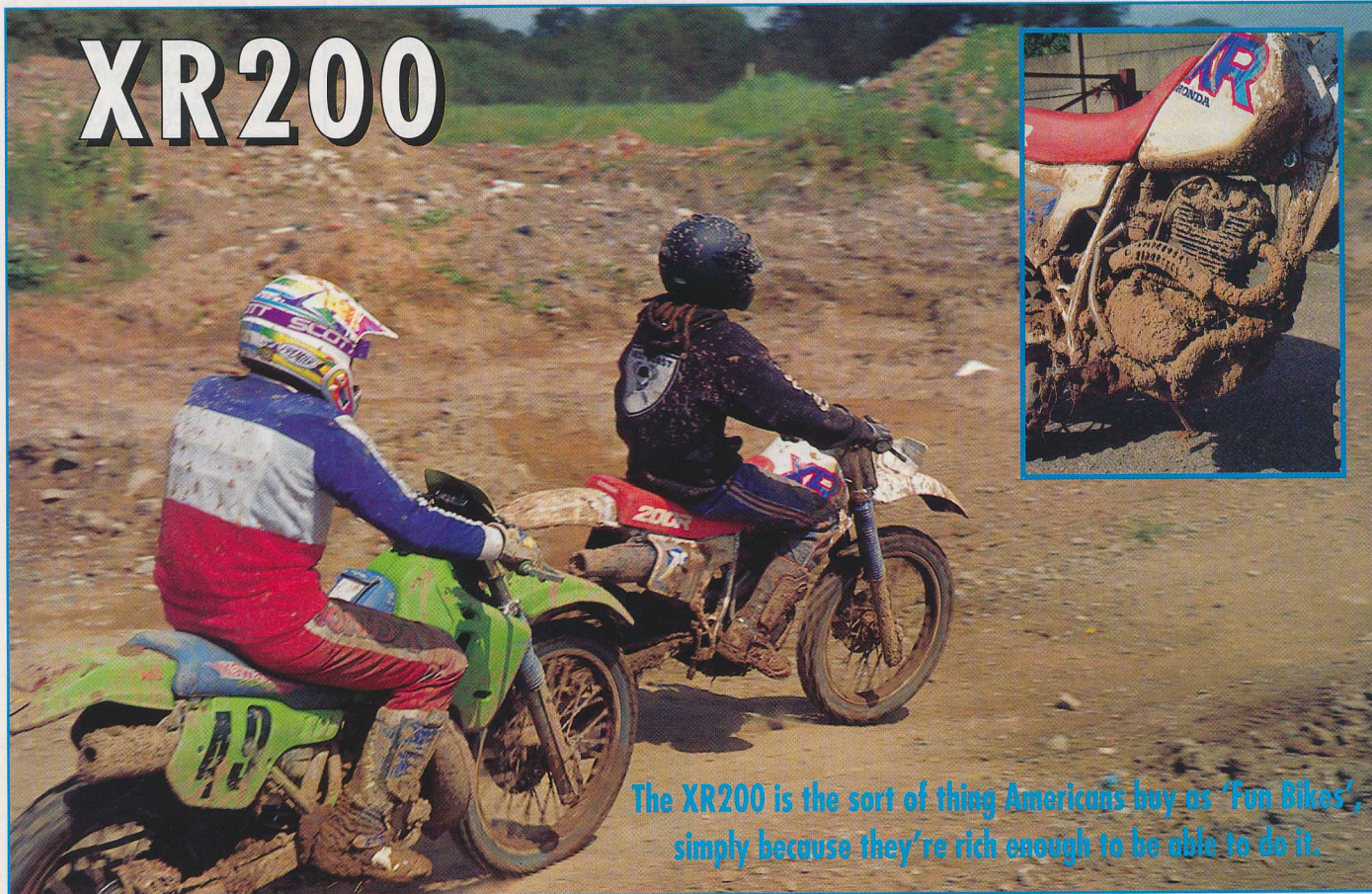


XR200



The XR200 is the sort of thing Americans buy as 'Fun Bikes', simply because they're rich enough to be able to do it.

This was meant to be a Grey Bike road/off-road test of an imported Kawasaki 200 trail bike, all upside-down forks, purposeful attitude, and bright green plastic. Except by the time I got there it'd been sold, and there was me with an entry for the Fulwood Enduro in just two days time.

No problem, West Coast had recently imported a container full of XR200 Hondas. All of them had been sold, except one kept back as a staff playbike. My baleful stare and pleas of 'Go on, lend us a bike then' worked wonders, so I loaded a brand new XR200 in the van, took it back home, greased up the chain, and went straight into competitive enduro racing.

I'd always fancied a do at enduros. In my time I've done sand racing, sprinting, drag racing, trials and hillclimbing; road racing's never grabbed me, and I'm too old for moto-cross. I'm probably also too old for enduros, but, well, any excuse to go mad on a bike for three hours...

The XR200 is the sort of thing Americans buy as 'Fun Bikes', simply because they're rich enough to be able to do it. I'd always thought the baby XRs looked like capable little bikes, but so many supposedly 'off-road' bikes aren't far short of complete crap when you try and make them actually do any off-road work, so it was anybody's guess how the XR might perform.

Like any bike with even pretensions at being a useful dirt tool, it's tall. At five-eight, I could just touch the ground at both sides. This isn't any great

problem when blasting about - you don't really need to touch ground, other than a precautionary foot out on greasy bends. But when you hit something going slowly and need to steady yourself, solid ground can seem a long way away (which is my excuse for falling off even before the race started, on the slow rolling lap following the marshall...). The bike's height makes the kickstart a little difficult to reach (no poncy electric starts on proper dirt bikes), and it takes concentration to balance the bike and swing it



SPEC:

Engine: 4-stroke single
Capacity: 195cc
Weight: 101kg
Power: 20ps/8,000rpm
Torque: 1.8kgm/7,000rpm
Front Suspension: 36mm Kayaba forks, air adjustable, 8.2 inches travel
Rear Suspension: Pro-Link with Kayaba shock, 8.3 inches travel

through to fire it up. Thankfully it's a reasonable starter - half choke when cold, and half a dozen kicks at the most sees it up and running. Stamp down on the retracable, spring-loaded gear lever to get the first of six nicely spread gears, try not to topple over in a heap as you turn round, and nail it across the field to the start line.

The course consisted of just about everything. Fast, flat grassy sections, with longish straights and sweeping turns; gullies and ditches; woods with tree trunks only slightly wider apart than the width of your handlebars; deep sandy ruts; caggy clay bomb-holes and dust covered dirt tracks, plus jumps, drops, climbs, and big holes you just fall into if you don't see them in time. A lap was about three and a half miles, and you did as many laps as you could in the three hour time limit.

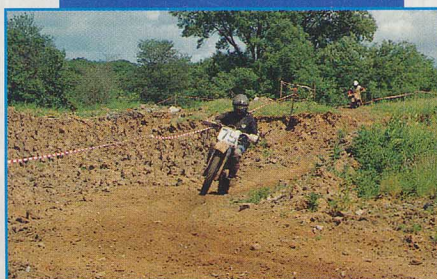
And I have to say the XR200 was as absolutely brilliant as I hoped it was going to be. Most enduro tools are hot-shot two-strokes, not much more than moto-cross bikes with lights. Unless you really know what you're doing, they're difficult to get to grips with. On the other hand, the XR200 is a very forgiving little bike. It's light enough to manhandle if you do get into trouble (a big plus point when a couple of hours of flat out racing over fierce terrain makes any bike difficult to pick up after decking out), but more importantly it tends to look after you so you don't deck out too often anyway.

Being a four-stroke single, albeit of diminutive capacity, the XR's power has a lovely soft and wide and useable spread (sounds like an Andrex advert...).

It doesn't come in with a bang, or try and rip your arms out their sockets; a touch too much gas doesn't see you hurtling off out of control towards the horizon like the ending of a Benny Hill show. This isn't an on/off throttle-happy bike, it's a bike to cosset the beginner. That doesn't mean it's slow - on a tight a twisty course I was keeping pace (and passing) a lot of the stoker boys - and a healthy 10:1 compression ratio means the little 195cc motor picks up quickly. It was only upon looking up the spec after riding the bike that I was surprised to discover there's just 20bhp underneath you - I'd have guessed it was nearer 30 from the performance. Okay, so the XR might be out of its depth on the long, fast forest tracks of a Welsh Championship enduro, but on tight clubman circuits you have as much power and speed as you need, and who could ask for anything more tra-la. The motor pulls from way low down, right up to the rev limiter (or was it valve bounce again? Er, sorry once more Nick), and it makes correct gear selection far less crucial than on a stoker. Come out of a turn or hit a clay-hole a gear too high and the little XR will still slog away for you. It's only when you hit seriously deep mud that you realise you've only 200ccs beneath you and you need to cog down to plough through the treacle - otherwise you could easily be on a full 250. The box itself is light but reassuringly positive - the only time I hit any false neutrals was when I caught the lever with my boot while being completely out of control. In the heat of competition most changes are done without using the clutch, but there wasn't a murmur of protest from the gearbox - almost as though it was designed to operate that way...

But a groovy engine and transmission isn't much on its own if the chassis can't cope, and the XR has obviously been put together with the intention of getting it right. The way you can float over some pretty grim terrain was impressive. Hit a deep hole or a big bump at speed and the bike will bounce way off line beneath you, but unless you panic and do something really stupid it'll also pull itself back into shape pretty quickly. The long-travel, air-assisted front forks are superb, soaking up just about anything, and only bottoming out when you land from the very scariest jumps. I didn't even check the pressure in the legs, but the spring rating was spot-on, and they were as good as anything I've ever ridden off road. To its credit, the rear end was nearly as good, although little bit more damping would have been nicer, perhaps. Even on the hardest setting there was a slight tendency for the back end to kick back a little when the going got really rough, and to be perfect, an aftermarket rear shock would be the way to control the back end. But the stock shock is still pretty good, and for a production bike, literally straight out the crate, the limitations of cost mean you couldn't really ask for more.

And despite all my best efforts, I couldn't break



And just in case you're interested, in my first ever enduro I came 7th in the Four-Stroke Enduro Class on the XR200, against lots of bigger bikes, and doing 22 laps (nearly 80 miles of very rough and very hard going) in three hours, ending up just 3 laps behind the winner. Now if only that bloody chain hadn't come off...

anything either. I crashed into a tree, I fell down a big ditch, I lost the front end on a gravel track whilst attempting a particularly reckless passing manoeuvre and got run over by the bloke behind, I dropped into a pothole, twisted the front end and had the front brake lever catapult me over the bars by my genitals - which some smug bugger caught on video (the crash, not my genitals...), and in the end I literally just simply fell off all over the place due to exhaustion. But the bike was completely undamaged - not even a broken lever. Meanwhile I've got more bruises than skin left, but that's another story.

The bike did shed its chain once, in a very mean and nasty mud hole, whereupon it jammed down behind the sprocket nut and the spokes, the gap between which was just wide enough to let a chain go down when being pulled hard by the engine, but not wide enough to let it out again when being pulled by a very tired and muddy Oddie. It was a complete bastard to get free and lost me loads of time. The nylon chain guide on the lower run might be the same as most dirt bikes have to keep the chain from being kicked off by passing scenery, but I'd fit something more substantial and metal if it was mine.

The brakes are as capable as the rest of the bike. The single front disc had acres of feel and feedback, but wasn't short of power, and was so easy to control I never locked the front end up once. The rear disc was slightly less sensitive, and tended to lock up fairly easily, but how much of that was the brake's fault and how much of it was my manic right foot when I realised I'd overdone it and was going far too fast to make the next turn is debatable.

The XR is a superb off-road bike. You'd be unlikely to win a Championship Enduro on it, but very few people have enough skill to do that anyway. What it will do is give you many hours of fun, whether you want to ride competitively in your local enduros, or just go out into the wilds and enjoy yourself at the weekend. The bikes aren't road legal as imported, but all you'd need is a speedo (one of those mountain bike jobbies will do the trick for about 12 quid), horn and number plate for daytime road use, and a pair of enduro lights if you want to ride at night. You'd probably also have to change the tyres for something with slightly closer spaced knobs to comply with the UK Road Traffic Act, but if you did all that you'd have a useful dual-purpose bike that actually did work off-road.

All the sixty-plus bikes brought in by West Coast were sold quickly - at £1850 plus VAT they were a serious Good Buy, and it was something of a one-off deal, so whether there'll be any more about remains to be seen. But if you are looking for a bloody good off-road toy, keep an eye out for one. And, er, can I borrow it again sometime Nick please...?

Oddie

(Photos By Karen)

Model - XR200. Year - 1993. Mileage - Nil. Price - £1850 plus VAT. Test Bike Supplied By West Coast