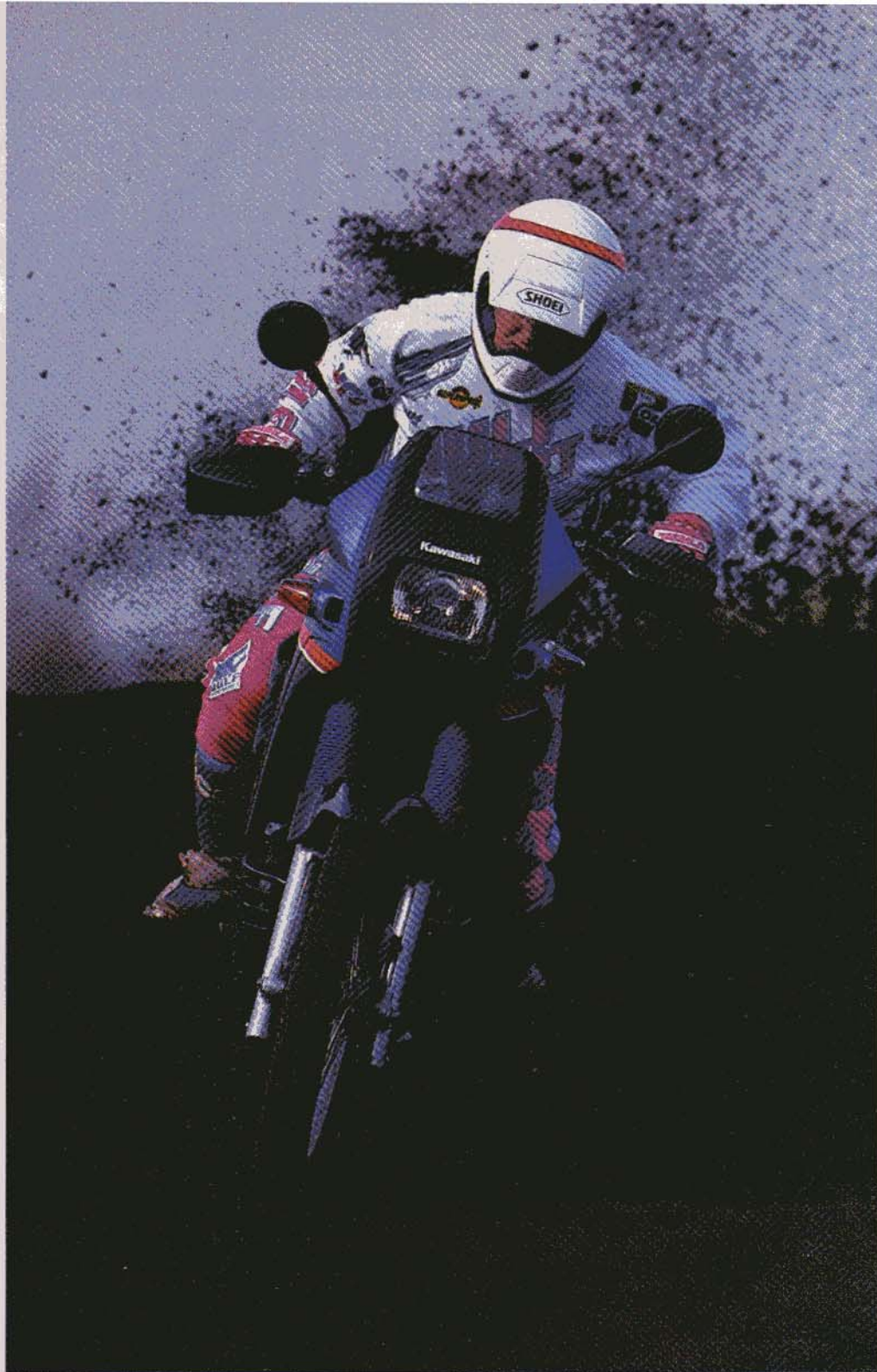


DUMPER TRUCK

Pics: David Goldman



Kawasaki Tengai: so refined it wouldn't say boo to a goose. Not without considerable encouragement, anyway.

There are no warning signs on trails. There I was trundling the Kawasaki Tengai along some relatively easy going on a Northamptonshire byway, when the plethora of shallow ruts suddenly converged into two mega-deep ones, which in turn disappeared into a seemingly bottomless quagmire.

Doubtless the result of a brainless four-wheel-drive countryside destroyer getting into extreme difficulties, the morass presented me with something of a dilemma. There was certainly no going back; the ruts were

already too deep and the motor cycle too heavy to manhandle around. Did I leave it parked in the rut and phone Kawasaki with a map reference as a guide to their machine's whereabouts? Did I pretend it had been stolen? Or did I risk serious damage to both machine and rider by attempting to ride through?

The possibly heroic (more likely foolhardy) answer was to hook the Tengai's gearbox into the third of its five gears, dump the clutch and go for it. Amazingly, the road-orientated rear tyre found some grip; the

machine slewed from side to side but somehow kept moving in the right direction until something resembling terra firma was reached.

Both engine and clutch were overheating — the electric fan furiously working overtime to rectify the former's problems — and both machine and rider were several stones heavier thanks to a liberal coating of Northamptonshire's finest clag, but we had crossed the 'edges of the world' to safety.

Moreover, my opinion of the blue, red and black Kawasaki had altered. When up against it

on the trail the big thumper had delivered the goods.

But let's not permit a moment's exhilaration to distort an over-riding fact that the big Kawa is most definitely more road than trail friendly. In my own humble opinion, big cube trailsters peaked in terms of off road usefulness three or four years ago with the Yamaha XT600, Honda XL600 and Kawasaki's own KLR 600. With decent chassis and suspension, real bashplates and not too much excess equipment they were relatively competent in the hands of macho types (with long legs).

Since then the Paris-Dakar influence, allied with the desire of Japanese designers to make them more suitable as roadsters (where most miles are clocked up anyway), has definitely shifted the balance.

This evolutionary process started when the KLR600 was superseded by the KLR650. Engine capacity grew from 564cc to 651cc, the fuel tank ballooned up to five gallons and the headlamp sprouted a mini fairing.

Below: despite the action pics, the Tengai is really a pure road tool; steering, suspension, tyres and fairing see to that. It's not too far removed from a sports single.



For 1989, with possibly more than a hint of Honda Transalp influence, the process continued in the shape of the Tengai. With a name that, in Japanese, means 'the edges of the world', the newcomer is based upon the same chassis and power unit but that handlebar fairing has grown into a considerably larger frame-mounted unit that blends rearwards into the sculptured fuel tank and downwards — almost — to the plastic 'bashplate'.

Suspension travel has been reduced by 10mm at both ends and the wheelbase is 15mm

shorter. The sump is 30mm nearer the ground and the definitely sports roadster front mudguard sits close to the wheel in contrast to its predecessor's dirt-orientated high clearance example.

The liquid cooled engine is a pleasant, reliable, twin-cam four valver. Twin balancer shafts cut down the vibes and power delivery is smooth from 2500rpm through to the red line at 7500rpm. It will drop below the former figure, especially in the lower gears, but there are objections in the form of transmission snatch.

From the front the Tengai looks like a roadster but it still feels like a trailie, with high, wide bars and a consequent upright riding position. The slim seat, which folds up against the tank for off road comfort, stays fairly firm and supportive, even on longish hauls. Not so the wider rear section, which has minimal padding and doesn't offer passengers much in the way of comfort.

A small amount of vibration gets through to the rider. It's not unpleasant though, but the well positioned mirrors — which give decent vision past even the hunkiest of shoulders — tend to give blurred vision as the tacho needle twists around its dial.

The faster you go the more the benefits of that half fairing become noticeable. It deflects a decent amount of wind blast off your chest, though your helmet is still out in the breeze. Possibly more significant is that the new, larger lump of plastic, allied with that slim mudguard, has steadied down front end movement at speed to virtually zero. While the KLR's bars can wobble noticeably — if not disconcertingly, at anything over 70mph, the Tengai holds steady right up to the top speed at something approaching





Would you believe £124.95 for this piece of plastic? We did; we had to pay for it.



Simple, uncluttered, pleasing to behold; and the needle zaps up to 100mph without bother.

TENGAI TAKE TWO

As John says, big trailies peaked in their off road ability three or four years ago. The trouble is, I reckon the KLR series peaked in on road ability shortly after that; the Tengai may be even more street-orientated than ever, but it's lost most of the good reasons which used to exist for buying a big KLR. Gone is the loopy, luxurious, long travel suspension; gone are the flick-of-the-wrist wheelies; gone is the 107mph top speed and near 50mpg economy; gone is the high speed instability which, while it wasn't always desirable, didn't actually do any harm and contributed greatly to the KLR650's character.

Still, buy a Tengai and you get a vastly increased fuel range (160 instead of 130 miles), some seriously grippy tyres (on tarmac), and enough wind protection to cruise flat out. Long distance comfort is unexceptional, the colour scheme (in blue) attracts a lot of admiring comments, back lane scratching is still fun, the engine makes a noise like a Honda C90. But there's hardly any soul left. Where Kawasaki's other two new bikes for '89 (KR-1 and ZXR) are stoaters, the Tengai is only average. RP

105mph on the clock.

Moreover, it carves a precise line into turns; fast sweepers and tighter, slower stuff. The Dunlops grip pleasantly in the dry (although I never felt confident in the wet) and the Kawasaki can be heeled into bends until all the — generous — ground clearance is used up.

Back lane blasting is real fun. The big single is pleasantly tractable, allowing a high gear to be held if it takes your fancy. Alternatively, it can be buzzed through the gears for maximum launch speeds off the turns, but with more weight on the front it's not a mean wheelie machine even if you yank the bars.

Gear-swopping is easy enough, with a short but precise movement on the lever. The brakes are sufficiently powerful for the high speeds attainable, yet offer good feel and consequently safe braking on slippery off road surfaces. The headlamp throws out a pretty feeble beam for a modern bike.

So, all in all the Tengai is a decent, fun roadster, with the

new, larger fairing having helped overcome the KLR's deficiencies. But it's that lump of plastic, amongst other things, which helps inhibit off road activities. The cost of falling off and crunching it amounts to £246 for all three sections. We're sending a bill for £193.85 (ugh) to ace enduroist Squire Tom Crees, who highlighted the plastic bashplate's frailty during our photo session.

As you'll see from the photos, though, Tom also proved that the Tengai can be hauled around on the dirt, if you've got the ability and courage — and it's not your bike. Reduced suspension travel seems to affect the front more than the back, with the air-assisted forks all too ready to bottom out.

Without doubt the Tengai is firmly roadster-biased, but with better off road manners than all that plastic would lead you to believe. And it'll pull out of some deep mud holes should you foolishly venture too far away from the tarmac.

John Pearson.

TEST SPECIFICATION

Kawasaki Tengai 650

Price £2999
 Warranty 12 months, unlimited mileage
 Importer Kawasaki Motors (UK) Ltd, 748/749 Deal Avenue,
 Trading Estate, Slough, Berkshire SL1 4RZ (0753 38255)

Engine

Type liquid cooled, dohc, four-valve single
 Bore & stroke 100 x 83mm
 Displacement 651cc
 Compression ratio 9.5:1
 Fuel system Keihin CVK40
 Ignition system CDI

Transmission

Primary drive, ratio gear, 2.272
 Final drive, ratio o ring chain, 43/15
 Gear ratios 1st 2.266; 2nd 1.529; 3rd 1.181; 4th 0.954; 5th 0.791

Electrics

Alternator 196W
 Battery 12V 14Ah
 Headlamp 60/55W

Performance

Maximum speed
 Prone 101.0mph
 Upright 96.5mph
 SS 1/4 mile 14.65sec @ 90.5mph
 Fuel consumption
 Average 41mpg



Chassis

Front tyre 90/90 521 Dunlop Trail Max
 Rear tyre 130/80 517 Dunlop Trail Max
 Front brake disc
 Rear brake disc
 Front suspension 38mm telescopic, air adjustable, 220mm travel
 Rear suspension Uni-Trak monoshock, 4-position adj rebound,
 5-position adj preload, 200mm travel
 Castor/trail 28° / 113mm

Dimensions

Wheelbase 1480mm (58.3in)
 Overall length 2220mm (87.4in)
 Overall width 920mm (36.2in)
 Seat height 870mm (34.3in)
 Dry weight 159kg (350.5lb)
 Fuel tank 23litres (5gal)

Tester's verdict

Good points street ability
 Bad points heavy and too much plastic for trail use
 Performance sufficient
 Economy not outstanding
 Comfort rider okay, passenger not so good
 Braking excellent
 Value average