

PLAISIR

ON THE PULP

They're big, tall and sexy and the only dirt they should see is in red light districts. John Westlake escorts four macho street-trailies to their natural hunting ground; Paris



ROAD TEST

R80GS ■ XTZ750
XR750 ■ DR800S



SLIPPY COBBLES, PLENTY of traffic lights, cafes packed with impressionable lovelies; the natural habitat of Very Big Trailie. He slides in a controlled and impressive manner over the cobbles, he dives to a halt at the lights, pauses briefly to tower over a lesser trailie, then pops a pleasingly effortless wheelie away. And thanks to VBT's lofty perch he can suss the reaction from the cafes while he's doing it.

Paris is what VBT was invented for. Admittedly, the inventors originally intended he should leave Paris as quickly as possible and head off across deserts towards Dakar, but our four VBTs seemed quite happy ripping up and down the Champs Elysee, weaving through traffic around the Arc de Triomphe and parking outside cafes.

But Normal Trailie can negotiate towns with a certain amount of aplomb; what VBT offers on top of that is the potential to travel between posing opportunities (towns) without the huge grin disappearing from your face. Normal Trailie doesn't have the necessary features to make high-speed cruising bearable (a comfy seat and a

decent fairing) and just can't go fast enough.

So what better test than a blast to Paris to determine the high-speed, long-haul prowess of four VBTs, then see how they handle the capital of trailie-land? All our candidates fared well in certain departments — big petrol tanks, big engines, screens of some description — and all were predictably dodgy in others (as noted by one short-legged tester who continually weaved across lanes of angry French drivers at lights to get to the side with the curb so he could put his foot down).

In their own way, all were amusing.

SUZUKI DR800S

AN 800cc SINGLE WITH A BEAK. It had to be the joker in this pack of sensibly-styled twins. It was, but instead of being regarded as a tiresome vibrating freak, after 1200 miles the DR was looked upon as an eccentric entertainer.

Top of the bill was the engine, which did all the things big singles are meant to; it rendered gear changing unnecessary by having torque coming out of its ears, made

It's a Sunday In December. You're in Paris. You've got four Very Big Trailies and there's half an hour 'til lunch.

What do you do?

a) Have lunch anyway 'cos Paris never closes

b) Park up, nip off for a cafe creme and take bets on which of your bikes will have been nicked by the time you get back

c) Check your green cards, buckle up your MX boots and have your own 20-lap Prix de L'Arc de Triomphe?

We did (c), and we very nearly died

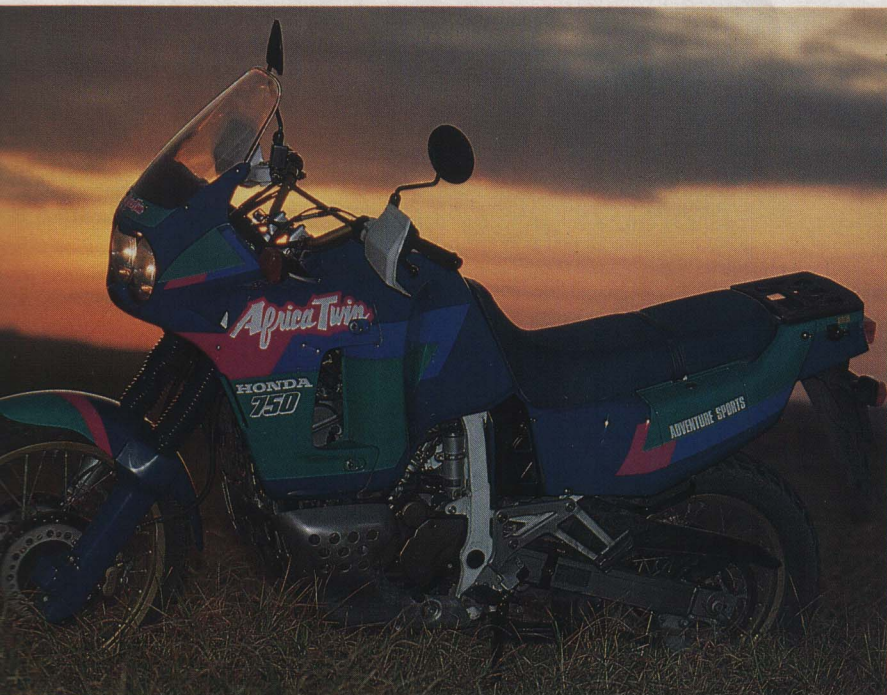
a wholesome chugging noise (sounding like an idling helicopter when ticking over), and vibrated. The DR is a huge single — its piston is the size of a small saucepan at 105mm across and has two 33mm carbs — and these qualities come in huge quantities.

Below 4000rpm the twins couldn't match the DR's eagerness to either pull briskly away from the lights, or chug aggressively out of bends. The dictionary defines 'stomp' as "a lively jazz dance with heavy dancing". This term is bandied around far too liberally these days and applied to all manner of nancy multis, when it should only be used to define the DR800S.

One notable advantage of this stomp — besides making a useless wheelie puller appear one hundred times better — was apparent following tour guide West through Paris along rapid but erratic routes from tourist attraction to tourist attraction. The DR's ability to execute rapid foot-up U-turns no matter what gear I'd managed to get in was invaluable; the twins could do them, but only the DR's engine inspired enough confidence to go for it in third with the might of the Paris rush hour charging towards you.

Once up to open-road speeds the big single started to struggle — wind resistance was so great that changing into top (fifth) below 4000 produced an unhealthy knocking noise and a lumpy feel which was clearly the DR's way of telling you to leave changes a few thousand revs later.

Above 4000rpm the DR fought valiantly to keep up with the Africa Twin and Super Tenere (we'll come to the BM later), but it was always onto a loser. Despite its four-valve head, the single never had the top-end oomph to tug it sharply from 90mph to 95, or even 80 to 90 come to that — 100mph was not impossible, but by the time it arrived you had to slow down for the next peage. In an unscientific test I found that from 85mph the DR actually accelerated faster if I suddenly ducked and pressed my chin on the tank, rather than cracking the throttle wide open. Ultimately, it's all about horses and the 800 has only got 46 of





them; motorways are not the DR's friend.

In Italy a DR800-powered racebike has been successfully campaigned in their equivalent to Sound of Singles, and it's apparently easy to wring more horsepower from the motor (an extra ten coming from fitting bigger carbs and a different exhaust), but the engine's lack of high speed pulling power became irrelevant after 10 miles at motorway speeds. By then you don't want to go 100mph, and are wishing the others would slow down and let you rest your neck; the screen is as useful as a chocolate fireguard, and by far the worst of the four.

Compared to the gale trying to blow your bonce off, the vibes are a small inconvenience. A chain-driven balancer shaft takes out the worst, leaving only a continuous buzzing reminder that you are sitting upon no ordinary motorcycle. On his way into work, Features editor Tim got another reminder of the DR's vibrational powers; a jet of oil spurted up between the headstock and tank, and hit him squarely on the visor (which he then lifted up to see what was going on — oh dear). The naughty vibes had managed to work loose a breather hose in the oil recycling circuit. We also noticed a screw holding the clocks in place had gone AWOL; wise DR owners carefully look over their steel for bits that have moved since last time before they start it up.

Brakes have never been big trailies' strong points, and sure enough the DR's aren't strong. The single disc and twin pistons at first feel as though they're doing the business as the DR dives sharply, but riding behind the Africa Twin and Super Ten (both with twin discs) you soon discover how much difference a disc makes.

What the DR loses in braking it makes up around corners, thanks to its lightness. It's all psychological of course because the Super Ten, for example, has exactly the same tyres and as capable a suspension set-up; it's just that the DR feels more chuckable, so you tend to abuse it more.

Under braking the front dived dramatically (the beak gets within one inch of the front mudguard if you really go for it), but



Top left: the Super Tenere, starting to rust. Top right: the Eiffel Tower, some mad Froggie rode a trials bike up it once, we don't think he did it on either the Africa Twin or Dr Big. Above, left to right, Johnny Boy: "Strewth, I can't look" Tour guide West: "It's OK, I know where I am now" Ad man Gavin: "You said that half an hour ago" Gastronomer Scoey: "Where's the chippy? I ain't 'alf hungry"

round corners both front and back stayed firm enough to stop any serious wallowing.

Even when you're tucked in behind that useless screen desperately trying to keep up with those damn twins, it's difficult to dislike the DR. It is a mixture of eccentricity, fun and cheapness that proves irresistible to

French people (there are DR-lowering kits over there for shorties), but not many British people. That's why Suzuki is no longer importing them. We are missing out.

HONDA XRV750 AFRICA TWIN

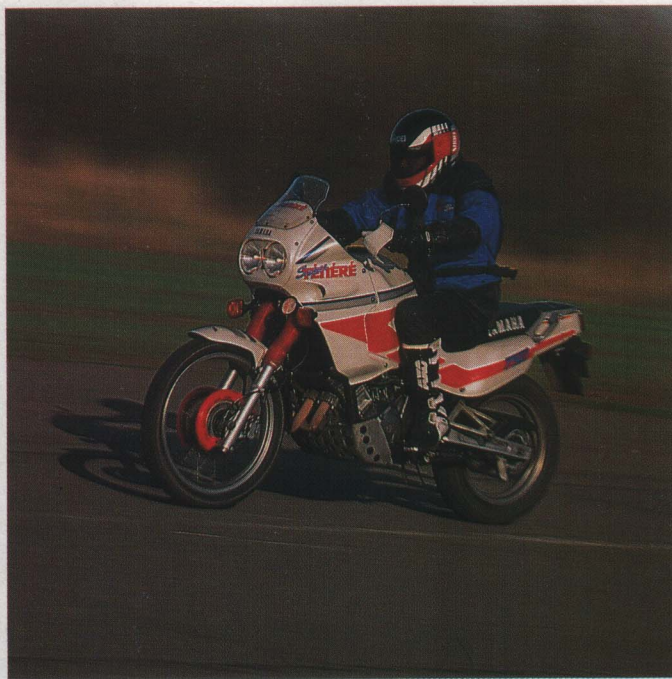
IN SHORT, A CRACKER. It wasn't the fastest (Super Ten), it wasn't the horniest (ours had a nasty paint job) but the Africa Twin was without doubt the best. It managed to do everything well — from posing to cruising — without doing it in an efficiently boring way.

An air of refinement and quality surrounded the bike. The engine, for example, came closest to matching the Super Ten's top-end poke, yet was the smoothest of the four. With only three valves per cylinder to the Super Ten's high-tech five, the Yamaha's top-end superiority was not a surprise; what impressed was the way the



ROAD TEST

**R80GS ■ XTZ750
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R80GS: panniers and heated 'bar grips come as optional extras. Sadly they're also virtually the only plusses the BM has over the other three bikes

Honda cruised at 100mph. By this time the Super Ten was still good for another ten mph or so, but sounded as though it wasn't keen to attempt the feat; the Africa Twin hummed where the Super Ten rattled.

Lower down the rev range the Africa Twin came into its own. Between four and seven thou the others didn't stand a chance. Riding the Honda on the open road this mid-range superiority became obvious as soon as the bikes lined up to overtake a lorry; the Super Ten rider whacked it down

a gear and blasted past in a flurry of slapping valves, the DR rider got his chin on the tank to punch through the slipstream and was on his way, and the Africa Twin rider just opened the throttle. We'll come to the BMW later.

On the Honda everything seemed easy. Motorways held no fears thanks mainly to a firm but comfortable seat which, like the DR, was covered in a suede-like material that stopped you sliding down onto the tank. At high speeds the tall screen created an irritating roar, but it guided enough wind blast over your head to let you grin sadistically as you upped the pace just enough to get the DR rider's neck muscles visibly bulging. The fairing also successfully threw rain over your head and the curvaceous tank moulded perfectly round your knees to keep them out of the way too.

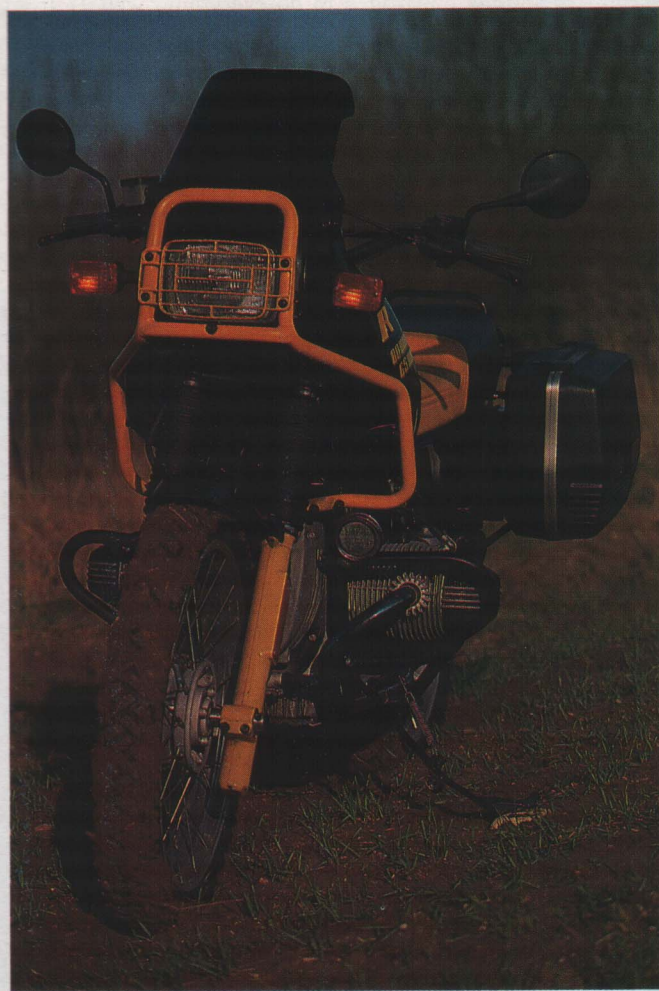
For a bike as hefty as the Africa Twin (over 500lbs wet) it felt surprisingly sharp round corners. It never felt as chuckable as the DR, but moving from Super Tenere to Africa Twin the consensus was that the handling was not as firm, but nevertheless more accurate. The whole unit felt stiffer, despite sharing the Super Ten's steel cradle type frame. Like the DR and Super Ten it gently rocked back and forward round fast corners, but at Parisian U-turn speeds it was superb — grab two fingers worth of the adequate twin discs, go down a gear using the best 'box of the lot, lever it in to the turn with the wide bars, stick your foot out for a pose if it's wet, and yank it upright round the other side. Not forgetting to grin, and salute the honking Frenchies in the traditional manner. It inspired complete confidence; ample confidence to up the pace and watch the BM and its rider squirm trying to keep up. But we'll come to the BM later.

Honda's attention to detail showed. The battery level could be checked through a little hole in the side panel, for example, and the console was pure Honda functional excellence. A neat little box to the left of the clocks held all the idiot lights, with an extra sidestand warning light poking up above. Two lights warned if fuel was running low

Left, Super Tenere: just about the best fairing; without a doubt the worst seat

Above: "Aw c'mon Phil, which way is it? It'll be getting dark soon"

Right: splendid colours, but white wasn't one of them. The Ten showed off its rust, the DR frame was a pig to clean



(no reserve tap) — one came on at half tank level which was a tad irritating at night, and the other lit up when you had a gallon left. The only detail quibble was the way the indicators were stuck onto the fairing — amidst an array of Dominator-like neatness they stood out as a could-do-better.

Other quibbles included the centrestand which required a most uncool struggle — not to be attempted in front of a café full of Parisian beauties — and the colour scheme. The fairing was pink, green and blue, the frame was white and the crankcases were brown. Obviously some Honda designer fancied himself as a Benetton beater, but the result looked like someone with a very odd diet had barfed over an otherwise corking-looking bike.

YAMAHA XTZ750 SUPER TENERE

IT HAD THE WIZZO five-valve technology, it had the Paris-Dakar winning pedigree, but it did not have a comfy seat. Considering Yamaha had obviously spent ages getting a twin to have both top and bottom-end sparkle it seemed vaguely ridiculous that they were let down by their seat sponge technicians. This was the reason



for the Super Ten coming third in the "I want a go on that one next" competition when a long motorway voyage loomed.

The seat was way too hard, and after only 20 minutes "felt as though you had a lump up your arse," according to one tester who drank his motorway coffee standing up. For short blasts and hacking round the Arc de Triumph, the Super Ten was up there with the Africa Twin and DR (we'll come to the BM later), but on long hauls it was a pain.

In its execution the Yamaha was similar to the DR — it had a rough and ready feel, and despite its failings was difficult to dislike. The motor was a cracker, mixing top-end superiority with enough down below to keep up with stompers like the DR. It did sound as if it was thrashing itself to bits (especially if you'd just got off the Honda), but ultimately survived hours of M-way abuse far better than the rider; the screen was OK and the riding position was comfortably upright, but that damn seat...

In Paris and on the N-roads going home the Super Ten was much more fun. Handling was very similar to the Africa Twin, in the way it dived when the twin discs were put to the test, and how the long travel suspension managed to soak up all manner of mid-bend bumps without becoming

overly wallowy. Yet there was a feeling of vagueness when compared to the more expensive Honda — it felt as though the Super Ten had done three times the mileage showing on the clocks and was just becoming a fraction too loose.

Similarly, the Yam had started to look abused. Rust was having a field day behind the silencer, and parts of the frame looked as though a spot more paint wouldn't have gone amiss. The impression given was that you were paying for a high-tech engine and you'd just have to forgive the annoying low-tech bits that would bump the price up to Africa Twin levels. But some of the annoying bits were very irritating — the non-adjustable levers, for example, were so far from the 'bars that effectively covering the brake was well nigh impossible, and made your forearm ache trying.

But at £4899, the Super Ten's larks-to-dosh ratio is up there with the DR. Pity about the seat though.

BMW R80GS

OH DEAR. AFTER SORTING out all the opinions of our merry band of testers on each bike, the BMW had the most written about it. This was not a good sign because

■
Paris is
what the
VBT was
invented
for
■

there were only two positive comments. The BMW was so out of its depth in this company that no part of its considerable bulk remained above water. Certainly, it may appeal to those who like a basic, easily maintained machine with a sensible riding position, but I defy an owner to ride one of the others in this test and not admit they've bought the wrong bike.

Starting up the flat-twin gave some indication of what was to come; first try to turn the ignition key without the foot catching in the mass of control cables (this was bloody annoying), then try to start it. Then try again. And again. This too was annoying. When it coughs into life on one cylinder try to hold the bike still and stop the vibrations bouncing it off down the road. This was amusing.

Once on the move the BM's plus points immediately came to the fore. The riding position was low, wide and comfortable; the seat was sumptuous, the adjustable screen was effective and the handlebar grips were heated. This combination made it a popular choice after spending an hour or two on the concrete-saddled Super Tenebre. A comfy seat and warm hands outweighed the mild high-speed weave, the heavy throttle and the struggle to keep up with

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Honda and Yam.

But as soon as either bends or towns appeared things started to go down hill. Corners were the more frightening of the two situations. None of these bikes could be aimed with precision, but the BM could not be aimed at all. It swayed, it weaved and got left behind. The latter was partly due to the single disc and twin-pot calipers being far too weedy for such a heavy machine, and partly due to the bike inspiring so little confidence that riders went slower than even the BM could manage.

But enough of the frightening whinges, and on with the irritating ones. The side-stand comes near the top of the list; it is spring-loaded, and so far forward that you have to get the tip of your boot on it, push forward until your shin hits the pot, then gingerly lower the bike. Even though the GS had the lowest saddle of the lot, this was impossible if you were short in the leg



department, which meant you had to hop off first. Very poor, but at least when you drop the BM it just rests harmlessly on its pots; dropping any of the others will be accompanied by the expensive sound of splintering fibreglass.

The gears were sensibly spaced to make use of the BM's low-down strength, but were often difficult to engage if accelerating hard. With a *gendarme* car coming the other way and halfway past an artie, one tester said he was peeved that he nearly died because the BM would not go up into third. Actually, that's not quite what he said.

No, the BM was not the success story of our tour. It was just too irritating to be pleasant, and without the heated bar grips and comfy seat would have been universally loathed. Of course, it could be that it takes longer than a thousand or so miles to become acclimatised to the R80GS, but none of us wanted to find out. □

SPECIFICATIONS

**BMW
R80GS
£5668**

**YAMAHA
XTZ750
£4899**

**HONDA
XRV750
£5679**

**SUZUKI
DR800S
£3699**

ENGINE/GEARBOX

Type	air-cooled, sohc, 4-valve, flat twin	liquid-cooled, dohc, 10-valve, parallel twin	liquid-cooled, sohc 6-valve V-twin	liquid-cooled, sohc 4-valve single
Capacity	798cc	749cc	742cc	779cc
Bore x stroke	80 x 70.6mm	87 x 63mm	81 x 72mm	105 x 90mm
Comp ratio	8.2:1	9.5:1	9:1	9.5:1
Power	50bhp @ 6500rpm	69bhp @ 7500rpm	58bhp @ 7500rpm	53bhp @ 6600rpm
Torque	45lb.ft @ 3750rpm	49lb.ft @ 6750rpm	44.1lb.ft @ 5500rpm	45.7lb.ft @ 5400rpm
Carburation	2 x 32mm Bing	2 x 38mm Mikuni	2 x 34mm CV	2 x 33mm Mikuni
Gearbox	5-speed	5-speed	5-speed	5-speed
Electrics	12V/25Ah battery; 60/55w headlight	12V/14Ah battery; 60/55w headlight	12V/14Ah battery; 60/55w headlight	12V/14Ah battery 60/55w headlight

CYCLE PARTS

Chassis	tubular steel double loop frame, Paralever swing arm	steel double cradle frame, box-section aluminium swing arm	steel double cradle frame, box-section aluminium swing arm	tubular steel double cradle frame, box-section aluminium swing-arm
Suspension front	telescopic fork, no adjust	43mm telescopic fork, no adjust	43mm telescopic fork, no adjust	41mm telescopic fork, no adjust
rear	Paralever single shock, preload adjust	Link-type single shock preload adjust	Pro-link single shock, preload adjust	Link-type single shock preload adjust
Brakes front	285mm disc, twin piston caliper	2 x 245mm discs, twin piston calipers	2 x 276mm discs twin piston calipers	single disc twin piston caliper
rear	drum	245mm disc, opposed piston caliper	256mm disc, opposed piston caliper	disc, opposed piston caliper
Tyres front	Metzeler Enduro Saharas 90/90 21F	Bridgestone Trail Wings 90/90 21	Dunlop K560s 90/90 21	Bridgestone Trail Wings 90/90 21
rear	130/80 17T	140/80 17	130/90 17	130/60 17

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	1513mm (59.0in)	1505mm (58.7in)	1565mm (61.6in)	1520mm (59.8in)
Rake/trail	28°/101mm	26.5°/101mm (3.9in)	27°/113mm (4.4in)	29°/135mm (5.3in)
Dry weight	215kg (473lbs)	195kg (429lbs)	212kg (466lbs)	194kg (427.7lbs)
Seat height	850mm (31.9in)	865mm (33.7in)	875mm (34in)	890mm (35in)
Fuel capacity	24 litres (5.3gal)	26 litres (5.7gal)	24 litres (5.3gal)	24 litres (6.3gal)

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	100.3mph*	110mph	106.8mph	104.6mph
Standing ¼ mile	14.42sec/89.3mph	13.18sec/97.4mph	13.46sec/95.6mph	13.9sec/93mph
Average mpg	34	34	32	38



It's one of those strange facts of life that big trailies are useless as trailies (unless your name's Peterhansel) but almost uniquely brilliant as both long-haul bikes AND round town squirty mobiles. The French, particularly Parisians, know this. Most Brits, seemingly, do not. Explanations to the usual address

FOR

R80GS: Heated bars, touring ability, robustness **XTZ750:** Top-end poke, A-road hilarity **XRV750:** All round excellence, build quality **DR800S:** Fine suspension, fun, cheap

AGAINST

R80GS: Agricultural engine, generally irritating; **XTZ750:** Hard seat, suspect build quality; **XRV750:** A bit pricey, high seat **DR800S:** Useless main beam, low screen

* A seeping head gasket blew on the speed run. This can't have helped the standing quarters that followed.