



Twenty years later, the Esperante GTR-1 is still Stupefying

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1 OF 8

Panoz Esperante GTR-1
PHOTO BY PANOZ LLC



DRIVING THE ORIGINAL PANOZ "BATMOBILE"

At 7000 RPM, conversation is impossible in the one-and-only street-legal Panoz GTR-1. The coupe's carbon-fiber race tub vibrates like a tuning fork. Just beyond the firewall, a 6.0 liter Roush Racing V8 howls with NASCAR ferocity. There are 1500 more revs available but we've run out of opportunity.

Out past the GTR-1's preposterously long nose, flashing lights crest a hill and it's time to lift. A Georgia State Trooper zooms by on a 180-degree heading. The [Dodge Charger](#) is the third police car to cross our bow in the last five minutes, heading to some unseen emergency.

Gear whine adds to the competition flavor of the experience as we brake and downshift to bring the GTR-1 down to the legal limit. The speedometer doesn't work but we had been flat in fourth gear – 2,341 pounds, "500-plus" horsepower – perhaps someone better at calculation can do the math for us.

With the engine unwinding there's time to consider how close this homologation-special is to its racing siblings and why driving it is so extraordinary.

The unconventional [Esperante GTR-1](#) is the product of Don Panoz's pragmatic mind.

Panoz left pharmaceutical company Mylan Laboratories in 1969 and founded his own, Elan Corporation, the same year. By 1996 he was on the cusp of retirement from Elan. His son, Danny Panoz, Panoz Auto Development founder, had been selling lightweight Panoz Roadsters since 1992. The elder Panoz suggested racing would bring attention to the small brand headquartered just north of Atlanta.

"This was January 1996," Panoz remembers. "Danny called me and said, 'Come down,

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I've got this English guy who builds race cars here. You've been talking about developing a racing heritage. This is the kind of guy you need to talk to."

The English guy was Adrian Reynard.



Panoz Esperante GTR-1
PHOTO BY PANOZ LLC

Reynard Motorsport was at the top of its game building championship-winning Champ Car chassis for the thriving CART series but Reynard was open to taking on new projects. His firm would create a GT1-class contender for Panoz Motorsports to race in the new FIA GT series and the [24 Hours of Le Mans](#), among the few races the pharmaceutical executive had heard of.

[Don Panoz](#) based his conception of the Esperante GTR-1 on the Roadster.

"To everything I said, Adrian said 'brilliant!' I told him that I liked Danny's car, and the Roadster and the GTR-1 are basically the same dimensions. I didn't know there hadn't been an engine up front for 34 years in a prototype."

Ferrari's 330 TRI/LM had been the last front-engine car to win Le Mans, in 1962, but the prospect of designing such a machine didn't daunt Reynard. In less than 12 months Reynard's Special Vehicle Products under Nigel Stroud came up with the car you're looking at. This is the original GTR-1, the literal blueprint for the closed-cockpit racers and the later LMP1 Roadsters Panoz would campaign until 2004.

As such, it's almost identical to the race car. Nearly every part of this unique, FIA-mandated homologation is made of [carbon-fiber composites](#), from its crash-tested tub to its beautifully crafted body panels. The suspension – upper and lower A-arms with pushrod and rocker-activated front and rear coil-overs -- mirrors the race car's.

Brakes are also basically the same, vented 15/14-inch Brembos enclosed within 18-inch x 10.5-inch forged aluminum center-lock wheels. Contrary to some reports, the fuel-injected, aluminum-block Roush Racing V8 mounted well behind the original GTR-1's front wheels does indeed boast the same 6.0-liter displacement as the racers.'

Slightly de-tuned for the street, it mates to one of the few components separating the road-legal version from the racers: A high-performance ZF five-speed gearbox was sourced as a street-able substitute for the race cars' Xtrac six-speed sequential transmission. Packaging dictated an oddity, however.



"We flipped it around," says Paul Caves, a team member who built the car with Reynard in 1996, joining Panoz thereafter.

The change makes driving the already challenging GTR-1 even more difficult. The gearbox's dog-leg pattern is reversed, with first gear where you'd expect to find fifth in a conventional pattern. But with patience and careful rev-matching on downshifts, the arrangement works.

The GTR-1's richly upholstered interior is the only other street-car concession. If you're five-foot-ten like me, you fit perfectly into the car's Alcantara buckets flanked by the transmission tunnel and carbon-fiber monocoque's wide door sill. If not, this isn't the car for you. Ditto if you like roll-down windows, rear glass to view the road behind or any form of HVAC.

Amazingly, it could be yours... if you have a spare \$1.5 million or so. Lovingly restored in 2015, the car appeared last fall at the Dubai International Motor Show and buyers/collectors came out of the woodwork. A deal was pending but not completed. Panoz confirms it's still for sale.

Better yet, Panoz recently announced it can build you a near-exact replica if you commission one – for about \$890,000. Replicas keep the homologation car's DNA, featuring the same composite construction. ABS won't be offered but a modern drivetrain and conveniences like air conditioning, rear glass, and windows that open will be.

"For a car as rare and exotic as this continuation will be, one of the things we are most interested in is drive-ability," says Panoz's director of engineering, John M. Leverett. "We really want people to drive these cars, not just stash them."

On the racetrack the GTR-1 was moderately successful, winning U.S. sportscar races against Porsche and Mercedes and finishing seventh overall at Le Mans in 1998.

Nothing compares to driving the original, a car less than 10 men (including Paul Newman) have ever wheeled. It's an American-backed, British-built racing car for the street. Loud, hot and supercar-fast, its composite chassis can only be challenged in a track setting.

On the street it's wildly impractical but irresistible to puzzled onlookers – a stunning, stupefying icon known to a generation of sports car racing fans as the "Batmobile".

By Jan Tegler

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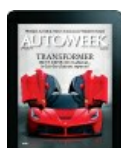
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