

300 MILE TRAIL TEST

HONDA XL500S

Reigning ruler of dual-purpose bikes

By Tom Webb



Each month, without fail, in the magazine business, we have a so-called deadline. What this amounts to is a certain number of articles each editor has to write, test various bikes and give invaluable input along with other odds and ends, until the final conclusion is reached. This is rather simple on a motocrosser or an enduro bike, but on a street-trail bike, it's not as clear-cut.

Doubling up

I decided to do this thing right. Not a cruise around on the streets, a few hours on the trails, then give it back. No way. Once the bike was delivered, I went over it thoroughly; but with a little extra care. I decided to take the big XL on a 300-mile, two-up ride, *all off-road*.

The trip would start in Mojave and end in Kernville. Spend the night, return through desert and mountains and end up at our original starting point. We traveled light; my wife left her hair dryer at home. There's not a lot of room on an XL500.

The bike

It looks basically the same as last year. Why change? It had our vote as the best dual-purpose, four-stroke in 1980. There are a few new surprises, though. Instead of the small, spindly swingarm, there's now a much larger box section item in its place. When you're dealing with a 300-pound bike, you can use all the increased rigidity available. It still has those Honda-style, dual-purpose tires and travel is identical, at eight inches in the front and

seven in the rear.

With a Chase-Harper tank bag, we could carry the normal amount of tools, tubes and spares for the trip. Starting the big XL was a cinch; choke out, get it to the top of the stroke with the compression, release and kick. It usually required no more than three or four strong boots before she would light up.

The first 20 or so miles were power-line roads. Fast, fun and not tiring. Almost every mile there was a good-sized washout. Even with the preload set at the firmest position on the shocks, we bottomed. This was expected, considering the extra weight we carried. Everything felt a little squirrely on those hard-baked, dry roads. So we just cooled it until we got used to the bike.

A left turn at Jawbone Canyon and we headed toward Kelso Valley and the Piute Mountains. The road going was in very good shape; all dirt, but with plenty of tight turns and enough ruts to make it interesting. Here's where the Honda shined!

In stock form, the XL let us chug up the roads beautifully. We'd get up to about 60 or so, see a turn, downshift, negotiate the difficulty and continue on. This tends to get tedious, so if I'd see a trail parallel to the main road, I'd hop on it. Most of these are composed of whoops and long, sandy uphill. On several of the larger ones, I had to drop Sally off and push. Not a pretty picture when you're riding double on a 300-pound, dual-purpose bike. A one-tooth drop in the countershaft sprocket would cure this. We forged on.

In the milder sections that were merely ripple bumps and lots of tight, turny canyons, we had a gas. But once we got on the well-used portion of the trails, severe bottoming was the order of the day.



1981 HONDA XL500S

Engine type	Four-stroke, single	Gearing, front/rear	14/41
Bore and stroke	89mmx80mm	Ignition	CDI
Displacement	498cc	Wheelbase	55.1 inches
Horsepower	N/A	Ground clearance	10.2 inches
Carburetion	.32mm Keihin	Steering head angle	28.5 degrees
Fuel tank capacity	2.6 gallons; .5 reserve	Weight (claimed)	293.3 pounds
Gas/oil ratio	Straight gas	Approx. retail price	\$1998
Transmission	Five-speed	Intended use, mfr.	On/off-road

Ride in style, comfort, safety with IntegralVip Cross...

King off the Road!

A fork kit, along with some Works Performance shocks, would help immensely. We tortured ourselves for about 20 miles, then jumped back on the main dirt road taking us to Kernville. After 100 miles, we arrived in the town of Weldon. We gassed 'er up, and wow! We only used a gallon and a half. Amazing! Two people, off-road and almost 70 miles to the gallon.

Finally, after nearly six hours of riding, we arrived at our overnight destination. My wife was complaining of a tender rear and I wasn't feeling too much better.

Early the next morning, we were back on the road again. The bike was checked first for any mechanicals; nothing loose, lost or rattling. One hundred and fifty miles and all that the Honda needed was a lube and chain adjustment.

Our route was a little changed for the ride back. Shoot to the Piutes, over Bird Spring Pass, explore Red Rock Canyon, then pick up the power-line road back to Mojave. A grueling schedule, no doubt.

By now we had come to trust the XL and get used to the strange feeling the 23-inch front wheel gave at first, and yes, even put up with the harsh bottoming.

Once through the 60ish miles of tight sand washes and ridge running in Redrock, we picked up the powerlines. By this time we were both beat and just wanted to get home.

For some reason, I decided to attack this section like it was a special test in an enduro. Where we barely averaged 30 on the way out, the speedo now pushed 60. It's incredible what one day on the Honda will do to your confidence. Finally, we got back to the truck in one piece.

Except for having to push up a couple of nasty sand hills (a larger rear tire and gearing change would have saved us the grief on one of them) and a couple of slide-outs in sandwashes, we rarely parted company with the bike all weekend.

Our bodies were a little sore, but what can you expect after 260 miles of doubles trail riding? We now have a deep respect for the King of the Dual-Purpose bikes, and are already planning another ride as soon as our rear ends lose their tender glow. One problem. Next time, Sally says I ride on the back and she steers. Urk! □



Sleek, Italian styling comes to motocross helmets in Nava's new, rugged, lightweight IntegralVip Cross. Performance tested and worn in competition in Europe by champions...including three world champions. The IntegralVip Cross makes you stand out from the pack with dramatic graphics and popular colors (black, white, red, yellow, blue). Standard competition clear or smoke shields are available.

Leadership in Sports Protection

