

**HANDLEBARS**

# A Harley Lands in America, by Way of Europe

By **STUART F. BROWN**

**T**HE 2009 Harley-Davidson XR1200 took me by surprise. Sure, I knew about its unveiling in 2006 at a European motorcycle show. But even that unusual setting for the debut of a prototype by the most American of bike makers did not prepare me for how different this Harley would be.

Now a production model as part of the Sportster model line, the XR1200 was developed to appeal to riders across the Atlantic, where Harley has been trying to expand its sales. Its focus is on performance, rather than the company's usual emphasis on relaxed cruising, and the ergonomics of its seating, foot pegs and controls make it what the industry calls a standard motorcycle these days. It feels quite right.

The XR1200 went on sale in April of 2008 — but not in the United States. It was offered only in European markets, where the company expected to find the riders who would most appreciate a Harley with good handling and brakes. Of course, plenty of us Americans like those traits, but we have not gone shopping for them in a Harley showroom.

For 2009 Harley's management took note of the clamor from American dealers and rolled out the XR1200 in the United States. At \$11,099, it costs roughly \$1,000 more than any other Sportster; if you want orange or silver paint instead of black, that'll be another \$280.

Harley has never built a bike that can hustle down a curvy road the way the XR does. That is because this time around the engineers paid closer attention to chassis rigidity and cornering clearance, and they fitted the XR with a capable chassis. The front suspension uses a 43mm inverted fork, the sort used on many sportbikes. The front discs are grabbed by a pair of excellent four-piston Nissin brake calipers that work powerfully and controllably, and both wheels are fitted with grippy Dunlop Qualifier tires.

This summer, Harley took the XR one step further, offering a \$1,500 performance handling kit with fully adjustable shocks and front fork that are used on the European-market XR1200X.

Such details have rarely been a priority for Harley's traditional customers, who are usually long-distance touring riders, or are interested mainly in casual riding, which entails a feet-forward riding position.

When sitting that way on a cruiser bike, the wind is constantly working to rip you off the bike, a situation I find very tiring. On the XR1200, you ride with your feet down below your knees instead of stretched out in front of them. And your torso leans slightly forward,

where the oncoming wind takes a load off your wrists and back.

The XR's air-cooled engine is based on the 45-degree V-twin used in Harley's Sportster models, which are lighter and nimbler than the maker's larger family of bikes. The XR version is fitted with higher-compression pistons and performance camshafts, as well as additional oil circulation and cooling provisions to deal with the heat that comes with increased power.

Cycle World magazine measured its output at 79 horsepower at the rear wheel, an unremarkable figure for a 1,200cc motor. Coupled with those horses, however, come 74 pound-feet of torque, the force that yields immediate results when you twist the throttle. And the torque curve is approximately flat (maximum torque is at just 4,000 r.p.m.), so the XR1200 pulls willingly from just above idle all the way up to the engine's redline.

The rider doesn't have to fuss with a lot of gear shifting, which frees up attention to savor the stable and well-planted feeling of this bike when it is heeled over in turns. At an idle, the XR1200's pushrod V-twin vibrates like crazy, but once under way a rubber engine mounting system smooths things out. You



**ROOTS** Styling of the 2009 Harley-Davidson XR1200 is derived from the XR-750 dirt track racer. Racing influence is also seen in the simple instrumentation, above left. Four-piston Nissin calipers, above right, are used at the front.

know there is a brawny motor down there, but you can comfortably ride through a tank of gas, about 140 miles.

Riders from outside the Harley universe are known to mutter unsympathetic phrases like "chrome don't get you home." The XR1200 takes this sentiment to heart. There is almost no chrome on the bike, and many surfaces have a silver powdercoat finish that makes engine parts look sand-cast, as are many parts on racing engines.

All of this is in keeping with the XR1200's styling inspiration, the XR-750 dirt-track racing machine that has won

many championships for Harley over the years. The graphics on its slim 3.5-gallon gas tank, the over-and-under mufflers and the low-rise handlebars all add to the track-ready look.

The XR does have a few warts, including a side stand that requires a bizarre contortion of the left ankle to lower. Meanwhile, the rider's right ankle runs afoul of the master cylinder for the rear brake, which should have been tucked out of the way. And most puzzling of all, the big bolt that goes through the front fork's upper triple clamp looks as if it was pulled from a bin

at the neighborhood hardware store.

Finally, like all Harleys, the XR1200 is heavy. With a full tank of gas, it weighs almost 600 pounds. One can imagine how much more fun this bike would be if it shed 100 or more of those pounds.

For those of us who grew up riding European and Japanese bikes with great handling and brakes, the XR1200 constitutes a nod of recognition. Harley is wise to begin building motorcycles like this. Fresh designs like the XR1200 will be just the thing to help Harley appeal to a broader group of riders when the economy finally gets its mojo back.

## Twins Done Differently

By **DEXTER FORD**

**W**HILE the number of cylinders used in motorcycle engines has ranged from zero to at least eight, the ideal number for many types of bikes seems to be two.

The V-twin engine design, a hallmark of modern Harley-Davidsons, has dominated the cruiser market for so long that it's easy to forget the earlier popularity of other shapes and sizes. The V-twin is also a staple of today's sport bikes, especially those wearing the Ducati logo.

With the 2010 Thunderbird, Triumph is reminding us that the parallel-twin engine — two side-by-side cylinders, usually placed vertically — remains a vi-



2010 Triumph Thunderbird

able alternative.

The Thunderbird engine is no throwback; it has twin overhead cams, four valves per cylinder, liquid cooling and electronic fuel injection. It's big news — 1.6 liters big, to be exact. The cylinders are similar in size to those in many car engines.

To keep the huge pistons from shaking the bike apart — a parallel twin does not have good inherent balance — the motor is equipped with a pair of spinning shafts to counterbalance the bigger bounces; a torsional damper mounted on the engine crankshaft deals with other sorts of buzzing. Triumph says the output is 85 horsepower and peak torque is 108 pound-feet. The red line, or maximum safe engine speed, is a conservative 6,500 r.p.m.

With its cruiser-standard low seat and forward foot controls, the \$12,499 T-Bird is no sport bike. But its well-tuned suspension, serious brakes and adequate cornering clearance may just give it enough British-style handling to make it a cruiser for riders who like curvy roads.

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