HARLEY-DAVIDSON FLHT ELECTRA GLIDE CLASSIC

Need the biggest touring bike on the block? Climb aboard the Electra Glide Classic—but you'd better have a thick wallet too.

☐ This is a motorcycle for the Faithful, the Rich Faithful. The Faithful will ogle the FLHT because it looks Big Twin Traditional; the lines and lineage are unmistakable, triple-distilled Milwaukee classic. The Faithful must be rich because the Electra Glide Classic tops $8600, making this a Harley-Davidson for those who own both the rainbows and the pots at their ends.

For about $11 a pound, the FLHT owner gets a big touring motorcycle, 781.5 pounds wet, with accommodations for two, their gear, and accessories. Big touring motorcycles are *heavy* (Honda's Aspencade is 766 pounds). To be roomy enough for rider, passenger and accessories, these machines have to be big, and an FLHT can't be this big without being heavy. The FLHT can handle a 400-pound payload. Even after counting in fairing, saddlebags, King Tour Pak and so on, a tubby rider and passenger would have 75 pounds available for luggage and gear. That's impressive. If you can't manage a tour on 75 to 95 pounds, you'd better try motorhoming.

The FLHT running gear is a variant of that found on the FXRS. The FLHT steering head is quite different, since the T-series motorcycles use Harley-Davidson's reversed triple clamps, which position the fork tubes behind the steering pivot when the front wheel points dead ahead. The FLHT fork, however, appears Harley-Traditional. The object of the assembly was to lighten the force the old FLH-series motorcycles required at the bars. Motorcycles that weigh over 900 pounds on the road, that have long (62-inch) wheelbases, and that carry 90/16 front tires, demand truck-driver muscles. Even with its reversed triple clamps, the FLHT still calls for manly effort at very low speeds.

Those accustomed to Japanese motorcycles will find other maneuvers awkward. At rest, the rider's feet get planted on the pavement between the footboards and passenger pegs. Since heavy machines encourage a rider to delay lifting his feet, occasionally our staffers would scrape the backside of their legs on the passenger pegs. To use the rear brake the rider must pull his foot off the floorboard to reach the pedal. Again, for our staffers, that's an unnatural move. The shift lever, however, can be worked with the left foot on the board.

Rolling down the interstate, the FLHT puts its rider in armchair comfort. Indeed, it's more chairlike than you might suspect. The rubber-mounted floorboards place the rider's feet forward, having them carry less weight than on other motorcycles, and the seat/handlebar/floorboard relationships put the rider bolt-upright, which is just fine because the fairing takes the majority of the wind pressure (a small bit of wind does channel up off the lower fairing). Rubber separates the rider's body everywhere from the engine and its vibration. The engine, handlebar and floorboards are rubber-mounted, and the seat is foam deep in rubber. Despite the insulation, the rider can notice upper end engine noise and the passenger will feel the footpegs vibrate. For non-adjustable units, the front and rear suspension components work very well on the interstate, the place for which they're calibrated.

It's exactly in the "features" and "adjustability" areas that Milwaukee must play catch-up. Some Japanese touring-bike built-ins—such as fender-mounted compasses and digital dashboard displays—are gadgetry in the grand tradition of pendulum-powered kitchen-knife-sharpeners. Other items, such as multi-function communication centers, are important features or electronic trivia, depending upon the rider's point of view. Still other features, such as air forks and shocks with onboard pumps and variable damping, define the upper limits of engineering state of the art for big touring bikes. Although Harley-Davidson has dealt successfully with several *basic* areas—vibration control, final-drive durability and reliability (H-D's answer was a fully enclosed oil bath chaincase)—clearly its next priority should be suspension tunability.

The FLHT gives its riders lots of lights, not all of them on the instrument panel. Both fenders have running lights, as do the Tour Pak and saddlebags. Twin spots complement the single headlamp. The FLHT can be seen—and its rider will never lack candlepower for the road ahead.

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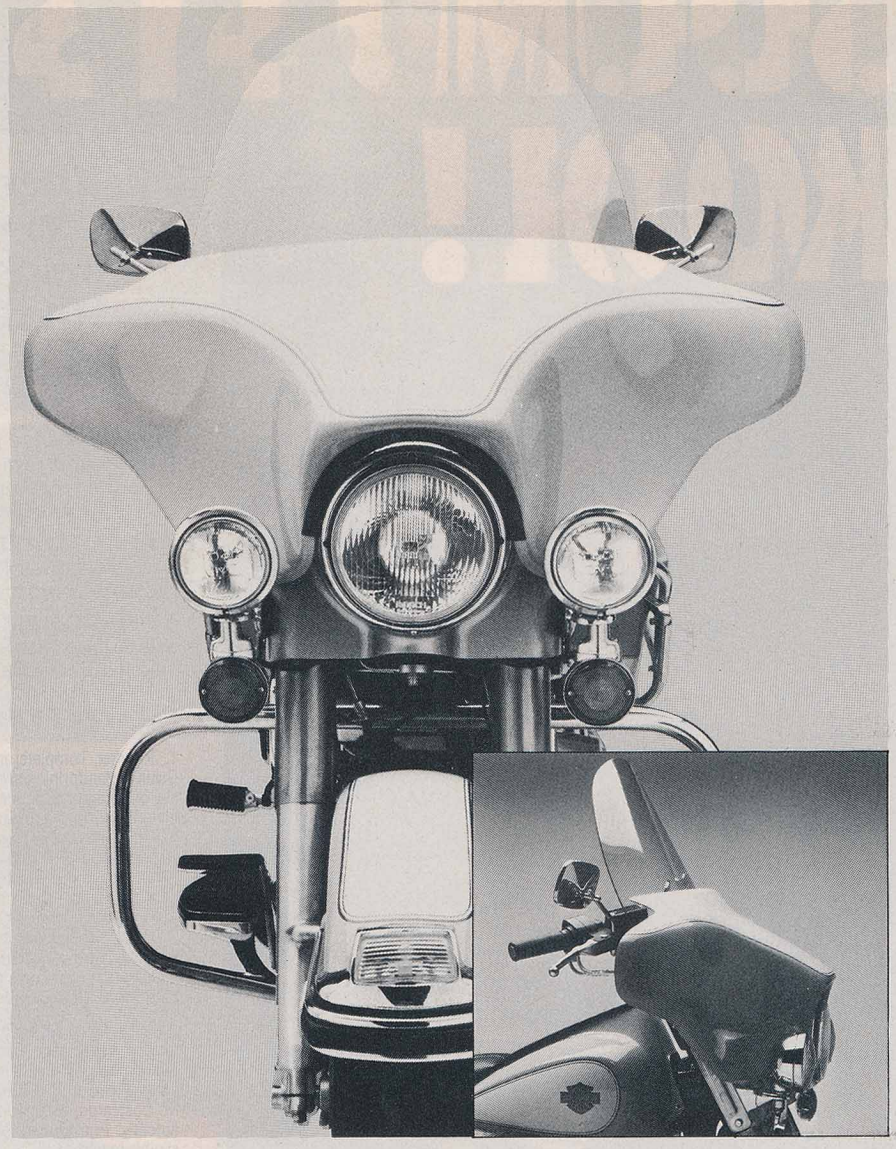
Packing space is likewise no problem. The King Tour Pak is a good place for light, bulky items because the recommended weight rating is 25 pounds; the saddlebags offer space to balance out loads at a recommended 15 pounds per side. Bags and Tour Pak mount on the bike with QD Dzus fasteners. In order to remove Pak or bags, the rider may have to shuffle through or remove the contents to unfasten the carriers, and then unplug the light lines. The bags must be removed to adjust shock spring preload. Both bags and Pak sealed perfectly in a day-long downpour.

The ignition may be operated keyless, though it takes the key to lock the fork. The lid to the gas-cap compartment is also key-operated; thus it's possible to ride off without keys, as long as your trip doesn't exceed your gas supply. The range is about 130 miles. The FLHT's average fuel consumption was, at 31.5 mpg, surprising since the FXRS (tested January 1981) has the same engine and returned an average near 50 mpg. But the FXRS is lighter and doesn't push a large fairing around.

Though the Harley-Davidson front brake improved with mileage, by contemporary standards the brakes reached an unimpressive level at best. The hand-lever requires substantial pressure, and even a gorilla grip yields barely mediocre retardation. Big touring bikes rolling 900-odd pounds down the highway need absolutely first-class brakes; in many ways touring heavyweights test brakes more severely than smaller, lighter sport motorcycles chased pell-mell into corners. Back-road friskiness is best avoided on the FLHT—and, for that matter, on any big touring rig, though the H-D's non-adjustable suspension underscores this point. Suspension, ground clearance and weight all work mightily against such behavior.

The FLHT is a very expensive motorcycle in a class of very expensive motorcycles. What makes all these motorcycles doubly costly is their one-dimensional nature, dictated by size, weight and comportment. As a class, big touring bikes lack versatility; they're fun only on open highways as ultimate, two-wheeled convertibles. In this respect, the FLHT is a good example of the genre: one full day in the saddle shows a rider both the strengths and weaknesses of big, heavy touring motorcycles. Presumably, Milwaukee believes there's little room for further development and elaboration of the FLH/FLHT concept. Elaboration such as multi-function communication centers and infinitely adjustable suspension would only make such bikes more expensive absolutely, and more expensive relative to, for example, the American-assembled Gold Wing Aspencade. Maybe Harley's recent introduction of the FXRT suggests that decision-makers in Milwaukee think lighter, more nimble touring motorcycles hold greater future promise for Harley-Davidson. With that, we'd agree. ■



Vital Statistics

Make & model	Harley-Davidson FLHT Electra Glide Classic
Price*	$8655

Engine

Type	Four-stroke, 45-degree, V-twin; air-cooled with pushrod-activated overhead valves; two valves per cylinder
Bore & stroke	88.9 x 108.0mm (3.50 x 4.25 in.)
Displacement	1337cc (81.6 cu. in.)
Transmission	Five-speed, constant-mesh; multi-plate dry-clutch

Chassis

Type	Double-downtube, full-cradle frame; box-section steel swing arm
Suspension, front	Center-axle fork with 41mm tubes and 4.6 in. (117mm) of travel
rear	(2) shock absorbers, adjustable for spring preload, producing 3.8 in. (97mm) of rear-wheel travel
Brake, front	Hydraulic, dual-disc with single-piston calipers
rear	Hydraulic, single-disc with dual-piston caliper
Tire, front	MT90-16 Goodyear Eagle SG
rear	MT90-16 Goodyear Eagle SG
Fuel capacity (main/reserve)	4.3/0.7 gals. (16.3/2.6 l)
Weight (full tank)	781.0 lbs. (354.3 kg)

Performance

Standing start ¼ mile	15.03 sec. @ 83.56 mph
Engine rpm @ 60 mph, top gear	2358 rpm
Average fuel consumption rate	31.9 mpg (13.6 km/l)
Cruising range (main/reserve)	137/22 mi. (220/35 km)
Load capacity (GVWR less wet wt.)	399 lbs. (181 kg)