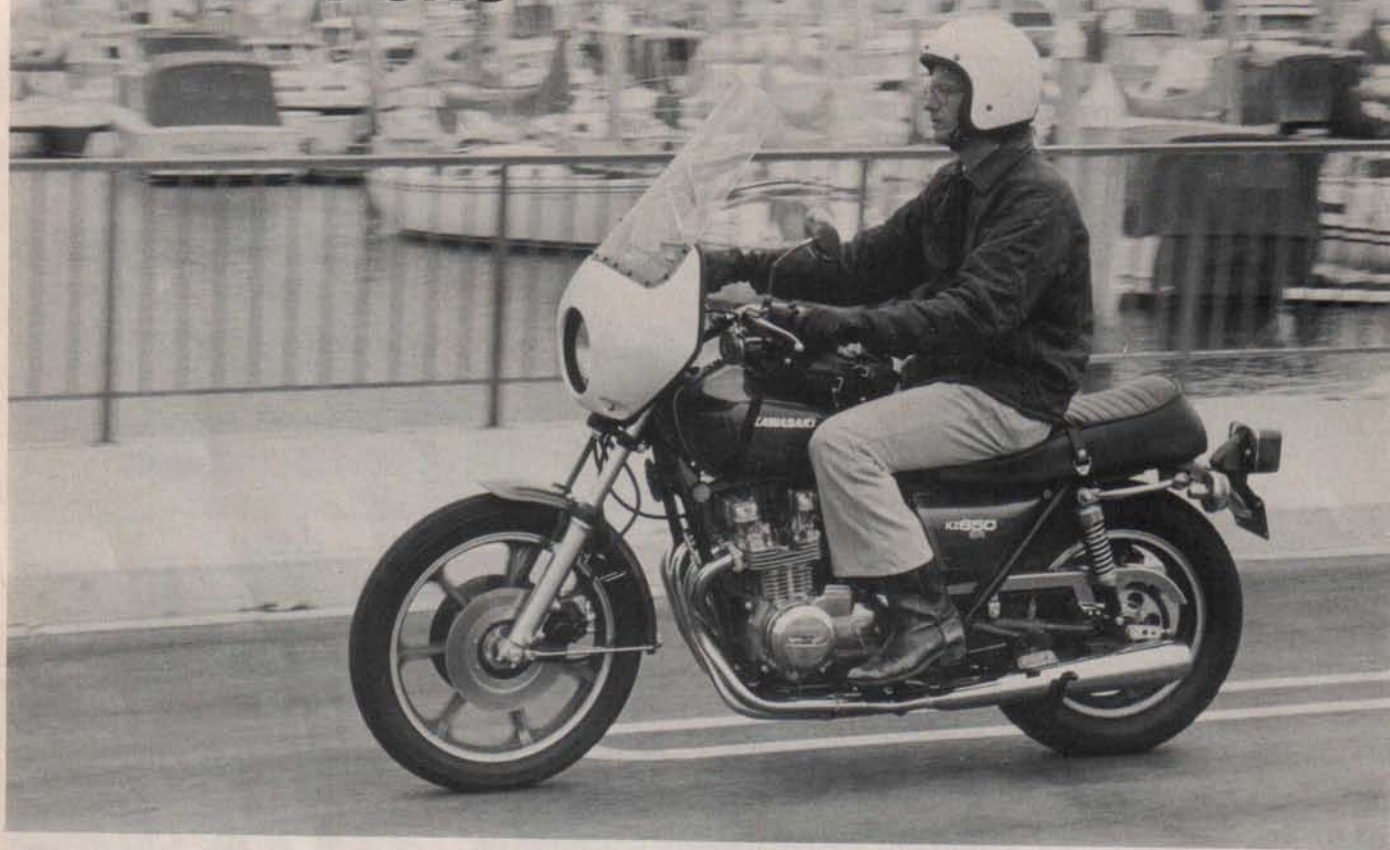


FIRST IMPRESSIONS



EPITOME OF JAPANESE MOTORCYCLES

KAWASAKI'S NOT-TOO-BIG, NOT-TOO-SMALL 650SR

BY STEVE KIMBALL

By now the phrase *Universal Japanese Motorcycle* has become a cliché — both with the motorcycle press which coined the term several years ago and with Japanese motorcycle manufacturers. It has become such a common term that when Honda introduced its CX 500 a few months ago, one of the engineers explained that Honda didn't want to build a

Universal Japanese Motorcycle. The engineer didn't have to explain what a UJM was. Everybody knew.

The engines found in UJMs, for whatever minute differences there are, all feel and act the same. UJMs generally have transverse four cylinder, overhead cam engines with four carburetors. They develop peak power at high engine speeds,

have little flywheel effect, put out lots of horsepower and can be modified to produce even more horsepower. There are disc brakes, frequently at both ends of the bike, five speed transmissions which invariably work well and all feel about the same.

Obviously the UJM must be a good motorcycle. That's why so many compan-

ies produce such similar motorcycles and why so many people buy those similar motorcycles. With slight differences between models the UJM is reliable, easy to drive, relatively serviceable, cheap to buy, has a smooth engine and enough carrying capacity to take a couple of people wherever they want to go. What more could a prospective motorcycle owner ask for?

There are a few characteristics of the UJM not altogether pleasing to a touring motorcyclist. Most UJMs have hard saddles, stiff throttle return springs and horns(?) more apt to awaken the lust of a young mosquito than to disturb something sleeping behind the steering wheel of an Oldsmobile. Oh, I almost forgot to mention the suspension of the Universal Japanese Motorcycle. But then again, there's little evidence most Japanese engineers ever thought about motorcycle suspension either. That's why there's such a booming business in supplying accessory suspension components for Universal Japanese Motorcycles.

Now let's introduce the Kawasaki 650-SR. It fits the description of a UJM about as well as any motorcycle made. From its four carburetors to its three disc brakes, the 650SR is pure Universal Japanese Motorcycle. Oh sure, the formula is changed slightly. The Kawasaki is not a 550 or a 750; it is a 650. Sort of an "average" Japanese motorcycle. Then there's that nebulous thing called styling. Whatever it is, the Kawasaki has it.

How about the size? There has to be a reason (or two) why Kawasaki didn't make a 750 or a 550 — the most common sizes of Japanese motorcycles. A few of those reasons could be that the 650 competes with both 550s and 750s, it can be smaller and more manageable than a 750 and more powerful than a 550, it is a size other Japanese manufacturers (except for Yamaha) haven't marketed and it is a size which in past years has been very popular for sport motorcycles. All in all, quite a few good reasons to make a 650.

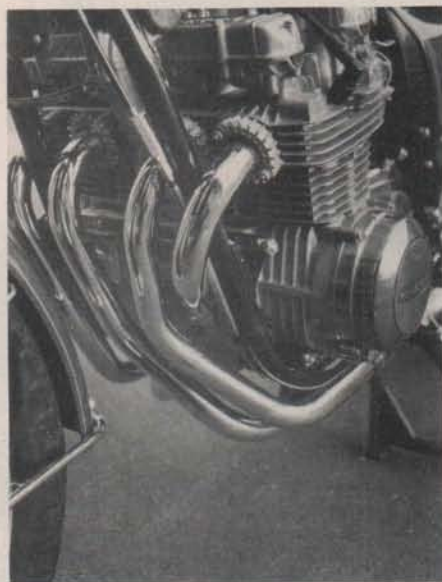
Kawasaki has also created several models of the 650 so it can better compete with other motorcycles. The 650SR is only one model. There's also the basic 650/4 and the 650 Custom (which Patti Carpenter rode for an Impression Test in RR for August, 1977 — "Moonduster" V8N8.) All models share the same basic engine and frame. The particular assortment of parts hung onto the basic cycle determines which version is produced.

To create the 650SR, Kawasaki puts on cross-over, four-into-two exhaust pipes and low mufflers, cast mag-type wheels (the rear one a 16-incher), a 3.7 gallon gas tank, the three disc brakes, a different

looking front fork with slightly greater rake and trail than the standard front end and a host of cosmetic changes.

Actually, it's not fair to simply refer to "a host of cosmetic changes." That's how the SR version first struck me — like a dolled up little sister of the Z1. Some of the changes — painted fenders and chromed instrument housings come to mind — don't affect the real working of the Kawasaki. But others — like the lower saddle and narrower, more swept-back handlebars — add a great deal to the appeal of the motorcycle. Maybe chrome instruments and painted fenders are important too.

Enough of the small talk, let's get down to the heart of the matter — the



Spaghetti-like exhaust system is reserved only for the 650SR. It's still quiet, though.

engine. It's easy enough to gloss over yet another four cylinder, mega-horsepower motorcycle engine. The engine is what makes the 650 a Universal Japanese Motorcycle. Please don't consider that negatively, however. All of the Japanese motorcycles using this design share an excellent reputation for reliability and durability. Nothing the Kawasaki did ever hinted that it couldn't carry me and any load I wanted to haul as far as I would want to go. The engine didn't leak or burn oil. It always started and it didn't make any weird noises.

As nice as all this sounds, all is not sweetness and light. To get all 62 horsepower out of a 652 cc engine, Kawasaki has tuned the engine perhaps too highly. Kept spinning at 5,000 rpm or more and

there's no shortage of power. Below that speed (which is about 60 miles per hour in high gear), the bike can be frustrating. At low engine speeds the engine doesn't respond at all well to gentle twisting of the throttle. It coughs and sputters and tries to die under those conditions. From about 3,000 to 4,000 rpm the throttle response could best be described as "twitchy." The engine either bogs down or grabs hold but it doesn't just gently accelerate. It's the kind of action which convinces some touring riders only huge engines operating at low speeds are suitable for touring use.

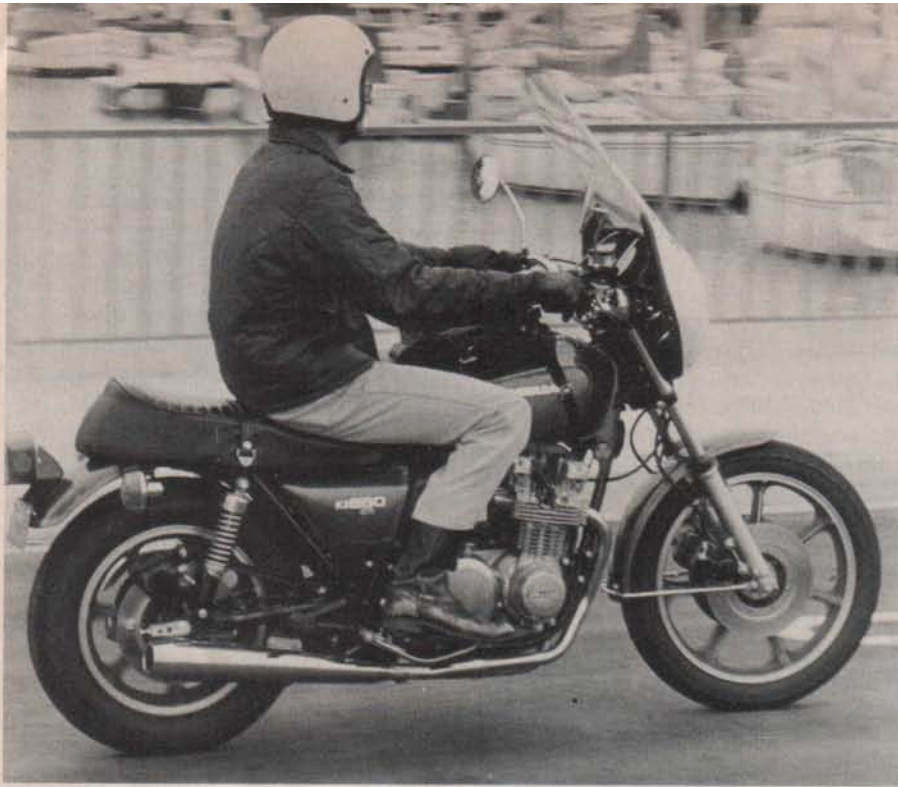
Cold starting can be another problem with the 650. My daily routine was to use about two-thirds choke, pull in the clutch lever (mandatory) and hit the starter button. The engine sprang to life immediately and ran at about 4,000 rpm. When the choke was backed off the engine would die. The Kawasaki just liked to be warmed up at a somewhat high engine speed. And it had to be well warmed before it would keep running.

The cold starting/poor low speed engine response combination was annoying. But it didn't really interfere with touring use of the motorcycle. Out on the highway the engine became unobtrusive with little noise or vibration — which was on the high side for Japanese four cylinder motorcycles. But if the most annoying part of a motorcycle is simply recalcitrance at slow speeds and when the engine is cold, things aren't all that bad.

As far as the size of the motorcycle is concerned, Kawasaki is going to be getting some gold stars from some "compact" riders. By coupling the 16-inch rear tire and an especially low seat Kawasaki has made the 650 feel a lot smaller than it is. The size is really deceiving. With the low seat, very quick acceleration and narrow handlebars, the 650SR just doesn't feel as though it weighs 478 pounds. The difference in manageability between the 650 and most Japanese 750s is far more than the difference in weight would indicate.

Only when the center stand was used did the Kawasaki feel heavy. At those times it felt about twice as heavy as it is because the stand requires a lot of muscle for use. Fortunately the side stand leans the bike way over and is quite stable. It's not as big as the Kawasaki police-style stand but it's a cut above average. The side stand also tucks up close enough to the bike so it didn't scrape on any kind of cornering I could do with it.

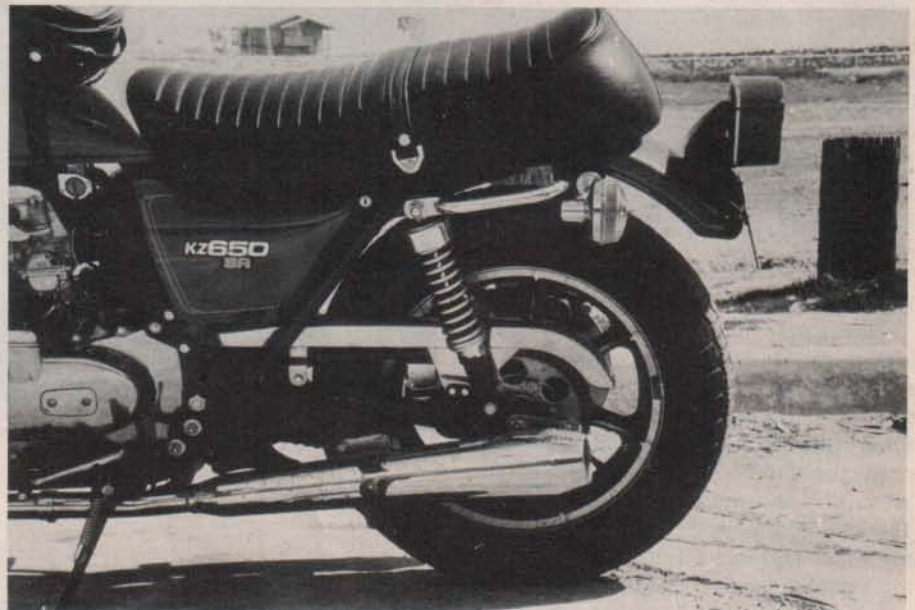
And that brings us to handling, a subject the Kawasaki is comfortable with. About all I can honestly say about the Kawasaki's handling is that there is noth-



The SR version of Kawasaki's 650 gets these neat chromed instruments, different headlight mounting and assorted other changes. The small wheel on the edge of the speedometer resets the trip odometer and is very convenient to use.



At least one Japanese motorcycle manufacturer still allows the motorcyclist to decide if the headlight is to be on at all times.



The Kawasaki 650SR sports a different saddle than the standard 650/4. Sleek looking perch moves the ground a couple of inches closer to the rider but becomes uncomfortable very quickly. Low mufflers (and only two of them) should make saddlebag mounting easier. Mag wheels are Morris-Mag look-alikes, but not made by Morris.

ing it did that bothered me. It went where I wanted it to go. There were no wiggles and no wandering. While the actual effort required to turn the 650SR is a bit high (remember the short handlebars?), cornering is very easy.

Those comments on handling, mind you, are not made by a road racer or anyone else with any special abilities at riding a motorcycle — only the thoughts of one average motorcycle rider who

values predictability as the most desirable handling quality.

To get that predictable and satisfying handling, Kawasaki has used a very stiff suspension on the 650SR. But that's part of being a UJM, remember? On short rides or commuting there's no problem. After more than a couple of hundred miles, however, the hard seat and even firmer rear springs and shocks just don't do much for comfort. Other comfort

factors, things like noise level, vibration, position of controls, are much better.

Kawasaki has provided some nice touches with the controls. There's a switch to turn off the headlights, a switch to turn on all four signal lights and all those switches are easy to reach and use. Other convenience touches are the sight window for oil level, low fuel warning light and a trip odometer resetting knob which can't be easily broken. The brake

light indicator struck me as mostly a gimmick. The low fuel light, however, is more than a gimmick on the Kawasaki. With about a 10-mile range on reserve and the smallish gas tank, it's nice to have some warning about 20 miles before reserve is needed.

When the reserve is needed, of course, depends on gas mileage which, in the case of the 650SR, averaged out to 43.3 miles per gallon. Nothing to write home about, mind you, but not disgraceful. Low tank was a dismal 32.9 and my imitation of the Mobil Gas Economy Run brought 49.4 on one tank. Because the odometer (and speedometer) were so accurate, no correction is needed, thank you.

Overall costs of operation should also be comparable to other UJMs of comparable (meaning 750 cc) size. Because of those four cylinders and their resultant requirements (like four carburetors, two cams and all those shim adjusting valves) service costs ought to be about the same as most other UJMs. Insurance costs will probably be the same as a 750 because most insurance companies don't give a price break to 650s which are all lumped with 750s for premiums. That big fat rear tire might last a little longer than average as those things are wont to do and the chain performed admirably, never needing adjustment in 1,300 carefree miles.

Wrapping things up, the changes which turn the 650 into the SR aren't all designed to make the bike more suitable for touring but some of them are quite adaptable for touring use. There's the big tire for carrying loads and the lower mufflers which can make saddlebag mounting easier. All those disc brakes are more than adequate to slow down any load — as long as the weather is dry. And while the low seat is uncomfortable it makes the bike useable for a lot more riders — those with short legs.

So Kawasaki set out to "chopperize" the 650 and catch a different group of motorcycle buyers than the company has in the past. Just because the 650SR isn't aimed at the touring market really isn't important.

What's important is that Kawasaki has begun tailoring basic motorcycles to fit different needs. Motorcyclists have known for several years that the basic UJM is a great starting place for any kind of a custom mount. Now Kawasaki is finding out. Don't be surprised if Kawasaki decides to make a motorcycle just for the touring market. Their version of a Universal Japanese Motorcycle would be a good starting point.

[RR]



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