Pantera 3907 review by Mike Drew

This afternoon I had the pleasure of fully evaluating the De Tomaso Pantera THPNMD03907, a July 1972 Pre-L model, which is currently being offered for sale by Fantasy Junction, in Emeryville, CA

In the interests of full disclosure, I should point out that I was the one who suggested to the widow of the former owner that the car should be brought to Bruce at Fantasy Junction for him to sell. I've known Bruce for decades and have found him to be that rarest of creatures, a genuinely honest used car dealer.

This Pantera was purchased at a Mecum auction in about 2018 by the former owner, Tom Leonard. He and I became friends and I have spent a lot of time around this car, both on driving tours, and also working on it in his garage, although today was the first day I actually got the opportunity to drive it. I will share my reflections below.

When I arrived at the building, the Pantera was conveniently positioned on a lift, enabling me to get a good look at the underside. It had been thoroughly cleaned of any road grime, affording a good look at the underpinnings.

The most serious threat a Pantera faces is chassis rust. In particular, water can enter the two vertical chassis members in the rear wheelhouses, mix with powdered dirt which collects there also, creating mud which then rusts the metal catastrophically from the inside out. I have seen Panteras that appeared absolutely fine to the naked eye, but upon inspection, it was discovered that the only thing remaining was the undercoating, and the metal chassis underneath was completely rotted away!

Thankfully that is not the case here. I was pleased to find that the chassis was completely rock-solid. It is normal for owners to drill drain holes here, to enable the water to escape. On this car, only one small hole was drilled in each of the forwardmost tubes. With a drill and drill bits nearby, I took the liberty of opening up that hole, and creating two additional holes. While this car has zero rust now, these holes will go a long way towards preventing any rust from developing in the future.

The A-arm bushings are original. The bits that are visible are noticeably dry-rotted and cracked, and don't look particularly good. However, this car only has 38k miles on it. On every Pantera I've worked on, whenever I have removed and replaced bushings that appeared as these do, the actual working parts of the bushings, inside the A-arms, were still completely perfect. While the bushings on

this car could be changed, doing so would have to be considered ‘recreational maintenance’ rather than a necessity, as there will be no actual improvement, apart from cosmetic.

The rear sway bar is normally 3/4 inch (nominally) and the front is 7/8 inch. A larger 7/8 inch rear bar was a factory option on European Panteras, and this car has been so-equipped as well. The benefits of the larger bar include flatter cornering, and a more balanced chassis with a reduced tendency to understeer in corners. As this car has been fitted with aftermarket wheels, with the delta between front and rear tire width notably greater than stock, with no under changes the Pantera’s tendency towards understeer would have been further aggravated. Fitting this larger-diameter bar will likely have offset this tendency and the car will likely understeer at the limit, just as a stock Pantera might, or perhaps it might even be closer to neutral-handling.

The swaybars are secured to the A-arms not with conventional rubber bushings and straps, but instead Sphereballs, which are essentially heim joints. They are actually nylon balls captured in aluminum housings, which allow the sway bar to move much more freely and operate as it should. This is a nice aftermarket upgrade.

The stock shocks and springs have been replaced with what appear to be Aldan coilovers with adjustable ride height and adjustable damping. The stock brakes have been replaced with a full Wilwood setup. While the brakes are now fantastic, the downside is that the rotors are large enough that apparently the stock wheels can no longer be fitted. (I didn’t try to install them, although I will be returning soon and will do so to see if they will still work, but I’m betting against it). Thus, if one wanted to return to running the stock wheels, it would necessitate returning to the stock brakes as well.

The rubber hoses were replaced with modern braided stainless/Teflon hoses at the same time the brakes were changed. Also, there is an IPSCO Pantera Parts mechanical parking brake system installed. The stock Pantera parking brake was never particularly effective; I forgot to try this aftermarket setup, but historically. I have found them to be marginally more effective than stock, but I would never trust it alone, and would also park the car in gear, always.

The stock clutch slave cylinder hydraulic line is normally a hard red plastic, which is known to fail. This car has had a braided stainless steel/Teflon aftermarket replacement line fitted, which should be immortal.

The driveshafts are stock and appear to be in fine shape, with no indication of spinning U-joint cups (at least none that I could see).

In the front, the lower valance is another area where it is customary to find rust damage, from water collecting and rusting from the inside out. This one appears to be rock solid, although some very unsympathetic former owner used a floor jack here and folded the sheetmetal lip at the bottom. This isn't visible from above, but is noticeable when underneath the car.

The steering racks on these cars start to show wear on the passenger-side support bushing at about 30k miles, and are completely shot by 60k miles. This manifests in unwanted in-and-out movement of the passenger-side tire, so the driver is steering the left front wheel and the right front wheel can flop in and out. The rack can also make banging noises when going over bumps such as railroad tracks. I have rebuilt well over 200 Pantera and Ferrari 308 steering racks (both cars use the same rack) over the years, and I rebuilt the rack in this car.
The original steering geometry was prone to unwanted bump steer. Ford engineers tackled the problem in late 1972 by inserting 10mm spacers between the underside of the chassis and the steering rack mounts, moving the rack down and to the rear slightly relative to the rest of the car. When I rebuilt the rack in this car, I fitted later-style spacers to give it updated steering characteristics. If the car was seriously lowered, it might be beneficial to remove them, but it's easy to do should one so desire.

Looking in the front trunk, it's all (or mostly) good news. The cooling system consists of a laydown Fluidyne radiator with two giant sucker fans, and some generic modern relays. The wiring all looks rather haphazard, but it works.

The braking system is actuated by a step-bore master cylinder and aftermarket booster, from Precision Proformance (a Pantera shop run by Bobby Byars, who sadly passed away a few years ago). There is a battery, but I couldn't see any date on it. It appears to be new-ish and works great.

The front trunk carpet is partially covered by some cheap expanded rubber/foam material, like you would find lining a tool box drawer. I meant to peer underneath to evaluate the condition of the carpet, but I forgot.

The interior is in fantastic condition. It has been entirely redone in leather, with a contrasting red and black color scheme that may not be to everyone's taste, but it appears to be very well-done. It smells terrific too.

The odometer showed 33384 miles, which I believe is the genuine mileage based on the overall condition of the car.

The turn signal switch works, which is not something one can take for granted. Sourced from the Mercury (Ford) Capri Mk 1, the Pantera switch has a known weakness with the holding mechanism. After 40 years or so, this mechanism breaks down, and while the turn signals continue working, the switch must be held up or down to continuously actuate them. But this one is working as new.

New custom floormats have been fitted, festooned with logos just in case you forgot what kind of car it was you were driving. They appear to be of very high quality, sourced from PI Motorsports

The abysmal stock Capri steering wheel has been replaced with a LeCarra unit. The stock wheel was 14 inches, the Momo Prototipo fitted to the European GTS was 350mm (13.8 inches), and this wheel appears to be 13 inches (I meant to measure it but forgot), which affords a bit of extra legroom for those whose girth demands it, but personally I prefer a 350mm or 14-inch wheel.

Surprisingly, the original electric window switches remain. They were of marginal quality and most cars have seen at least one of them fail, and so many cars have had their switches replaced with infinitely better and nominally similar Bosch switches that many owners don't even recognize the fact that their switches are not original. But these are. The windows go up and down with alacrity, so much so that I suspect the stock motors have been replaced with Ford Aerostar motors or something similar, a popular upgrade.

The major and minor instruments are all also original Veglia gauges. It's common to see the minor gauges rearranged in the panel to put the most important (oil pressure) at the top, but this car retains the original orientation which is a bit haphazard.

The headliner is a bit dirty and stained, and lets the interior down somewhat. The sunvisors are in fine shape, as is the interior mirror and dome light.

The switches are all new-ish and thus in terrific shape. There is a flake of chrome missing from one corner of the ashtray.

The engine bay is workmanlike, lacking some of the bling often found on Panteras. The engine is apparently stock internally, fitted with an Edelbrock Performer 4V intake manifold and a Holley double-pumper carburetor. The ridiculous stock fuel tank filler has been replaced with an extremely useful and high-quality gooseneck filler from Hall Pantera, which is a huge safety plus and really a most-do modification on any early Pantera such as this.

The exhaust system consists of stock headers/manifolds (they are neither equal-length headers, nor are they cast iron manifolds, and instead are a sort of mish-mash design of unequal-length headers), and stock-style mufflers. However, these mufflers are from a later L-model Pantera, and instead of angling upward at a jaunty angle, the chrome tips point straight out of the back of the mufflers, so as to clear the large one-piece bumper found on Panteras built starting with #4269. Although they look fine, it certainly would be better if they were angled upwards, which would be a simple job for any muffler shop to undertake.

The water bottles are original and show no signs of corrosion. The clutch slave cylinder is an original cast-iron unit and is covered with surface rust, but is perfectly functional. The A/C condenser and fan are in their proper location and all lines and electrics are hooked up.

The reverse switch on the gearbox appears to have been broken off, and 'fixed' in a very amateur manner by gluing it in place with JB weld or a similar substance. It's worth noting that one of the wires was disconnected from the switch, but the backup lights don't work at all, even when the switch is bypassed and the wires are connected together. While it's possible the bulbs are simply burned out, it's equally possible there is a wiring issue that would require investigation.

The removable fiberglass trunk has great upholstery and has had a pair of hardware store handles fitted which makes it very easy for one person to manipulate. (If the trunk was lifted out of the car while heavily loaded, these handles might cause the fiberglass to fail, so it's always best to remove anything from the trunk before attempting to lift it). The Dzus fasteners which originally retained the trunk are all missing (as are the corresponding female retainers on the sides of the trunk compartment, although they are present at the rear), but as they are completely unnecessary, most Panteras have long since done away with them.

The body is in terrific shape. The right rear corner of the car was nerfed in a parking lot incident some years ago, which precipitated a bare metal respray in a very vibrant shade of red. The paint shows extremely well apart apart from a very obvious door ding, which isn't an 'innie' but instead just shows displaced paint. The chrome is also in fantastic condition.

The side view mirrors are rather obtrusive, but one can't argue with their excellent function. They were sourced from a Pantera vendor, I believe from PI Motorsports, but I don't know what their original application is.

The glass is all original and in good shape.

The windshield wiper arms are original, but the blades and blade holders have been replaced with generic auto parts store units.

The wheels are 17-inch polished aluminum Campagnolo clones, which I believe were sourced from Precision Proformance. There have been numerous different attempts to replicate the original wheel look, with varying degrees of success. For reasons too complicated to go into here, these particular wheels feature a very compromised design where the 'pentagon' in the center is rotated so that the points and flats are in the wrong location. They are therefore very 'wrong' when compared to the original factory wheels. They look good in isolation, and are of decent quality, but once you look at them next to original wheels, or alongside really good 17-inch replicas, you can never un-see the obvious design compromises (which were brought about by a lawsuit between two Pantera parts suppliers—again, it's a long story that doesn't need to be repeated here).

It was an unfortunate choice made by the previous owner, who simply didn't notice the difference until it was pointed out to him and by then it was too late.

There are some lighting issues. The left rear taillight and left rear side marker light are both inoperative, along with the aforementioned backup lights. This could be down to simple bulb issues, or bad grounds. Remember that the car was completely dismantled and painted, and it's possible that insufficient care was taken when the car was reassembled to ensure everything works properly. It's a simple matter to throw some bulbs in there and see if that fixes it.

The high-beam circuit in the headlights is also inoperative. Not only do the lamps not illuminate, but the blue high beam indicator on the dash also does not illuminate, suggesting that perhaps the high/low beam function of the switch (co-located with the turn signal switch and the horn in a single unit) is inoperative.

(The horn works fine however).

Finally it was time to take it for a drive. The car started up instantly and immediately idled well. There was no indication of a choke working (no fast idle function), and I've been told that the carburetor is excessively rich, which would explain the excellent start-up characteristics.

The clutch is among the heaviest I've experienced in a Pantera. It was not changed by the former owner as far as we know, which suggests that it may be original, but original clutches are not normally this stiff. It could be down to an excessively stiff spring on the clutch slave cylinder (which I meant to remove for

purposes of testing, but forgot), or it could just be down to a very stiff aftermarket clutch installed by a former owner that we simply don't know about.

The clutch pedal squeaks and groans when it is used, which demands some simple lubrication, but clearly there is a lot of work going on down there.

Once underway, the car drives extremely well. The brakes are simply outstanding, as one would hope from a full Wilwood system. The car's alignment seems to be okay as it tracks well and doesn't hunt grooves in the road.

There is a pronounced hesitation and backfire on initial acceleration. This is almost assuredly caused by an accelerator pump on the carburetor that has failed, which is a trivial matter to rectify. Once past this, the engine pulls smoothly and evenly right to the 6000 rpm redline. Given that it is almost assuredly stock inside (it's worth noting that it is a 'numbers matching' block), it was never going to be a ball of fire, as by this time in Pantera production, in deference to the evil EPA smog gods, Ford had lowered the compression ratio from the 10:1 found on the 1971 models, to a modest 8.6:1 with a commensurate reduction in horsepower.

Still, a stock Pantera is not a slow car by any means! Positioned alongside a contemporary Ferrari 308, when both drivers put their right feet down, soon the Ferrari driver won't know which way the Pantera driver went!

So the engine pulls smoothly and cleanly after the intial tip-in stumble from idle to redline, but when lifting off the gas, the theatrics begin. The original exhaust manifolds/headers were of notoriously poor quality, and are prone to leaking. The ones on this car have several pinholes which manifest as noticeable ticking exhaust leaks at idle and when underway, and allow air to be sucked into the exhaust tract under deceleration, causing popping and banging backfires in the mufflers.

(The kids probably think that sounds cool, but we know better).

While it may be possible to remove these headers and weld up the holes and cracks, new ones will inevitably appear in short order. As the Rolls Royce salesman famously said, "They all do that, sir". Hall Pantera used to sell headers that bolt right up to the stock mufflers, free up a good 10-20 extra horsepower, and are completely devoid of the flaws inherent in the stock design. Sadly these have not been available new for a number of years, but they are pretty easy to find on the used market, for a very reasonable cost.

Everybody gets agitated about the Pantera's reputation for overheating. In 38 years of fooling around with these cars, I have *never* seen one that has a better-performing cooling system. Frankly, I was astonished at how effective it was. The early cars such as this were fitted with 230-degree gauges, meaning that when it is running at 200 degrees, the needle appears to be dangerously deflected to the right. One simply has to read the gauge properly to understand that even though the needle isn't pointing straight up and down, the displayed value is well within the realm of reason.

In fact, the car seems to run right at 180 degrees going down the road, which all well-behaved Panteras should do. What's astonishing is the fact that when sitting and idling after a freeway drive, the car resolutely refuses to heat up. The temperature (measured at the back of the radiator and on the pressure tank with a hand-held laser thermometer) rises to just above 180 degrees, at which point the radiator fans kick on (they both come on together, unlike the stock scheme where they were sequential). After a minute or so, the temperature drops to 170 degrees and the fans summarily switch off. They will continue to cycle on and off every few minutes, with the temperature holding steady, until the car is once again underway, at which point they switch off and stay off.

Amazing. Bordering on the supernatural….

The driving experience is as comfortable as a Pantera gets, which is to say, pretty darn okay. The seating position takes getting used to, as the front wheel encroaches on the pedal area and the seats aren't especially well-designed, but this is a characteristic of all Panteras. The ride quality of the aftermarket shocks is beyond reproach. Simply put, this is a Gran Turismo that is designed to be driven for hundreds of miles at a time, and the suspension is firm but compliant. There is a complete absence of clonks or groans or rattles anywhere in the cabin, apart from the squeaking clutch pedal (which can probably be fettled with a quick shot of lithium grease or WD-40).

The oversize side view mirrors really earn their keep when behind the wheel, affording a much better than normal view to the side and rear.

The shifter is rather heavy and not as distinct as I'm used to, although it went into all gears smoothly with no grinding or other untoward behavior. There is a trunnion bearing that supports the solid rod shift linkage, bolted to the left chassis rail just to the left of the engine. This was original filled with grease, and I suspect the grease in this one has long since turned to stone. There are various options available to address this, ranging from fitting a new OEM unit (which costs under $100), to more advanced heim-joint systems which deliver better performance for an extra few hundred dollars.

The air conditioning system components are all present, and all the electrical bits seem to function properly, but the A/C doesn't actually work. While it's possible it might work after a recharge, it's likely the gas would quickly leak out, so if an owner wanted working air conditioning he would have to commit to replacing all the hoses and having the system properly serviced.

The heater works extremely well as I found out by accident, because the heater had been left on by the former owner on his last drive, and it wasn't until I was almost back at the shop before I noticed and shut it off. The heater valve actually seems to do its job well, although they are notorious for leaking when shut off so the heater is always somewhat on. I wasn't able to really verify how well the valve shut off but I can tell you emphatically that it works great when it's open!

There is some sort of Sirus XM radio system installed, which I never bothered trying to figure out.

So, let me summarize this car's strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

NO rust! This is the single most important consideration when buying a Pantera
Fantastic brakes
Love-it-or-hate-it leather interior
Phenomenal cooling system (which is the second most important Pantera consideration)
Terrific paint, chrome and glass
Sorted, compliant suspension
17-inch wheels fitted with modern tires
Everything important works
Roasty toasty heater

Weaknesses:

Bogus design 17-inch wheels
Carburetor needs a rebuild and tune, both because it's too rich and because the accelerator pump doesn't work
A/C doesn't work
Inoperative taillight, side marker light and backup light
A handful of minor flaws in the paint
Somewhat vague and muddy shift lever action
Slightly underwhelming engine performance (better than new, but nowhere near that of a true hot rod Pantera)

Chronic exhaust leaks

It is not my role to attempt to be the arbiter of the financial value of this car—it will be worth whatever the highest bidder is willing to pay for it. I can say that even though its history is unknown prior to its purchase at the Mecum auction, the body is in absolutely phenomenal, rust-free condition, and much money has been spent recreationally since it was purchased in 100% original condition, in order to vastly improve the brakes, suspension and cooling systems, not to mention the paintwork.

If one wanted to drive a really nice Pantera and wasn't concerned with trying to blow modern 911s off the road, this car would be an excellent choice as-is. And given the plebian origins of the Ford engine, a substantial increase in horsepower could easily be had for less investment than your average tune-up on a contemporary Ferrari.

I am always available should you want to discuss this car further, and of course Bruce at Fantasy Junction will entertain any and all inquiries as well.