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650 Ninja

Kawasaki Redefines The Twin

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There's More than One Way to Skin a Cat. Kawasaki's 2006 650 Ninja pushes the parallel twin to new levels in attempt to squeeze their way into the twin sportbike market. This week Bikeland.org and was busy at our secret testing facility riding this latest offering.

Though the 650 may share some roots with the 500 Ninja, such as the low seating position and raised bars, that's where the similarities end. The 650 Ninja is powered by a compact liquid-cooled, DOHC, 8-valve 649cc parallel twin that pushes out an unknown amount of power since we didn't have access to a dyno. Our seat of the pants dyno put the power right in the ballpark or higher than the SV650, its only real competition.

The 650 sports a horizontally mounted adjustable rear shock, and a front end lacking in any adjustment. The aftermarket



will be busy with this bike to make it track ready. The raised handlebars made me



feel like I wanted to grab a little lower, for clip-ons that did not exist. When we were dropping off our 650, technicians at Burnaby Kawasaki were in the process of unsuccessfully attempting to fit lower Clubman style bars to one. Apparently the bar ends intersected parts of the bodywork, so the switch will be a bit more involved than just a straight bolt on.

The frame is available in gold or burgundy. The burgundy colored frame had people polarized about this bike. They either loved the color it or hated it. I'm in the hate it category with the burgundy, but loved the gold version.

Probably the coolest thing about the 650 is the bellypan exhaust. This exhaust is a work of art and



probably one of the nicest looking stockers I've ever seen. I kicked myself for not bringing my MP3 recorder along so you could hear the exhaust note. There's nothing like the melodic, harmonic sound of a big twin engine, especially when you let off the gas.

I was eager to see what a 2006 parallel twin would feel like. My first bike was a Honda 360T, and it was less than awe-inspiring. I owned a Ducati 900SS for several seasons and I've had my share of seat time with 90' twins, including some Kawasakis and Suzuki's SV650 and SV1000.

Thumbing the starter brings the fuel-injected twin to life. Nothing to adjust or fiddle with, the silky smooth fuel injection works wonderfully. The bike pulled away with ease. Power was strong right from 1000 rpm all the way through to the 11,000 rpm redline. Giving the bike gas brought the front wheel up in the air with no hesitation whatsoever. Gone was the abruptness of the fuel injection 5 years ago.

Up and downshifts were smooth and predictable. The biggest draw of this bike



(for me) is the torque. This bike pulls, and pulls hard. The gearing felt short, so by the time you were in 2nd/ 3rd you were doing about 70, but the bike pulled hard all the time through the entire rpm range.

A couple of wheelies caught me off guard. I didn't expect the power to be as strong as it was, and I had a big smile on my face the whole time I rode the bike. I even had to pull over and laugh at one point, I was so caught off guard by the bike's subtle lines, I really didn't expect it to rip like it did.

Tossing it into corners was easy, and the low seating position gave lots of extra leverage. It struck me that the bike almost felt supermotard-ish (if that's even a word), with its big thumperlike engine, higher bars and low seat. A bizarre fusion of bikes rolled into what is definitely an urban assault vehicle.

The bike is light. I didn't take scales with me so I can't give you an accurate number for weight, but it felt lighter than the 636 sitting in our garage, so I would peg it (and I'm guessing) at around 390 wet, maybe less.

The downside to this bike was storage. There's no room under the seat to stash anything. We had a hard time fitting in my cell phone and wallet. The seat barely closed. Plan on buying a tankbag or ditching the toolkit (not always recommended) if you want to carry things on this bike.

The handling was surprisingly quick. The rear swingarm is another work of art. The styling cues from Ducati can be seen in the tubular steel frame. The rear shock is offset, and according to KMC it's built like this to make the bike slimmer by relocating the battery.

The brakes were excellent. Kawasaki's standard petal shaped rotors with Tokiko calipers made stopping (and stoppies) easy. The bike wears Bridgestone BT 020s, and strangely only a 160 in the rear.

Kawasaki expects to take this bike racing, and has the SV650 square in it's crosshairs. With some time and fiddling invested I predict this bike, and specifically this motor, will shine on the racetrack.

In the city and for every day use the inexpensive 650 Ninja is guaranteed to make you smile. You'll have no problem hanging with your friends for weekend canyon carving sessions. You may even piss one or two of them off when your twin walks away from them in the corners!

If you're interested in buying one, you'd better hurry. We happen to know that Burnaby Kawasaki had two of them in stock. The first one that came out of the box was sold immediately. Chances are that by the time you read this, the second one will be out the door too!

EDITOR'S NOTE:

CORRECTION DEC 19, 2005

KMC has informed us that the gold framed version is not available in the US. Stateside customers will need to look north to Canada to purchase the gold framed bike. We recommend Burnaby Kawasaki for sourcing this bike.

