

First Test: All-New Yamaha IT175 Enduro

MOTORCYCLIST

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MAY 1980

**Kawasaki KZ550**  
Fastest Middleweight  
In Four-Stroke History

How Harley-Davidson  
Will Tackle The '80s

Cruising On Honda's  
New 900 Shafty



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**Countersteering:  
How To Use It**

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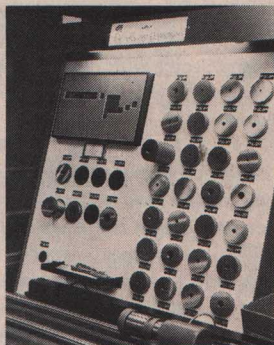
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Jeff Karr is riding the KZ550 pretty fast for this cover shot in the Malibu mountains, but not nearly as fast as he went while winning two classes at an AFM production race. He says the Kawasaki is so fast it's almost like cheating. Photo by Art Friedman.

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# HONDA CB900 Custom

## TEN SPEED AND HOT SHOE

In the past, we have had a tendency to regard the flashy, chopper-styled, Custom/Special/LTD genre of street motorcycles as special-purpose machines. We sort of categorized them as motorcycles built for—and good for little more than—trolling boulevards and cruising the disco circuit on Saturday nights. Admittedly, that was a limited definition of those machines, which are obviously put to a much wider range of uses than merely profiling. However, calling them profilers was an easy way to pigeon-hole the Specials and Customs and LTDs. After all, their style was their calling card and styling kind of overwhelmed other considerations—including some basic functional ones.

Handlebars which swoop high and wide may match *The Wild One* picture the rider wishes to paint on the boulevard, but they are awkward during spirited cornering. Peanut tanks limit range. Low-cut seats are too short of padding for comfort on long rides. Those fat, squat rear tires may say "macho" in raised white letters, but by lowering the chassis they also reduce cornering clearance. With those kinds of functional demerits in their column, it's easy to see why we classified the factory choppers as special-purpose motorcycles, suitable mainly for growling up and down Main Street on weekends. After all, for every flashy chopper model there was a standard sports-touring model which inevitably came out ahead in comparisons of range, touring comfort and sporting character. If those functional considerations were what buyers wanted they would buy the sports-touring models, right?

The Honda CB900 Custom goes a long way toward changing the way we regard chopperesque styling. It's also the first model where the buyer can find that sort of styling without having to pay for it in the form of a flock of compromises to sporting character and touring competence. The CB900C is a Custom, meaning it's wrapped in Honda's version of the chopper look. It's also a no-

apologies tourer. And a relatively competent sports bike. There are still some compromises in function but, even to a bunch of road testers who value function above all, the styling compromises haven't spoiled the way the bike works. The people responsible for the 900C obviously intended for it to work as well as it looked.

That's a good thing because buyers attracted to the Honda 900 Custom

don't have a standard-styling model to fall back on if the Custom doesn't meet their functional requirements. But since there isn't a standard model, the bike was built from the start to wear Custom clothes. Therefore Honda didn't have to try to adapt the Custom's seat, tank, front end, rear wheel or other pieces to a chassis designed for a standard version. No compromises were neces-



Despite some annoying drive-train snatch, the CB900C makes a competent corner-carver. It steers accurately and has plenty of ground clearance while riding hard through a tight corner. It's the perfect answer for a rider who knows two kinds of style: riding style, and chrome and paint.

sary for the sake of interchangeability. The CB900 Custom is the only bike using this chassis and drivetrain.

The seed which grew into the CB900C was planted by shoppers in Honda dealers' showrooms who said they liked a transverse four like the Honda CB750 but wished it had a shaft drive. They didn't mind if some power was given away by the right angle drive gears needed to fit a shaft to a transverse multi. Nonetheless, just adding a shaft to a CB750 would have made the 750 unacceptably slow in Honda's opinion, so Honda followed the path chosen by Suzuki when that company converted the GS750 chain-driver into the GS850 shafty. They increased displacement to compensate for the power lost in the shaft-drive's extra gears. However, instead of just pumping up the CB750, Honda turned to an existing engine, the one used in the CB900F.

The CB900F is sold only in Europe. It's a double overhead cam, 16-valve four which is styled and equipped like the American-market CB750F with a chain final drive. Honda says that they don't import the 900F because they believe demand isn't great enough. They feel that those who did buy the 900F would pass over the CB750F, the CBX and now this CB900C to do so—thereby reducing sales of those models. However, the 902cc engine was perfect for this new American shaft-drive model, so it was pressed into service.

The 900 engine has the same bore

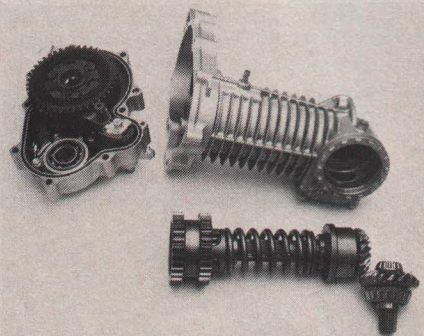
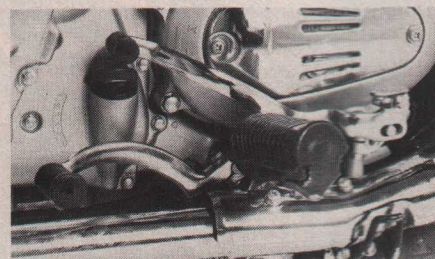
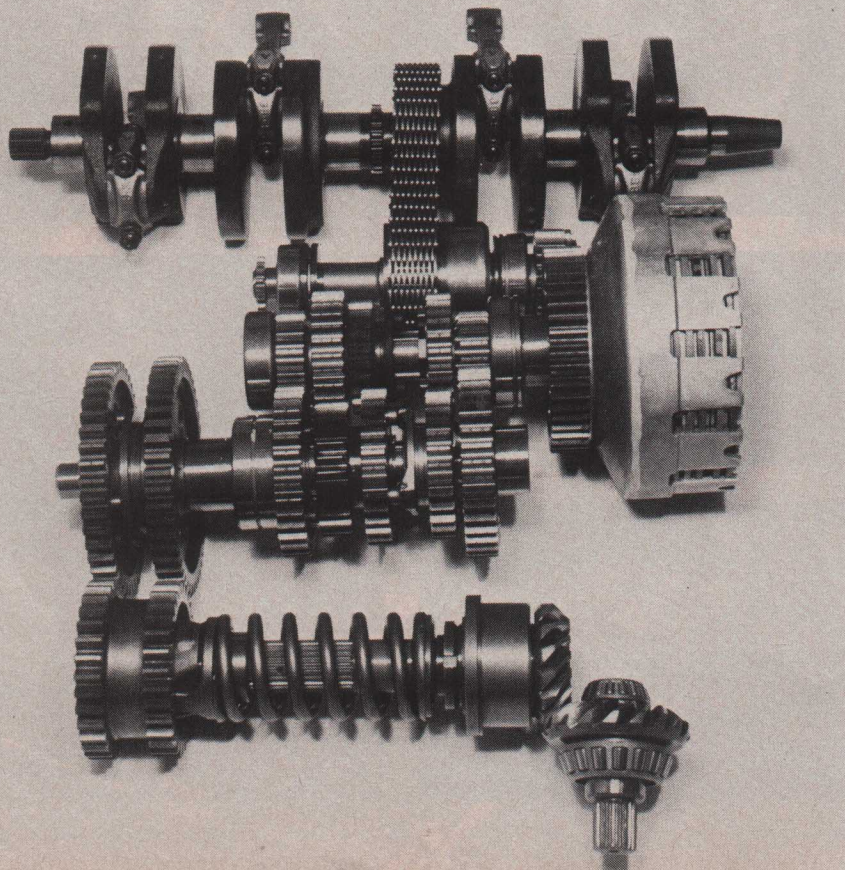
centers and valve angles as the DOHC CB750 and uses much of the same tooling. The stroke is 7.0mm longer and the bore is 2.5mm wider than the 750's. The 900's crank is a bit heftier than the smaller bike's. Reshaped piston crowns and combustion chambers drop the 900's compression ratio to 8.8:1 from the 750's 9:1. The 900's intake valves are 1.0mm larger than the 750's and the exhaust valves are 0.5mm bigger. Except for carburetion changes, the 900C engine is the same as used in the European 900F and even retains that bike's oil cooler. Perhaps the biggest difference in the power-producing package is the Custom's four megaphone mufflers instead of the F's pair of two-into-ones.

As in the CB750, the camshafts are driven by a pair of link-plate (Hy-Vo type) chains. One drives the exhaust cam from the middle of the crankshaft; the other loops around both cam's centers to drive the intake cam. Each cylinder's four valves are actuated directly from the cam lobes via buckets and shims. Shims of various thicknesses are available to adjust valve lash. The crankshaft rides on plain bearings and passes power to the clutch through another link-plate chain (on a sprocket to the right of the cam chain's) and a jackshaft. The narrow alternator is at the crank's left end and the electronic ignition's moving parts are on the crank's right end. All these pieces are the same as or similar to the 750's and it would be possible to

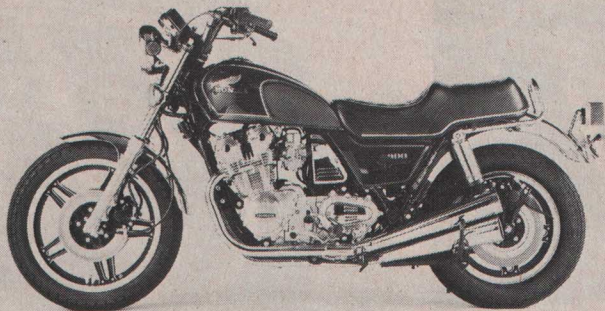
make your CB750 into a CB900F using the 900C's crank and top end. You wouldn't even have to bore the cases. However, you can be sure that it would be *much* cheaper to use an accessory big-bore kit to get the additional displacement.

Honda wanted the 900 Custom to have the same basic crankcases as on the CB900F to lower the bike's price by reducing tooling costs. For the same reason they also wanted to use a right-side drive shaft like the ones on their other two shafties, the GL1000/1100 and the CX500. Unfortunately, the 900F's cases and transmission were arranged with the countershaft exiting the cases on the left. That would have been the natural place to plug in the final drive shaft. To make a right-side drive shaft work with a left-side transmission output shaft, Honda used an additional shaft, running behind the crankcase assembly to plug into the front of the drive shaft. This had two potential drawbacks. One potential problem—the increase in engine length created by the cross-over shaft and its case—Honda saw as an asset. Americans like roomy motorcycles—long bikes with long wheelbases. A long engine bay meshed perfectly with the long-wheelbase concept.

The other problem was the additional power loss created by the extra gear pair needed for this arrangement. For this there was no ready remedy, if one was even needed. However, Honda did find a unique

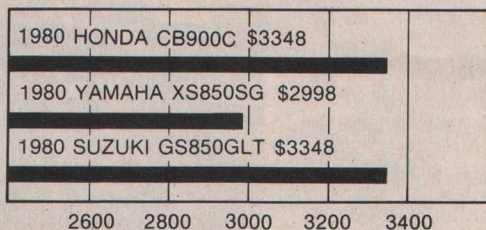


The CB900C's drive train is very similar to the CB750's—all the way through the gearbox. The extra two gear pairs which lead to the driveshaft plug in at the point where there would normally be a countersprocket. The subtransmission's shift lever has a heel pad, but it is still awkward to make quick shifts between ranges.

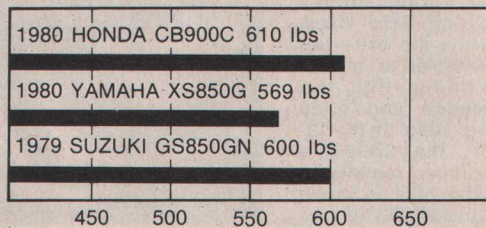


# HONDA CB900 Custom

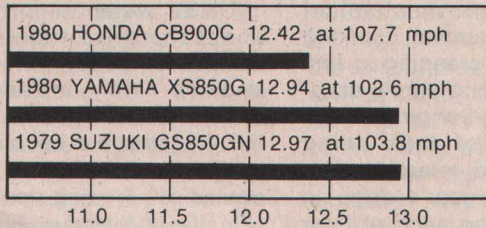
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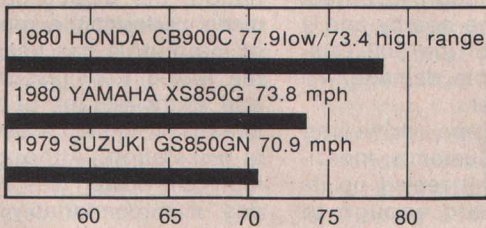
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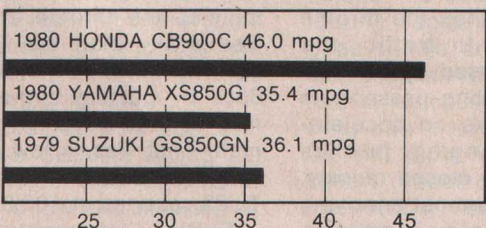
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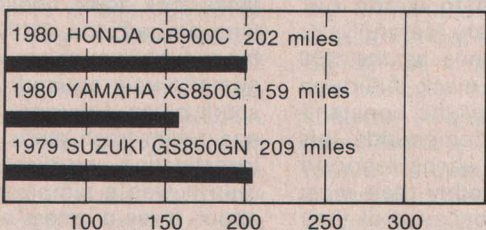
## HIGH-SPEED PASS, TERMINAL SPEED



## AVERAGE FUEL CONSUMPTION



## AVERAGE TOURING RANGE



Suggested retail price.....\$3348  
 Warranty.....6 months, 4000 miles  
 Number of U.S. dealers.....1787  
 Cost of shop manual.....N.A.

## ENGINE

Type.....Four-stroke DOHC four  
 Displacement.....901.7cc  
 Bore x stroke.....64.5 x 69mm  
 Compression.....8.8:1  
 Carburetion.....4, 32mm Keihin CV (acc. pump)  
 Ignition.....Transistorized pointless  
 Lubrication.....Wet sump  
 Lighting output.....260 watts  
 Battery.....12V, 14AH

## DRIVETRAIN

Primary transmission.....Link-plate chain, jackshaft;  
 2.041:1  
 Clutch.....15 plates, wet  
 Final drive.....Shaft, 3.091:1

## CHASSIS

Fork.....37mm Showa air/spring, 6.2 in. travel  
 Shocks.....Showa air/spring, 4.0 in. wheel travel  
 Front tire.....110/90-19 Dunlop F11 tubeless  
 Rear tire.....130/90-16 Dunlop K127 tubeless  
 Rake/trail.....29°/4.88 in. (124mm)  
 Wheelbase.....62.2 in. (1580mm)  
 Seat height.....31.3 in. (795mm)  
 Ground clearance.....7.0 in. (178mm)  
 Fuel capacity.....4.4 gal. (16.5 liters)  
 Wet weight.....610 lbs. (276.7kg)  
 GVWR.....1070 lbs. (485kg)  
 Colors.....Blue or burgundy  
 Instruments.....Speedo, tach, resettable tripmeter,  
 lights for turnsignals, low oil pressure, high  
 beam, neutral and low rear shock air pressure

## PERFORMANCE

Fuel consumption.....41 to 50 mpg, 46.0 mpg average  
 Average touring range.....202 miles  
 Quarter-mile.....12.42 sec. at 107.7 mph  
 Top-gear 50-mph pass, terminal speed.....77.9 mph low  
 range, 73.4 mph high  
 RPM at 60 mph in top gear.....4380 low range,  
 3877 high range  
 Speed in gears at (redline).....(9500):  
 Low range: 1st 52.8 mph;  
 2nd 70.1 mph; 3rd 90.2 mph;  
 4th 108.1 mph; 5th 130.1 mph  
 High range: 1st 59.7 mph;  
 2nd 79.2 mph; 3rd 101.8 mph;  
 4th 122.2 mph; 5th 147 mph  
 Speedometer error.....30 mph, actual 30  
 60 mph, actual 60

use for this additional power transmission point. Instead of simply using a gear on the end of the transmission output shaft to drive a gear on the crossover shaft, Honda built in an extra little attraction. Honda calls it "Select Range." Essentially, it's a two-speed sub-transmission, operated by its own shift lever located just above the normal lever for the five-speed gearbox. The sub-transmission gives you a choice of ranges, a low one for maximum acceleration and easy getaways in traffic and a high range for lower engine speeds and improved fuel economy on the highway. In part this system is a response to a complaint Honda has heard from Gold Wing riders: You can't change ratios with a shaft-drive. On the CB900C you can.

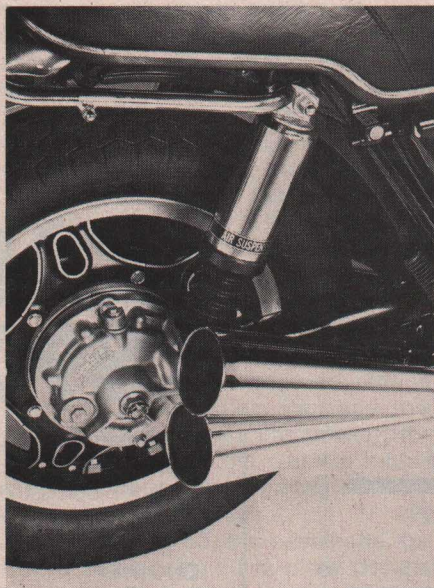
Instead of a normal gearbox where gears engage one another, the 900C's sub-transmission has a wheel with dogs on both sides. The wheel slides on the countershaft's splines. A small shift drum slides a shift fork which pushes the wheel back and forth to engage the high-range gear pair (0.638:1 ratio) or the low-range gear pair (0.721:1). The shift lever stays in position once shifted.

This sub-transmission has its own case which may be removed with the engine in the frame and it's lubricated by its own supply of gear oil. A

The difference between high range and low range is not quite as great as the difference between ratios in the main gearbox. For example, high gear in low range (5.26:1 overall ratio) is positioned between top gear in high range (4.66:1) and fourth gear in high range (5.60:1). The difference between ranges is about 500 rpm in fifth gear at highway speeds.

It would be difficult to use the sub-transmission as though you had a ten-speed gearbox. Its lever is awkward to reach and you would have to stir both levers at every shift to select ratios in the right sequence. The sub-trans also requires a deliberate shift when changing ranges. It's easy to accidentally select a false neutral between ranges. In practice we changed ranges when we were changing riding conditions. When we pulled on to a freeway or highway, we shifted up through the main gearbox in low range then clicked into high range to cruise. When we dropped back into city traffic or turned on to a twisty canyon road for some fun, we clicked the sub-transmission down into low range.

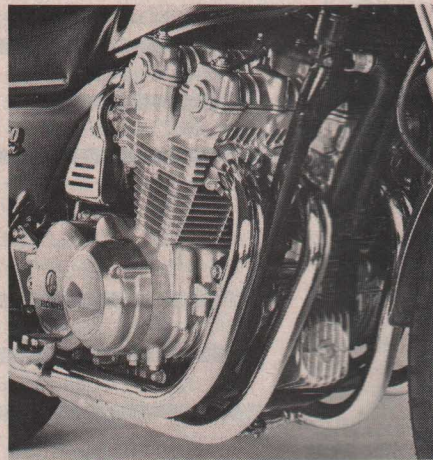
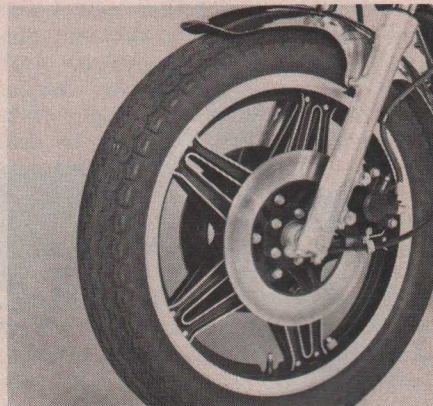
Something, probably all the extra gear pairs, in the 900C transmission has made it much noisier and snatchier than the CB750's. It clanks loudly when you drop it into first and each shift thereafter is accompanied by a robust clank. More annoying,



Honda definitely wants the CB900C to work in touring applications. That's why the 900 Custom has air/spring shocks (above) like the pure-touring Gold Wing. The ride is excellent despite the extra unsprung weight of the shaft-drive mechanism. The rear hub looks like the GL1100 and CX500 pieces and uses some of the same tooling. Also in the interest of touring comfort, the CB900C's engine is insulated by rubber mounts, a first for a Honda four. The bike is much smoother than the very similar CB750.

but of no apparent mechanical consequence, is a staccato clanking which is set up when creeping in first gear with the clutch just barely dragging. This bang-bang-banging is apparently the result of lash being quickly reeled up and released over and over, causing a gear's dogs to clank as they reach the ends of their travel. It was loud enough to attract the attention of anyone nearby and it seems to be typical of the 900 Custom. The only probable damage will be to the rider's nerves.

A more troublesome drive-line complaint was the Custom's inordinate amount of lash. It reeled up its lash with a clank, hard enough to chirp the tire in second and skid it momentarily in first when the throttle was snapped shut. In traffic, the abrupt transitions caused by the lash would treat unsuspecting passengers to neck-snapping jerks on acceleration and helmet-banging lurches when the throttle was closed quickly. The lash problem was most annoying when we were out play-racing on back roads. We had to watch our throttle transitions very carefully or be lurching off our lines as the 900 reeled up its driveline slack. Although the abrupt response of the constant-velocity carburetors compounds this problem, the Honda carbs respond better and more smoothly than most other CVs, probably because of their accelerator pump.



Those were our only complaints about the drive train. The gearbox clanked smoothly from gear to gear and we rarely missed shifts. The clutch heated up and got grabby at the dragstrip but became its amiable, progressive self again as soon as it cooled off. Finding neutral was easy.

In its chain-drive European incarnation, the CB900 carries a pretty mean performance reputation. Some of the muscle has been dispersed in the added transmission components and extra weight of the Custom's chassis. The 900 Custom, however, is no slouch. Although it has the high-rpm power bias typical of Hondas, it is comfortably strong at low and midrange rpm. It responds willingly to the throttle and feels much less peaky than the CB750. It out-sprinted the Yamaha and Suzuki 850s by posting a quickest quarter-mile time of 12.42 seconds at 107.7 mph. That was in low range. In high range its best 440 performance was 12.83 seconds at 106.3 mph.

Getting representative dragstrip times took some fiddling. On its first time around, the CB900 was slowed by a high-rpm miss which we presumed was caused by unhealthy spark plugs. However, when we tried again with fresh plugs, it still missed. Investigating, we discovered that the culprit was a simple plastic barrier about three-quarters-of-an-inch from the air intake horn. This barrier is in-



tended to help keep debris from falling into the air horn. In the case of our machine the barrier, which is mounted to the frame with a single screw, was apparently flexible enough to be sucked against the intake horn at high rpm, cutting off incoming air and causing the miss. We removed the barrier and the miss disappeared.

Although the plastic barrier's effect on power wasn't noticeable during normal street riding, it did ruin gas mileage. We rode the CB900 for several hundred miles with the barrier doing its thing and were horrified at the dismal 30 to 38 mpg we got. After we discovered the problem, gas mileage rose to a more reasonable 41 to 50 mpg. Even with the smallish 4.4-gallon capacity of the Triumph-like teardrop tank, that will get you about 200 miles per tankful.

The small fuel tank is the only place where the CB900's styling has done significant damage to its function. The seat is low and stepped—in keeping with fashion on the cruisin'-for-burgers circuit. However, the seat still has a respectable amount of padding and the rider's portion is longer than on most factory choppers. (That long wheelbase is showing up.) The pegs are fairly high relative to the seat, but the whole arrangement works out better than we anticipated, even on long rides of several hours. Looking at it,

we didn't expect to like the seat, but we did. It didn't get hard or cut off the circulation to the rider's hind-quarters after 50 miles or so of touring. We didn't feel cramped because of the riding position, a pleasant surprise. The bars are stylish but not extreme. As a result they don't spread you out in the wind like a parachute and even our most ardent canyon-road commando, who always gripes about the bars on factory choppers, had good words for these. They don't interfere with body English during spirited cornering.

Honda wanted the 900 Custom to have a comfortable seat, handlebar and riding position because they intended the bike to have a clear-cut touring capability. Shaft drive and a good saddle are just two of the elements aimed at making the big Custom a successful tourer. Honda will offer the touring fairing from the GL1100 Gold Wing Interstate as an option (about \$500 with lowers) for the 900C. To ensure smoothness the CB900C is the first Honda four—and the only Honda in recent memory—with a rubber-mounted engine. The CB750 has a mild buzz at high rpm, but basically there's no vibration to speak of on the 900C. Or at least we didn't feel any. However, three of the four bolts securing the taillight assembly and the nut for the clutch lever pivot screw all loosened and fell off the bike. Vibration could have

been the cause.

To guarantee a plush ride, Honda fitted the CB900 Custom with air/spring suspension like the new Gold Wing's. Both legs of the front fork are filled through a common valve on the top of the right fork tube to give 11 to 16 psi of air assist. The FVQ rear shocks, which get from 28 to 64 psi, are filled through a valve under the left side panel. A light on the dash warns if rear shock air pressure drops below the minimum recommended level. To cut static friction in the fork, the 900 uses two DU-material low-friction bushings in each leg, one at the top of the slider and one at the end of the 37mm stanchion tube. This system, used in several 1980 Hondas, prevents binding and improves compliance on small bumps. Combined with the soft initial rate of air suspension, the low-friction feature delivers an excellent ride over tiny bumps and judders. Generous travel and the air suspension's progressive nature takes care of big bumps as well. There's nothing to complain about in the ride.

The air suspension also aids in giving the CB900C a sporting flair. The bike has good tires, well-controlled suspension and a surprising amount of cornering clearance. With the suspension inflated to pressures near the upper end of the recommended scale, only the most aggressive riders will ever drag anything while cornering. Only the drive-train lash interferes with the 900's precision when gliding through a corner. With the suspension pumped up, the CB900 handles precisely and stably, not as perfectly as a CB750F or even a standard model Suzuki 850 shafty, but well enough to transmit a strong sense of confidence and control to the rider. You can drop it into low range, grab a handful of throttle and—if you are wary of the lash—do some impressive corner-carving on your favorite back road.

With its long wheelbase, the big Custom handles slowly at low speeds but not as heavily as its weight might suggest. Its low seat height (which can be adjusted slightly with the air suspension) allows a firm stance even for short-legged riders.

Except for a surge in the front brake at low speeds and moderate pressures, the brakes were excellent. Both the dual front discs and the single rear offered exceptionally controllable, progressive operation and good power. They never faded or became grabby.

Maintaining the CB900 Custom is pretty straightforward. There are two extra oil reservoirs (in the sub-transmission and rear end) to attend to, and you must buy shims to make the

*continued on page 101*



infrequent valve adjustments. Pointless ignition, tapered roller steering head and swingarm bearings and an easily removed rear wheel all simplify maintenance. Our experience indicates that the Dunlop K127 will have a long and happy life, although this is the first 16-inch version we've had. Like the 19-inch front tire, the rear is run tubeless on a ComStar wheel.

If you've been lying awake nights hoping that Honda would import the CB900F, you are apparently out of luck. The CB900 Custom is handy out there in the swervery, but it's no pumped-up mountain-road rocket for riders who run on pure adrenalin. It will work well for the rider who likes to chase down twisty back roads and it can still coddle the open-highway wanderer. It does have some shortcomings, but in this case they aren't major and the more noticeable ones—like drive-train lash—can be blamed on something besides the styling.

Minor weaknesses can't keep the Honda CB900 Custom from being the most appealing of the big chopper-styled street bikes. Without those minor flaws it would be one of the best street bikes of any kind. **M**

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- No-quibble, 12-month guarantee
- Webco exclusive U.S. distributor

Subminiature transducer microphone (1) fits into any type of helmet as shown. Flexible extension tube in open-face helmet eliminates wind noise yet catches the softest conversation without distortion or feedback. Stereo-effect earphones (2) require no helmet modification to fit. Pull-apart plugs (3) link helmet systems and control box for absolute safety. Cast alloy control box (4), the "brains" of the Sonic Intercom system, houses the subminiature printed electronic circuitry, individual volume controls and long-life PP3 9-volt battery (supplied).



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