



Although they aren't written anywhere, and no one carried them down from any mountain top, they *do* exist. Since ancient times, there have been the Ten Dirt Bike Commandments. You know them, although you might not *know* you know them. The first is, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's premix"—a good commandment because you never know if he has mixed it yet or what the ratio is. Then there's "Thou shalt honor thy motocross socks and keep them holey." It might be possible to ride without holes in your socks. We're not sure; we have never tried it.

There are others like, "Thou shalt not pass on yellow" and "Thou shalt not wheelie in the pits," but by far the most important commandment is, "Thou shalt not ride a 650 in the dirt."

Like the other commandments, this is just good advice—but this is a new age and the ultimate commandment might be outdated. Last year we agreed that the Suzuki DR650S was the best heavy-weight dual-purpose bike available. Of course, it still wasn't very good, but it was certainly better than Honda's plastic-wrapped NX650 and Kawasaki's giant KLR650. Being the best isn't the same thing as being good.

Now the Suzuki is back with a handful of changes. Also, it has a new challenger: Honda's new XR650L. Is the Honda now the best? More importantly, is either bike *good*? We had to know.

JUST THE FACTS

Suzuki has had a big thumper motor for a long time. Back in the late '70s, the DR370 came out and it was later turned into a DR400 and a street-legal SP400. Eventually the DR and SP500 came out, followed by a 600cc version. The current DR shares a lot of design philosophy with those early DRs, but it's now the product of more than a decade of evolution. The Suzuki has a monstrous wet-sump motor. That means that the oil is carried in the engine cases instead of in the frame. Suzuki's small-bore four-strokes have dry sump motors and carry the oil in the frame, while Honda's line is the exact opposite—the 650 is a dry sump and the 250 is a wet sump. Wet sump motors generally are bulkier and run hotter, but can be lighter. The Suzuki 650 has an oil cooler to get rid of some of the heat.

Suspension-wise, the DR is primitive. It has an old-style, non-cartridge Kayaba fork with less than ten inches of travel. The rear shock is a non-adjustable, non-reservoir Kayaba that supplies less than nine inches of rear-wheel travel. This year the Suzuki gets a smaller fuel tank that is much less obtrusive than the old one.

The Honda, of course, is brand-new and the source of all the latest dual-sport gossip. On paper, it blows away the Suzuki in every respect. It has a cartridge fork. It has a modern, reservoir, fully adjustable shock and—here's the big news—an electric starter. Does it weigh more

than the Suzuki because of the addition of the starter and the battery? No. The XR is about 30 pounds lighter than the DR.

IS IT A SLAUGHTER?

Yes. In stock form, both bikes get slaughtered off-road. The XR might be light compared to the DR, but that doesn't mean it's light compared to anything else on earth. By the time you get some gas in the Honda it weighs in around 350 pounds, and that's heavy. The DR is heavier and feels heavier. We must admit that this year's DR is lighter-feeling than last year's. Why? Because of that smaller tank. The earlier DR had a 55-gallon drum mounted behind the handlebar. Paris-Dakar styling never really caught on in this country and we are glad. We really don't want tanks that big or (ugh!) fairings.

Okay, now that we have established that neither of these bikes is exactly nimble, we will just lower our standards and pretend like *all* bikes weigh this much. The next big problem is the tire selection. Stock, both bikes come with street tires that are so bad that ranking them is pointless. These tires probably are used because any of the modern semi-knobbies would wear out too fast. So the stock tires will be on the bike, making you miserable that much longer.

THINGS THE SUZUKI DOES BETTER

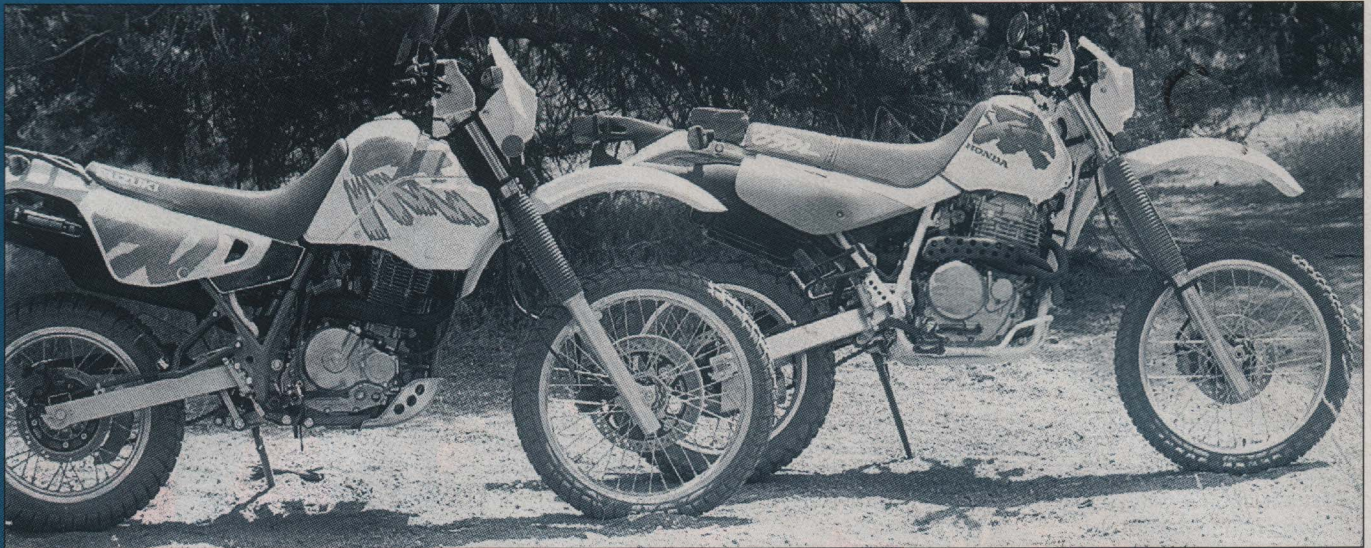
Right off the bat, you should know that the Suzuki sells for \$3799. That's \$600 less than the Honda. Even though the Suzuki is heavy and has bad tires, \$600 will make up for a lot of dissatisfaction. Also, there are some things we liked about it. We need to admit that we entered this comparison with certain preconceptions. One of those was that the Honda would be better than the Suzuki at everything. It's not. The Suzuki engine actually works better than the Honda's off-road. They both have good bottom-end power, but the Suzuki seems to keep on pulling after the Honda flattens out. The motors actually are very similar—that is, they both are great. The powerbands are so wide you almost forget to shift. It's just that the Suzuki's is a little better. If you could somehow put the DR powerband into a 210-pound motocrosser, you could win world championships on it.

Even with such incredibly wide powerbands, though, both bikes suffer from one terrible fault when ridden off-road: They both are geared way too tall. The Honda seems to have the same gear ratios as the dirt-only XR. Then, to make the bike acceptable for street riding, the primary and final drive ratios were made much taller. That leaves the machine with a super-tall first gear—the bike can hit 40 mph before you shift to second. The Suzuki is no different. It doesn't even have the excuse of using a dirt bike transmission—it was originally designed as a dual-purpose bike and so should have a much-wider-ratio gearbox. Both bikes have about the same

HONDA XR 650L VS. SUZUKI DR 650S

Two new meanings
for the term
"heavyweight"

By the DIRT BIKE staff

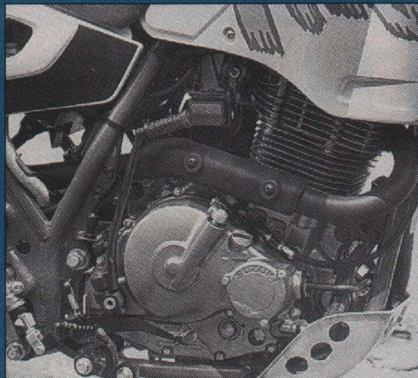


DR650S vs. XR650L

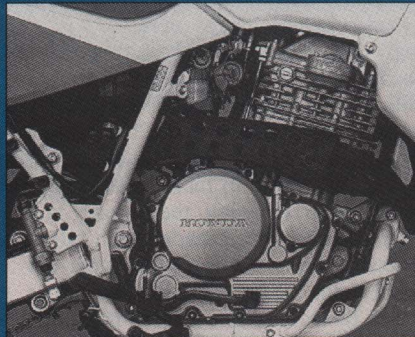
| | SUZUKI DR650S | HONDA XR650L |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Engine type | SOHC, four-valve, air-cooled kickstart 4-stroke | SOHC, 4-valve, air-cooled, electric-start 4-stroke |
| Displacement | .640cc | .644cc |
| Bore and stroke | .95.0mm x 90.0mm | 100mmx82mm |
| Carburetion | .40mm Mikuni | 40mm CV Keihin |
| Fuel tank capacity | 4.5 gal. (17.0L) | 2.8 gal. (10.6L) |
| Gearing | 15/43 | 15/45 |
| Lighting coil | Yes | Yes |
| Spark arrester | Yes | Yes |
| Street-legal | Yes | Yes |
| Claimed weight | 348 lb. | 312 lb. |
| Running weight w/no fuel | 363 lb. | 328 lb. |
| Wheelbase | 59.4" (1509mm) | 57.3" (1455mm) |
| Rake/trail | 27.5°/4.5" | 26.65°/3.82" |
| Ground clearance | 10.2" (259mm) | 12.9" (328mm) |
| Seat height | 35.0" (889mm) | 37.0" (940mm) |
| Tire size and type: | | |
| Front | Bridgestone 90/90-21 Trail Wing 41 | 3.00-21 Dunlop K850A |
| Rear | Bridgestone 120/90-17 Trail Wing 42 | 4.60-18 Dunlop K850A |
| Suspension | | |
| Front | Kayaba, nonadjustable, 9.4" (239mm) travel | Showa 43mm cartridge fork, adj. comp., 11.6" (295mm) travel |
| Rear | Kayaba, adj. preload, 8.7" (221mm) travel | Pro-Link, Showa aluminum piggyback shock, adj. prel./comp./reb., 11.0" (280mm) travel |
| Country of origin | Japan | Japan |
| Suggested retail price | \$3799 | \$4399 |
| Distributor/manufacturer: | American Suzuki P.O. Box 1100 Brea, CA 92621 (714) 996-7040 | American Honda Motor Corp. 1919 Torrance Blvd. Torrance, CA 90501-2746 (310) 783-2000 |

PARTS REPLACEMENT COST

| | | |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|
| Piston | \$59.77 | \$61.61 |
| Ring (s) | 39.06 | 38.44 |
| Air filter | 14.22 | 28.95 |
| Clutch plate (drive) | 12.42 | 6.75 (6) |
| Clutch plate (driven) | 11.78 | 8.59 (7) |
| Front sprocket | 23.12 | 22.05 |
| Rear sprocket | 37.62 | 35.95 |
| Front brake pads | 31.99 | 23.00 |
| Rear brake pads | 40.10 | 21.00 |



Suzuki's motor is buried in a heavy, underdesigned frame. The bike costs a lot less than the Honda, and it should.



Remember the Honda NX650? That's where Honda found the motor for the new XR. It's hard to believe that such a good engine was wasted on such a bad motorcycle.

top speed, right around 100 mph (don't ask us how we know).

Back to things the Suzuki does quite well: It will start when the battery is dead; the Honda won't. Even though we really like electric starters, they make us nervous. The Honda doesn't even have a kickstarter, so if the battery is dead, so are you. Come to think of it, though, starting *any* big four-stroke makes us a little nervous. The Suzuki is a perfect example. In the garage it starts first kick, as long as you kick it really hard. On the trail it starts second kick. In a ravine on a 100-degree day when flies are attacking your eyes, ears, nose and throat, it can take from three to 100 kicks. To tell the truth, we would like to see a big thumper come with both an electric starter and a kickstarter—and maybe someone to start it for us.

THINGS THE HONDA DOES BETTER

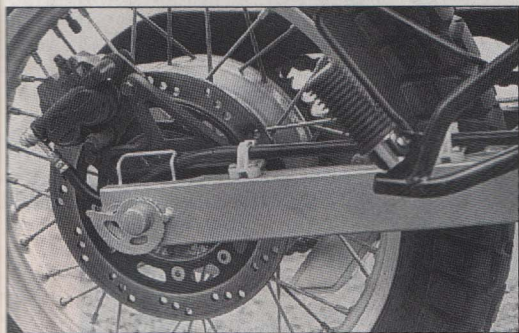
The Honda does everything else better. The biggest difference between the two bikes is in the suspension department. The Honda's is good, *really* good. We have even thought about taking the XR fork and putting it on a CR motocrosser instead of the mediocre upside-down units that all MX bikes are stuck with these days. It might be better.

It's interesting that the Honda actually has stiffer spring rates than even the dirt-only XR600. The street-legal version weighs about 40 pounds more than the dirt model. So, effectively, the dual-sport bike is just as stiff as the off-road XR. We will go so far as to say that the XR has the best overall suspension of any dual-sport bike ever. In whoops the bike tracks straight, yet it still manages to cushion impacts from rocks and small bumps. The only faults in the Honda's suspension package are associated with the bike's weight and tires. The tires make the bike wallow in loose dirt, which makes the back end do weird things, and the weight makes everything hit bottom in gullies and G-out ditches.

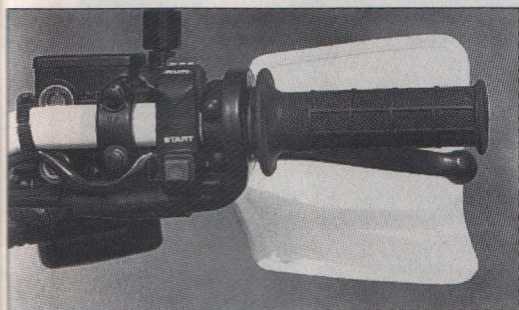
The DR suspension does fairly well,



The DR has nice power with a weak clutch and absurdly tall gearing. Last year it was the best, but times change.



The Suzuki has the biggest rear brake we have ever seen on a dirt bike. Of course, it's the biggest dirt bike we have ever seen, too.



Push de button, Max: The magic button makes the Honda.

considering it's the cheapest stuff that Suzuki had lying on the shelf. It's way out of its league compared to the Honda, though. The bike just doesn't have enough travel to be really effective in big bumps, small bumps or any bumps. Even if the shock and fork were of high quality, there is only so much you can do with eight inches of travel.

WEIRD TALES

These machines come with some really strange smog equipment. In order to make them pass EPA tests, both bikes have devices that pump air into the exhaust sys-



If you don't want to read the test, we won't make you. The Honda bests the Suzuki in every aspect of off-road performance—but you will feel guilty if you don't read the whole story, won't you?

tems. This doesn't result in any fewer hydrocarbons being spewed into the air but, since more clean air is being emitted from the tailpipe, the percentage of smog is lower. The bottom line is that these pumps don't make the air any cleaner, they just make the bikes pass tests. Such is the danger of having bureaucrats meddle in motorcycle engineering.

Actually, the Suzuki has other weird things. It has a 17-inch rear wheel, which makes it very difficult to find decent tires for the bike. Pirelli makes some. Both bikes have great brakes and need them. When you get that much mass in motion, it takes a lot to slow it all down. Suzuki also was at a loss on how to make the bike even heavier, so a luggage rack was added.

Honda tried really hard but couldn't find a clumsier place to mount the battery. It's on the left side of the bike—just look for the huge bulge.

WHICH WINS?

Do you really have to ask? The Honda is a dirt bike made into a dual-purpose

bike. That's a good approach. The Suzuki, on the other hand, is a dual-purpose bike designed to be inexpensive. It was just by accident—or rather by default—that the Suzuki was the best of the big-bore D-P bikes in past years. There was nothing serious to challenge it.

The best news is that now the ante has been upped. Other manufacturers will soon start making dirt-worthy 650cc D-P bikes. The Honda XR650L is just a set of tires and sprockets away from being a truly good dirt bike. The Suzuki, on the other hand, really can't be made into a serious off-road bike. It costs tons less than the Honda (\$600—okay, so that's not exactly tons, just megapounds), but you couldn't fix it even for three times that much. The Suzuki remains what it has always been: a good bike for the price. The Honda, on the other hand, is something quite different: a great bike at any price, and a good reason to break the ultimate dirt bike commandment. □