket tires like this car has fitted has necessarily increased steering effort and blunted feel, as the tradeoff for much greater traction and cornering power. With the power steering fitted, this car sticks, stops and corners without the extra effort. I may have been converted in my thinking by this car...)

The car tracks perfectly, hands-off. The steering *better* be fantastic, as I rebuilt the steering rack that is installed in the car, replacing a 1990s-era rack which had failed and was not easily rebuildable. Having done something like 250 Pantera steering rack overhauls over the decades, I've become pretty good at it, and this car shows it.

The brakes are simply fantastic. The combination of the calipers in tip-top condition, modern grippy brake pads, and the improved master cylinder means that the tires will give up long before the brakes do. If one was to drive the car aggressively on a race track, lap after lap pounding on the brakes, one might eventually discover their inherent limitations which manifest as brake fade, but one would never come anywhere close to that driving on the street, even with a level of aggression that would invite being arrested.

The exhaust note is surprisingly manageable. Yes it's somewhat loud inside the cabin, but not nearly as loud as one might imagine.

The engine is simply terrific. Given that it retains the stock-ish displacement of 350-something cubic inches, rather than being stroked to 377 or 393 or 408 as many replacement engines are, the performance is limited, but it is still almost assuredly cranking out well in excess of 400 horsepower, maybe even 450, which is quite a lot in a car that, keep in mind, weighs barely more than 3000 pounds.

The gearbox shifts easily even when cold, and is basically unnoticeable when underway. You move the lever, it goes into gear, simple as that. There is no untoward ring gear whine which some Panteras manage to have for unknown reasons.

There are some gimmicks in the interior I never bothered messing with. There is a GPS speedometer unit positioned atop the dash between the regular tachometer and

speedometer. There is a pushbutton starter, which thankfully has been wired in parallel with the ignition switch starter so the driver is free to choose which method to use. The radar detector also was not installed when I drove it.

The aftermarket shocks provide a firm but controlled ride, and the ride quality is much, much better than one might expect from a car such as this. Remember, this was designed as a GT car rather than a sports car, and is set up for high-speed long-distance touring. The car won't beat you up as you go down the road, but neither is it wayward or floaty. It is instead extremely well-controlled. It is very easy to precisely position the car anywhere on the road, and it doesn't pull or wander in any way whatsoever. I recently drove a Ferrari F355, and the ride quality and driving dynamics were markedly similar (although this Pantera's steering is notably better than the Ferrari's).

So there you have it. The car's strengths are almost innumerable, and the only weakness is the open exhaust, which isn't as open as it seems, and is in any case a matter of personal taste, easily rectified should one so choose.

Summing it all up, I have had the good fortune of driving literally hundreds of different Panteras over the space of the last 37 years, all over the US and Canada, and in Europe. None of them were the equal of this Pantera.

None.

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