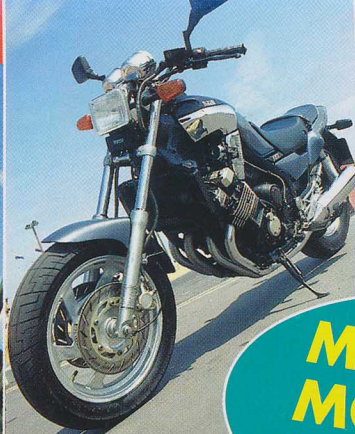


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STREETFIGHTER FZR250 PROJECT



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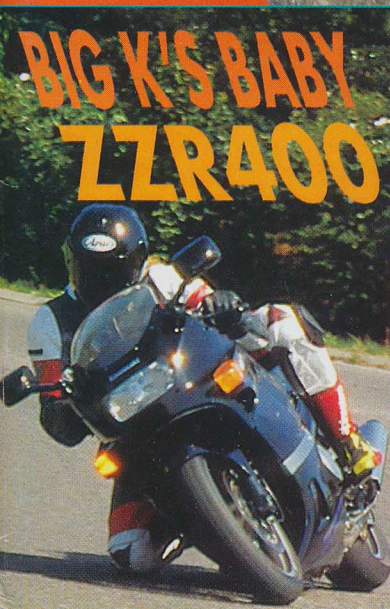


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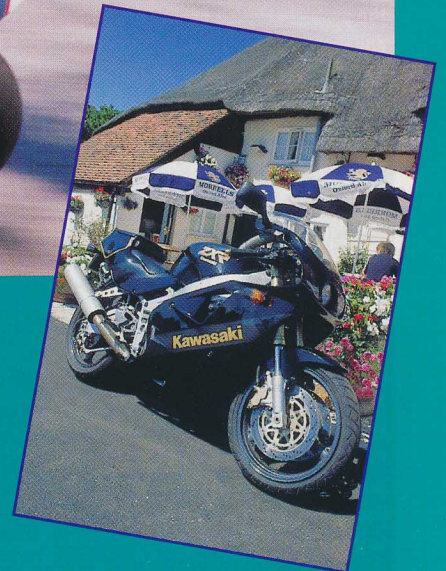


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KEV Racing's GSR400RRSP in action at Mallory earlier this year.



Odds, Sods,
and an Importer's Tale.....4

ZXR400
Pricey Scratcher8

VT1100 Shadow
Better Than a Harley?12

Tech Stuff
Sortin' After
Standin'18

ZZR400
Black and Bulky ..22

Reader's Race 1
NC21 at the Manx
Grand Prix26

Reader's Race 2
Roundy Round
GSXR40028

XR200
Oddie Endures All.....32

FZR Series
250/400 Full Model
Histories36

FZR250 Project
A Mini Streetfighter40

FZR400SP
Tom Tries A Tankin' Tool.....46

Survey Results
We Tell You What You Told Us ..50

VFR Survey
Now Tell Us Some More.....51

Fazer 750
Genesis Lump, V-Max Styling54

MVX250
Cheap Triple Stroker.....60

Buyer's Guide 1
What To Buy From
Japan.....62

Dealer Listing
Where To Find Greys.67

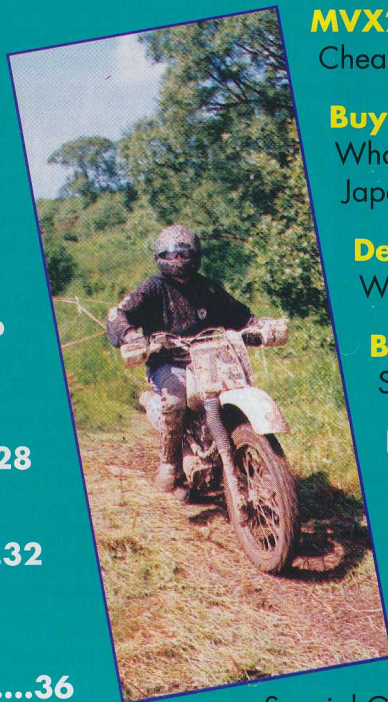
Buyer's Guide 2
Stateside Stuff68

Price Guide
How Much It'll
Cost You.....70

Tech Info
NSR250 Tune Up72

LTD700
Special Guest Tester
Tries Cruising.....74

Letters
Words From The World
Of Greys78



Pretending To Do Important Things - **Oddie**
Doing Real Important Things - **Annie**
Causing Traffic Jams - **Tom Isitt**
Drawing Lovely Pictures - **Mark and Rich**
Attacking The Establishment - **Nick Culton**
Sending Useful Stuff - **Ian Dwyer, Ago, Colin Jones**
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ZZR400



I've never ridden any of the new generation of sports/tourers before, so Kawasaki's extensive ZZR range was something of an unknown quantity to me. Like all road-test bikes, I approached the ZZR400 with what I thought was an open mind. But with hindsight, I suspect I had some pre-conceived ideas which needed dragging out from my subconscious and discarding...

I know what radical race rep bikes are, and what they're supposed or not supposed to do. And, having owned a couple of Gold Wings, I've experienced the

'heavy' end of touring bikes. It made sense to me that a sports/tourer would fit somewhere neatly in the middle, but of course, when you're talking about fitting between two extremes, the middle ground is both wide and varied. As I was putting several hundred miles on the ZZR, I had time to contemplate this concept, and realise that a sports/tourer is actually a very broad generic mantle, and not as simple to pigeonhole as I'd first imagined.

And I didn't like the ZZR at first; first impressions do count for something, despite how much we might try to deny it. Lots of people rave about ZZR styling, and it's

certainly well-considered and integrated, but it's just so bloody bulbous. Too much Starship Enterprise and not enough Klingon Battlecruiser for me, I'm afraid. But it was a model which did warrant testing, so I cleared my head as much as possible, and prepared to spend a few days in its company.

Without an initial rapport with the machine, at first I contented myself with a fairly objective analytical assessment. It's certainly a bike you can feel instantly at home on - there's no need for a period of acclimatisation - and it's exactly the sort of bike a born-again biker



would feel happy to return to biking aboard. Everything does what you'd expect it to, efficiently and unobtrusively. The riding position is good, with a well-contoured, plush seat, and footrests that aren't too high or too far back, to lean you gently towards the slightly raised clip-on bars. It's a very comfy motorcycle, even after a full day in the saddle. Too much town work will see your wrists start to complain a little, but I rattled off 200 miles on A-roads across the Pennines one morning with no aches and pains anywhere. The instruments are straightforward and easy to read (the white lettered

dials glow red at night, a neat touch), the mirrors seem incongruous stuck out the front on stalks, but do give a reasonable rearwards view, and although there's no fuel gauge (or reserve...) there are two handy little warning lights which flash to tell you you're about to run out of something vital. The pillion gets both grab-strap and grab-rail, the flip-out bungy hooks work neatly, and there are two neat trip meters for recording individual and separate distances. All in all it's a pretty well appointed bike - 10 on 10 so far.

For the most part, riding the bike confirms a careful-

ly designed package. The front end is absolutely superb, it tracks faultlessly, with good turn-in and nice light, neutral steering. You can roll the throttle on and off mid-turn and the bike just holds its line perfectly. Handling is certainly on a par with most sports bikes - a taut 24 degrees 30 minutes of rake tells you where the Kwak is coming from - and a good rider on a ZZR will keep up with an NC30 pilot on the swervy stuff no problem. Yet the ZZR is also very stable and predictable - motorway cruising at ton-plus speeds is a breeze, and rash attempts to promote instability fail miserably. Even



under heavy braking the bike stays in line, the back end refusing to perform the wandering about many pure sports bikes are prone to.

If the front end is spot on, the rear end lags only a short distance behind it (about four feet, actually...). A slightly soft rear shock could do with better damping, but that only makes itself apparent when you're really pushing it hard and deep into bends. The pre-load was already set quite high on the rear shock, so I left well alone (it's a bit of a bugger to adjust anyway), and there's no damping adjustment, so what you've got is what you've got. For the most part it's nigh-on perfect anyway - it's a touring set up rather than a race set up, but even so, it's no worse than many race reps in fact.

All this adds up to a good, controllable ride. The Michelin Hi-Sports must surely contribute to this package, giving so much feedback you'd think you were holding the front wheel spindle instead of the handlebars, and lesser tyres might give lesser results, but good tyres can't mask a bad package, so the ZZR must be inherently right to start with. Even when you want to pick up the pace, the baby ZZR doesn't require huge amounts of concentration or effort to keep motoring along - an essential requirement on a bike that has a tourer role to play. The only limiting factor is the ground clearance, or lack of it. When you really push it hard, particularly on bends that dip and climb out, it doesn't take too much to have the ZZR dragging bits of its

undercarriage on the tarmac. An uprated rear shock would certainly help, but basically there ain't a lot you can do about it, matey. Then again, if you're going to ride on that sort of limit regularly, there are other bikes more suited to the task you should be looking at.

The brakes are as efficient as the rest of the package, as ZZR brakes usually are. Top quality 4-piston

Tokicos up front do the business, although this particular bike had slightly less bite than normal at first, a consequence of still being on Jap pads. And before you all jump to that old wrong conclusion about Jap brakes, there's no difference in spec or performance

to UK stuff, it's just that Jap riding styles and conditions don't rely much on heavy braking, and pads often glaze over and harden up through lack of use, which is why most importers tend to throw new pads on bikes before sale. But don't make the mistake of thinking the ZZR doesn't brake well, a few good hard stops from ton plus and the brakes were nicely bedded back in (and I was scraping my dangly bits off the back of the tank...).

Which pretty much leaves only the engine performance to talk about. I've deliberately left this towards the end, because if there is a fly in the ZZR's otherwise effective ointment, for me it's the peaky power output from the motor. It's a traditional across-the-frame four, watercooled, 16 valve, DOHC, etc etc, in this case with semi-down draught carbs on longish inlet stubs, and it was here that my previous thoughts about the concept of sports/tourers took root.

Initially I was disappointed. The ZZR seemed flat until a fairly vigorous nine grand was dialled in. When your experience of tourers is mostly formed from the tractor-like qualities of your Interstate Wing, an apparently peaky motor just doesn't seem right. There's a bit of poke around 4 or 5 grand, which is well useful round town, but with Kawasaki stubbornly retaining their characteristic powerband on the little ZZR, it struck me as being at odds with the bike's raison d'etre. It picks up around 8,000, but only really happens in a big way above that 9,000rpm mark. For sure there's plenty of grunt from then on up, right on to the 14,000 redline, but I was surprised to find such a concentrated top end on an ostensibly dual-role machine. If the ZZR had sharper styling, and lots of stripey graphics, it'd be more in keeping. But then it would be a ZXR...

The engine itself is fine, it carburetes well, throttle response is good, and that distinctive Kawasaki raw edge hasn't been sanitised out of all existence beneath that black plastic. It's not as quick as the out-and-out race rep stuff, but you wouldn't expect it to be. But it's not slow either, and if you're prepared to give it some stick, you can make pretty rapid progress.

And this is where I started to get a clue that maybe my expectations were wrong. I can't argue that if Kawasaki had brought the power band down a couple of thousand revs, it would have made a better bike. Between 7 and 9 grand is more useful than between 12 and 14 on a bike with any pretensions at touring, even if it is in a sporting manner. But when I stopped being disappointed with the ZZR, and just rode it without that harsh analytical eye, I started to warm to it much more. You can get across country quickly and without fuss, be

That does mean of course that legal motorway travel drops you out of the powerband, which is a bit of a bugger for overtaking, and the answer is to cruise at 85-90mph, officer.

it by motorway - I held 110mph for some 25 miles on a (fairly) empty M62 - or on A-roads - where 90mph bend swinging isn't a problem. In more mundane traffic, you do need to cog swap more, but if you accept that, the ZZR starts to reward you.

Cog swapping wasn't the nice slick affair you need under those conditions, though, and the six speed box always felt a bit clunky, particularly in the lower gears. I traced a noisy, snatchy first/second shift to a tired cush drive in the rear wheel - something I've seen before on low mileage Kawasaki's - and that wouldn't be helping the transmission in general, but whether fixing that would solve all the problems, I have my doubts. But either way, the two problems of peaky motor and less-than-perfect shifting took the edge off the ZZR's otherwise pretty faultless all-round performance.

The gears are nicely spaced though, first is low enough for smooth take offs without dialling in fistfuls of revs, while sixth is a useful overdrive, letting the revs drop to a relaxed 7 grand at a steady 70 cruising. That does mean of course that legal motorway travel drops you out of the powerband, which is a bit of a bugger for overtaking, and the answer is to cruise at 85-90mph, officer.

Despite the long motorway legs, fuel consumption is crap. The 14 litre tank displays its funky fuel warning light after less than a 100 miles, and with only about a couple of litres left by then, you ignore it at your peril. I couldn't believe I was only getting 39.6mpg, so I filled up and checked another tankful, with a slightly less frantic pace I managed 41.4mpg. Absolute rubbish, my 1100 Wing will do better than that, even at the rate I ride it. For even a sporting tourer it's pretty dismal, and for a bike like the ZZR, where you could happily stay in

the saddle all day, frequent fuel stops are as irritating as they are expensive.

But if you can afford to put the gas in it (I'm just a tight git), accept a peaky motor (which is admittedly addictive above 9 grand), and enthuse over the corporate ZZR styling (still looks like a blob to me), the ZZR will cover the ground for you, and give you a good time

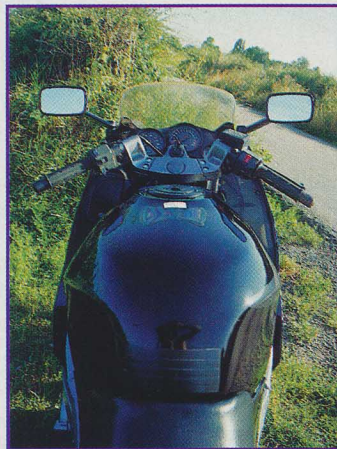
into the bargain. Two up doesn't seem to make much difference, to either speed and handling or fuel consumption, so it's a good buy if you take regular pillions. It's big for a 400, more so than most imports it gets mistaken for a bigger brother, so although it won't intimidate smaller riders, bigger bikers won't feel like they're perched on a mini-bike. And it carries it's bulk well, so although it's a portly 193kg, it'll change direction quickly enough, and doesn't actually feel that

much heavier than a more sporting 400.

A bike like this, with a few scratches and knocks here and there from container transport, will cost you a tad less than three grand. A real minter will hit you for a couple of hundred quid more. Whether that's value for money or not is your own opinion. I grew to like the ZZR after all, it is quietly efficient, deceptively quick over distance, and remarkably comfortable. It's equally at home on 40mph back roads as it is on 90mph trunk roads, and it's a doddle in

town - the archetypal all-round motorcycle. I'd still prefer a less peaky motor, but then maybe I'm just a Wing-riding Luddite. There's not much in the way of direct comparisons in the 400cc sports/tourer bracket, so if that's your bag, keep a look out for a nice little ZZR400 to treat yourself to. Suzuki's GSX-F is about the only other competitor, and we'll be testing one of those just as soon as we can get hold of one.

Odgie



It's just so bloody bulbous. Too much Starship Enterprise and not enough Klingon Battlecruiser for me, I'm afraid.

Whilst it's easy enough to make comparisons with later models and call the ZZR a sports/tourer, it's also easy to forget that, at the time, the ZZR was launched with pretensions far more towards sporting rather than touring, and it's only as bikes have become more radical that the ZZR has been perceived differently.

Whereas most 400s are a natural extension or evolution of previous models of the same capacity, the ZZR was never designed to be a 400. Kawasaki's range of 400s runs from the GPZ400, through the GPX400, to the ZX4 as tested last issue, and finally to the ZXR400 still available today. Kawasaki's decision to produce a ZZR400 was achieved by simply reducing the capacity of the new ZZR600 (they also produce a ZZR500 for the Austrian market). The 400 is little more than a 600 with a 400 top end (even the head castings are the same, and can be interchanged with little work), and different carbs and silencers. This explains the ZZR's comparatively large size for a 400 - it even weighs in at exactly the same as the 600, making it a full 30kg (60lb) heavier than a CBR Aero, and 10kg (20lb) heavier even than Suzuki's GSX-F.

It's a fairly bulletproof model - the bike is designed to take the 98bhp of the 600, so the 59bhp of the 400 will pose no problems. The worn cush drive in the rear hub is a common problem on many Kawasaki's - the rubber just isn't man enough for the task - and although it's a fairly simple job to replace, even new rubbers don't last too long, and the problem can reoccur pretty regularly.

Thanks to Trev for wearing out a knee slider doing action shots.



SPEC:

Engine: Water-cooled, DOHC, in-line four, 16 valves
 Bore & Stroke: 57.5x38.5mm
 Capacity: 399cc
 Weight: 193kg
 Power: 58ps/12,000rpm
 Torque: 3.7kgm/10,000rpm
 Wheels: 120/60R17 front, 160/60R17 rear

Model - ZZR400 Year - 1993(G). Mileage - 16,875. Price - £2995. Test Bike Supplied By West Coast Motorcycles