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Pick a PANTHER

If you're after Morgan-style motoring but with a difference then either a Lima or Kallista will see you sitting pretty...

Fancy Morgan-style motoring but on a miserly budget? Then there's really only one choice – the Panther Lima and the later Kallista.

Now while the name Panther might not mean much to many, it's one that dates back 40 years and was located at no less a place than Brooklands. Founder Bob Jankei had a passion for retro-style cars of the 30s, twinned with modern mechanicals, and his first effort was the Jaguar S100 looking J72, which was followed by the De Ville, which again used Jaguar engines and mechanicals and V12 if you wished! At £27,000, and using Austin 1800 doors, the De Ville was at one point the UK's most expensive car – dearer than a Rolls. Even Jankei's Dolomite Sprint-derived Rio saloon was more expensive than a Jaguar XJ12, when launched in 1975.

The Lima was Panther's alternative to a Morgan, although costing almost the same as one. It's a different story these days, although Panther prices are on the up. Best get one while you can, then!

History

The Lima was launched in 1976 and was a curious mix and match of

components. It was originally based upon a Vauxhall Magnum 2300 platform and running gear, while the 30s style appearance was dictated by MG Midget doors and windscreens, topped by a quality fibreglass body.

In a car weighing 862kg it gave the Lima excellent performance from the 108bhp engine, which became downright shattering when Panther offered a turbocharged alternative just two years later. At the same time, body making was transferred from Byfleet to Plymouth.

A popular car that was also available in automatic form, Lima was also sold via selected Vauxhall dealers. It's quoted that 897 were made before the Series 2 surfaced in 1979. This featured its own Panther-built box-section separate chassis (the Viva was due

to be discontinued soon) for better rigidity and handling. There was also a Turbo derivative but only 10 were made (out of 350 S2s in total) before the company went into receivership and was purchased by Jindo Industries in 1980, a Korean engineering giant.

Two years later the revamped Kallista (the name is Greek for small and beautiful) surfaced and was almost a new car, not least because the majority of the car was now made in Korea but still assembled in the UK. Now made of aluminium instead of GRP the Vauxhall bits and Midget doors were replaced by Ford Cortina and Capri running gear and bespoke bodywork. And yet, at just under £6000, it was £2000 less than a rival Morgan or Caterham and you only had to wait months, not years, to own one.



Vintage touches included running boards and wire wheels plus Panthers were pretty well built



yet were still faster than a twin carb Magnum 2300. In turbo form, Limas became real scalded cats, but melted their pistons, too.

Panthers are softer going and demand less from the driver than an equivalent Morgan, especially the ride. The Vauxhall chassis is far more compliant; the later larger, stiffer Kallista is better still and far less jolly. Both models feature a front chin spoiler which, while totally out of kilter with the vintage styling, is essential for stability, plus the harder riding Lima could be unusually tail-happy, too.

In terms of performance, Panthers are surprisingly evenly matched, giving TR6 levels

FAST FACTS

Best model	V6 Kallista
Worst model	Anything ropy
Budget buy	Lima
OK for unleaded?	Usually needs additive
Will it fit your garage?	L 3850 x W 1695mm
Spares situation	Pretty good
DIY ease?	Excellent
Club support	Strong
Appreciating asset?	Yes, especially Kallistas
Good buy or good-bye?	Former, sadly underrated

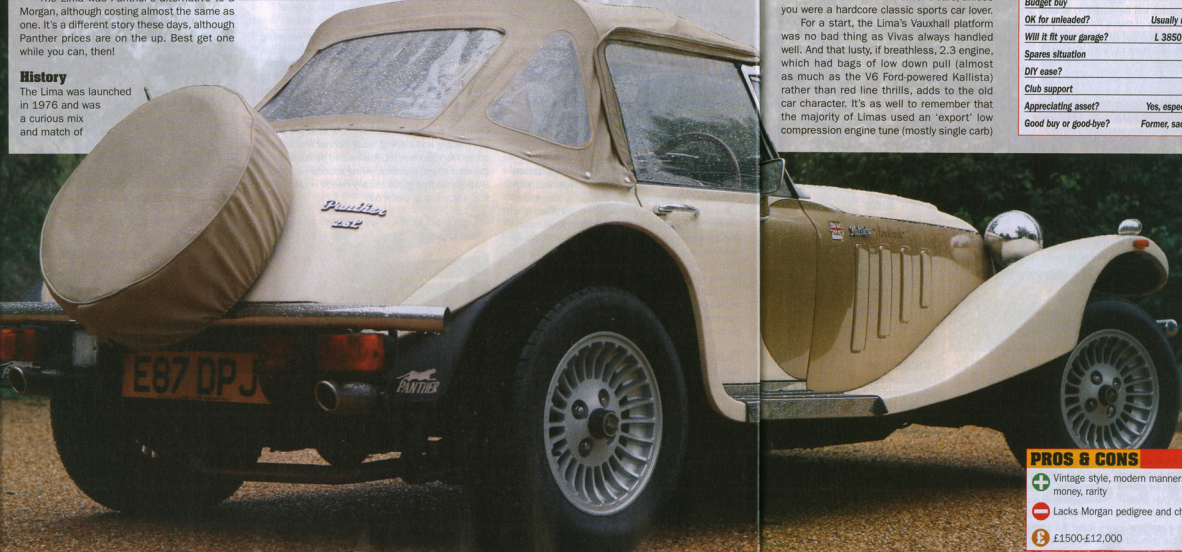
Driving

Comparisons between the Panthers and Morgans is inevitable and, while you can't knock Morgan's pedigree, you have to admit the Panthers were better driver's cars, unless you were a hardcore classic sports car lover.

For a start, the Lima's Vauxhall platform was no bad thing as Vivas always handled well. And that lusty, if breathless, 2.3 engine, which had bags of low down pull (almost as much as the V6 Ford-powered Kallista) rather than red line thrills, adds to the old car character. It's as well to remember that the majority of Limas used an 'export' low compression engine tune (mostly single carb)

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Limas feature fibreglass bodywork, so look for the usual cracking and crazing problems, along with poor panel repairs. Kallistas feature aluminium bodies which are more specialist and expensive to repair.
- Early Limas used the conventional platform taken from the Vauxhall Viva HC and, so long as rust has been kept at bay, it's easy to maintain and repairs panels are available. S2s have a dedicated box section chassis which is strong.
- Do the usual checks for poor accident and rust repairs. Some parts are available but you may have to fabricate certain items.
- Common rot spots on all include the chassis rails, rear axle location and the A and B posts. Midget doors were used on Limas and they rust. You can fit MG panels but they need modifying along the leading edge. It's not difficult, though.
- Mechanically all cars are straightforward and pose few worries. The slant four Vauxhall unit is long lasting although hardly smooth. Bearing rattle on cold start is due to oil pump location - but anything more than eight seconds before the oil light goes out points to pump or crank wear.
- Excessive wear is usually on the slant four's piston and bores although parts supply is reasonable but can be patchy. This engine was used in a variety of Vauxhalls as well as the Bedford van, which ironically will be the low compression engine.
- Cam cluster is quite rare but oil leaks from the cam carrier and rocker cover aren't. Cam belt breakages don't mean the pistons killing the valves. Exhaust manifolds bolts work loose and are awkward to get to.
- Turbo engines can destroy their pistons (especially if it's been converted to high compression) and turbo parts can be expensive if it needs an overhaul. Has it already been ditched (only 10 were made)?
- There's still a plentiful supply of Bjeldestein tuning parts on the market; big valve heads work extremely well on this engine as does a 28/36 DCD Weber; better than the Stromberg carbs, either single or twins.
- The Ford engines are quite robust. The CVH can smoke and fume and become tappety plus watch for failing head gaskets, too. Weber used on this engine carbs are expensive to overhaul if worn but alternatives are available.
- Cologne V6 is similar to earlier ohv Essex unit so is a simple engine to work on and, if carb not Bosch fuel injection feed, like the Capri 2.8, is that much easier to maintain.
- The V6 also has a tendency to overheat, especially if the radiator has been allowed to get clogged up. Blow head gaskets and cracked cylinder heads are symptoms to check for, so look for oil and water leaks in the engine bay along with white emulsion on the underside of the filler cap.
- Limas used Vauxhall transmissions and, while rarely quiet, are robust. Change quality is always loose but should select gears okay. Some folk fit the evergreen Sierra five-speeder but you can also use the Vauxhall 2F five-speed which was used on Droopsnot Frenzas, last of the line Vx4/90s and even some Bedford CF vans!
- One of the great things about the Kallista is its Capri transmission, boasting a slick gearchange and strong final drive which will take 100,000 miles if looked after and at this mileage, plus parts supply is better than old Vauxhalls.



PROS & CONS

- Vintage style, modern manners, value for money, rarity
- ➖ Lacks Morgan pedigree and choice
- £ £1500-£12,000



Panthers wear the retro look well and of good quality. This is a Kallista which shares few parts with earlier Lima

of performance. The Escort XR3 engine used in the Kallista feels crisper (0-60mph in 1.1 seconds) although not half as gutsy, but there again there's always the V6 option which goes really well and is almost up to Plus 8 performance levels, in injected guise anyway.

And it's this car the press really liked over the Lima, which, while it was applauded for its efforts, was fairly slated for a harsh ride and especially concerning some rear wheel steering which Car in 1978 (in a twin test with a Morgan) put down to the Lima being based upon a saloon floorpan geared up for more weight.

The re-engineered Kallista was all-round the better car. *Autocar* said that with its "Good looks and enjoyable handling" plus a useful £2000 saving over a Plus 8, "The Kallista offers enough of everything that any enthusiast could want..." although it did criticise the car's rather over-tall gearing which blunted the sporty feel.

Car thought it liked it too, but quite quickly changed its tune for reasons we don't know. In its 1984 test it hailed the Kallista as "raw but involving" and said it "must the world's best roadster buy, never mind Britain's". It added that the ride was "a lot better than a 'Mog' and better too than the gut-jarring Lima" and reckoned that, despite its reasonable price, the end result was "far better than kit car standard". Yet just three years later in '87 the Kallista had moved in its famous *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* car guide from Adequate to Boring and was originally labelled a "Senseless 30s replica, before the monthly simply summed Kallista up as "Pointless".

So, what changed all of a sudden, we wonder? The magazine's views on retro cars, perhaps, because the Kallista was by now well sorted and nicely trimmed. It thought that the Panther,



Lima cockpit uses Vauxhall bits; note rare automatic

which it conceded terrific value, was now a bit of a contradiction, but aren't all retro roadsters – even Morgans – to varying degrees?

Prices

Good value when new, Panthers still represent good value now. Costing roughly the same as Morgans when new - actually the £10,747 Panther Kallista was £1000 dearer than a Plus 4 in 1986 - they command similar used values. The Panther Owners' Club recently released its value guide and says, expect to pay £10,000 for a top Lima and £6000 for a good one and perhaps £1500 upwards for a project - later Kallistas are around £500-£2000 extra. If you like the challenge of a project then arguably the Lima, with its Viva running gear, is the logical choice, as parts will be easier to obtain, although given the rarity of these Panthers, plus the fact that they've been out of production for some two decades, it's best to buy a complete car in good condition.

VERDICT

A Morgan may be the real thing, but there's not much wrong in picking a Panther as your petrol-head pet either. The blend of retro looks with contemporary mechanicals make them very usable and fairly easy to maintain, while their lowly values can only rise over the years. And, as Panthers are delightfully different, you'd be crazy not to at least consider one.

THREE OF A KIND



Reliant Scimitar SSI

Launched around the same time as the Kallista, the Scimitar was more a modern 'Frogeye' rather than a pastiche roadster, although few folks liked the Reliant's gawky looks. But underneath lurks a fun, easy owning sportster that easily takes the place of a Midget for even less money. Escort CVH ones are peppy but the turbo'd Nissan -powered model is a real goer. Parts supply isn't too grim either.



Morgans

Well we couldn't leave out Malvern's marvels could we? Although specialist made, there's a very wide choice of models to suit all pockets; Plus 8s are most wanted but there's little wrong with the Plus 4 and 4/4 either, especially Fiat or Rover powered models. As you'd expect from a car that's still firmly vintage, it's a demanding drive but spares and support couldn't be better.



Caterhams

Even more rudimentary than the Morgan is the long strain of thrilling Caterhams and there's even more choice around so take your time and choose with care plus don't buy more performance than you really need either. The hardcore design and driving experience make the Panther better for touring but nothing beats the Caterham as a driver's car. Good spares and specialist support includes race series.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- The worst that's likely to materialise is worn synchromesh on second gear and vocal gearbox bearings. Accelerate hard in each gear and see if the car jumps out of cog. If it does the gearbox has had it and you can bank on having to spend around £400 on a replacement box and perhaps £250 for a diff.
- The Lima used Viva running gear and is simplicity itself. Worn ball joints, weak dampers and shot void bushes which locate the rear axle are the only points of concern and all are cheap and easy to put right.
- Likewise the brakes which are disc and drum. Handbrakes can be strangely ineffective mind. If you can't obtain Viva discs and callipers then look for Victor or even Ventora types which are upgraded and almost a straight swap.
- Kallistas use a mix of Cortina Mk3 /4/5 and Capri running gear so all the usual checks prevail. It's pure Cortina up front with Ghia gas filled dampers, incidentally. Also the spring rates are different so speak to owners club as ordinary "tina types may not be good enough.
- At the rear its Capri but the leaf springs have been ditched for coil springs. The self-adjusting brake mechanisms can seize up if the car hasn't been used much, but they're not inherently unreliable so should be trouble-free.
- On all models, a strong smell of petrol on the move indicates fuel leaks which can be common, originating either from corroded fuel lines or the tank itself (especially Limas for some strange reason).
- Trim is mix and match but decent quality. Limas use the Viva/Magnum instrument pack centrally mounted on the dash along with Vauxhall switchgear, while Kallistas use a more tailored style now Ford supplied, and the steering column is XR3 by the way. In other words, if you know what to look for you can find what you need at autojumbles.
- Most Panthers will feature wire wheels which suit the car of course. As always check for broken, damaged and rusty spokes plus see that the hub and splines haven't worn.
- Finally join the Panther Car Club (www.panthercarclub.com) who are a great bunch and will help you all they can search for the right car and parts. There's a fine social scene too to make the most of the car.