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SECRET BIKES REVELED:

2000 HONDA XR650R



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The sheets come off Honda's great red hope

By the Staff of DIRT BIKE



Honda's new 650 has a frame like nothing else on earth. It has a single backbone, yet it's made of aluminum.



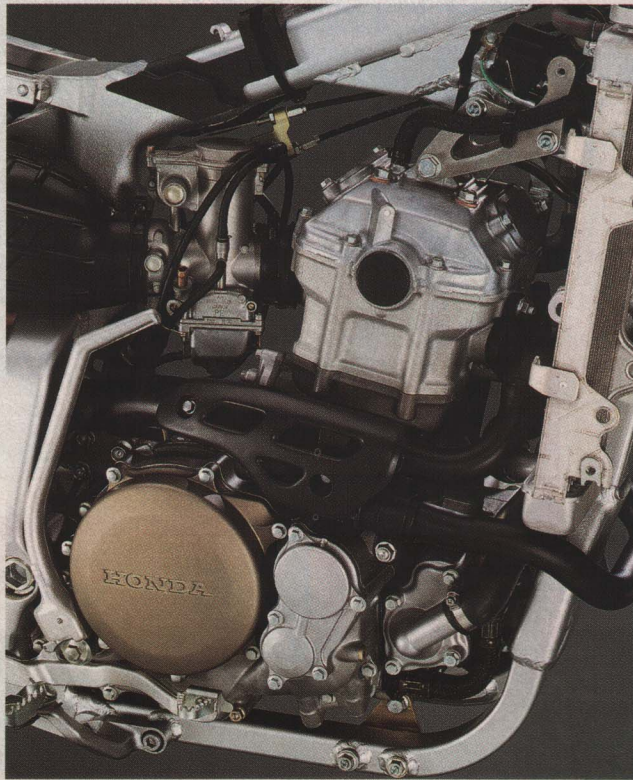
It's been a year since this day was supposed to happen. Back in late 1998, we boldly announced that Honda's new liquid-cooled, aluminum-frame four-stroke was about to be released. Honda had officially discontinued the XR600R, and so an all-new replacement just had to be right around the corner. So we waited. And waited. Nothing happened. Then Honda brought back the old 600.

Behind the scenes at Honda, wild things had happened. Japan had sent a prototype to American Honda, and it was flat rejected. Honda had a reputation to protect. Bruce Ogilvie and the test riders in America felt the new bike (whatever it was) wasn't up to the task. Maybe it would have been good enough in the days before Yamaha's YZ400, but the world had changed.

2000 HONDA XR650R

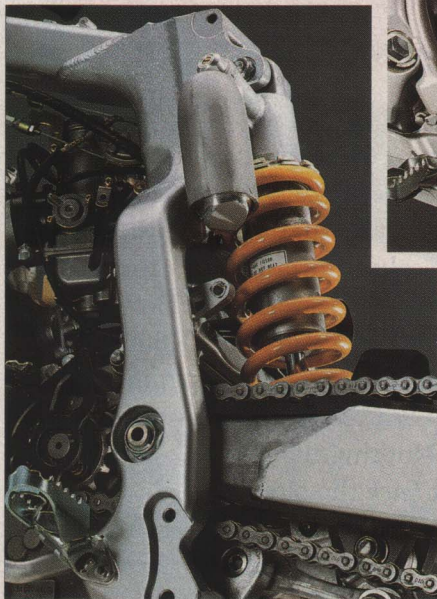
So here we are a year later and Honda has just now unveiled an all-new XR650R to a gang of enthusiastic dealers in New Orleans. The bike will coexist in the line with the old XR600R—Honda wasn't about to make that mistake again. The 600 still has a huge following of loyal four-stroke lovers.

But the new bike might just accumulate its own core of followers. Here's the lowdown:



Honda says that the new liquid-cooled engine weighs 88 pounds. That's not particularly light, but then the bike wasn't designed for Supercross.

This isn't the first liquid-cooled four-stroke dirt bike from Honda. Remember the NX250 dual-sport? Honda never made it as a pure dirt bike because it ran too hot to meet the strict in-house reliability standards. Apparently, this new machine does meet them.



Kayaba supplies the suspension for the new XR—Honda is splitting its purchases between Showa (on the 600, 400 and CR250) and Kayaba (for the 650, 250 and CR125).

In many ways, the new motor is much more conservative than we expected. It only has one cam and doesn't even use Honda's double-rocker arm design to splay the valves radially (like the 600). The two sets of valves are parallel. The carb is an aluminum-body 40mm Keihin without any of the throttle position sensors or roller bearings that Yamaha uses on its 426. The new XR has a counterbalancer and a dry sump motor, which means the oil is carried in that aluminum frame.

The frame itself is quite different from the ones on the CR125 and 250. It has a large single backbone instead of a twin-spar perimeter design. Remember when Kawasaki tried a perimeter frame on the KLX650R? The engine was so tall that there was no room for fuel. A more traditional backbone allows 2.6 gallons of fuel to be carried where those twin spars would be. The bike has a removable subframe (in aluminum, of course) and Kayaba

It's a 649cc, liquid-cooled, single-overhead-cam thumper in an aluminum frame. The engine has the same stroke as the XR650L street bike, but nothing else is similar. The valves are larger (two 37mm intake and two 32mm exhaust), the compression is higher (10:1) and the engine has a dry ignition so that it revs more freely. In

suspension. The shock is a CR-level unit, although the fork is a conventional (right-side up?) design.

The bike has a number of interesting details, like a magnesium quick-access clutch cover, a side-access airbox and a great big plastic skid plate. But in some ways the new bike is disappointing. After a year's wait, we were hoping for something that could go head to head with a Yamaha 426. Honda might have something else up its corporate sleeve for that, but the 650R is no motocrosser. It's heavy; Honda claims it will be 277 pounds. From past experience with Honda's claimed weight figures, we expect the real weight with oil and coolant (but no fuel) to be around 285. That's more than the XR600R. There is no electric starter—for that amount of weight, it certainly *should* have one. But then there's the price—\$5699 ain't bad

This is clearly a new version of the XR600R despite the coexistence of the two models. It's a big western bike, made for hauling down dirt roads and running forever with very little maintenance. For racers, there will be high-performance parts available, like an intake manifold, an exhaust end cap and assorted goodies. So for four-stroke desert racers, the wait is over. The XR650R has the Baja 1000 written all over it.

But don't be too surprised if Honda pulls something else out of its workshop later in the year. □

