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# australasian **DIRT BIKE**

**BIG BORE  
IT243!  
CRAIG SMITH  
JUMPS  
FOR JOY!**



**MARCH 1987, ISSUE 91 \$3.50 (\$3.75NZ)\***

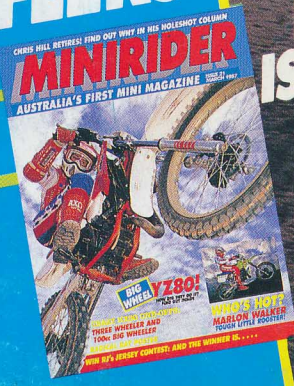
**WHO'S RIDING WHAT IN '87  
KTM350 ENDURO  
RACE-BRED,  
USER FRIENDLY**



**SHOOTOUT!  
DAKAR vs  
KLR650  
BURKE AND WILLS DREAM MACHINES**

**ALSO INSIDE!  
Interview:  
RICHARD NIELSEN**

**ADB's experts:  
GALL  
LOVETT  
HEFFERNAN**



**YAMAHA  
YZ125T  
IS WHITER, RIGHTER?**

**HONDA'S  
XL250RH  
STOPPED IN TIME**



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MARCH, 1987  
ISSUE 91  
VOL.16, NO.1



Australasian  
**DIRT BIKE**

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Australasian **DIRT BIKE** is published by **ADB HOLDINGS PTY.LTD.** (Incorporated in NSW) 22/104 Old Pittwater Rd, Brookvale, NSW, 2100.  
**POSTAL ADDRESS:** PO Box 696, Brookvale, NSW, 2100.  
**TELEPHONE:** (02)938 4155.  
**PRINTED BY MAGAZINE PRINTERS, DUBBO, NSW.**



### COVER

When it's late at night the day before deadline, what do you do for a cover? Go overboard, that's what. What a smorgasbord of delights! Here we have the Big Bore IT200 with Craig Smith (nearest camera) and brother Brett figuring out if it works (photo: Geoff Eldridge). We also have Pelle Granquist blitzing the ADB photo set on his KTM350 (photo: Andrew Clubb). Finally, Mark Pace trying to work out if the YZ125T has any top-end or not (photo: Clubby).

\* Recommended and maximum retail price only. You guys ought to be amazed at this che-e-e-p price. After all, it's printed in Australia now, and everyone knows Aussies are a bunch of overpaid, underworked non-productive bludgers who can't make anything for a decent price even if their lives depend on it.

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# HONDA'S XL250

## Time machine.

**During the past five years, ADB has tested only two XL250s - an incredible gap for one of Australia's biggest selling motorcycles. When we wanted to know why so few XL250s had graced our magazine, the answer slowly became crystal clear.**

**You're looking at a bike which is all but identical to the model Honda introduced in 1983. Time may stand still for no man, but it sure has been polite to the mighty XL250R.**

**O**K. We're amazed. Amazed that as time marched on and every other dirt bike improved by leaps and bounds around it, the big selling XL250 stood still. The bike you see here, apart from a front disc brake, a couple of minor cosmetic changes and a different colour scheme, is the same as Honda was building way back in 1983.

We're also mighty amazed that it still sells so well, but maybe it proves one thing we always went on about in ADB's dim, dark anti-four-stroke past.

Trailriders aren't really concerned too much about the bike. They want the image. And in that sense, it's pretty much enough that the front guard is at least six inches away from the front tyre.

This is a DIRT BIKE, dammit - see the air under the guard?

### A BIT OF PERSPECTIVE

As much as the XL250 hasn't

changed, neither have the XT250, the TS250 or the KLR250 changed in anything much except paint schemes.

The whole shootin' match has stood rock still - and we never even noticed.

We were too busy looking at new CR and XR Hondas, upgraded YZs, spoofy new KDX200s, brilliant KTMs, improved Husky four-strokes, radical minibikes and warped Paris-Dakar replicas to even notice.

But now we stand back and study the situation, what has changed in the trailbike scene? The answer? Nothing at all, really.

Trailbikes are still overweight, slow, poorly suspended, fragile things that cope better with city traffic than any form of dirt riding.

But you know what? There's something good about riding in the city to work on your "dirt bike" and not getting evil stares because it makes heaps of noise when you ride past stationary cars in traffic

jams.

There's something nice about an engine that doesn't vibrate your teeth out on a Monday morning. An engine with a 1st gear you know will let you climb a nasty hill, and a top gear that lets you take the freeway if you're feeling lazy. An engine that starts easily, doesn't chew lots of gas, doesn't leave clouds of blue smoke at the lights, has a decent 12 volt electrical system that powers bright lights with a quartz halogen beam, and has a full warranty.

A bike that has pillion pegs for your girlfriend (the bike we were given for testing is, technically, Honda's "ag" 250 and as such comes with no pillion pegs and no strap across the seat). It's a bike with tyres that stick half OK on tar. Light feeling controls. A tacho to watch when you're bored. A steel tank that doesn't have peeling tank stickers on it.

Just like there's something satisfying in the knowledge that with this very same excellent road bike you can also venture along the toughest trails mother nature has to offer. Speed is the only thing you won't be doing in the bush with a bike like this, that's fer sure.

It's a bike about which the fastest thing is the speed it passes through street legal ego.

Personally, we figure the new XR250 is ten times the bike and

**Continued over**

Photography by Andrew Clubb





# HONDA XL250R Continued

there's no way we'd buy an XL like this while there were XRs around, but we're slowly getting used to the idea that there is a market for these things. And that if you're not a power crazy enduro freak then an XL isn't so bad after all.

We're not saying this to score extra advertising dollars, either, if there are any of you out there who think we've wimped out. We're as surprised about our mental turnaround as the next guy.

## ENGINE

It's slow, boring, predictable, unexciting.

It starts pretty easy from cold - pull on the handlebar mounted choke lever, switch the key on, check the silly killswitch, gently kick through the lever till the valve lifter clicks, raise the kickstart lever back up to the top, then kick with authority. It starts quietly and quickly settles down to a quiet idle.

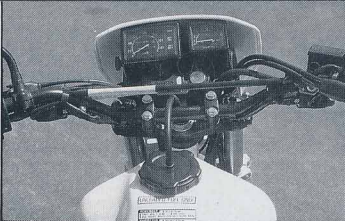
It's not a cold blooded engine, preferring you to switch off the choke lever almost straight away (our test was done in late January, remember), and it revs out pretty cleanly, pretty quickly for a four-stroke Honda.

When the engine warms up it gets harder to push the lever through top dead centre for some reason, but once you do get it through and hear that magical click, it'll start nearly every time. Not as easily as either a TS250 or a KLR250, though, since you often need a few kicks to convince it you're serious about wanting to ride off into the sunset. In fact, now we think about it, this bike was almost as iffy about hot starting as previous XL250s with the RFVC head and twin throat carbs - it'll start sometimes, won't others, will, won't, won't, will. It's a worry, but it didn't seem as bad. New jetting specs have helped.

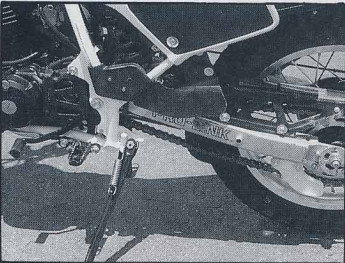
Like we just said, the carburetors are still those bloody awful dual throat Keihin jobs that they got rid of on the XR last year. Apart from being difficult to work on, there's always a hesitation right off idle. In the bush this translates as a hiccup and nine times out of ten (well, maybe five) it'll stall.

The engine's a real revver, though. At 80km/hr, it's spinning at 5,000rpm. Nothing much happens up till about 3,000rpm, then the engine starts to show it has some life at around 3,500. By 4,000 you know you're getting near the power, and most of your riding will be done in the 5,000 to 6,000 rpm range. After our magic KLR650 the XL felt as gutless as a Christian looking at a lion up close, but what do you expect from 400 less cubes? In a while we came to expect less of it and thought no more about it.

By comparison, since none of them have changed, the XL250 is not quite as quick as a Suzuki TS250, which is a two-stroke, remember, about on a par with the XT250 Yamaha, and ahead of the KLR250 Kawasaki for acceleration



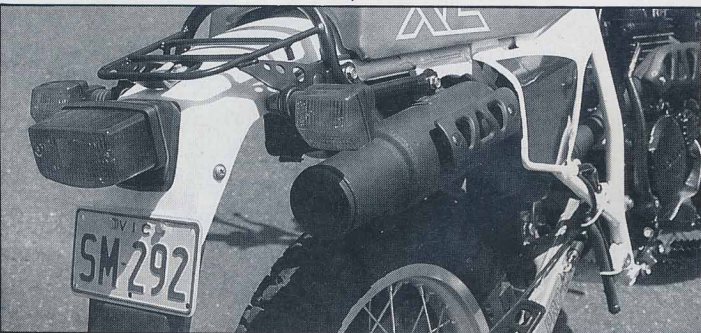
**ABOVE**  
*Rider comfort is good. Seat is well shaped, bars feel right, levers all fall easily to hand, pegs are in the right place. No complaints here, buddy.*



**ABOVE**  
*Honda's XL rear suspension is on the soft side, has harsh compression damping, not enough rebound damping and could do with an oil change. Otherwise, it works fine on the street. There's no external damping adjustment on the shock for fussy owners. Swingarm is steel, with visible pillion peg mounts (fitted on normal XLs - this is an "Ag" model). Snail cam chain adjusters are a neat touch.*



**ABOVE**  
*The forks are way too soft for any serious dirt riding, especially in combination with the super strong front brake. On tar, the brake is excellent. We quite liked the Dunlop K550 tyre. Headlight is 12 volt with a quartz halogen beam, instruments are good, clutch is super light, controls are all comfortable.*

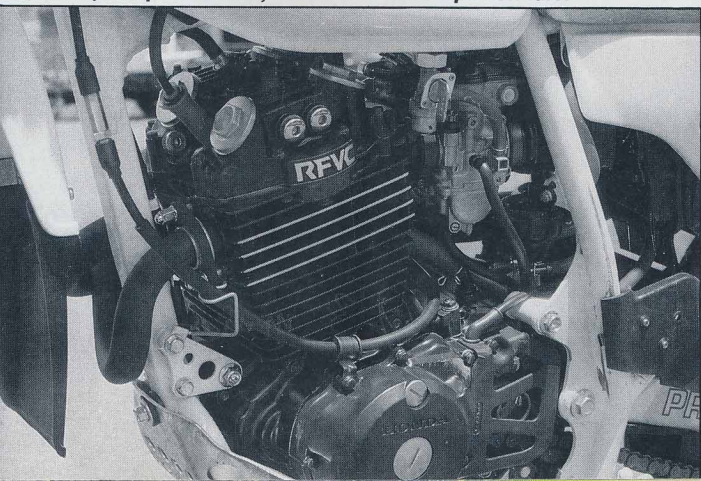


**ABOVE**  
*We always admire four-stroke trailbike mufflers for their ability to keep the noise down, but we're told they have a rust problem. Namely, they rust out from the inside, and replacement*

*mufflers aren't cheap at \$337.04. However, there are accessory mufflers available for the XL250R (see our feature on mufflers elsewhere in this issue), but they aren't as quiet as stock.*

*Although the engine was an iffy starter when hot, with a tough TDC compression force to push the lever through, it started first kick from cold. It thrives on revs, most work being done in the 5,000-6,000rpm bracket, mean-*

*ing that good four-stroke motorcycle engine oil is essential, but it has a good reputation for reliability. The gearbox is brilliant, but the twin throat carbs are hopeless, giving the engine a dead spot off idle.*



and general power delivery.

But then, if you're buying a 250cc trailbike you can't be an honest to goodness power freak.

The Honda returns what we figure is a reasonable fuel economy: ours ran up 160 kms around town before switching to reserve, which gives a mileage of 19.5 kms/litre since there are 8.2 litres from full to reserve, according to the superficial owner's manual - surprising when you consider we got nearly 18 kms/litre from the 650 under the same riding conditions.

As for the gearbox, we loved it. It shifts like a knife carving through soft butter, and the ratios are well chosen. The clutch is amazingly light (all the controls on Honda's XL250 are amazingly light and user-friendly).

## FRONT END

The XL250 trades on the image won for it by its XR250 brother, but the two have nothing in common, especially suspension-wise.

The XL's forks are OK for road riding and too soft for the dirt. They deliver 220mm of wheel travel with small 37mm diameter tubes that have air caps up top if you feel you want to increase the spring rate or bleed off some unwanted air pressure.

Looking back to our most recent XL250 test, we notice we rated the XL's forks as "way too soft - abysmally, dangerously soft" in the dirt.

In combination with the hyper, nova, mega-powerful front disc brake, off-road adventures can turn into real heartstoppers as the front end bottoms out and you're staring at an unwanted trip over the bars in a lot of situations.

We figure the forks need stiffer springs, different fork oil weight to stock (slightly heavier) and a tad more volume, but we also figure no XL owner will bother finding out so we left ours as they came.

There was a fair bit of hyper fast rebounding into rider's faces, too, with the light rebound damping. This caused a little bit of vagueness with the steering at times, as the front wheel would tend to flick to one side or the other when it happened.

What it boils down to should be fairly obvious.

The XL needs to be ridden cautiously in the bush. We think the word is "casually", as in "casual trailride", or "casual rider".

## REAR END

It's a similar story at the rear to the front. The suspension is too soft for any form of serious bush work, but not as noticeably as the front, where the brake really makes it known.

The compression stroke of the shock is too harsh, even on the tar, giving you a too-firm ride by comparison to either a TS250 or a KLR250, although the XL does rate on an even rear suspension par with the XT. That is, marginal.

Damping, both on the compression and rebound stroke, disappear pretty quickly in the dirt, leaving the bike to pogo wildly out of control. Soft front, unpredictable back. Hooley dooley.

**TYRES**

The Dunlop K550 dual-purpose tyres fitted both ends do a reasonably good job, we found. Naturally, we won't try to compare them to a good Dunlop knobby for dirt use, because it's impractical, but we have to admit that dual purpose tyres have advanced in leaps and bounds by comparison to those awful old trials universals. About the only things which stop these new tyres are sand and mud, so beware.

On the tar, there seems to be plenty of grip as long as you don't think they're like the tyres Freddy Spencer uses.

In the dirt they're actually very good on real hard surfaces, although their performance falls off the more the ground tends towards softness.

**BRAKES**

On the tar, the disc front brake is excellent once you get used to the excessive nose diving of the soft front end. It's better than either the TS or KLR for outright stopping power, but till you're used to it you need to bear in mind that you should use it carefully around corners or in the wet.

However, once you hit dirt things aren't so rosy.

That disc is way too strong, and lacks feel by comparison to the XT250 which also feels strong but seems to give better control through the lever.

With the soft front end you can end up sprawled on the dirt unless you're real careful. After a while of getting used to it you can control it



better, but more feel would be appreciated.

If we had our druthers, we'd take the power of the Honda front stopper because we're smart enough to know we'd only ever ride on the road, where better stopping is safer.

**COMFORT AND STUFF**

That fabulous computer term "user friendly" springs readily to mind again in relation to the XL250.

Everything about the bike seems designed to please, just like a happy little dog. The controls are light, it's quiet, well detailed, stops well on tar, has a good seat, reasonably shaped (if a bit flattish) handlebars, all the right instruments - everything's all there and all in the right places.

The bike isn't cramped, although it does feel significantly smaller and lighter than a 600cc trailbike, and far easier to manage than a Paris-Dakar replica. Big riders commented that they felt conspicuously big

on the XL. The tank has neat scallops on each side so your knees aren't pushed wide apart.

And by contrast to a Paris-Dakar bike, it feels outrageously light.

However, at this point we'll quote ourselves again: we said in our previous test (at a time we were, admittedly, more heavily into enduro racing than Peruvian epics) "it's heavy."

It hasn't changed - it still porks in at a claimed 117kg dry - but somehow attitudes have changed. We know - ours have. Years ago it was considered chic and avante gard to slag anything heavier than 96 kilos and make great efforts to drill out bolts and buy alloy fuel tanks. Nowadays people are working with better bikes (like, the XL250R handles about as well as a 1972 CZ250, if you even know what one of those was) so weight is less critical.

Matter of fact, let's look at a few random weights. The new Husky 510 four-stroke, a real competition-

bred racer, weighs 116kg, only one less than the XL250. A Kawasaki KX250 motocross bike weighs 96.5 kg, but it's equipped with less road legal gear and has plenty of expensive materials to keep the weight down. The XL is in the current weight ball park, that's for sure.

What we are clumsily beating around the bush trying to say is, we didn't abuse our test XL250 from daylight till dark for being too heavy. In fact, coming hot on the heels of the shootout between the Dakar and KLR650, we thought the XL was lightweight stuff. But then one good enduro loop aboard a KDX-200 would soon sort all that out, we suppose.

To a regular owner with nothing else to compare it to, the XL would be highly regarded.

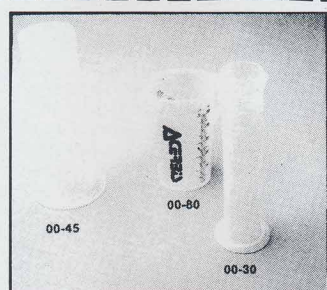
Nevertheless, the trailbike cut-cost aspect of the XL means it's still fragile in the dirt.

It's easy to smash blinkers and lights because they're not well tucked out of harm's way. The gear-lever is a stamped metal piece that bends like plasticine, and the bars are so soft they bend easily too. The metal tank doesn't take kindly to impacts. The footpeg mounts can be broken and bent.

As for the engine, there's still no oil cooler to keep engine temperatures down, so using a high quality four-stroke motorcycle engine oil is essential, as is changing the oil at regular intervals.

The bike you see in these photos is supposedly Honda's ag bike XL,

**Continued over**



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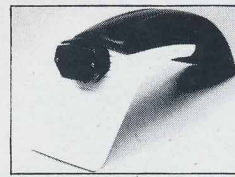
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# HONDA XL250R Continued

coming with no pillion pegs or seat strap. Normal XL250s are identical, but come with them.

## BOTTOM LINE

We're quite pleasantly surprised that our own mental attitudes have changed so much that a bike we once thought was a bit of a dog could turn out to be so damn pleasant and easy to get along with.

More than anything, it proves that these trailbike things are all a state of mind.

If you're a mad-keen racing fanatic accustomed to weekly rebores, expensive bills from your own personal tuner and weekly forays interstate to attend big time races, then you'll rightly accuse the XL250 of being a real heavy dog.

However, if you've grown a little older, become a little more laid back, or you're looking for your first dual-purpose bike, or have decided that street riding isn't racing, and that trailbikes are better than road-bikes on city streets, then an XL250 would make a welcome addition to your garage.

We know ours was well used - and well thought of - by the time it was given back. Hell, it was even liked by a couple of people who'll remain nameless.

Photography by Andrew Clubb



## HONDA XL250RH

**Test bike:** Honda Australia, Victoria.

**Retail price:** \$3,260  
NSW recommended

### ENGINE

Type.....Single cylinder SOHC,  
RFVC twin-carb air-cooled  
four-stroke  
Bore x stroke.....75 x 56.5mm  
Capacity.....249cc  
Carb.....Twin throat Keihin 24mm  
Compression ratio.....10.2:1  
Ignition.....CDI  
Starting.....Primary kick  
Air filter.....Oiled foam element  
Chain.....520 O-ring  
Gearbox.....Six speed

### FRAME & SUSPENSION

Frame.....Single downtube split  
cradle steel tube

#### Suspension:

Front.....Telescopic forks, 37mm  
diameter tubes with  
220mm wheel travel  
Rear.....Honda Pro-Link single  
shock with 195mm  
wheel travel  
Tyres....Dunlop K550 Dual purpose  
Brakes.....Disc front, drum rear  
Lighting.....Full ADR legal lighting,  
12 volt quartz halogen  
headlight  
Compliance Plate.....Yes

### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....1,380mm  
Seat height.....860mm  
Ground clearance.....275mm  
Fuel capacity.....10.5 litres  
Dry weight.....117kg