

ESP LTD M-330R, VIPER-330, EC-330 & H-330NT £625, £595, £559 & £529  
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS

# ESP LTD M-330R, Viper 330, EC-330 & H-330NT

**£625, £595, £559 & £529**

LTD introduces five new models of a stripped-down spec and boasting ESP-branded active pickups to ease the pressure on the wallet. We give four of them a test drive...

*by Simon Bradley*

**L**ike most mainstream guitar companies, ESP constantly strives to identify gaps in both the market as a whole and within its own catalogue; after all, where there's opportunity, there's the chance to make a nice wedge. Thanks to the endorsement of a number of A-list metal bands, not least Metallica, Slayer and Children Of Bodom, the vibe of many ESP and the firm's lower priced LTD guitars is intertwined with the dark art of high-octane rock – boasting active pickups, fast necks and a sturdy construction.

This shiny new Indonesian-made LTD 330 Series subscribes wholeheartedly to the ideal. Aimed at players who are meagre of pocket but flush with ambition, it fits snugly between the cheaper end of the catalogue and those models suited to semi-pro players with a bigger budget. Each of the five incumbents feature a bolt-on neck, just one choice of finish per model and come loaded with the new ESP-branded active ALH-200 pickups.

"The new ALH-200 set features ceramic bar magnets to cover any string spacing and

to give plenty of punch along with the moderate output coil windings," ESP tells us.

"Although active, we wanted to keep more of an organic sound, so players will notice that our pickups do offer a moderate amount of gain, and we feel that players can actually use our active pickups with their existing amps and not feel like they are completely changing their sound."

Do these guitars offer yet more choice or further muddy the waters? Let's take a closer look at four of the five new models to find out.







## M-330R £625

**T**he M Series offers a more than reasonable compromise for Metallica fans who aspire to owning a full-on Kirk Hammett model but can't afford it – the M-330R is unique in the range in that it's the only one to feature a reverse headstock. Along with the MH-330FR, it also offers a double-locking vibrato – a Floyd Rose Special – and a traditional three-way toggle selects the pickups.

The rosewood 'board is bound in white, and the maple neck itself is cut out from a spread of maple comprising several 19mm sections. It offers certainly the widest and flattest feel of all four guitars here and, as with all 330 models, it is a bolt-on. The heel has been shaped to ease access to the higher frets, which leads to a trapezoid rather than rectangular four-screw neck plate, and the mahogany body has been finished in the only possible hue: gloss black.

### Sounds

Active pickups are more versatile than many give them

credit for – they have any number of uses outside of the metal tones they are often associated with. But that said, our first port of call for our sound test is to dial-in a scooped crunch. Initially, the bridge pickup sounds too bright and provides less in the way of bass depth and girth. In addition, the middle seems overpowering at times, giving less of a Black album-style crunch and more of an unattractive bark.

More cleanly, the neck pickup possesses a surprisingly tuneful Strat-like quality and, when used totally clean, the toggle's central position is genuinely impressive for picked notes and cool chords.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Looks good; simple layout; decent clean sounds

**We dislike:** The largely unconvincing metal tones

**Guitarist says:** As a metal guitar it's disappointing, but clean tones are decent

## Viper-330 £595

**T**his all-black, SG-esque Viper is pure Tony Iommi and it doesn't get much more metal than that.

Strapped on it's slightly less neck-heavy than an SG, as the mahogany body is reassuringly weighty, while the offset horns are a nicely modern twist.

The control panel adds a master tone alongside a volume and three-way toggle, and the rosewood 'board's white binding has been uniformly and nicely scraped back between the frets. Its feel, although wide, is more akin to that of a Gibson Les Paul Classic in as much as the perceived breadth is counteracted by a smooth 'U' profile and, when strummed acoustically, the inherent resonance promises good things to come.

### Sounds

Again, starting with a high-gain tone, the Viper is immediately fuller sounding than the M perhaps due to the hard tail and all-mahogany construction, but that's not to say that the exaggerated

middy character has been dispensed with. Muted riffs tend to be a little too flat with poor string separation, and the treble can be overly abrasive in too non-musical a manner. That said, the tone control is adept at smoothing some of the edges when required.

Where the Viper has more success is with classic rock, and John Sykes-esque riffs – all pinched harmonics and huge chords – are convincing enough. Frustratingly, the strident high-end prevents us from nailing that lovely AC/DC rhythm sound, but clean, funky strums benefit from the bite, especially when using both pickups together.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Comfortable to play; has plenty of vibe; cool neck

**We dislike:** Again, those high gain tones

**Guitarist says:** With a sleek neck and dark looks, it's just the sonic performance that needs work



## EC-330 £559

**E**SP's single-cutaway EC and Eclipse ranges include some lovely guitars – James Hetfield, for example, swears by his Truckster and Iron Cross. When set-up well, they produce a wonderful noise.

Here the complement of controls is further expanded to include independent volume pots alongside a master tone and, at 49mm at its thickest, the mahogany body is sufficiently slender to reduce weight without, in theory, having an adverse on the tone. It also offers some smooth contours, including some shaping around the entire neck plate and behind the cutaway – there's even a subtle central arch.

The maple neck is nicely finished and gives a profile that on the spec sheets is stated as being the same as the Viper but which, to us, feels slightly thinner and more compact, especially at the lower frets.

### Sounds

Tone-wise the EC sits between the M and Viper – it has less depth than the latter but a

better overall balance than the former, and the lightweight construction makes it arguably the nicest to play here.

The now-familiar theme of a less convincing metal tone continues here, and we're beginning to have some doubts about these pickups. We did compare all four guitars with some EMG-equipped models and when you require tight aggression and fire to your riffs, the EC just doesn't cut it.

At lower gains, things perk up and on the off chance an all-black guitar such as this screams lighter, bouncier tones, there are plenty to enjoy in the EC-330. We're not sure that's the target market here.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Lightweight; comfortable to play; extensive controls

**We dislike:** The lack of finish options is most evident here

**Guitarist says:** Again, the EC is fine for cleans, but the metal tones let it down

## H-330NT £529

**W**hy this was deemed to be the one to be finished in snow white is anyone's guess, but the change does allow for other variations in livery. We last saw the mother-of-toilet seat binding on an ESP Formula-II we reviewed in 2010, although the masking here seems to be a little slapdash, especially around the cutaways.

The mahogany body joins the 648mm (25.5-inch) scale maple neck in the customary bolt-on manner, and there's a lip to the rosewood 'board too. The style of inlays here harks back to ESP's earliest days and, as with just about every other modern LTD guitar, the model number graces the 12th fret.

ESP-branded tuners adorn each headstock, including the H-330's cool version, and as with all hardtail Horizons, the strings are secured through the body by six coordinating black nickel ferrules.

### Sounds

Now we're talking. With the only major difference in build here being the through-body

stringing, we can assume that it's made all the difference. Metal tones are full, expressive and cutting, with the much-reduced middle hump adding to, rather than detracting from, the experience. The neck pickup is a usable mix of warmth and high-end cut for Hammett-style solos.

The neck binding makes the side dots quite difficult to see, which is an oversight, but it's still very playable indeed.

Lowering the gain reduces the depth but leaves a disproportionate level of treble, so bluesier styles are better served, again, by flicking to the neck pickup to take advantage of its inherent roundness.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** A much improved selection of metal tones

**We dislike:** Just some finishing niggles

**Guitarist says:** Probably the best sounding guitar of the quartet, albeit with certain issues too



## ESP LTD M-330R

**PRICE:** £625  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**BODY:** Mahogany  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Locking/43mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 24, extra jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Floyd Rose Special double-locking vibrato, ESP tuners – all black nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Two ESP ALH-200 active humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, master volume  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** M-1000 (£1,049), M-300FM (£699) and M-100FM (£359)  
**FINISHES:** Black only  
**Selectron**  
**01795 419460**  
**www.espguitars.com**

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★☆

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



## ESP LTD Viper-330

**PRICE:** £595  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**BODY:** Mahogany  
**NECK:** Mahogany, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 628mm (24.75 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Graphite/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 24, extra jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic-style bridge and stud tailpiece, ESP tuners – all black nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Two ESP ALH-200 active humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, master volume, master tone  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Viper-1000 (£999), Viper-300M (£679) or Viper-100FM (£299)  
**FINISHES:** Black only

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★☆

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



## ESP LTD EC-330

**PRICE:** £559  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**BODY:** Mahogany  
**NECK:** Mahogany, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 628mm (24.75 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Graphite/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 24, extra jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic-style bridge and stud tailpiece, ESP tuners, all black nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Two ESP ALH-200 active humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, two volumes, master tone  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** EC-1000 (from £949), EC-401 (£739) or EC-10 (£179)  
**FINISHES:** Black only

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★☆

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



## ESP LTD H-330NT

**PRICE:** £529  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**BODY:** Mahogany  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Graphite/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 24, extra jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic-style bridge, ESP tuners – all black nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Two ESP ALH-200 active humbuckers, three-way blade selector, volumes, tone  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** H-1007 (£999), H-1001FM (£879), H-351FR (£789) or H-51 (£249)  
**FINISHES:** Snow white only

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★☆

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★

## The Rivals

There's a huge choice of suitable rivals to the four guitars that we have here on test, so here's a cross-section of what's out there. For starters, **Schecter's Blackjack ATX C-1** (£699) boasts Duncan active Blackout pickups as standard while the **Jackson DK2** (£682) is a straightforward pro rock axe that won't let you down. The through-neck **Ibanez ICT700** (£699) is a shape guitar with which to frighten the children, while the **Epiphone Tony Iommi G-400** (£399) is a truly doom-laden SG, loaded with USA Gibson humbuckers and dripping with dark majesty.

## Verdict

Any attempt by a company of ESP's stature to provide guitars that are more affordable should be applauded and the prices of the 330 models are certainly getting closer to a figure most players could justify.

However, this perceived value is counteracted by a couple of fundamental compromises; namely the bolt-on neck, which to be fair is front and centre in the spec sheets, and the flat and uninspiring performance of the new ESP pickups.

The appeal of a guitar sound is wholly subjective yet, for the metal tones that we feel should certainly be present on these models, the performance just isn't good enough, especially

when compared with an EMG-loaded guitar.

Here's the issue as we see it. On the face of it the M-330R is a no frills hard rock and metal axe that, at a full RRP of £625, is arguably at the top end of what a player would want to pay for an Indonesian guitar. However, the M-300FM that sits next to it the LTD catalogue is priced at £699, and offers not only through-neck construction and a flamed maple top, but an EMG 81 pickup set too. It plays, looks and sounds better than the 330 and, once you've factored in the exceedingly generous deals that are available in the stores and online the moment, it's

unlikely it'll come in at much more than the 330's SRP.

This can be applied to all four of our review models and their counterparts in the LTD stable and, based on our experiences with them, we really can't see why they'd be top of anyone's shopping list when better LTD guitars are available just close to the same price, let alone instruments from other brands.

It goes without saying that you should try them to see and hear for yourself, and, as we've said, anything that's made more affordable is admirable. But if it were us, we'd look elsewhere in the LTD catalogue for guitars that are superior in just about every way. **G**