

The 2006 Ninja ZX-14

Bikeland comes Full Circle

When Bikeland was born back in the fall of 2000, we were just a small group of ZX-12R enthusiasts. For five years our members held the ZX-12R close to their hearts, and eagerly looked to the future for a rebirth of their beloved motorcycle. I say beloved, because the members of this site truly have dedicated themselves to the development and refinement of the ZX-12R.

I think it's safe to say that none of us expected the newest incarnation of the ZX-12R - the Ninja ZX-14 - to look the way it does. Since its announcement in September 2005 Bikeland's members questioned the ZX-14's looks, its performance, its overall size and weight. In fact members have questioned pretty much everything about the ZX-14 from its George Foreman Grill RF900'esque strakes to the omission of the letter "R" in the model name. For months there has been little to do but wait, ponder, discuss, dissect and speculate about this bike. Kawasaki has remained amazingly tight lipped about the ZX-14 and its potential performance.

I feel fortunate that Kawasaki has valued our members' input throughout all these years enough to invite Bikeland to the World Press Introduction, and for that all of you should feel honored. This is a level of recognition we never expected when freek and I first sat down and decided to build the website. I don't think that the membership of this site realizes the amount of work the staff at KMC have put into this event, and the birth of this model. The last two years have been an eye opening experience for all of us at Bikeland as we have had a front row seat (whether we knew it or not) to watch and participate in the creation of a brand new motorcycle.

As your direct representative at this event I had some serious business to attend to. When I found out from Kawasaki that we could include a second rider from Bikeland, the choice was daunting. So many of you have contributed your thoughts and feelings, your technical knowledge and your expertise that we didn't really know if there could be a single "right choice". The decision was difficult but after much deliberating we asked MadMike to accompany me to this introduction, and our reasoning was purposeful.





First of all, those of you who know Mike know that he is both straight up, and a standup guy. Second, this event was unique as it focused on three different disciplines of riding; there was a street riding section, a high-speed oval track, and also a drag racing component. I couldn't dragrace my way out of a paperbag and well, Mike can. Third was the fact that like myself, Mike wasn't a big fan of the new bike. We wanted another objective opinion from someone who was a skeptic and wasn't really sold on the machine.

I also have to add just what a tough crowd Bikeland's readership is. The brutal honesty of our members never ceases to amaze us. The opening volley on the introduction of the ZX-14 in September came from our very own Swft who said, "Hope you get a chainsaw 'cuz that bike done got hit by a whole ugly forest."

Wow.

Strong words from a dedicated and diehard Kawasaki owner.

Beyond that there were the folks who wanted the bike that didn't seem to exist... The ZX-14R... The mythical 1400cc sportbike that weighs the same as a 10R and handles the same too. To that crowd I ask, why? When Kawasaki announced its direction was to make focused motorcycles, all of us should have realized that the 12R's days were numbered. I owned a 12R for four seasons and found it to be a great bike overall, but the truth is that it wasn't really great at any one thing in particular. The ZX-10R out-handled it in the tight stuff and the ZX-12R lost hands down to the ZZR-1200 for touring and long hauls. It was never quite as fast as expected in stock form, and fell short of Kawasaki's arch rival the Hayabusa by a hair enough times that it never really did shake its black eye.

As one last aside to the 14R proponents, if you want a focused sportbike and 175+ hp isn't enough for you then buy a ZX-10R or GSXR1000 and drop in a turbo - problem solved. Neither the 12R nor the Busa were ever the focused track tools that their liter bike equivalents are and we can all safely agree on that fact.



Even though KMC USA is heavily promoting the straight-line dragracing capabilities of the ZX-14, the new Ninja was primarily designed to take on the open road and the canyons, and to do it fast, damn fast! I mean faster than you can imagine.

If you want to go touring, but not Goldwing style, then the ZX-14 is your bike. Soaking up the miles with ease, the redesigned ZX-14 was comfortable and a pleasure to ride. If you want to dragrace or simply have bragging rights at the local hangout, the ZX-14 wins hands down for 2006.

Why does the ZX-14 exist?

The official company line is that the ZX-14 was designed to be a flagship bike representing power and speed. At the intro Mike and I had the opportunity to have lengthy casual conversations with the engineers who penned the designs for this bike. Believe it or not, Kawasaki has been listening to you for the last five years. Your observations, complaints and suggestions were duly noted, and the ZX-14 was designed specifically to surpass the ZX-12R in every aspect. They actually read what you write at Bikeland, and this surprised us.

The appearance of the bike has polarized the opinions of many readers, however you might be interested in knowing that within KHI itself and even among the engineers and designers working on the project we talked to there were those who liked or disliked certain aspects of the bike, such as the headlights and the Foreman Grill. One of the main reasons that the headlight design and overall design you see today won out over others was that Kawasaki wanted the ZX-14 to be a brand new motorcycle, unique in appearance, and distinctly different from its predecessor - the ZX-12R.

That is the evolution of this bike.

The ZX-14 was derived from the ZX-12R, not the ZZR model line. The lack of an "R" is irrelevant. For those of you concerned, *this bike is a Ninja.*

A question of weight.

The new ZX-14 redefines the starting point for building fast bikes, and where Kawasaki stops the aftermarket picks up, doing the finishing work for you. As a platform for modification the ZX-14 raises the bar well above its 12R roots. Though in full stock trim it may tip the scales at a few pounds more than the 12R, weighing the individual components that make up this bike reveals a honed, lighter weight product. Technicians from Muzzys Performance products told Bikeland that the bits that make up the 14 are substantially lighter and more refined than their 12R counterparts. The parts that count like the frame, the engine and all the bits that make this bike go, weigh less.

"Then why" you might ask, "does this bike weigh more than the 12R?" ... and exactly how much more does it weigh?

We were curious as well. If all the good stuff weighs less, then why is it fatter? We asked the engineers from KHI this very question. After some translating they pulled out their calculators and gave us the ZX-14's wet weight, with fuel.

The ZX-14 tips the scales at about 555 lbs wet, according to KHI. Before you panic, relax and read this next bit: the extra weight of the ZX-14 is easy to spot and deal with if desired. First of all the tank is about 1 gallon larger than the ZX-12R, so you can take 7 lbs of that weight and attribute it to fuel. The next offender is the exhaust which weighs more than the 12R's system. This is a good time to tell you why the 14 comes equipped with dual cans. Anyone remember how



big in diameter the ZX-12R's stock canister was? Emissions standards have changed, and engineers told us that to meet Euro3 spec the can would be so large it would be ridiculous. That accounts for the majority of the extra pounds.

Apparently the wheels weigh more than the 12R's, but by how much I do not know. Miscellaneous items like the plastics and the headlight assembly eat up the rest of the extra weight. Owners should have no problem shedding pounds off this bike, and whether they do or not, they will be in for a treat because the ZX-14 goes like you wouldn't believe. This bike pulls, and pulls HARD.

How does this bike feel?

How does this weight affect the handling? Does it slow it down or make it feel sluggish? Not at all. In fact one of the most surprising things about the bike is how light it feels and how easy it turns. You forget just how big a bike this is when you take it out for a spin. This is actually one of my only complaints about the 14. As bizarre as this may seem, I had a hard time wrapping my head around how I felt the

bike *should* handle, and how it *did* handle. I'm sure that with time in the saddle I'd have no problem getting used to it, but especially on the oval at high speed the light feel of the bike robbed me of a little bit of confidence. Mike noticed this as well. It made it feel a little sketchy topping 155 and I don't know if it was the tires (they were new with only 4 miles on them) or if the bike needed a steering damper, or if it was just a mental thing because I was going 155 leaned over pointed at a concrete wall.

The bottomless pit of power: enter the wormhole...

A few years back sitting beside a campfire after a long day's ride a group of Bikeland's 12R owners sat back and talked. After a round of heavy drinking one of our members mixed some Midol with his booze. It turns out mixing Midol and booze acts like a kind of 12R truth serum because he poured his heart out to us about just how it felt to ride a ZX-12R...

"Riding it" he said, "is like being sucked deeper and deeper into a wormhole where space and time are warped and the

bike pulls faster and faster and harder and harder.”

“Do you know what I mean?” he insisted, “A worm hole... You know... The edges of everything bend in and it looks like a tunnel. That’s what it feels like to ride my ZX-12R” he told us.

We could all relate. Even though the 12R was a handful in the corners, it did pull like stink and that’s what mattered to a lot of us... the bottomless pit of power.

Enough power on tap to get you into a lot of trouble, and you won’t even see it coming.

The ZX-14 is amazingly fast. The engine pulls, but it does not feel like a ZX-12R. The power comes on in a smooth and deceptive manner. There is no “hit” where you are launched forward, just a constant smooth and pleasurable pull that sucks you forward. This got me into trouble no less than three times when I was on the street ride. One time I was feeding it gas coming out of a corner and the next thing I knew the back end broke loose on me. I recovered with a smile on my face and had to remind myself to watch out because there really was so much power on tap, and again there was a disconnect between what the bike felt like and how much power there really was.

How to deliver so much power?

When I got back from the street ride I was cornered by a large group of KHI engineers and representatives who wanted to know my initial riding impressions. Caught off guard, the first word that came to mind for me was “deceiving”. I told them that the bike was so smooth that I didn’t realize how much power it really had until I got myself into trouble. They didn’t understand what the word “deceiving” meant, and spent some time with their translators, who couldn’t successfully translate the word for them. Then they pulled out their pocket translation computer. (How very Japanese!) When they read the computer’s translation, they seemed confused and not necessarily pleased. I tried to explain to them that it wasn’t a negative comment, and that it was in fact very cool that the bike was so powerful yet so rideable. When I left them I wasn’t convinced that they knew what I meant. Perhaps the translation computer had been wrong?

Much later that night at dinner I found myself sitting across from Stanley Takagi who is the General Manager of Product Advancement and Racing. Stanley is a cool dude who kind of reminds me of Mr. Miyagi from the Karate Kid movies. Stanley

sized me up, and then with his thick Japanese accent he scowled, looked me in the eyes and said, “I now understand what you mean when you say deceiving.”

“Oh no” I thought to myself as a knot formed in my stomach, “Had I explained it properly? What did the translation computer tell him??”

His scowl turned into the most amazing ear to ear smile, and then he said, “Our goal was to make the power delivery smooth, with no abruptness.” I relaxed. Finally we understood each other, and he knew from my candid off guard comments that his goal had been achieved.

Me on a dragstrip? Surely you jest, sir!



I had never been on a dragstrip in my life, and I wasn’t expecting my first attempt to be when I was handed a brand new bike and told to launch it down a track. I had no idea how 14 felt or how it would run. Hey, I’d never even ridden the thing... ever!



I managed to persuade the Kawasaki guys to at least let me try the bike out before I sealed my fate on the dragstrip. I grabbed a ZX-14 and took it out in the parking lot for a whopping 5 minutes. The bike felt light, the clutch buttery smooth. I got up to a blistering 15 mph! With 5 minutes of slow speed parking lot experience and not a single drag launch to my name I set out for four passes on the strip.

With some initial instruction from Rickey Gadson and Ryan Schnitz, I at least knew how to trigger the starting lights.

I rolled up and took off. I was overly cautious, carefully feeding the throttle unsure if the bike would flip me over backwards. My first pass ever was a 12.35 at 123.7 mph. I came back, got a few more pointers from Rickey and Ryan and headed out again. My next pass was 11.74. Back for more pointers and then an 11.58.

My homie Alex Edge from Motorcycledaily.com ran over to me and told me that he noticed that I was shutting the power off well before the end of the ¼ mile. (hey... dude... that'll hurt your times!) With that info in hand I rolled up for my last pass. I had a good launch and as I approached the end of the ¼ mile I didn't know if I should shift or not! Was there enough time? When did the rev limiter cut in on this thing? I decided to ride out the gear and see if I could stay on the gas longer.

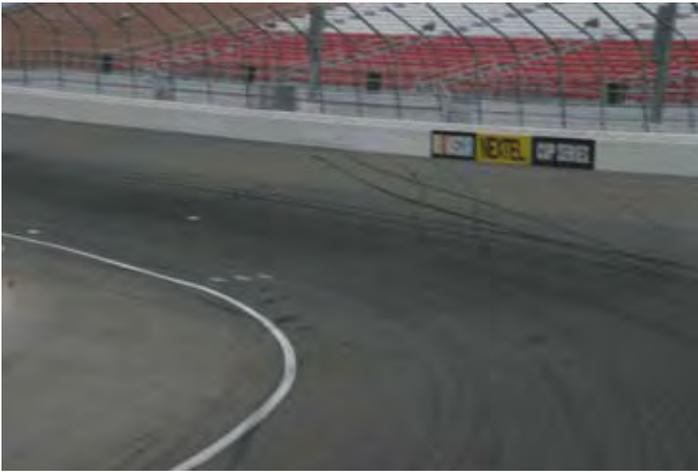
Big mistake! I bogged into the rev limiter before the end of the ¼ mile... should've shifted, doh! But hey, guess what? Even with that mistake I hit a respectable 11.05 at 134.46 mph! If this doesn't speak volumes about this bike's power, than I don't know what does. Joe Average who's never dragraced in his life is almost in the 10's without a stick of experience.

Get out there on that oval, son!

If there's any way to guarantee you crap your pants it's to get on someone else's brand new bike with new tires and try to go as fast as you can on an oval. For those of you who haven't tried this, I can assure you that the experience is the mental equivalent of running as fast as you can towards a wall of sharp pointy knives.

Thumb the starter and bring the bike to life. Point, shoot and then turn left. When the corner gets tighter turn left some more. Make sure you ignore all those skid marks (and there were lots) that tell the tale of those who somehow forgot to turn left and shoveled themselves into that pillowy soft concrete barrier. (not!) That oval is a lot smaller than you think at a buck fifty!

As the speedo wicked its way up past 145 the bike felt as though it began to float a little. Don't get me wrong; the bike



is extremely stable at speed. It's just that it feels light, almost too light. The bike is so stable at speed that Mike and I both had a similar observation; on my last lap around the oval I sat up and "took it easy". I opened up my visor and spent some time looking around, relaxing checking out the scenery and soaking up the view. Here's the kicker: I was going 130! Mike noticed the same thing. Afterwards we both laughed that you could actually sit up and relax at 130 as if you were going 35... look around, humm and ha and maybe daydream a little.

This exemplifies the mental disconnect I had with the ZX-14; that its refinement was such that the speeds do not translate themselves into perception. Reality is warped. 130 is 35. All the rules about speed you've learned are challenged. Your mind has a difficult time rationalizing the fact that you are going so quickly and doing it so easily. Brother, it just ain't right! No police officer is going to understand this, and lots of us are going to have a lot of 'splaining to do!

There were a couple of nutters in the group that had no fear and managed to pull near 180 indicated down the front straight. They have more mental fortitude than I!

What about right hand turns?

Good question. The dragstrip told me that the bike could go fast in a straight line and I now knew from the riding the oval that it had no problem turning left, so what about turning right, and what about stopping?

Good thing it stopped raining!

Where I live it rains a lot! No, really, lots! I don't think I'm making it clear, but when it rains it pours and it doesn't stop for days on end. Our last stretch of rain was a record setting 35 days and I mean *24 hour a day rain*, not just a sprinkle here

and there. That's why I had to laugh when they cancelled the street ride on account of rain. Heck, I'll ride anything in the rain, but this is Vegas and apparently when a few measly drops of water hit the road it's Headline News in this city, and the cause for great concern and panic. Even funnier was the fact that the great "storm" passed in hours and the roads were dry come the afternoon. Good thing 'cuz come hell or high water I was going to ride the ZX-14 on the road. I'm not sure if the folks from KMC understood that.

It was dry and sunny as we headed out from the track and merged onto the Interstate. The bike felt light yet planted. We settled into traffic and spent some time straight line droning down the superslab. This gave me a chance to experiment a bit with the 14. The first thing I found out was that first gear tops out at about 86 mph. Next was wind protection, which was excellent. I'm a tall rider (6'3") and I had no issues with buffeting or wind. Across part of the desert we experienced extremely strong gusts of wind including cross winds that meant that we had to ride in a straight line, leaned over. Still no problem for the 14 though some gusts were strong enough to blow me sideways across my lane. There were no irritating vibrations from the engine at cruising speed.

Comfort wise the seat was extremely nice. I could have ridden for hours, or days. The view from the mirrors was clear and unobstructed. Tucking behind the windscreen was easy and Kawasaki even included a neat little chin shaped indentation in the tank that fit my AGV helmet perfectly. The 14 ate up the miles with ease. After the drone we approached our turnoff and headed towards the Valley of Fire State Park.

The access road began to twist itself into the sort of place we'd hit for a nice summer rip. Even though this wasn't going to be a high speed balls out run as the State Patrol and Park Rangers were aware of our presence, we still had a few chances to have some fun. This gave me a chance to get a





real feel for the Ninja. Getting on the brakes showed nothing but ample stopping power. The brakes had plenty of grab. Excellent and instant feel from the direct action front master cylinder.

Throwing the bike into the corners was a treat. Though this big bike is no ZX-10R, it is a capable canyon carver and definitely not an armful like the ZX-12R. Rolling on and off the throttle gave smooth and seamless response. No abruptness, not even a hiccup from the new fuel injection system.

Through rough sections of rippled pavement the bike handled very nicely. The suspension absorbed the rough road and was never upset. We passed through some very big dips in the road at speed and the bike had no problems dealing with them. The suspension did not bottom out.

In the tight 15 mph twisties the only problem I had (as I

mentioned earlier) was metering the power. The disarming and easy to ride nature of this bike makes you forget very quickly just how much stomp is inside the thing. Be very

very careful giving it gas or you will go down. Don't doubt the fact that this bike makes big power, enough to really hurt you and your body if not used correctly.

I hate to repeat myself, but I can't stress enough how smoothly the power is put down and how it creeps up on you. You'll be riding along minding your own business enjoying yourself and *you will forget* that this is a monster of an engine. Be forewarned; as mild mannered as the bike may seem on the surface, a turn of too much gas on this bike at the wrong time will spell disaster.

The Valley of Fire was wonderful and the views breathtaking. I couldn't help but think to myself that this was exactly

what this bike was made to do ...



... to lose yourself in the experience, the view and the road.

After a brief stop we turned and headed back. I couldn't have had a better day.

Various aspects of this bike

The ZX-14 has no storage space under the seat whatsoever. Good luck getting your wallet and keys in there. Why do they always do this to us? I don't know. Maybe in Japan people Origami everything to fit, but here in North America it just doesn't cut it. To make matters worse, it's going to take a whole bunch of figuring from talented people like Dino to solve this problem and I think he will have a much harder time with this bike than the 12R as there seems to be less subframe space to work with. Arghh. Before we left for the street ride I had to ditch the toolkit and managed to just barely fit my camera and driver's license in the small space provided.

The fit and finish of the bodywork is definitely nicer than on the 12R. The phillips fasteners are gone and replaced with allens. The George Foreman Grill panel is easily removed, and does serve a purpose. According to engineers from KHI, it isn't there for aerodynamics, but rather serves as part of a system to channel engine heat away from the rider. Sorry Y2K, but you wont be selling any heat blankets for this bike. KHI reads Bikeland and they've put you out of business for that product. The engine is insulated, wrapped and shielded, leaving not a drop of hot air on my legs, or on Mike's. We thought that was cool (ha ha). The rear seat cowl comes stock with the bikes in Canada

and the USA. I don't know about the rest of the world, but if you're in North America you don't have to worry.

The seat felt lower than the 12R, but this didn't bother me. I found the riding position to be very comfortable and relaxing. I could have ridden for hours (if they'd let me!).



The transmission shifted smoothly both with and without the clutch. The new hydraulic clutch is direct driven, like the brake lever reservoir system. It provided really nice feel and was very smooth. It did not display any of the abrupt "on off" characteristics of other hydraulic clutches. The engine was smooth and quiet, and definitely did not sound noisy like a ZX-10R. The torque and power were everything I expected, and more because the bike delivered it in such a smooth manner.

This bike begs to be ridden out on the open road and taken on long trips. Throwing the 14 through corners is easy, almost too easy for a bike of this size.



The dashboard sports worm-hole's preferred easy to read gauges (you know, one day some guy in Japan's going to want to meet you, wormy!), and also has a trip computer that I spent some time messing around with while droning. The computer spits out information like distance to empty, the standard fair like a fuel gauge, clock etc, but also provided real time fuel mileage. Lugging the engine on the Interstate in 6th at 75 mph saw over 50 mpg but pinning the sucker in 1st at 80 netted me 16 mpg. There is a price to be paid for thrashing around on this bike. It made me chuckle.

The tires seemed to perform well. I'd have to really ride the bike some more to decide. It comes stock with Bridgestones designed specifically for the 14. I'm not really a Bridgestone guy, but hey... that's just me.

Opinions are just opinions, right?

Why am I telling you this? I just want to point out a couple of things that I think matter. First of all with regards to objectivity I want to say that I feel very strongly about being straight up with everyone. I have thought long and hard about what to say about this bike, and in fact I sat down with another rider while at the intro and we talked for hours about what we could find that we didn't like about this bike. This is one of the reasons I have waited before I posted anything in detail. I didn't want to be called out as not presenting you with all of the facts, but honestly the issues I can find with the bike are minor, and I am picking it apart when I try to do that.

Performance wise I can't deny the ZX-14 is setting a new standard. Aesthetically, I cannot tell you what looks "good" and what does not; after all beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I've always liked the look of the headlights, but not liked the Grills and Mike's the opposite. He doesn't seem to mind the Grills and he hates the headlights. These are things that only you, the consumer, can decide.

I also want to caution you about what you read elsewhere; and to read it carefully to make sure you get the "entire picture". We were surprised that more than one journalist we spoke to did not bother taking the street ride, or take the bike on the oval even when presented with the opportunity. One person even commented to me that they felt there was no value in taking a 200 mph bike on the street. I beg to differ. I feel that the street riding capabilities of a bike are equally important as its track behavior. All of it speaks to the rider.

Know your source and don't believe every figure you read on the web. Check the 1/4 mile times you see on other sites reported from this event against reliable sources like Dragbike.com, Psychobike or Bikeland's own DragbikeZone. Rickey and Ryan and Rob Muzzy are all members of these sites.

Hey, where's the numbers?

Why am I not including hard figures like the fork diameter and final drive ratio in this review? I don't need to retype a press release from Kawasaki to tell you how I feel about a bike. A few miles in the saddle and you know right away if you like it or not. Numbers are just numbers. I'll include all of the PDF's Kawasaki has given us as links in ZX-14.com's forum. There you will find every number and measurement you may desire, those very same numbers I am positive that you will find repackaged for you by the rest of the world's media.

What does this bike need?

In my opinion a set of waterproof factory hard bags styled to fit the bike would finish it off and give you the chance to pack up and take off for a weekend getaway. What we all thought were mounting points for hard bags turn out to be the mounting points for the knurled grab handles used to help hoist the bike onto the optional center stand. A slipper clutch would be a nice addition. I feel that a slipper clutch has enormous value on the road, especially for canyon carving. I don't think a slipper clutch should be a bonus given only to people who take their bikes on the track.



*The ZX-14 begs to have its legs stretched and
America has the roads to do it.*

The bike was great.

I loved it.

Some people think the styling sucks.

It's fast.

I like the black one.

'Nuff said.

