



● Pictures: Tony Sleep

Floating on the 'Wing'

*Brian Tarbox
reclines,
switches
on the radio*

*and lets the
good times roll*

*on **Honda's***

two-wheeled

version

of a

Rolls Royce

THE spec sheet makes horrific reading: dry weight 798lbs, wheelbase 66.9 inches, overall height five feet and overall length a shade under three yards. Can these really be the vital statistics of a motor cycle? The answer is yes, but then the GL1500 Honda is no ordinary motor cycle.

The fourth generation Gold Wing has grown two extra water-washed cylinders, boasts a capacity of 1520cc — that's 92.7 cubic inches to you Harley freaks — and even has a reverse gear to aid car park manoeuvrability. Reverse gear on a solo motor cycle? Yes, and its no gimmick either. Remember this bike weighs only 100lb less than a mini and is only a foot shorter!

Its six cylinder motor is the biggest purpose built motor cycle engine in existence. The 1600 Brazilian-made Amazonas is the only larger capacity production bike you will find and that is powered by a VW car engine.

On paper the GL1500 sounds like the steroid packed equivalent of a two wheel juggernaut cobbled together by Frankenstein and Co. Ltd. Press the starter button and it's a different story. The weight disappears like magic. The engine is silk smooth and as quiet as the proverbial mouse. What appears a hideous colossus is miraculously transformed into a sleek, Rolls Royce style limo.

Gold Wings are part of the American dream. They are built in the States and that is where most of them are sold. Despite that enthusiasts have made the Gold Wing Owners Club of Great Britain the biggest one-make club outside North America and the GL1500 is probably going to add a few more recruits.

Honda UK have brought in only a handful of machines and demand easily outstrips supply. Several members of the owners' club have shipped in their bikes from the States while dealers have started to pirate-import from West Germany and the USA.

So what's all the fuss about? After nearly three weeks in the saddle I think I understand. The new six is luxury bike travel at its best. Forget Bimotas and RC30s. This is a different kind of laid back enjoyment. Just switch on the radio and let the good times roll...

HONDA GL1500 GOLD WING

Press the starter button and the weight disappears like magic. The Wing on the move is a surprisingly nimble steed with its ultra-low centre of gravity.



Pilot's eye view of the Gold Wing cockpit. Five star equipment and five star luxury.



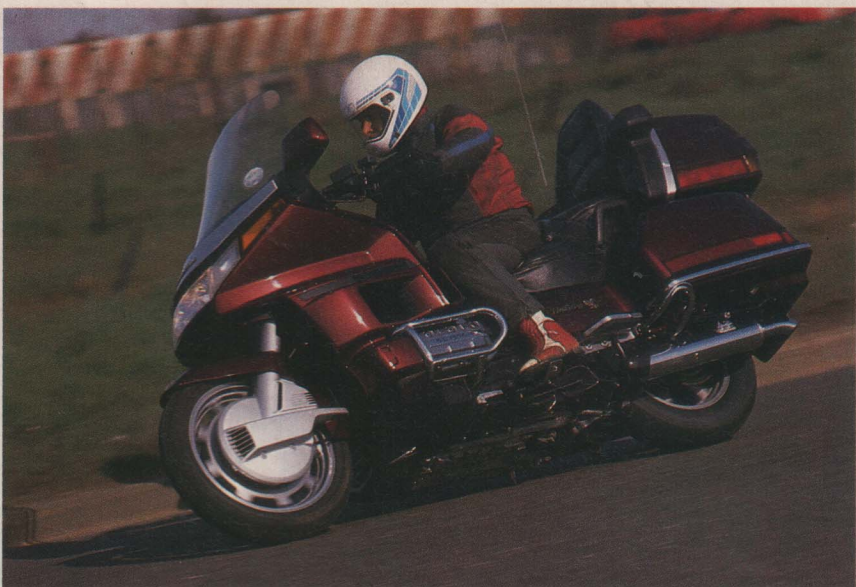
Fill up under the flap on the false petrol tank and strike up the band with the built-in stereo radio/cassette. ZZ Top or Chopin, sir?



The flat six engine powers the Gold Wing to a genuine 115mph hauling two people and luggage. More importantly, you can pop it into cruise control and purr along all day in comfort



Twin front discs are fully enclosed and there's a single disc at the rear. Probably the Wing's poorest feature, the brakes could only be described as adequate.



● Engine and transmission

★★★★★

THE GL1500 is not a good bike to buy if you enjoy anonymity. The new Gold Wing stops passers-by in their tracks. I have never come across a motor cycle that attracted so much casual interest.

Whenever I parked, people gathered to gaze in awe at the megabike. They shook their heads in disbelief when told it was powered by a flat-six engine. Questions would be popped about comfort and price. Could you hear the radio when on the centre stand? The inquisition would go on and on. Some onlookers thought it was magnificent. Others dismissed it as over the top and ridiculous. Either way, no one ignored it.

The one question I was never asked, even by the youngest admirer, was "how fast does it go mate?" You don't have to be an authority on motor cycles to realise the unimportance of the answer. Honda could well follow Rolls-Royce's famous example and merely say that power is 'sufficient'.

In actual fact it is a more than sufficient 100bhp. The short stroke (71 x 64mm), 1520cc engine churns out its maximum at just 5,200rpm and will hit a genuine top speed of more than 115mph while hauling two people and their luggage. More important is the torque. There's bags of it: 15.3kg-m at 4,000rpm with the pulling power of a tractor at less than half that engine speed.

The red line is drawn at 5,500rpm and engine is so remarkably smooth and quiet you have to keep an eye on the tachometer to stop going into it in the lower gears. On several occasions I found myself motoring along in third thinking I was in top. There is no hint from the exhaust note that a change is required.

When pushed, the acceleration is surprisingly good for such a colossal machine. Rarely it is necessary to cog down when gliding past 60mph traffic: Hit the open road and you can switch to the cruise control, lock in your escape velocity, and enjoy the scenery.

Power is fed to the rear wheel by a fully enclosed drive shaft which is almost as smooth in its pick-up and delivery as a chain. The hydraulic clutch is light to operate but the gearbox is a little clunky. But then cog-swappers should look for their enjoyment elsewhere. The Wing calls for a whole new style of riding. No longer is there any need to change down for corners — the torque pulls you through.

I found this relaxed style of riding took

some getting used to. For the first 50 miles or so I was using the gearbox far more often than was required. Fifth gear is officially designated as an overdrive and comes with its own warning light to indicate when it is engaged. In reality the motor will pull that ratio from 750rpm meaning you can stick in in top and leave it there for 99 per cent of the time.

And then, of course, there is that famous reverse gear to help extract yourself from tricky parking situations. To operate it, start the engine, pull a lever on the left side of the bike and crawl back by pressing the starter button. And don't be afraid. You only move as fast as you would pushing the machine, but it is not just a gimmick. Park with your front wheel buried into the kerb on a slight incline and it avoids the risk of a double hernia.

Twin 35mm CV carbs linked to a fuel pump feed the engine which boasts hydraulic self-adjusting tappets among its low maintenance features.

Still, servicing is best left to the experts. The four cylinder Wings enjoy a reputation for reliability which is second to none and the same should be true of the new six.

The low revving engine should have a car type lifespan of 100,000 miles plus and comes backed with a two year guarantee which is a good reason for avoiding the pirate importers and buying one with a genuine UK passport.

● Chassis

★★★★★

ALL that weight suggests the Wing should handle like a crippled elephant. In fact it is surprisingly nimble thanks to a low centre of gravity.

Getting all that meat so close to the deck means the bike can be flipped from footpeg to footpeg with minimal input through the wide bars. Twisty B roads hold no horrors for the machine but its real domain is fast roads with long sweeping bends. The Wing feels far better when it can be set up for each corner rather than being rushed through them in quick succession. The problem is that the bike has a slight tendency to run wide due, no doubt, to its enormous wheelbase.

Straight-line stability was criticised by another rider but I found nothing to complain about. Even flat out the bike seemed steady on its feet and the weight actually helps combat the effects of a strong crosswind despite the wide profile it presents to the elements.

The Dunlop tyres — 130/70 x 18 front



and 160/80 x 16 rear — offer good adhesion but squirm when confronted with road scars and cats eyes. That's just something the rider has to get used too.

More difficult to ignore is the lack of braking power. The trio of disc brakes fitted to the machine are only just up to the job and can be described as no more than adequate. In emergency-stop situations they can bring a lump to your throat. The brake lever operates only the front right disc. Its partner is linked to the rear disc and brought into play by the brake pedal as on the system favoured by Moto Guzzi. Even at slow speeds I didn't feel comfortable leaving the braking to the linked system alone.

The Wing uses a double cradle frame with box-section top rails and feels very rigid. The suspension is also very good with 41mm front forks and twin rear shocks.

One of the rear shocks — but only one — is air sprung and can be adjusted by the bike's own on-board air compressor to accommodate different load and road conditions.

● Equipment

★★★★★

WHERE do you start on a bike that's got the lot? Even the handbook looks up-market with its leatherette cover and gold lettering.

Comfort is perhaps the prime consideration and the Wing scores maximum points. Riding the GL1500 is like taking a trip in your favourite armchair. The King and Queen seat locks the rider into position and is comfortable and well padded enough to recline in from dawn until dusk without feeling any strain.

And wind pressure is non-existent. The full fairing with its three position screen sweeps the air away. A funny thing is that the air actually appears to regroup behind the rider and push him in the back!

Air vents are located in the fairing and can be used to direct in a cooling breeze or warm air from the engine.

One thing I didn't like about the set-up is that you actually have to look through the screen even when it's on its lowest setting. In heavy rain that became a problem. On one occasion I had to pull in and stop because my visor misted up and I couldn't see through the droplets of water that refused to be blown from the screen.

Its high level protection does, however, mean there is no problem in listening to the on-board entertainment which comes in the form of an AM/FM radio and stereo

cassette. There is also an intercom and headphone system providing you have got the attachments for your helmet.

The electric air compressor used to adjust the rear shock also has an extension valve which means it can be used to inflate your blow-up tent or your mate's spare tyre.

And there's plenty of carrying capacity for luggage for those weekends away. Both the panniers and the top box each carry 20lbs of equipment and there are further storage compartments in each side of the fairing and in the passenger's arm rests.

A key in the top box and release levers underneath give access to the panniers and trunk which is big enough to accommodate two crash helmets.

The standard equipment includes a clock, self-cancelling indicators, handlebar choke, and a headlamp height adjuster. And the string of warning lights seems to go on for ever.

The Wing is fairly easy to pull onto its centre stand and you would be wise to use it. Both I and a previous tester had the machine roll off its not-so-secure side stand. Fortunately the crash bars prevented any serious damage.

● The price you pay

★★★

SINCE its launch last year, the price of the GL1500 has soared from £8899 to £9799 — an increase that would cover the cost of two Camino mopeds!

So is the mighty juggernaut worth the best part of ten grand? Many owners would undoubtedly agree that it is but that hasn't stopped a whole army of enthusiasts from hunting out a 'black market' bargain. I have heard it claimed that for every Wing Honda UK import a second is smuggled into the country through the back door.

The simple fact of the matter is Wings cost a lot less in their country of origin — the good old US of A. Quite a few buyers fly

out to the States, pick up a Wing and bring it back as a personal import. But there is an easier option. Several dealers who had better remain nameless are involved in the same enterprise and will pass on some, but by no means all, the savings to their customers.

Still, for every bargain hunter there is a well-heeled enthusiast willing to cough up the extra to avoid any possible hassle should things go horribly wrong some-





The fairing gives full protection but there's no way of peering above the screen in rainy weather.

where along the line.

Apart from anything else, Honda offers a comprehensive guarantee — 12 months on the complete bike and two years cover on the engine and transmission. Could they, as part of an international group be made to accept liability for problems on a bike they didn't import? If you find yourself adrift in that particular boat you had better find a lawyer to man the oars.

Even if you go to America to buy the bike, you are hardly likely to return there to purchase your spares. In this respect the only game in town is the one run by Honda UK. In their parts catalogue they list a replacement screen at £132.39. Front disc pads are £10.85 each, the rear shocks are £172.27 each and each front fork leg would set you back a shade over £197.00. And you've got to add VAT to all those prices!

The high value of the bike is also going to be reflected in the price you pay, for insurance 'loading' is inevitable. And the news at the petrol pumps is not much better. Despite the overdrive facility you would be lucky to get better than 45mpg even if you switched the engine off going down hills. Behaving like a boy racer will be penalised with a fuel consumption figure in the very low 30's.

No one pretends that owning a Wing is going to be easy on the pocket but they do enjoy a reliability record which will see you riding your 1989 model well into the next century.

● Conclusion

★★★★★

GOLD Wings produce strong reactions — you either love them or loathe them. There is no middle ground.

Most buyers are mature riders and many of them end up hauling the family around in a sidecar. Would I buy one? No, but I know and understand the man who would.



Controls on right of fairing for adjusting rear suspension.

Plenty of room for luggage in the huge rear box and there's more storage space in the pillion passenger's armrests (yes, really) and in the fairing.

Left-hand bar controls with self-cancelling indicators, lights, horn, flasher...

