

15 Riders Rate 13 Bikes — Simultaneously

Economy Run offers unique opportunity for comparative testing

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How does a Kawasaki 1000 compare to a Honda 1000? How does the Suzuki 550 compare with the Yamaha 650? How does the Harley FLH compare with anything?

Those are interesting questions for which no answers are available. Few motorcyclists, including professional test riders, have the opportunity to simultaneously rate many different machines on a specific point by point basis.

Although the test riders were not professionals, a unique comparison-test opportunity was presented during the Western-Eastern Road and Racing Association (WERRA)/Motorcycle Economy Run last fall (see *Motorcycling In The Public Eye - Rider*, Dec. '77).

The ride was conducted with 13 new bikes ranging in size from 400 to 1200cc engine displacement, on public roads, with controlled speeds and rider changes. The requirement was for each rider to be on each bike an equal amount of miles. This was for fuel consumption figures, but it also worked out perfectly for machine evaluations. In most instances, the time each rider spent on each bike was not all at one stretch; it was broken up into two or three different riding periods, frequently not in the same day. This way each rider got a chance to try each bike under different conditions of terrain, road and weather. As a result the bike evaluations are based on com-

prehensive riding experiences. An aspect of the evaluation that makes it even more interesting is that these were not professional testers, rather a group of riders with considerable differences in riding experience, physical size, age and motorcycle preferences.

Bikes owned (but not ridden on the run) included three Hondas, two Suzukis and one BMW, Triumph, Yamaha and Kawasaki. Only one rider owned a dirt bike, but there were five Harley owners who bordered on the fanatical in their brand loyalty. This appears to be the only real qualifying element in the overall evaluations. In an attempt to dilute this bias, at least in the Harley-Davidson FLH evaluation, the one where this prejudice seemed to show up the strongest, three sets of figures are offered: the combined values, with the five owner's evaluations removed, and the five owner's evaluations separate.

One of the reasons offered for being on the run by many of the riders was a chance to ride and evaluate the different bikes for their own purposes, that is, to select their next bike. The run was an ideal setting for this with a chance to ride the different bikes one after the other during the nine days of steady riding required to make the run.

While the route was primarily over interstate roads, it also included a fair amount of 2-lane roads, city streets and

urban areas, and enough hills and mountain grades to give most a chance to try the different bikes under these conditions. There was a fair amount of riding after dark and the weather ranged from bright sunshine to rainstorms and even heavy crosswinds across the desert. Speeds were conservative and there was little chance to do much spirited cornering. Basically it was typical US touring conditions.

Each rider filled out a form or made notes at the end of the day on the bikes ridden that day. The forms covered four major categories: Performance, Comfort, Ease of Operation and Appearance and Quality, plus plenty of room for comments. Under the major categories the following items were asked to be graded:

Performance. Acceleration, braking, handling (city and highway), horn and lights.

Comfort. Seat, pegs, bars, grips, vibration, exhaust sound, engine noises, throttle spring, suspension compliance (front and rear).

Ease of Operation. Brakes (front and rear), clutch, gear shift, hand controls, instrument legibility.

Appearance and Quality. Paint and decals, engine, chrome, and overall looks.

The following grading system was used: 1, very bad; 2, bad; 3, poor; 4, acceptable; 5, good; 6, very good; and 7,



excellent. With 13 bikes and 15 riders participating in the evaluation project, the number of evaluation sheets was 195 — quite a bundle of data. Each sheet was averaged for the major categories and this was used to get an overall value for that rider and that bike. Then these were

averaged to arrive at a value for each bike in each category as well as overall. The actual numerical difference between the bikes is small, but they indicated decided differences in the rider's opinions of the bikes, and these are backed up quite heavily by the comments offered by

the riders. A few of these comments are included, especially the ones that occurred more than once from different riders.

Some of the results are rather surprising, while other aspects of them are

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DATA TABLE

BRAND	MODEL	OVERALL	PERFORMANCE	COMFORT	EASE OF OPERATION	QUALITY AND APPEARANCE
BMW	R80/7	5.9	6.3	5.7	5.7	5.9
Harley	FLH	5.7	5.3	6.0	5.3	6.2*
		5.3	4.9	5.6	4.7	5.3**
		5.9	6.5	6.4	6.8	6.4***
Harley	XLCR	4.7	4.9	3.7	4.7	5.3
Honda	GL1000	6.0	5.9	5.7	6.1	6.3
	750A	5.7	5.3	5.5	5.8	6.2
	400A	5.6	5.5	5.4	5.7	5.7
Kawasaki	LTD 1000	6.2	6.4	6.2	6.1	6.2
	650	5.7	6.0	5.5	5.7	5.6
Moto Guzzi	850	4.6	4.8	4.0	4.5	5.1
Suzuki	750	6.0	6.3	5.9	5.9	5.8
	550	5.9	6.2	5.8	6.0	5.7
Yamaha	650	5.2	5.2	4.8	5.3	5.2
	400	5.3	5.6	5.1	5.6	4.9

*Total Sample

**Non-owners

***Test riders who own Harley-Davidson machines

Motorcycles were rated on a 1 to 7 scale: 1, very bad; 2, bad; 3, poor; 4, acceptable; 5, good; 6, very good; 7, excellent. Comparative results between different brands may be noted by reading vertically along the number columns. Comparison results with the same machine, but in different categories of performance, may be noted by reading across the table.

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pretty much as expected. For instance, it's not surprising that the smaller bikes didn't fare as well as the larger ones primarily because they were evaluated under long-distance touring conditions. Incidentally, the bikes were all box-stock as they would come from the dealer, so this meant no fairings except on the two Harley-Davidsons. The big FLH (Harley 74) had the saddlebags and fork-mounted fairing it is sold with and the cafe racer style XLCR had the quarter fairing that comes on it stock. The ratings tended to be on the high side, but this is understandable because the raters are all enthusiastic riders. It also points up the fact that nearly all the bikes on the market today are very good motorcycles.

The overall table places the bikes in the order of their respective ratings. The exception is the Harley FLH; it is placed where the non-owners rated it. Owner vs non-owner ratings are covered in the data table. If we include Harley owner's evaluations in with the other ones on the FLH, it moves up into fourth spot for a 3-way tie with the Honda 750A and Kawasaki 650 in the overall rating table. The actual figures for each bike in all the major categories are listed in a separate table in addition to the tables showing how they compared in each major category. Of interest is the subtle changes in order that occur when the bikes are compared under the different categories.

While the performance order is quite similar to the overall ratings, there are some differences. BMW moved up a position, while the Gold Wing moved down three positions. The Yamaha 400 moved ahead of both Honda automatics, the 400A and 750A. In view of the ratings, a couple of bikes deserve a short explanation. The Harley XLCR is not and never

was intended to be a touring bike. It is a pure sport bike with its short bars and lean-over riding position, but in fairness to the riders, they evaluated it based on their actual experiences, which were purely touring, so it shows up very poorly. It's more a case of the wrong use rather than the bike being as poor as indicated.

The second bike is the Moto Guzzi. Here the case is reversed. The bike was not setup for touring with a fairing or shield, so the riding position turned out to be equally uncomfortable as tested since the riders had to sit too upright because of the bars and floorboards. Without a fairing or shield it placed undue strain on the rider. These two points are clearly illustrated by the comfort ratings.

The ease of operation listing showed some minor shifts in the relationship of the different bikes. The Gold Wing moved up to share the top spot with the LTD and the Suzuki 550 and 750 swapped positions.

The quality and appearance listings show even further shifts in the order of the bikes. The Gold Wing moved into the top slot by itself, reflecting in part, how much its appearance appeals to the average American rider. One point that's surprising is the number three slot for BMW. It would appear it got there because of its appearance rather than any defects in its quality. Notice that positions three through six are only separated by 1/10th of a point each, so all can be considered quite good in quality evaluations.

Looking over all of the major category ratings, the Suzuki was one of the big surprise bikes on the run, that and the Kawasaki LTD because of how well everyone liked it. These comments reflected this view: "excellent, thinking of trading in my Gold Wing on one," "I ride a Harley and find it hard to admit I can't find any faults," "absolutely beautiful," and "good handling and very fast." The following two comments appeared on several sheets: "great machine," and "best on run." While the LTD is not only a very powerful bike, it is a mildly customized model and the rider's reactions were certainly influenced by this, but the Suzuki 550 is a little different. It is not the most powerful, the most expensive or even terribly outstanding in any single category, it is just a very fine all around bike along with its stable mate the GS750. The GS550 received comments like: "very quick, easy to ride," "good for around town or touring," and "very smooth and nice riding." While one of the most frequent comments was, "best instruments, especially night lighting."

Comments on the other bikes added to their ratings as well, in a way that numbers just couldn't compete with. On the BMW there were several comments of "excellent overall," and "finest motorcycle made for touring," as well as repeated reference to the "confusing turn signals." There were also comments like

"predictable handling and comfortable ride," but there were several about the "uncomfortable seat" and the "bars being too short." One comment provided a clue to something that probably influenced all the BMW ratings, "I question the cost."

The Harley FLH generated such comments as "comfortable on the road," "not a city bike," "I didn't like it, period," "lots of vibration and heavy handling," "a workhorse." One comment from one of the Harley owners seems to sum up their feelings about it: "anything the bike lacks, I can live with or fix." Two comments pretty well covered the whole range of those laid on the Harley XLCR: "not for touring" and "great as an attention getter."

Most of the comments on the Gold Wing were basically on one of two themes, either "well built and dependable" or "smooth, not exciting."

The Honda 750A apparently surprised several riders with its comfort. Such comments as "surprisingly good" showed up several times, but also such differing opinions as "didn't like automatic transmission" and "nice and smooth," "easy to ride" and several times "good beginner's bike."

Rather predictably, the Honda Hawk 400A got this comment repeatedly, "excellent beginner's bike," but it also got several "super little bike" and "surprised at overall comfort." The main thrust of the comments were "nice town bike" and "good commuter," but one that summed up many was "fun machine."

Everyone seemed to like the Suzuki 750. Comments like "excellent 750," "surprising performer," "fast," "one of best on run." And there was a high percentage of this one: "I would buy one," seemed the most complimentary of all.

The Kawasaki 650 didn't seem to generate the enthusiasm that many of the others did. There were comments like "not exciting" and "not bad but not special either." Several were "nice bike, good acceleration" plus a couple of "nice handling." One rider differed considerably from most, his comment was

"fell in love with bike and will buy one."

The Yamaha 650 didn't fare too well in the comments, except one rider said, "it brings back memories of my old Triumph." Other riders commented on the "excessive vibration" and several said, "not meant for touring."

The Yamaha 400 received lots of comments like, "excellent small bike" and "good for city and short trips." One rider said it was their "choice for best buy." One rider stated "I've got to love this little bike, across the desert with heavy crosswinds it just kept on truckin'." But several riders complained of "vibration in the pegs."

The comments on the Moto Guzzi didn't all match up to its low ratings in the evaluation. It received the following comments from two or more riders each, "handles nice on the road, it sort of grows on you," "has character" and one "it feels like an old Indian." I assume they meant the motorcycle.

While, in general, the evaluations were fairly subjective, they did represent a good cross section of riders. There are a number of things that I would have changed if possible — having the bikes closer in displacement and possibly a somewhat more varied road selection — but otherwise it represents a rather unique and special opportunity for a group of riders to evaluate a group of bikes under actual touring conditions. □