

# XR650L

## HONDA

*After 2 years, the wait is over!*

*By the thumper freaks at DIRT BIKE*

**B**ack in August of 1990, when we tested the prototype of the XR250L, the Honda R&D guys brought out an XR600R with an NX650 motor wedged into the chassis and a tiny battery stuffed into the airbox. We took one spin on the bike and were instantly hooked. Babbling wildly, we asked when the bike would be on showroom floors, or at least in our callused hands. The Honda guys just grinned and claimed it was an in-house project bike, an experiment. No way would that bike ever see production.

We knew better. Honda went on to blow away the competition with the XR250L, and we knew it was only a matter of time before the 250 got a new big brother. That was two solid years ago, two years of champing at the bit—and two years of interdepartmental ping-pong at Honda. The project bike was what we would build—a pure dirt machine that we could hang some minimalist lights on—but the finished product you see here is almost entirely different. It is a machine built by committee, evidently a committee with a lot of lawyers and street geeks on it.

Is this necessarily bad? Well, yes and no.

### INSIDE THE NEWEST DUAL-SPORT

Yes, this is still an NX650 motor wedged into an XR600R-style frame. It has the same suspension travel as the 600 and the same type of suspension. The XR and XRL share a conventional cartridge fork, piggyback shock and box-section swingarm. Honda went with stiffer spring rates for the 650, because the bike is carrying a lot more weight than the 600.

The 650 weighs in at 327.5 pounds. That is a lot, but still light compared to

the other behemoths in the Open dual-sport class. Besides the heft of lights, turn signals, a steel gas tank (courtesy of DOT), passenger pegs, mirrors and the electric starter, the 650L is burdened by emission control devices and the battery/fusebox that rides under the left side panel.

The left side panel bulges a lot more than the XR600R piece, and both will be scarred for life on the first low-side, but they are a lot better than the nightmarish plastic that the old NX650 sported. The hideous motor shrouds come courtesy of Honda's street-bike guys, who demanded the shrouds be installed to keep the motor cooler. XR motors run hotter than most street-bike motors, and the street types at Honda pinged until the shrouds were installed. We took them off before we ever straddled the bike.

The emissions octopus isn't so easily removed, so we left it on for this initial test. Jetting is horribly lean, even on a 49-state bike. The muffler is right off of the XR600R. A 40mm constant-velocity carb is attached to the NX motor, whereas the XR has a 39mm Keihin with conventional slide.

Nestled at the center of all this is one of the best motors ever made. The NX650 motor has a huge 100mm piston and 82mm stroke, for a displacement of 644cc (the XR is 97mmx80mm for 591cc). It shares the basic design and several pieces with the XR motor but doesn't have a kickstarter. Honda claims this saves weight and, besides, you don't need a backup because Hondas are very reliable. We plan on installing a kickstarter on our project XR650L, so stay tuned. Where the manual decompression lever is on the 600, the 650 has a choke lever.

We had hoped the XRL would have its battery inside the airbox, like Honda's original project bike, but it rides under the bulging left side panel, with its weight up high, like a Husky 610 exhaust system. Moving it to a more centralized spot will be very hard indeed, but we plan on doing just that at a later date. For now, let's ride it as is, minus the barn doors attached to the tank.

### DID THE COMMITTEE DO GOOD?

Yes, yes, yes! This bike is sweet. It doesn't feel as heavy as it really is. It feels taller than the 600, because the seat is a little wider. The side panels are a little wider at the front, too, but you can't get back far enough to feel the wheel-well-like bulges towards the back of the bike. Overall, the ergonomics are good, with the exception of the bars, which are shared with the 600, being a tad low.

We loved the NX650 motor, and the XRL mill doesn't disappoint us at all. Starting is as easy as pulling the choke lever with the left index finger and hitting the starter button with the right thumb. The bike snaps to life and warms up quickly. Clutch pull and engagement are light and correct. The tranny shifts well but goes into gear with a big clunk, worse than the 600. Gear ratios are taller than the 600, or even the HRC 628, so you will be in first where you would use second on the 600.

This means you have to wind each gear higher off-road or the bike will want to fall on its face when you grab the next gear. The added vibration makes your

**At 352 lb. with a full tank of gas, the Honda XR650L isn't really a leaper or whoop wagon, but an extraordinary fire-roader and competent trail bike. ►**











# XR650

hands tingle after a while, so we are going to install a BarSnake when we go to taller handlebars. Aside from off-throttle popping from being jetted so lean (another thing we will deal with in the follow-up project test), this is the only thing we have to snivel about, motorwise.

Compared to the 600, the 650 doesn't rev as quickly, but it has more torque for clawing up nasty hills and is smoother on fireroads. It'll cruise easily at 80 mph, too, something the 600 wasn't designed to do. The suspension doesn't soak up the small stuff as well as the XR and bottoms a bit easier, but it has a good overall feel for a giant dual-sport. The XRL has at least 1.5 inches more travel than any other bike in its class, so it should clean up in the shootout.

The XRL comes with bogus Dunlop K850A dual-sport tires. Well, they are in the hunt with most other OEM dual-sport meats, but OEM rubber couldn't hunt down traction on dirt with a pack of bloodhounds. Slip on a set of DOT-approved Metzeler Unis or Pirelli MT17s as soon as possible. With the stock tires, the XRL is skittish on hardpack and downright scary in mud or sand. Otherwise, the XRL handles just like an XR600 with 40 pounds of gold in the airbox.

Brakes are identical to the 600. The front can't be used hard with the stock rubber except on the street, where it will stand the bike on its nose. The rear feels weaker than the XR's, because there is so much more weight to haul down from speed. Also, the rear chatters on rocky

◀ **Stock tires squash the XRL's sand-wash savvy. Toss the K850As for a 3.00-21 Metzeler Unicross front and a 130/80-18 Pirelli MT17 and your 650 will handle a bazillion times better.**



downhills a lot more than the 600, due to the tire.

## BITS & PIECES

- There is an engine kill switch attached to the sidestand. We hate it, but such is life in sue-happy America. Disconnect it.

- The air filter is paper and cannot be cleaned. Go to a K&N gauze filter.

- Turn signals are rubber-mounted and tiny. It doesn't get any better than this.

- The speedometer has a resettable trip-meter but doesn't roll forward or backward like an XR unit. There is no tachometer, but there is a kickstand-down idiot light.

- It costs around \$200 to convert to a back-up kickstarter. The XRL has the decompression system on the cam, like the 600, but doesn't have the manual setup.

- Oil is carried in the frame, just like the XR. Change it often for maximum engine life.

◀ **We wonder if there was a closet wheelie freak on the XRL design team. Awesome torque, great balance and a carb that doesn't fuel-starve combine to make the XRL the ultimate wheelie bike.**

- The headlight and taillight are shared with the XR250L, as are the fenders. You can also trade the 650's battery for the 250's, which is half as heavy and girthy.

- Rake is 26.65 degrees and trail is 3.82 inches, just like the 600.

- The CV carb is very sensitive to throttle position, so much so that hitting an expansion joint in the road can cause the motor to rev for a moment. The very first XL did this, so longtime Honda riders won't be bothered. This CV has a linkage which prevents throttle lag associated with normal CV carbs.

- Locking the fork is done by pushing in the ignition key and turning. It's notchy, but at least it works, which is more than we can say for Suzuki's.

- If you don't ever plan on carrying passengers, the buddy pegs and seat strap are easily tossable.

- Honda's new ad campaign says, "If you don't have a wing, you don't have a prayer." The XRL logos don't have Honda wings. Weird.

- Footpegs are right off of the XR600. We like them.

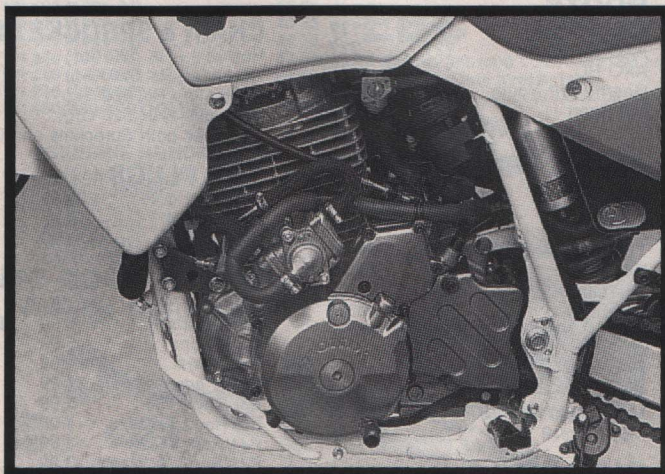
- Mirrors are rubber-dampened, so you can actually see things with them at speed.

- Honda tells us that primary gear ratios are identical to the HRC 628 kit. If you ride mostly dirt, go to 14/48 gearing for XR-like ratios and harder acceleration.

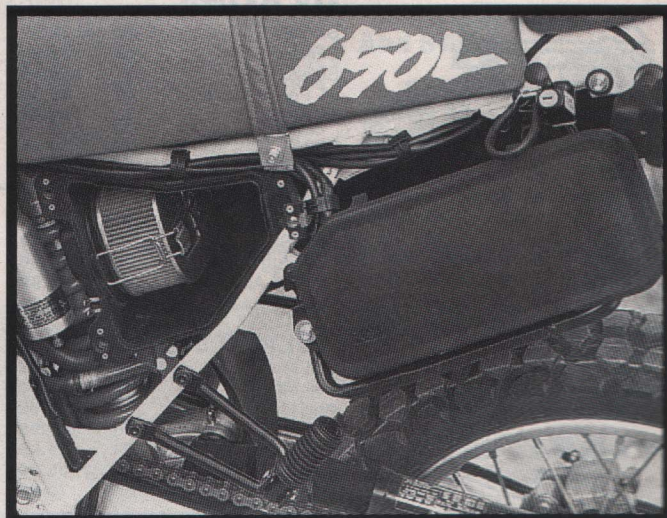
## WAS IT WORTH THE WAIT?

Let's put it this way—we only get one test bike, and Ron wanted to buy it after one ride. So did Tim, and so did Joe, Rondo and Hunky. With five guys wanting the same bike, things could get really ugly, fast.

The XR650L is a great bike, probably the best Open-class dual-sport ever built (look for that shootout, soon). It has real



**Give-and-take:** We would like to trade in the octopus emission control device for the kickstarter the Honda guys claim we will never need. Whoever does need it will be a very unhappy camper, indeed.



The paper air filter isn't washable. Inside the "saddle bag" are a battery, fuse box and rectifier.



# XR650



## 1993 HONDA XR650L

Engine type.....SOHC, 4-valve,  
air-cooled, electric-start 4-stroke  
Displacement.....644cc  
Bore and stroke.....100mmx82mm  
Carburetion.....40mm CV Keihin  
Fuel tank capacity.....2.8 gal. (10.6L)  
Gearing.....15/45  
Lighting coil.....Yes  
Spark arrester.....Yes  
EPA-legal.....Yes  
Claimed dry weight.....312 lb.  
Running weight w/no fuel.....327.5 lb.  
Wheelbase.....57.3" (1455mm)  
Rake/trail.....26.65°/ 3.82"  
Ground clearance.....12.9" (328mm)  
Seat height.....37.0" (940mm)

Tire size and type:  
Front.....3.00-21 Dunlop K850A  
Rear.....4.60-18 Dunlop K850A  
Suspension:  
Front.....Showa 43mm cartridge fork,  
adj. comp., 11.6" (295mm) travel  
Rear.....Pro-Link, Showa aluminum  
piggyback shock, adj. prel./  
comp./reb., 11.0" (280mm) travel  
Country of origin.....Japan  
Suggested retail price.....\$4399  
Distributor/manufacturer:  
American Honda Motor Corp.  
1919 Torrance Blvd.  
Torrance, CA 90501-2746  
(310) 783-2000

dirt bike suspension and a real dirt bike chassis, with a few tabs welded on it for the street hardware. It handles and stops and slides like a real dirt bike. With some aggressive tires, it can go anywhere the XR600R will go, and many places it won't. The XRL has more power and versatility than the XR, plus it has effortless starting.

It's not perfect, and we wish that the street-bike engineers at Honda hadn't gotten their hands on the project, but the XRL is a fantastic bike, for the street and trail. We are already planning on shaving off the heft and slimming this puppy down, and maybe even racing it to La Paz in the Baja 1000. That's right, we would choose a dual-sport bike over an HRC XR628R to race the length of Baja. There is that much potential in the 650. □

### PARTS REPLACEMENT PRICES

Piston.....\$61.61  
Rings.....38.44  
Air filter.....28.95  
Clutch plate (drive).....6.75 (6)  
Clutch plate (driven).....8.59 (7)  
Front sprocket.....22.05  
Rear sprocket.....35.95  
Front brake pads.....23.00  
Rear brake pads.....21.00



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Comp II Jerseys  
Gel 1 Jerseys  
SR36 Gloves  
Super Belt II  
Gel T-Shirts  
SR135 Jackets

MX PANTS	REGULAR	SALE
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Sinialo SCDII	169	<b>119.99</b>
Sinialo SSO	169	<b>129.99</b>
JT Power Pants	109	<b>59.99</b>
JT Kevlar	159	<b>89.99</b>

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### MX GLOVES

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MSR Stg1	29	<b>16.99</b>
Sinialo Air	49	<b>39.99</b>
Sinialo Kevlar	38	<b>29.99</b>

### HELMETS

	REGULAR	SALE
Bell Moto 5	259	<b>159.99</b>
Bell Moto 4	189	<b>139.99</b>
Aria MX Pro	259	<b>165.99</b>
Shoei VFX	329	<b>299.99</b>
Shoei VX3	239	<b>159.99</b>
Lazer, MX 4	109	<b>95.99</b>
AGV Fire	139	<b>79.99</b>

### BOOTS

	REGULAR	SALE
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AXO RC Kevlar	???	???
AXO RC	???	???
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MX Sport	129	<b>89.99</b>

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AXO Pentagons	???	???
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Thor Youth	89	<b>75.99</b>
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Acerbis Frt.	75	<b>49.99</b>
Sinialo Youth	48	<b>38.99</b>

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M62 100 or 110x19"	<b>36.99</b>
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Renthal's + RK 520 Std.	<b>69.99</b>
Renthal's + RK 520 Org.	<b>98.99</b>

\*Includes both Sprockets and Chain\*

### NGK PLUGS

	REGULAR	SALE
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EG's Box 4	19.99	<b>11.99</b>
ES's Box 10	25.99	<b>11.99</b>

### OTHER GOOD STUFF

	REGULAR	SALE
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Oury Grips	5.99	<b>3.99</b>
Tie Downs	21.99	<b>10.99</b>
EBC Pads	21.99	<b>17.99</b>
Bel Ray LT56	5.99	<b>1.99</b>
Bel Ray LT 10W	4.99	<b>1.99</b>
PJ1 Fork 15W	3.99	<b>.99</b>
PJ1 Spray & Wash	3.99	<b>.99</b>
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