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ON THE COVER: Hold onto your ports, the '92s are here! Photos courtesy of Kawasaki, Suzuki and Yamaha. Color design by DeWest; color separations by Valley Film; drool marks by . . . what's your name, anyway?



OFF-ROAD TEST: KTM 600 D-XC

AUSTRIAN THUNDER

The thumper lover's thumper

By the DIRT BIKE Staff

This is a bizarre world. It's full of people who body surf, bungee jump, eat glass, walk on hot coals and watch network sitcoms. There are people who claim to like polka music, dentist visits and cats. When you think about all that, it's an easy stretch to accept that there are people who love four-strokes. It makes them seem almost

normal.

KTM's 600 D-XC is a thumper lover's thumper. It's a four-stroke with no specialty. That's the way *all* four-strokes used to be, but as the age of specialization descended on dirt bikes, things changed. Honda XRs became known as Baja bikes, ATKs got reputations as motocrossers, Husqvarnas and

Husabergs became identified as woods bikes. Somewhere along the way the versatility that made thumper lovers love thumpers began to fade.

With the 600 D-XC, though, KTM has a four-stroke cast in the original four-stroke mold. The company has made no effort to pigeonhole the bike into one category.

Who says there aren't tight trails in the West? The KTM thumper is sure-footed over this devil's ridgeback, but it's more at home winding it out in the valleys.





**IS A BIT OF EVERYTHING
NOT MUCH OF ANYTHING?**

In stock form, the KTM comes without a headlight, taillight or odometer. Visually, it looks like a motocrosser, or one of KTM's two-stroke D-XC desert-racing models. Does that mean it's either a motocrosser or desert racer? Not really. KTM just offers the bike that way because the four-stroke market isn't big enough to sell separate models with and without headlights, etc. If you want all that stuff, the dealer will be delighted to accommodate you.

The 600 isn't very different from last year's model. It still has a liquid-cooled single-overhead-cam motor with four valves. There is absolutely nothing unusual about the KTM powerplant. When it first came out, it had an electric water pump, which was interesting but weird. Now the water pump is driven off the camshaft, just like a Husky or Husaberg. It also has an oil pump (unlike a Husky or Husaberg, but very much like any Honda four-stroke), so the technology here is all stuff we've seen before.

FLYING AIR MULLER

Perhaps most interesting about the bike are its fork springs—there aren't any! KTM decided to bolt on a Muller fork, which uses air, rather than springs to make the fork rebound. If you've been around a few years you know that this was tried without much success in the '70s. The problem was that compressed air is much more progressive

Air forks? Sure, why not? If you have a year or so to spare for testing, you might even get them dialed in.

than coil springs. To illustrate, a 20-pound coil spring requires 20 pounds of pressure in order to be compressed the first inch, then 20 additional pounds for the second and so on. Twenty pounds of air, however, requires 20 pounds of pressure for the first inch, then 40 for the second, 80 for the third and so on, progressively getting stiffer. How much stiffer simply depends on the volume of air being compressed. So with those early air forks, if you had the right amount of air pressure for the first few inches of travel, you almost certainly had too much for the last few inches.

The big difference between the Muller fork and the first air forks and shocks is volume. These days, fork legs are much larger than they were in the '70s, and when a large volume of air is compressed, the progressive increase in compression rate isn't as sharp. The Muller fork is unusual in other ways, as well. The right fork leg is a cartridge type; the left side isn't. Weird, huh? All of the rebound damping takes place in that right leg, while the left side is responsible for low-speed compression damping only. KTM's original reason for installing the Muller fork was to reduce weight. The four-stroke was criticized for being a little heavy, and the elimination of fork springs meant the elimination of five pounds.

DOES IT WORK?

No. Right now the fork is the weakest part of the KTM. The front end of the big thumper deflects easily and that makes the entire motorcycle difficult to ride. At first we suspected that too much air pressure was the problem, so we decreased it from 34 to 30 pounds. Then it felt too soft and still deflected easily. The KTM's front end is adjustable to a fault—you can spend months trying different combinations of air pressure, oil level and oil weight before you even start turning the clickers (high-speed compression, low-speed compression and rebound damping). To make things more complicated, you can use one oil viscosity for rebound damping and another for compression. We are quite sure that the Muller *can* work, but we never stumbled on the right combination of adjustments. Check back with us in 1999; we might be getting closer by then.

As for the rear end of the bike, it works better but is still hard to get real excited about. We rode most of the time with both rebound and compression adjusted to four clicks out and were fairly happy. If you do some hardcore motocrossing you might be fairly unhappy, but then the bike isn't really meant for that kind of riding.

**ENOUGH SHOCK TALK—
HOW'S THE MOTOR?**

Earlier we said the KTM thumper specializes in not having a specialty. That's because the motor has the most linear, easygoing powerband on earth. Where an ATK is a



KTM 600 D-XC

Engine type	Four-valve, liquid-cooled 4-stroke
Displacement	552.6cc
Bore and stroke	95.0mm x 75.0mm
Carburetion	38mm Dellorto
Fuel tank capacity	2.3 gal.
Gearing	15/50
Lighting coil	Yes
Green sticker legal in stock form	No
Claimed dry weight	247 lbs.
Running weight with no fuel	261 lb.
Wheelbase	58.3 in. (1480mm)
Rake/trail	27.5°/NA
Ground clearance	14.0 in. (355mm)
Seat height	37.8 in. (960mm)
Tire size and type:	
Front	90/90 x 21 Metzeler All-Cross
Rear	120/90 x 18 Metzeler All-Cross
Suspension:	
Front	Muller inverted air, adj. reb./high- and low-speed comp., 11.8 in. (300mm) travel
Rear	White Power aluminum piggyback, adj. reb./comp., 13.2 in. (335mm) travel
Country of origin	Austria
Suggested retail price	\$4759
Distributor/manufacturer:	
KTM America	
1906 Broadway	
Lorain, OH 44052	
(216) 244-2726	

PARTS REPLACEMENT COST

Piston	\$283.30
Ring	62.03
Clutch plate (drive)	11.85 (7)
Clutch plate (driven)	6.97 (8)
Front sprocket	21.64
Rear sprocket	57.75
Front brake pads	22.95
Rear brake pads	22.95

◀ At 261 lb., the KTM might be light for a four-stroke, but it's still not very light.

high-revver with a wild turbo boost on top, and the Husaberg barks off the bottom like a pit bull with an attitude, the KTM is a good-citizen midrange motor with a gradual delivery. At first you might think it's slow, but it's not. It will easily pull right alongside a stock Honda XR600. The KTM just feels slow because there's no snap anywhere. That's bad news for the wheelie crowd. Getting the front end up requires a little work.

On the trail you might miss that snap whenever you need to pop the front wheel over a log or a root. The KTM goes *forward* when you open the throttle, not up. It goes forward fast, too, so you might develop a new technique—*crushing through* the logs and roots.

Tight woods aren't exactly the KTM's strong point, anyway. When it comes to weight, the 600 has good news and bad news. The good news is that the bike only weighs 261 pounds, dry, according to the unquestionable *Dirt Bike* scale. KTM did a lot of work removing excess poundage since their first thumper was released. The bad news is that the bike still feels heavy. Why? Beats us. (Literally. The bike beats us.) It's just a big, wide, slow-steering motorcycle. The tank and seat are wider than normal, and the triple clamp has more offset than other KTM models (22mm vs. 18mm). All that adds up to a machine that isn't very responsive to rider input. There also is a slight pendulum effect to the front end. Once the

KTM 600

fork starts turning one way, it just wants to keep on going. It takes a conscious effort to point the bars straight again after you make a sharp turn.

WHAT'S IT GOOD FOR?

So the KTM isn't all that great at motocross and it's not so hot on tight trails, either. What's left? The bike is a gas on medium to wide-open trails. California riders should love it. There is no headshake to speak of, and the bike is more comfortable than a giant bean-bag chair filled with marshmallows. You can ride the bike for hours on end without even realizing it. If you like hill-climbing, then you're going to be in thumper heaven. The even power delivery makes tackling hills a natural, and if you don't make it, the machine is light enough to bulldog back down to Mother Earth. It isn't until you start lifting that you realize that the bike is lighter than it looks.

Starting was never difficult during our test. We know, we know; you've heard that line before in magazines, then discovered first-hand that the bike only is easy to start on the showroom floor. Get it out on the trail and the Incredible Hulk couldn't kick it hard enough. In the case of this year's KTM, though, it always started on the first or second kick without much of a starting drill. We just would kick the left-side kick-starter as hard as we could (with no gas) and it worked. For hot starting, there's a fast idle button on the side of the carb, but we never used it—we didn't need to.

What's odd is that last year's KTM motor was supposed to be virtually identical, but it was much harder to start. The only explanation is that some roll off the assembly line with easy-start magic and others don't.

We like the handlebar-mounted choke. We never saw the carburetor on the bike (we were told it had one) and we were glad we didn't have to track it down every time we had to use the choke. We would like to file our gripes about the cooling system, though. We had the bike boil over three times in slow riding conditions.

The brakes are good, the clutch pull is easy, the handlebar has a crummy bend and the stock tires (Metzeler All-Crosses) are like a very bad dream that won't let you wake up. Our test bike came with different tires, thank you.

DO YOU HAVE TO LIKE THUMPERS?

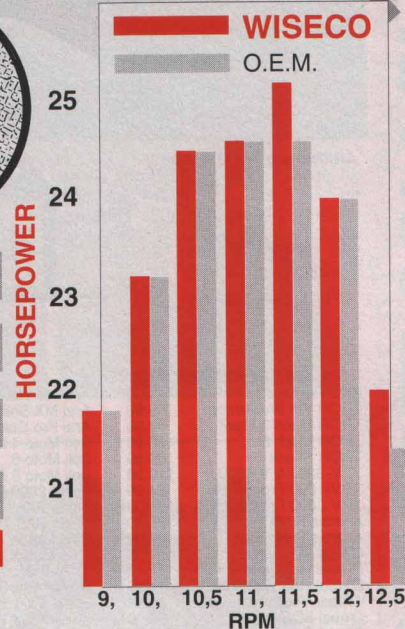
The KTM 600 is a good motorcycle, and it's so close to being a great motorcycle that it's frustrating. All the hard parts have been done: It's light enough and it makes enough power. What keeps the bike from greatness is little stuff. It's too wide. The fork isn't dialed in (we don't want to say goodbye to the Muller front end, we just want to see it undergo more development). The steering is strange.

Right now the KTM is a bike that any thumper freak will automatically love. Fix those things, either at the factory or in your garage, and *anyone* will love it. □

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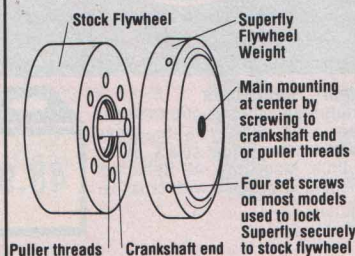
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