

TRAIL BIKE

& ENDURO

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ORANGE

APPEAL

FIRST TEST OF THE NEW KTM200EXC



• 98 BRITISH ENDURO CHAMPIONSHIP
We look at the main contenders and ask:
who will be champ?

• Plus: We pay a visit to Geraint Jones' Enduro School - and survive...

HONDA



SL230 TESTED



Chic to cheek



Honda's new SL230 matches simple mechanicals with surprisingly sharp styling. But does it go as well as it looks? Si Melber found out...

Pics: Si Melber

Regular readers of TBM will know that from time to time we bang on about the Yamaha Serow being a damn fine trail bike. Under 250cc, light low and ridiculously easy to ride, the Serow hits the spot for us because for shorties, beginners or those riders for whom speed is simply not an issue in their day to day riding, there is no better machine to take you into the countryside.

Honda, however, would like to dispute that. Their new SL230 may look like the sort of bike you used to ride the last time Hot Chocolate were in the charts, but look what happened to them. Retro is chic these days and the SL just goes to prove that a trail bike doesn't have to look like an agricultural implement to do its job. In fact though it harks back to bikes of the last two decades (and before), everything about the SL230 is new; from the air cooled, sohc, two valve, 223cc motor (used as a stressed member), to the rakish side-panels, upswept silencer and big round headlight. For certain this is a bike that has been designed to look appealing and - in our opinion - it works.

So how does the SL measure up as a dual purpose bike? Well I must admit that when I first saw the little 230 pictured in Japanese bike mags a few months ago when it was launched, I pretty much wrote the thing off as far too pretty for the dirt. I figured this was a street bike that had been given some off road looks to make it more appealing to the Japanese youth who (thankfully) like that kind of thing. Then I started to see SLs appearing in off road tests from Japan and Australia and I began to take some notice. Having had one on test for the past week - I realise my first impression was perhaps a little hasty.



Let me start by pre-empting our test by saying that the SL is a dual purpose bike in the truest sense of the word. It's a bike that will happily carry out either function - without excelling at



**Above: As long as the trail stays fairly smooth the SL copes perfectly well. -
Left: Where the hell are we?**

either of them. You wouldn't expect it to. This is not a bike on which you are likely to win race at your local enduro - even in the trail bike class. Nor is it (for obvious reasons) a road burner. What it is however is a deliciously styled and capable commuter-cum-town bike that

will take you out at weekends and let you get dirty.

It has a delightful set of manners both on and off road that conspire to place a huge grin on



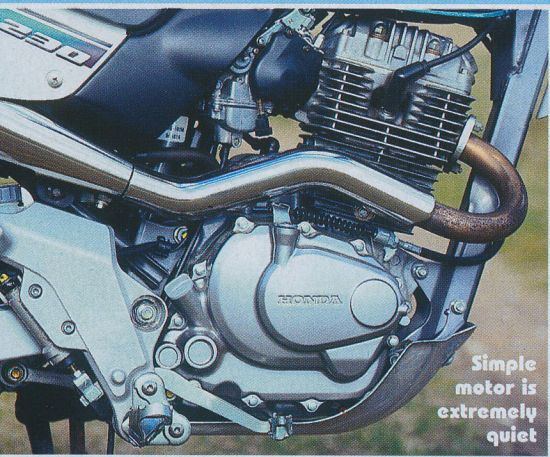
Small but perfectly formed



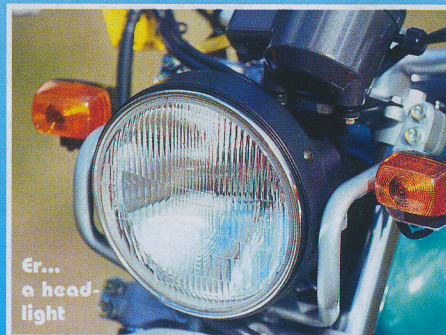
Alloy bars and simple dials lend the SL230 a flat-tracker look



Useful rack has bungee hooks and grab handles built in



Simple motor is extremely quiet



Er... a headlight

your face wherever you ride it. Despite tipping the editorial scales at 112kg, it actually feels about half that weight - trust me. I put this down to the low centre of gravity imparted by a sensibly low seat height, that while not tiny, certainly makes this bike an option for sub five-foot-five-ers. In fact pretty much anybody could get on this bike and enjoy themselves - whatever their experience. The engine starts on the button (there's a handlebar mounted choke just above the clutch lever), and the controls and ergonomics are as near perfect for this type of machine as you will find.

Settle yourself into the narrow but comfortable seat and away you go. There are six gears to choose from, and unlike some quarter litre bikes the SL actually pulls from way down low with a sizeable portion of its power available in the midrange. That means that you don't have to rev the nuts off the thing to get it moving, though if you want to ride it like that, the SL won't complain. It slips from gear to gear far better without the clutch (both up and down), and even on the road there seems to be enough punch from the lively motor to keep you ahead of most of the traffic.

Of course all this is relative - if you're used to riding big bikes then the SL isn't going to give you sleepless nights - but then you wouldn't expect it to. Around town it zipped along nicely, turned quickly and rewarded us with probably the best fuel consumption of any bike we've ever tested. I can't tell you what the figures are because despite riding it on a daily basis for a whole week it still hasn't used anywhere near a full tank of fuel yet!

On the bone dry chalky trails of Wiltshire, the SL felt nicely composed, relaxing to ride (both standing up and sitting down), and most importantly a whole lot of fun. Okay there are a few niggles - the suspension is a little soft at anything approaching pressing-on speed, the rear tyre is tubeless whereas the front isn't necessitating carrying two different forms of puncture repair kit, and probably the biggest beef is that the footpegs are a little too low giving ground clearance problems on deeper ruts. This means that all sorts of trail debris makes contact with your boots, but really the simplest answer to all these problems is to slow down a little (thereby avoiding punctures you hope) and spend your time looking around a bit more. On the more slippery trails of Somerset, the SL made the most of its fine handling to remain sure-footed despite the lack of grip and it really was a hoot to direct down narrow, single track trails where you could make the most of its pleasant steering and forgiving handling. Footing at any time is of course no problem.

I know we've said it before (about bikes like the Gas Gas Pampera), but the SL really is the perfect little machine for riding in sensitive areas. The exhaust is virtually silent, the styling is inof-

Chic to cheek



Basic sohc, two valve, air-cooled mill is a throw-back to the 70s

fensive and low enough to look non-threatening, and the SL leaves very little in the way of footprint to acknowledge its passing. In fairness to the Yamaha XT225 Serow, the SL probably isn't quite as good off road, though a true comparison will have to wait until we get them both together in a month's time.

There's not much in it of course and whereas the Serow looks okay despite its styling, the SL looks superb because of it. I really do have to stress this point. The SL looks great in the metal. The paint is thick, the quality good (alloy Renthal bars come as standard), and there is not a bike in its class that can touch it in the styling stakes. From those cheeky little side panels to the chromey upswept exhaust; the clocks, bars, seat, tank and overall quality are all typical Honda.

And there are other nice touches. The rear rack is not simply stuck on the back, but designed to work within the overall design - built in grab



handles and bungy hook extensions add to its versatility, while at the front there are a pair of alloy headlamp protection bars. Both these items providing perfect strapping points front and rear.

We also got the chance to test the bike two up over about 30 miles of city riding. Not surprisingly you have to work the engine much harder to keep up a reasonable speed, but as for comfort - surprisingly good. The usual thing with a bike of this size is that the seat is too short so that the pillion ends up either sitting on the rack or leaning back all of the time (good for your solar plexus muscles, but not much fun). The SL is different in this respect. The seat is roomy enough for two and comfortable for short periods, though the rear pegs are a bit high.

Conclusion

Overall the SL gets top marks for combining a useful measure of versatility with a huge dollop of fun. I'm sure that a little suspension tweaking would make it a match for the Serow, though as it is, it's perfectly capable off road. Remember too that a sub-250 makes for cost benefits in other areas too - cheaper road tax, great economy, and minimal wear and tear on things like chains and tyres.

Of course demand is not going to be massive for a bike of this type (though the Serow remains one of the best sellers of all trail bikes), simply because it's not big or bad enough for some people. Which is a pity because as a second bike or

even as a main machine for a person looking to start trail riding on, there are few bikes which are as versatile and easy going - particularly on the road. Currently the SL is only available as a grey import at a price of £3495 (the same as the latest Serow), so if you want a bike that matches usability with rakish good looks then the choice comes down to simply which colour of SL you're going to choose.

Honda SL230

Eng:	Air cooled, sohc, two valve, single
Capacity:	223cc
Bore/Stroke:	65.5x66.2mm
Comp Ratio:	9:1
Gearbox:	Six speed
Wheelbase:	1350mm
Seat Height:	810mm
Trail Weight:	112kg
Fuel Cap:	10L
Price:	£3495

Thanks to The Container Company for the supply of the SL230. They still have a few left - though not surprisingly they are proving very popular. Call 'em on 01362 698147.