

# KAWASAKI Z400G



To the outsider peering into the mysteriously parochial world of contemporary motorcycling, especially those who last swung a leg over such eye-watering machinery as lightweight 500cc singles before the war, the advantages and virtues of simplicity in engineering might be self evident.

A machine that in original intent was built just to carry its rider in reasonable comfort and economy need, after all, be no more than elemental in its construction.

Where demands are modest, and they still often are in uncommitted riders wanting bikes with more practical than pretentious features, they are easily satisfied by a bike with an equally modest specification.

Unfortunately, the marketing pressures on the manufacturers to offer bikes that pander to the popular imagery associated with motorcycling – the macho appearance projected by the current fashion in customs and the technological leap-frogging occurring in the superbike field being just two – complicates the picture. And simple, cheap motorcycles inevitably fizzle out in time.

Kawasaki's Z400 twin is a typical case. Introduced five years ago, it was offered in an attempt to woo American

## FRILLS BUT NO THRILLS

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Kawasaki's Z400 was built essentially as a commuter, so was their decision to give it the custom treatment a wise one? *John Nutting* finds out. Photography by *Jerry Young*.

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riders onto a Kawasaki four-stroke that didn't have intimidating road-rippling performance in the hope that they eventually would move up the performance scale.

In Europe it came across as a commuter bike. The simplicity was provided by a 398cc parallel twin engine with a single overhead camshaft and five speed gearbox. Bearings were plain shell type and primary drive was by a tough inverted-tooth-type chain, one of the first times such a chain was used on a bike.

The one departure from the low-key approach was the use of chain-driven counterbalancers to minimise the inevitable vibration that resulted from the use of two pistons rising and falling together, a feature that has since been adopted by Honda on the Dream twins.

If nothing else, the Z400 was an adequate motorcycle, if boring to the enthusiast. With a top speed of just over 90mph and comfortable handling, it provided the sort of economy, around 60mpg, that the rider-to-worker wanted, along with pleasant flexibility for a rock bottom price of under £600.

Five years on however the latest Z400, the Custom, has plunged us into confusion. It's still the same bike really,

albeit using the updated six-speed engine with a new cylinder head and improved lubrication that was introduced just over a year ago.

In its Custom guise, the Z400 is supplied with classy-looking cast alloy wheels finished in black with machined highlighting. Paintwork is black with gold striping and the bike looks much smarter and up-to-date than its less-flashy Z400B sibling.

Trouble is despite the attractive appearance for which Kawasaki charge £1,039 inc. VAT, £90 more than the ordinary Z400B, when you get down to riding the bike it's still the same boring commuter machine. In other words, a real bring down.

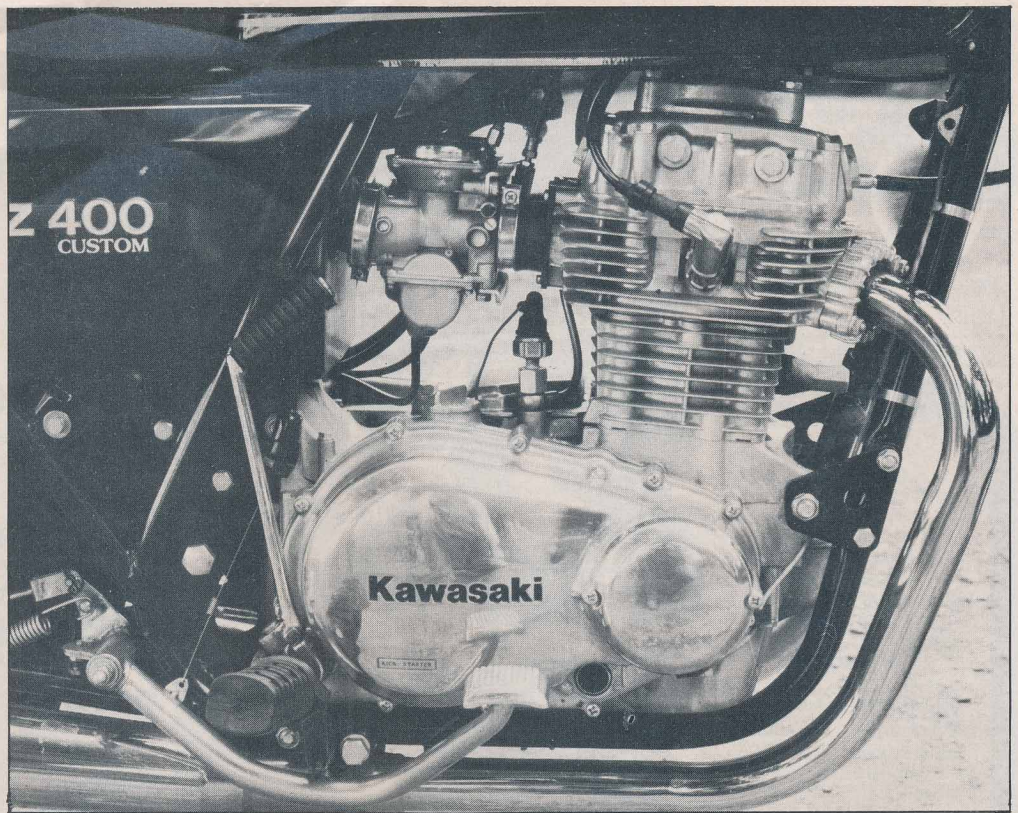
True, you get the latest sintered-alloy padded disc brake up front, and this offers a marked improvement in wet weather braking over the old-type disc brakes. But that doesn't overcome the fact that there are 400cc twins in the world that can provide much smoother and more lively performance.

The problem lies primarily in the balancers. These consist of two bobweights fore and aft of the crankshaft that in combination with the crank counterweights are supposed to balance the primary forces of the pistons at the top and bottom of their stroke. Because the bobweights are spun by a chain and run in the opposite direction as the crank, they neutralize each other at mid-stroke.

However, for such a system to operate properly, all the three shafts must be in line otherwise horizontal forces occur, resulting in other, small vibrations.

Which is what happens on the Z400. Below 5,000 rpm it runs fairly smoothly and were you to just use the bike in town it would be easy to conclude that the bike was a smooth runner. But use the bike's 9,000rpm red line, plus the engine's full 36bhp performance and it's a different matter. It rattles and shakes very uncomfortably and gives the impression of being plain unco-operative.

Fortunately the bike pulls well from low revs, making the six-speed gearbox rather superfluous since it adds little to the overall performance of the bike. Top speed is about 97mph and 80mph cruising is



well within its capacity.

High speed running on motorways is far from the Z400 Custom's main strength, however. Neither is it the sort of bike that encourages fast riding, simply because the engine never seems to be happy spinning in the upper half of its rev range.

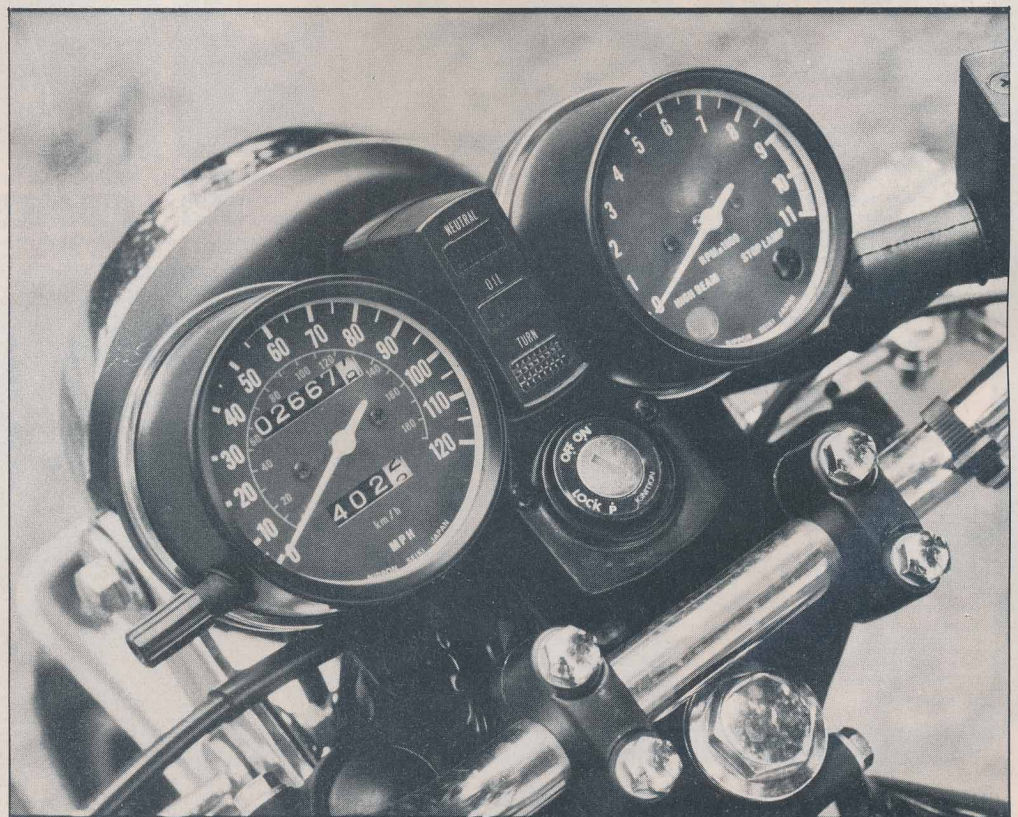
Accept that there is adequate tractability at low revs and then the Z400 becomes more appealing, particularly for commuting.

There is plenty of room on the bike and the distinctly unsporty riding stance is very comfortable. The suspension offers a good ride but lacks sufficient damping for precise handling at higher speeds. You'll be discouraged from high spirited riding anyway by the lack of ground clearance.

We couldn't paint a better picture of the Z400G if we described it as being like a 250cc four-stroke twin with

*Above: Kawasaki's engine, although fitted with counterbalancers, is full of bad vibes when buzzing at the engine's full, 9,000rpm, 36bhp potential. It was well finished and oil-tight, though.*

*Below: Instrumentation was excellent and pretty accurate, too.*

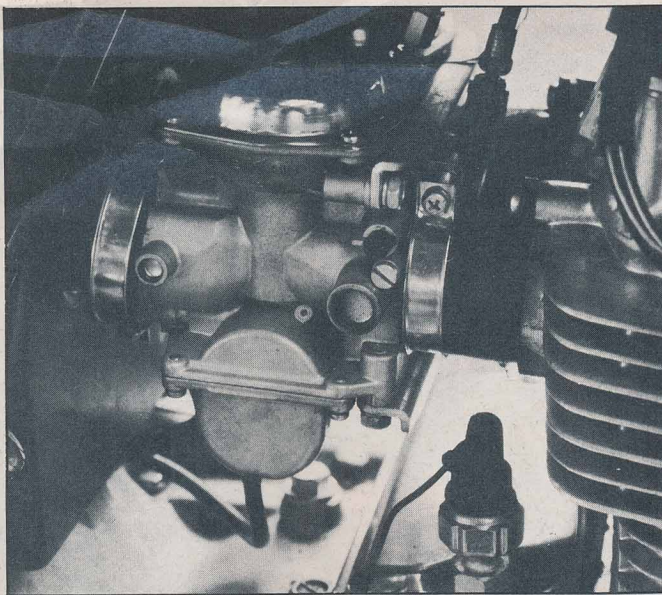


more flexibility and a slightly higher top speed.

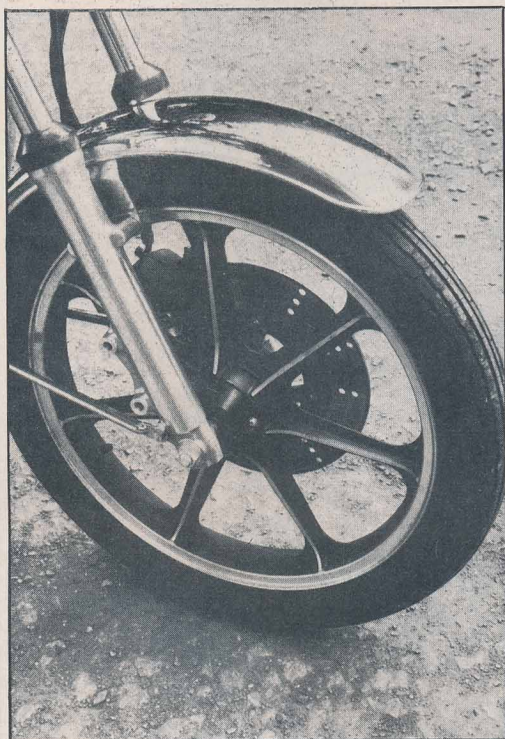
At 370lb dry, it weighs about the same. The dimensions, such as the 53.7in wheelbase, are also much the same. The overall fuel consumption of 62mpg is roughly the same as the two-fifties we've recently tested, too.

It has extra details such as the retracting prop stand operated by a trip lever from the engine sprocket, electric start and the brake light warning lamp in the rev counter face. It also has annoying faults such as a locking fuel cap that leaked badly when the 3.1 tank was anywhere near full.

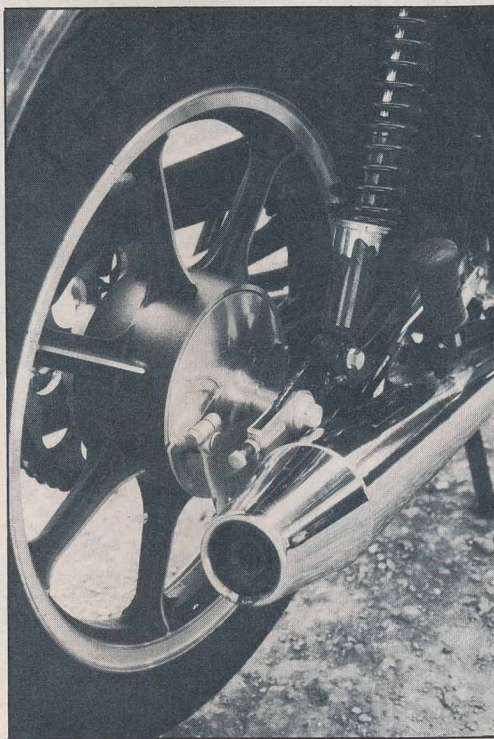
So basically you're buying a bike similar to the two-fifties



*Keihin constant velocity carbs were fuss free throughout our test and well rubber mounted.*

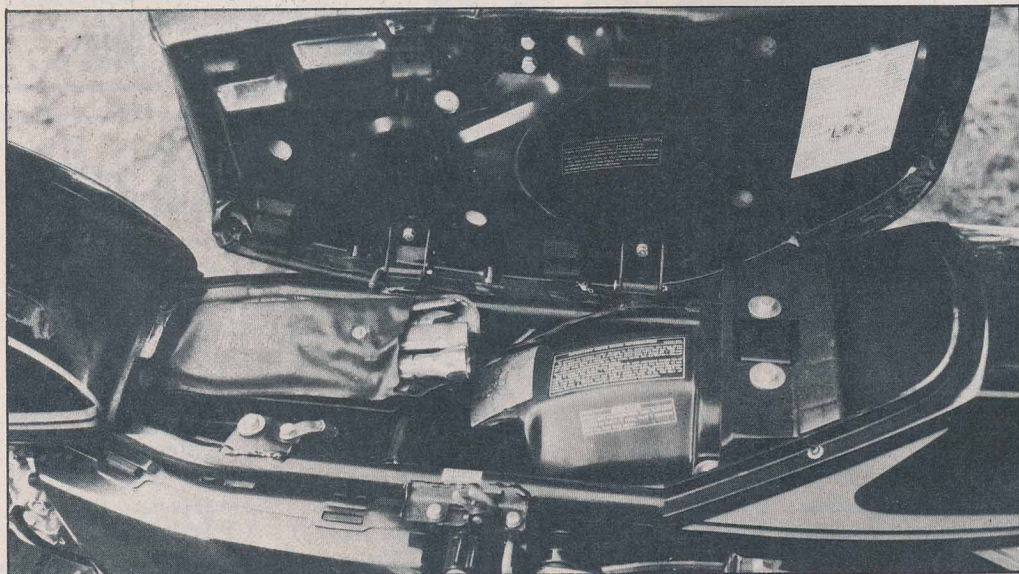


*Alloy wheels contribute to the extra £90 you have to pay for the Z400's Custom package, and their worth is debatable.*



*Drum brake and pull-type chain adjusters are standard on this otherwise "special" version of Kawa's commuter.*

*Below: Beneath the hinged seat lie the usual collection of warning transfers and stamped-out tools.*



at something like £150 more, plus of course increased insurance.

You can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear, so the saying goes. And no amount of tarding up will disguise the fact that the Z400G is one of the less appealing bikes in the 400cc class, for all its comfort and economy.

#### KAWASAKI Z400 CUSTOM

<b>Price inc. VAT:</b>	£1,039
<b>Engine:</b>	SOHC 360-deg, balanced parallel twin
<b>Capacity:</b>	398cc (64 x 72mm)
<b>Lubrication:</b>	Wet sump
<b>Comp ratio:</b>	9.5 to 1
<b>Carburetion:</b>	Two 32mm CV Keihins
<b>Max power:</b>	36bhp at 8,500 rpm.
<b>Max torque:</b>	23.7 lb-ft at
<b>Max torque:</b>	23.7 lb-ft at 7,000rpm
<b>Electrics:</b>	12v 12ah battery Single-phase alternator 35/35w headlamp
<b>Primary drive:</b>	Morse-type chain
<b>Clutch:</b>	Wet multiplate
<b>Gearbox:</b>	Six speed
<b>Final drive:</b>	530 roller chain
<b>Fuel capacity:</b>	3.1 gallons
<b>Frame:</b>	Duplex cradle
<b>Suspension:</b>	Telescopic fork (f). Pivoted fork with 5-pos spring preload adjustment (r)
<b>Brakes:</b>	10 1/4in disc (f) 6 1/4in drum (r)
<b>Tyres:</b>	Yokohama 300S18 (f) 350S18 (r) on cast alloy wheels

#### DIMENSIONS

<b>Wheelbase:</b>	53.7 in
<b>Seat height:</b>	31 1/2 in
<b>Handlebar width:</b>	29 in
<b>Grnd clrcnc:</b>	6 in
<b>Rake/trail:</b>	63deg/3.9 in
<b>Dry weight:</b>	370 lb

#### EQUIPMENT

Mirrors, electric start, 120mph speedo, 11,000rpm rev counter, brake light warning lamp, trip meter, vacuum fuel tap, tools, headlamp flasher, locking fuel cap, locking seat, helmet lock, steering lock.

#### PERFORMANCE

<b>Top speed:</b>	97mph
<b>Speeds in 6th gears at:</b>	97mph
<b>max power 4th revs, 8500 calculated:</b>	89mph
<b>1st:</b>	77mph
<b>3rd:</b>	64mph
<b>2nd:</b>	49mph
<b>1st:</b>	33mph
<b>St. 1/4-mile time:</b>	15.8 secs
<b>0-to-60mph time:</b>	7.5 secs
<b>Speedo correction at 60mph:</b>	55mpg
<b>Fuel consumption</b>	
<b>Average:</b>	62.2mpg
<b>Best:</b>	65.8mpg
<b>Worst:</b>	57.8mpg
<b>Tank range:</b>	175-205 miles
<b>Importer/manufacturer:</b>	Kawasaki Motor UK Ltd, 748 Deal Avenue, Trading Estate, Slough, Berks.