

CLASSIC DRIVER

Pagani Zonda S7.3 Roadster



The following is an extract from Simon Park's feature in *Auto Italia* magazine, April 2005. For access to the full feature, plus articles on the Silver Flag hillclimb, Vincent Gaye's gorgeous Ferrari 250GT SWB, two Ferrari 360 British GT Championship cars and much more, see www.auto-italia.co.uk



How many here-today-gone-tomorrow supercars have greeted a gaping world with fanfares of hyperbole, dripping with words like 'dream', 'vision', etc, these last 20 or so years? The Zonda isn't entirely immune to hype, but it's a road-going certainty it'll still be here tomorrow, and the day after. Over 50 coupes and Roadsters have emerged from San Cesario so far, and continue to do so at the rate of 15-17 a year. The world of the super-rich has taken the Zonda to its heart, and with good reason. This is an uncompromising machine with its priorities in the right place - the driving experience. The hi-tech spec, the figures, the materials, the shape - they're all other-worldly; but it is the sum of this extraordinary collection of parts that makes the Pagani special.

The Roadster looks lower, lithier, more linear than the coupe. Detail-wise, the simple circle is the Zonda's principle leitmotif - from tubular air vents which peer like inquisitive worms from atop the fascia, via the pedals and speakers, to the rear lights and - ahem - exhaust orifice. The interior has a retro feel that stops well short of pastiche. The big alloy toggles, all labelled

in English, are a delight; and the classically simple, squared-off Sparco wheel typifies the no-nonsense cabin ambience - oh-so stylish, but hardly sumptuous by prevailing £300k-plus standards. There are no airbags here, simple leather pull-handles for the doors, lots of exposed carbon-fibre and a good old-fashioned gearlever. The phrase 'a big Lotus Elise' kept coming to mind.

The clever removable roof conforms to the 'no frills' ethos. If sitting at the lights showing off your one-touch techno-top is your thing, then look elsewhere. The Zonda's rigid-carbon-fibre and floppy-fabric item lives in a drop-down compartment inside the front bonnet lid, and requires both a vertical posture and a certain facility with press-studs to fit. But fit it does, beautifully - Horacio Pagani drove one recently at 335km/h with the top in place to prove the point to a German client (was he *really* thinking about the roof at 210mph?). Sadly, I didn't get to go quite that quickly...

On the road

As we neared the lights, David Testi's frustration showed. Very suddenly, the V12 erupted, my vital organs hit my spine and the Zonda leapt towards the outside lane. At the same moment, the elderly Panda two cars in front did the same - in apparent slow motion - and, just as abruptly, the belts dug into my shoulders as David hit the brakes. It all took three seconds at most, and we never exceeded 30mph, but the sheer brutality of the Zonda's dynamics was scary even within the confines of this urban crawl.

But if the unfeasibly young Pagani test driver has to put up with the odd moment like this, still he'll get no sympathy from me. Once clear of the town, he was able to give vent to his frustration on a seductively empty 500m straight - and leave me gasping. We've worn out all the superlatives, we motor-noters fortunate enough to experience any of this new generation of crazy super-dupercars. Been in an E-type? A Miura? An

Evo V111? A 360? They don't prepare you for this - for the lung-crushing, pile-driver impact of a 7.3-litre AMG-tuned Mercedes V12 unleashing 550lb ft of torque and propelling 1280kg of carbon-fibre, steel and aluminium down a damp Modenese B-road at a rate which, quite literally, defies description.

I could even begin to understand the factory's initial reluctance to let some old English geezer out in a customer's car, Roadster number eight (there was no press car available), in these less-than-perfect conditions. But after some cajoling, form-filling and gentle finger-wagging ('not too fast, now') I was handed the keys. Thank yooouuu. David sat alongside me, but displayed admirable nonchalance throughout my 15 minute, er, saunter (in Pagani terms) around the company's prescribed test route.

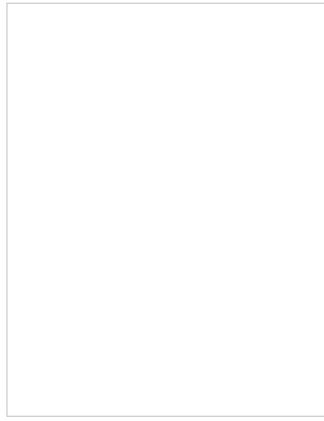


The Roadster boasts bigger 19in APP wheels and stiffer roll bars than the coupe, but engine and transmission remain unchanged, as do your 'driver aids' - simple ABS and traction control. Inside, a comfy seat and perfect driving position await. A starter button set into the gearlever knob brings the big Merc motor to life, an intense baritone throb sounding almost muffled, as if gagged by its carbon-fibre cocoon. Pre-flight briefing in mind, there was no question of unleashing it completely, but the slightest depression of the right foot gets it excited - even at 1000rpm the response is explosive. There's no substitute for cubes, but this is a simply stunning, state-of-the-art engine that combines brute force with breeding, not ignorance.

And the rest? Pick yourself a worn-out superlative. All the major controls are light and easy to use, the steering total perfection. The same goes for the ride - the alloy suspension is an object lesson in symbiotic springing and damping. It's firm, of course - but so, so composed. A couple of fast-ish sweeping bends were satisfying rather than sensational - the bloody thing didn't even notice them. Understeer, oversteer? Not relevant at real-world speeds, and on damp give-and-take roads with this much power on tap... don't even think of going there. The tiniest hint of scuttle-shake, perhaps? Well, when you run out of superlatives you do tend to nit-pick.

Both acceleration and braking are mind-boggling. A couple of overtakes allowed me to indulge myself shamelessly with quite unnecessary bootfuls of power. It made me laugh out loud, but also had me reflecting on just how much of the potential of cars like this is wasted - unusable, even - on the road. There are big differences between even the fastest road cars and purpose-built racers, and Pagani has developed a 600bhp 'track day' Zonda, called the Monza, which goes some way towards bridging the gap. But you'd need a race track to ask any really searching questions of even the 'standard' item.

Too fast, too big? Well, petite it ain't - at a lardy 6ft 9in across, its rear end wouldn't look out of place in a Dallas shopping mall. But the Zonda is so breathtaking in conception, so perfect in execution, so maddeningly faultless in all but the most trifling detail that you look even harder for things to criticise. A new design will appear in 2007, and will no doubt improve on the current one - though God knows how. Meanwhile, this is as good as it gets.



Words by Simon Park and pictures courtesy of Michael Ward and Auto Italia magazine.

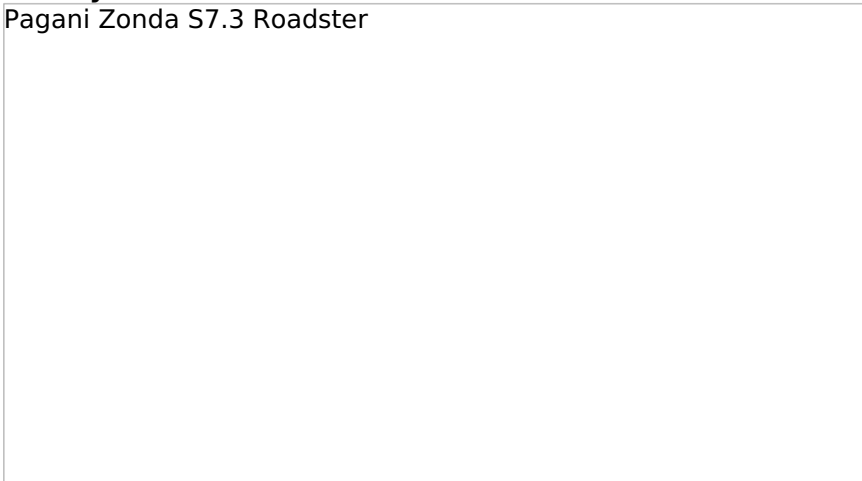
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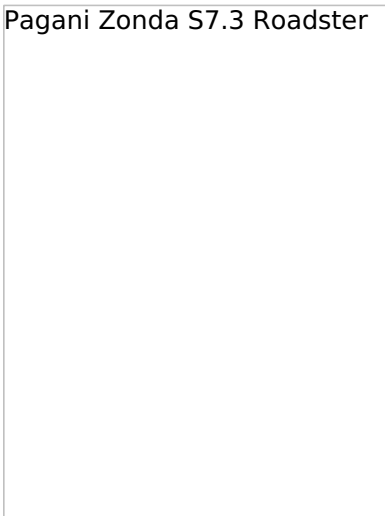
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