

# Graduation Time





While PRS's USA-made guitars cost the earth, its Korean-made SEs out-sell them and cost far less. Now, with a new makeover, they just got even better

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## PRS SE SANTANA, SE CUSTOM 24 & SE TREMONTI £849 EACH

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**W**hile PRS Guitars is coming to the end of its 31st year of producing industry-defining, top-notch production guitars, the SE ('Student Edition') range is only half that age, originally appearing after much deliberation in 2001. Back then, the much less established company worried whether a cheaper 'offshore' line would devalue and reduce sales of its USA models. It needn't have worried: over the years the SE range has become much more than a copy of the USA line, not least with a diverse range of signature models and SE-specific models.

But some have decried the SEs as the 'poor man's PRS', and to an extent that's true. But with top-quality Korean build and USA-conceived parts and pickups, the SEs remain affordable, highly giggable working guitars. Now, with 2017 around the corner, PRS has done a bit of a refresh with, for the first time, a Paul Reed Smith signature headstock logo over a vastly reduced SE motif, and various updates that make them, on paper at least, better than ever. Let's start at the beginning...

### SE Santana

Back in 2001, the first SE was a Santana signature, a rather dowdy-looking slab-body electric, more in the vein of a Les Paul Special than the company's flagship Custom. It was swiftly blinged up for the next version (that appeared in 2002) and from then on the SEs took flight.

In the flesh, the new headstock décor does look classier. The black signature script is in strong contrast to the unfaced headstock, even though that black plastic truss rod cover still looks over-large. With

an all-over gloss natural finish (aside from the yellow-stained top), you can clearly see how the construction differs from the USA model. The neck is one-piece and is very clearly quarter-sawn, but the body appears to be three pieces with clean but off-centre joins, while the 'bevelled' maple top (again, three-piece with off-centre joins) is faced with a subtly flamed veneer, far less figured than you'd see on any USA model. The glossed finish does appear thicker than the USA coating, too, but if you like your guitars box-fresh and shiny, you can't fault it.

Fretwire is a little wider but flatter than the standard USA gauge, yet extremely well installed and polished to a slippery mirror sheen. The 'old-school' solid bird inlays – so much a part of the PRS recipe – actually look quite vintage-like in their

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dark pearloid, and that final, ahem, 'bird' in front of the top fret indicates a full 24-fret complement (like the USA model), not the 22 of the previous SE Santana models. And along with its different shape, the Santana uses the shortest PRS scale of 622mm (24.5 inches) – as opposed to the main 635mm (25-inch) scale – again, just like the USA Santana model.

Another change to this new Santana is its pickups, which swap from the good-sounding, if slightly generic, 245 'buckers to open zebra-coiled SE Santana pickups (Korean-made replicas of those used on the USA guitar). These are controlled by a simple three-way toggle with closely placed volume and tone with dark amber speed knobs. The triangular rear cavity apes the original. Inside, we see a treble bleed cap on the volume and notice that – although there's no pull/push switch on the tone to activate any coil splits – the pickups have four conductors, so if you wanted that feature it'd be an easy enough aftermarket mod. While we're round the back, the vibrato cavity has a coverplate (the USA model doesn't) that isn't recessed but has a single open hole for string access. The unchamfered dark grey painted vibrato block appears to be steel and it's set as standard with four springs. Tuners and straps buttons are more generic than the PRS's USA spec, but at less than a quarter of the price of the USA piece, do we care? Like all SEs, of course, it comes with a very rugged gigbag.

### SE Custom 24

It took a while for the Custom 24 – PRS's original and still best-selling vision – to



1. Part of this refresh includes a Paul Reed Smith signature logo on the headstock like the pucker USA Core and S2 models
2. The volume and tone on the Santana are closely spaced and the pickups are selected by a standard toggle switch. There are no coil-splits, though
3. Another 2017 upgrade are the Korean-made Santana humbuckers: replicas of his USA signature pickups. Also, this new Santana has 24, not 22, frets – just like Santana’s USA signature

make it into the SE line, appearing in 2009, four years after the first flat-fronted 22-fret Custom had entered the range. Like the Santana, aside from the cosmetic logo change, we also have a pickup change. Instead of the quite generic ‘SE’ humbuckers, we now have Korean-made versions of PRS’s latest date-series humbuckers, the 85/15s. They look like conventional uncovered ‘buckers, unlike the USA versions with their rectangular bobbins, and despite their different specs, they look identical to those on the Santana.

Of course, the guitar’s shape, conceived after the Santana shape, is well known as the PRS outline with its longer upper horn, less pinched waist and squarer, more Fender-like base. Where the Santana is virtually natural all over, the Tobacco Sunburst finish here has a well-applied dark ‘burst to its top (with natural edge ‘binding’, of course), while the back, sides, neck back and headstock have a deep brown, slightly translucent colour.

The L-shaped rear control cavity is just as tidy, although along with the treble bleed

cap we also get the partial tap circuit on the pull/push tone control. This means that instead of switching off one coil entirely, like a standard coil split, some of that dumped coil – approximately 10 per cent (neck), 16 per cent (bridge) – remains in circuit. This adds a little thickness and volume to the split sound and, in theory, a little hum-cancellation, too. It’s a simple but effective change here that’s been a feature of the USA guitars for some years now, and we believe it’s the first time it’s been used on an SE.



### SE Tremonti Custom

The third main PRS shape landed PRS in a whole lotta trouble back in the early Noughties, and while it's always been an artist favourite, the Singlecut has ebbed and flowed in the USA Core line and has actually been more visible at this SE level. That said, before this reshuffle, there were five Singlecut models in both lines, and from the initial raft of new SE models that drops to three: the 245, the Zach Myers and this Tremonti model.

It's an all-round bigger deepened and weightier piece, but that's the point – certainly for artists like Mark Tremonti. Its single-cut *with* vibrato mix remains pretty unique (there's no Stoptail option here, unlike the USA model), and like the other models here, we get a pickup change from those 245 humbuckers of the previous model to the SE Tremonti pair fitted here: you got it, Korean-made versions of Mark T's USA-made signature pickups. The toggle-switch is Les Paul-style on the upper shoulder, although the four-control layout is different to the classic Gibson drive: the two controls closest to the bridge are the pickup volumes (the neck pickup volume is the highest); the outer two controls are the tones. Like the Santana, there are no coil-splits, but, again, the humbuckers are four-conductor if you want to get out that soldering iron.

The Tremonti is not only noticeably heavier, but thicker, too, at just under 57mm – pretty much the same girth as the USA model. Earlier SE Singlecuts were a lot thinner. Compare that with the Custom, which measures just under 49mm, and the Santana, which is just under 47mm in depth. So, while the maple caps are pretty similar in thickness (on average 13.7mm), the Tremonti's additional depth comes from the extra approximately 9mm of its mahogany back.

### Sounds

Aside from its very slightly 'long neck' strapped-on feel, compared with a Strat,

for example, the 24-fret Custom remains one of the most comfortable feel-at-home guitars money can buy. The volume control falls under your fingers, and the pickup switch and tone lie in the arc of your hand. The vibrato might not have the locking tuners of the USA models, but with the usual string stretching you can't ask for more, and there's a crisp, clear ring to the unplugged resonance coupled with the sort of neck feel and setup that disappears – you just get on and play.

The Santana, by comparison, has a slight neck pull strapped on, but it is far from unbalanced and feels a little more compact. In addition, you do notice that it has the trimmest weight of our trio. The unplugged response of the Santana is very similar to the Custom and the neck feels subtly, but noticeably, fatter in the hand.

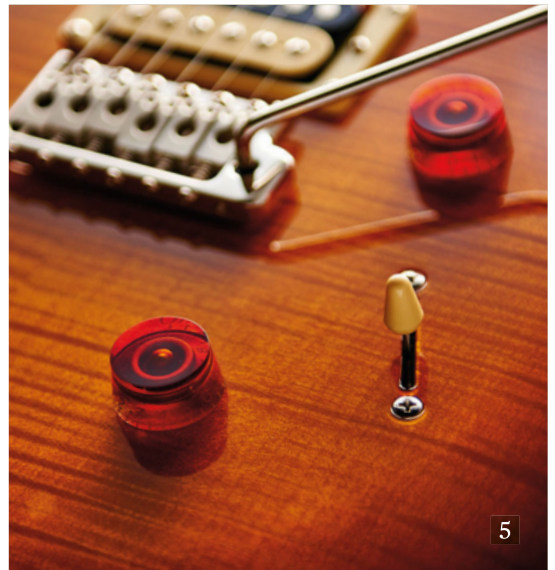
The Tremonti might be the weightiest on test here, but having used an early Singlecut of similar weight for years, it does feel like home to this writer. It's very centred on the strap, less feline than the Custom, and there's more than a hint of extra sonic depth, even before we plug in.

The Tremonti has the most Gibson-esque voice, certainly in the neck position where the extra lows created by the construction bring in a sound that's at once bluesy and jazzy and old-school. Kick in the bridge, however, and prepare to rock!

Of course, we'd like to say that we can't hear any difference between our reference 2016 USA McCarty and this SE Custom, but that would be a fib. Initially, the Custom seems a little under-powered until we notice the pickup heights are much lower than the quite closely placed 58/15s on our McCarty. Evening those up makes a real difference and we close the gap a little. This new Custom certainly retains the chameleon-like character of the USA model and there's a relaxed midrange that doesn't dominate: gritty rhythm tones falling easily into a classic rock genre, while the neck sounds fluty, expressive and definitely in the PAF-alike ballpark. The coil-splits sound a little thinner than those on the USA model. If you want more diversity, this could be a good thing. Conversely, they sound a little thin with a little more edge and brittleness, especially on cleaner amp tones. Comparisons aside, this is one of the best-sounding SEs we've played, especially after tweaking those pickup heights and installing some heavier strings.

The Santana's voice is different from the off with the bridge pickup hitting our amp hard. Switching to a dirtier amp voice, there's plenty of Santana-esque mid-focus, a very slight 'cocked wah' tonality that sounds fat and fruity. It's less of a favourite for cleaner voices, lacking a little fluidity, whereas both the McCarty and to a lesser extent the SE Custom sound very creamy and more musical. In a more gained environment, though, like we said, there's a lot to like about the vibe, feel and sound of this one.

The Tremonti has arguably the most Gibson-esque voice, certainly in the neck position where the extra lows created by the construction bring in a quite familiar sound that's at once bluesy and jazzy and – surprisingly perhaps – old-school: 'classic' might be a better word. Kick in the bridge, however, and prepare to rock! It's a powerhouse that, like the Santana, has plenty of midrange poke – it loves gain but still retains a bite. Of course, a single-cut



- 4. Tuners on all the SEs are good units, although the majority of the USA Core models use open-backed locking types
- 5. The volume and tone controls here have wider spacing along with a three-way lever pickup selector. However, unlike the other guitars, we get some partial coil-split sounds via the pull/push switch on the tone control here
- 6. Again, we have a pickup upgrade: this year's SE Custom 24 uses Korean-made replicas of the open-coil 85/15s used on the USA Core Custom 24

with vibrato isn't an everyday piece and while, for some, it's like putting jam on your porridge instead of salt, it's a crackin' combination that adds subtle shimmer to the pushy pickup mixes, especially with delays and reverbs to the fore, or can be used for more gymnastic techniques. Unlike the other two, we also have a back route, so the vibrato upbend range is increased with just a shade under a full tone upbend on the top E and pretty much down to slack, certainly on the lower strings. The upbend on the Custom is closer to a semi-

tone on the top E and around a tone on the G, whereas the Tremonti can take that string up nearly a major 3rd. We have to say, though, with minimal string stretching, this is a very in-tune system.

### Verdict


As ever, the SE models give the player some of the PRS experience in the general feel and look of the instruments, a hugely careful build and sounds that go a long way to emulating those loftily priced Core models. Yes, they feel more generic, but we

can't remember playing a bad one over the past 15 or so years. The new SE Custom is case in point: it's a lot of guitar for the player who needs a wide palette of sounds. Also, the Korean versions of the 85/15 pickups nail a more classic humbucking sound compared with the older, mid-focused PRS sounds. Bundle in that superb vibrato, the lively resonance and easy playability, and it has to be money well spent.

The Santana certainly has its own vibe, and for fruitier, gained sounds it has a strong voice, although coil-splits would be



a welcome addition and would definitely increase your options. With more low-end, the Tremonti really can sound huge and the bridge pickup is well voiced to send the mildest of amps into overdrive. But it has a duality that lies in its much more vintage-y neck humbucker: with a little shimmer from the vibrato, it can sound extremely retro and less rock. Yes, our sample was a little overweight, but with such a strong voice, that perceived ‘minus’ actually seems to add to the powerful delivery.

All three guitars are also great platforms for those of us who like to add our own DIY mods: from simple coil-split additions to the Santana and Tremonti, or more fundamental pickup swaps or tuner upgrades, these models all have considerable potential. Each of the models is also extremely stable, good acoustically voiced instruments that are not only serious ‘student’ guitars but have plenty of appeal for the more seasoned player who is on a budget. A better deal? Definitely. 



**PRS SE Santana, SE Custom 24 & SE Tremonti dimensions**

(all dimensions in mm unless stated)



**SANTANA**

**CUSTOM 24**

**TREMONTI**

|                                |          |             |          |
|--------------------------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| <b>Nut width</b>               | 43       | 43.46       | 43.25    |
| <b>12th fret width</b>         | 54.6     | 53.51       | 53.7     |
| <b>1st fret depth</b>          | 21       | 20.6        | 20       |
| <b>12th fret depth</b>         | 23.7     | 22.4        | 21.8     |
| <b>Weight (kg/lb)</b>          | 3.58/7.9 | 3.82/8.4    | 4.23/9.3 |
| <b>String spacing bridge</b>   | 52.5     | 52.5        | 52.5     |
| <b>Bridge PU DC res (ohms)</b> | 12.62k   | 8.52k/5.65k | 14.91k   |
| <b>Neck PU DC res (ohms)</b>   | 7.57k    | 7.8k/4.71k  | 8.17k    |



- 7. An upgrade to the SE Tremonti is its Korean-made versions of Mark's signature USA pickups
- 8. Again, despite the vibrato, this SE Tremonti has non-locking tuners along with a friction-reducing nut
- 9. The pickup volume and tone controls are laid out in a different diamond placement to Gibson's classic configuration



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### PRS SE SANTANA

**PRICE:** £849 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Mahogany with carved-flame maple-faced maple top  
**NECK:** Mahogany, Santana profile, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")  
**NUT:** Friction reducing  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, old-style bird inlays (pearloid), 254mm (10") radius  
**FRETS:** 24, medium  
**HARDWARE:** USA-designed PRS vibrato with PRS logo'd die-cast tuners  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x PRS-designed SE Santana humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The USA Santana signature starts at £3,649  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Santana Yellow (as reviewed), Orange

8/10

**PROS** Tidy build; pre-Custom vibe; excellent vibrato and fat sounds

**CONS** The addition of coil-splits would've increased your sound options here



### PRS SE CUSTOM 24

**PRICE:** £849 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Mahogany with carved-flame maple-faced maple top  
**NECK:** Mahogany, wide-thin profile, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")  
**NUT:** Friction reducing  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, old-style bird inlays (pearloid), 254mm (10") radius  
**FRETS:** 24, medium  
**HARDWARE:** USA-designed PRS vibrato with PRS logo'd die-cast tuners  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x PRS-designed SE 85/15 humbuckers, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (w/ pull/push coil-split)  
**OPTIONS:** The 22-fret Custom 22 (£849) has same specs w/ toggle switch and no coil-splits  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The USA S2 Custom 24 costs £1,549 and the Core Custom 24 starts at £3,300  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Tobacco Sunburst (as reviewed), Scarlet Red, Trampas, Whale Blue



9/10

**PROS** Classic sounds; partial coil-splits, excellent vibrato; affordable version of PRS's classic solidbody

**CONS** PRS's maple/birds aesthetic isn't to everyone's taste



### PRS SE TREMONTI CUSTOM

**PRICE:** £849 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Mahogany with carved-flame maple-faced maple top  
**NECK:** Mahogany, wide-fat profile, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")  
**NUT:** Friction reducing  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, old-style bird inlays (pearloid), 254mm (10") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium  
**HARDWARE:** USA-designed PRS vibrato with PRS logo'd die-cast tuners  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x PRS-designed SE Tremonti humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The USA S2 Singlecut costs £1,549; the USA Mark Tremonti signature starts at £3,349  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Gray Black (as reviewed), Vintage Sunburst

8/10

**PROS** Wide contrast sounds with low-end power; wide travel vibrato

**CONS** It's weighty; no coil-splits or hard-tail option; not everyone will enjoy the control layout