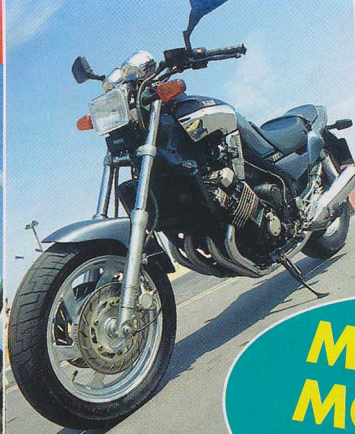


Grey Bike

STREETFIGHTER FZR250 PROJECT



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FAZED
FZR250

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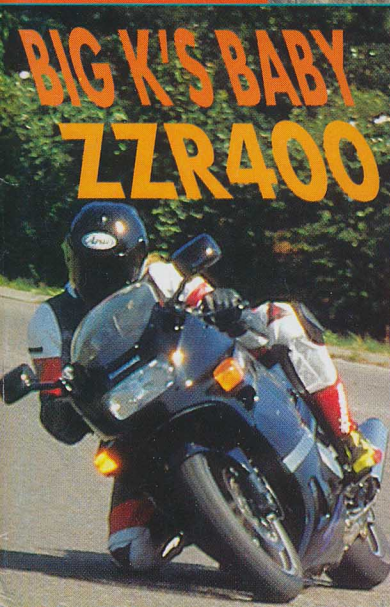


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PLUS: ZXR400

MVX250 ★ XR200

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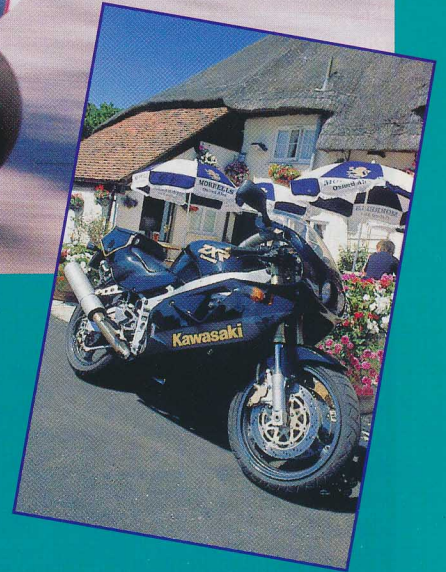


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KEV Racing's GSR400RRSP in action at Mallory earlier this year.



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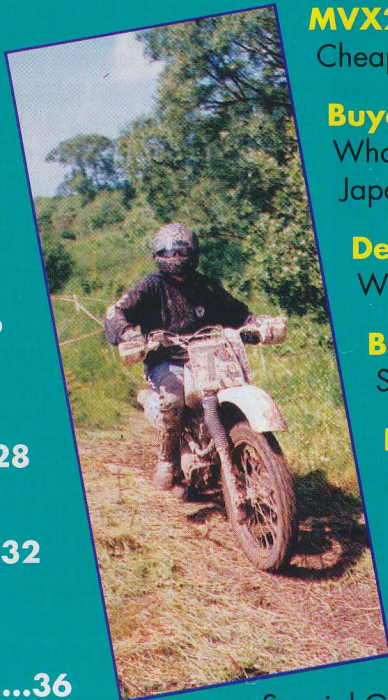
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Grey Bike Road Test



It was a massively expensive UK import back in 1991, but nowadays you can get a grey import for sensible money. Tom Isitt took one for a spin.

FZR400-SP

SPEC:**Motor:** Liquid-cooled DOHC 16-valve in-line four**Displacement:** 399cc**Bore x Stroke:** 56 x 40.5mm**Compression Ratio:** 12.2:1**Max Power:** 60hp @ 12,200rpm**Max Torque:** 28ftlb (3.8kgm) @ 8000rpm**Carburetors:** 4 x 32mm Mikuni**Transmission:** Gear primary, six speed box, chain final**Frame:** Aluminium-alloy beam frame**Rake:** 24°**Trail:** 92mm**Front Fork:** 41mm telescopic with preload adjustment**Rear Suspension:** Rising-rate monoshock with preload adjustment**Front Brakes:** 2 x 298mm disc with four-piston calipers**Rear Brake:** Single 210mm disc with single-piston caliper**Front Tyre:** 120/70 x 17**Rear Tyre:** 160/60 x 17**Wheelbase:** 1365mm**Dry Weight:** 365lbs (160kg)

The first time I saw one of these was in a Proddie race at the Isle of Man. It was small, red and white, and going like a bastard. I can't remember whether it won or lost, who was riding it, or even the year. But I remember it slingshotting out of Brandish and disappearing in a blur of red and white. It was motor-ing. For Proddie racing at the TT it was about the right size and power, and a well-riden one was capable of seeing off much bigger machines.

I didn't get to ride one until 1991, when I tested the first of the official UK imports. It was a pukka piece of kit — all multi-adjustable suspension, EXUP styling and racy good looks. But it had a price tag that put it up there with bikes like the GSR-R1100, the FZR1000 and VFR750s. And that was a major handicap. Who was going to pay £6500 for a 60hp 400 when the same money would buy a 125hp 1000cc bike? It was almost as if Yamaha imported it to prove a point about Japanese 400s — they were too expensive to import officially.

But that didn't stop the grey importers bringing in sheds of nearly-new ones and punting them out at more sensible money. In

fact the FZR400 has been one of the most popular grey 400s ever. And with good reason...they're very good.

At this point I should say that this was supposed to have been one of those back-to-back, FZR400RR-SP versus slightly newer FZR400RR tests, but there was a problem. And the problem was the stock 400RR broke down in the middle of the Dartford tunnel and caused a five-mile tail-back on the M25. Yep, it was me. Stranded in the tunnel, juggernauts thundering by at 50mph, and no hard-shoulder to pull off on to, I was scared shitless and cursed every grey importer on the face of the planet.

So the back-to-back test became a solo bike test of this '89 FZR400RR-SP. Ah well, such are the joys of road-testing bikes for a living.

One of the most important things about grey bikes, apart from their relative cheapness compared to equivalent officially-imported machines, is their exclusivity. Who wants to ride around on a bog-stock XYZ600 when you can ride around on a ABC400RR-SP for less money and still knowing that you could go months without seeing anything like what you're riding? And even though grey bikes are now becoming relatively common-place, there's still a cache about turning up outside the pub on a state-of-the-art race-rep that most people have never even set eyes on.

Which is why the SP versions of grey imports are so perennially popular. In general the difference in cost between a stock bike and an SP version is comparatively minimal. This is especially true of the older bikes. Modern '90s SPs are pretty damn costly, but a five year-old SP, while still offering exclusivity, still has the cudos of being something a bit special. Plus, of course, this SP didn't break down in the Dartford Tunnel and try to turn its rider into a radiator ornament on a 32-ton Volvo artic.

So can a six year-old FZR400RR-SP really cut the mustard in 1995? Or is this just a bike that looks nice and has an SP moniker, but which lacks the cutting-edge performance we've come to expect from hot 400s over the last half-decade?

Well, for a start the SP looks the business. I reckon Yamaha's styling team lost out with the FZR range when they went to twin headlamps under a single headlamp glass. Call me old-fashioned, call me a luddite (call me at 4am and ask me where my write up is...), but I reckon this '89 FZR looks the absolute biz. The single seat unit, the under-stated graphics, the twin-headlamp fairing - it's a little beauty. For my money far more swoopy than the later, angular FZR's, and far better looking.

And the good news is it goes as well as it looks. Okay, so it's a six year-old bike, but with low miles on it. And in its day the FZR was pretty hot tackle (to be honest it hasn't got an awful lot hotter over the years, but then again there are a fair number of Jap models which haven't been mechanically updated for the 90s). Powered by a water-cooled, double overhead cam, in-line four displacing 399cc from a bore and stroke of 56mm x 40.5mm, the FZR makes the usual 59hp at 12,000rpm. Not massive, but not bad either. Certainly fast enough to whistle you up to a top speed of...well...more than can be indicated on the speedo which only goes up to 180kph. Actually, around 135mph will be about the SP's maximum, but that's plenty fast enough to lose your licence (not to mention a limb or two if you get things badly wrong).

I have to say that I rather like these quaint 180kph

speedos most grey imports come with. I know most of them have dinky little stickers on them showing roughly



where 30mph, 50mph, 70mph and (sometimes) 100mph occurs, but if I owned one I'd take off the stickers. I kind of enjoy spending those long motorway miles performing mental arithmetic somersaults trying to work out whether I'm doing 79mph or 97mph. Actually, I always end up doing 72mph, even at 180kph, and that's what I'm going to tell the magistrate.

And this is the sort of bike that will put you up in



front of The Beak on fairly regular occasions. It's a bike that, frankly, needs a damn good thrashing (I'd horse-whip it...if I had a horse, to quote Karl Marx). Like all small-capacity four-strokes, particularly of the race-replica variety, the harder you work 'em, the better they like it. And the FZR is no exception.

First gear is very tall (natch), due to the close ratio gearbox which almost invariably grace SP versions, and requires much clutch-slipping and revving to get it going cleanly, but once you've clunked your way through the loud and notchy gearbox (it's an FZR, sir — they all do that) it motors along quite nicely. Below 4000rpm it couldn't pull the skin off a grape, but between four and seven grand it begins to show a modicum of tractability, showing the benefits of the EXUP system - nice. At seven grand it takes a deep breath and buries the tach needle in the red line.

Yes, it has that rush of power, that burst of energy, which is beloved of stoker fans and aficionados of small four-stroke racers. In the first two gears it really flies through the top half of the rev range, revving out easily and quickly to its 14,000 rev limit, even though peak power is to be found 2000rpm lower down the rev band.

And once it's singing you just use your left foot to hoof it up and down the gears, keeping it revving between 10,000 and 12,000rpm.

Do this and you are rewarded with sparkling performance. It isn't the brain-scrambling lunge towards oblivion you get when keeping a GSX-R11 on the cam, but a more manageable, understandable and less life-threatening burst towards the wide blue yonder. It's exciting, it's controllable, and above all it's fun. It isn't going to scare you witless, but it will get the pulse racing, the blood coursing, the adrenaline pumping.

And when you get to the bendy bits, the FZR handles those pretty well. Hammer on the brakes and the FZR pulls up hard. Weighing in at 365lbs dry there's not much of this bike, so when Yamaha's twin 298mm discs and four-piston calipers get to work on them you can pop out a contact lens pretty easy.

In the turns the FZR's racy steering geometry (24 degrees of rake and 92mm of trail) means that you can pitch it in very hard and very fast. It's a real point-and-stuff machine, thriving on pushing the front end hard (make sure you've got the stickiest rubber around if you're going to play that game on a regular basis). In the turn the FZR holds its line well and the suspension, although not up to the standard of later models, still does an excellent job of keeping you the right way up and heading in the desired direction (the front fork's screw-down adjusters - again an SP refinement - allow you to tinker to some extent).

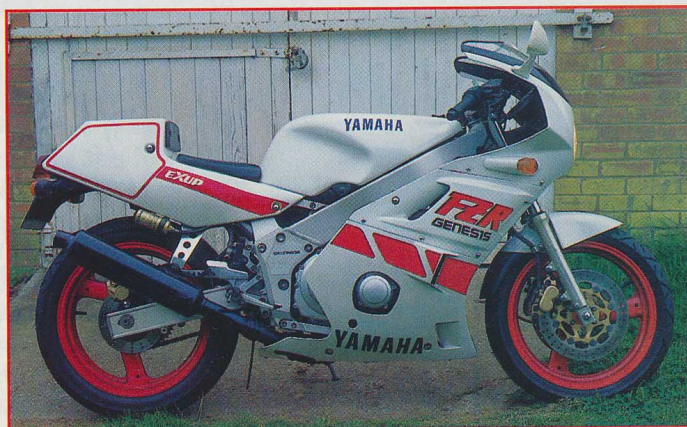
At the back the remote-reservoir rear shock is a little soft on standard settings for a lard-belly like me, so some adjustment is called for to get the best from it. This is easier said than done, unfortunately - like a lot of rear units, the thread and collar pre-load adjuster is a real pain to get at (about as bad as a GSXR), and the best method appears to be to lay the bike on its side...

In terms of rider comfort, the FZR isn't as small or as cramped as you might expect. Even for someone of my 190 lbs and 6ft stature you don't have to fold yourself in half to form a kind of origami sumo-wrestler in order to get on the thing, and although I wouldn't relish 400 miles a day on a motorway, it wouldn't be impossible. In fact the riding position is considerably less cramped than on some bigger bikes (GSX-Rs, for example), but that seat is still uncomfortably thin and under-padded.

All in all the FZR400RR-SP is a gas. It's svelte, sexy, painfully good-looking, and it goes as well as it looks. It may not be very practical (no pillion seat and minimal luggage carrying capacity), but what it lacks in practicality it makes up for in excellent performance and an exclusivity you won't get with many other machines. In terms of comparison with newer stuff, there hasn't been that much improvement over the years apart from maybe higher tech suspension, but whether you'd be able to appreciate any genuine benefits from that in real-world riding is debatable, to be honest. Other than that you'd get a sharper styled fairing and graphics, but you'd also be paying a grand to fifteen hundred quid more for the privilege. The FZR may be six years old, but it isn't dated. And at £2500 or thereabouts for a model such as this, that's a small price to pay for a very good little race-rep.

Tom Isitt

Yes, it has that rush of power, that burst of energy, that is beloved of stroker fans and aficionados of small four-stroke racers. In the first two gears it literally flies through the top half of the rev range...



Model - FZR400-SP. Year - 1989(G). Mileage - 8,030. Price - £2595. Test Bike Supplied By MC Centre.