

You might as well send a guy wearing a white shirt, black wingtips and a wire into the regular Mafia Friday-night poker game as label a new motorcycle a "standard." Either is the kiss of death. If bike-makers have learned one thing in the last 15 years, it's that American motorcyclists can be persuaded to buy cruisers and radical sportbikes, but even giving away hardware (remember the \$3999 Honda CB750?) won't entice them onto Plain Jane, unfaired machines that hark back to the general-purpose streetbikes of the Seventies and early Eighties.

But those standards have always offered features that riders could use, even if they weren't as sexy as Harley-Davidson styling or GSX-R raciness. Things like a comfortable riding position, room for a passenger, even practicalities such as centerstands and plenty of places to hook bungee cords — all features your mom would surely recommend if she knew anything about motorcycles — make your everyday riding life easier.

But the manufacturers have learned their lesson, and are trying a new tactic: If "standards" won't sell, how about "naked sportbikes?" The difference is both one of nomenclature and one of attitude. For these new minimally faired machines actually perform, accelerating and cornering in a manner that exceeds the needs of all but the lunatic fringe. And — shhhh, don't tell anyone — they do so while offering most of the comfort and convenience of the sit-up bikes of years gone by. Let's take a look at the current crop.

#### Ducati Monster S4

Ducati's original Monster 900 pointed the way to a naked future. The air-cooled machine borrowed its engine from the 900SS, while its styling came from Harley-Davidson dirt-trackers, if only Harley dirt-trackers had been designed by smooth Italian stylists. The result was a lightweight, torquey streetbike that was a delight to toss around urban curves. But its two-valve, old-tech engine limited it to around 70 horsepower, and it was never going to kick sand in the face of modern Fours.

Enter the new Monster S4, uniting the eight-valve desmo motor that has won about six thousand Superbike races with traditional Monster nakedness. This didn't come, as you might think, by cramming the eight-valver into a standard 900 Monster chassis. No, the process was almost exactly the opposite, with Ducati engineers taking the existing ST4 sport-tourer chassis (already carrying an eight-valve engine) and fitting it with Monster-look bodywork. The only drawback to that approach was that some of the clean look of the old, air-cooled machine was lost in the tangle of hoses and wires providing life support for the liquid-cooled 916cc engine.

But in exchange for that comes real power, 97 horses delivered to the rear wheel at 8700 rpm, almost 40 percent more than with the old Monster at far higher rpm. That's enough to pull this Twin through the quarter-mile in 11.06 seconds at almost 122 mph, numbers that would be decent for a hardcore 600 and beyond all but the raciest Twins. The performance image is further enhanced by raising the bike about .8-inch compared to other Monsters for enhanced cornering clearance, and fitting lower — though oddly angled — fixed bars instead of a tubular handlebar.

All in all, the new engine makes for a decidedly sportier and more aggressive Monster. Tallish gearing and power that hits higher in the powerband make it less of an urban thrasher — it even feels a little soft around town at the bottom of the range in first. But get it out on a curvy road, and the powerful

midrange and top-end combine with sure and solid handling to let you fly. With more flywheel than the four-cylinder machines, the S4 has traction to burn, and it's an easy machine to ride hard. Push far enough and you'll eventually drag the sidestand on the left and the muffler on the right, but by then you're working the machine enough that you can feel the changes in rear-tire slip angle with small movements of the throttle, and that's about fast enough for the street.

### Ducati Monster S4 Spec

Dry weight 436 lb.

Wheelbase 56.9 in.

Seat height 31.5 in.

Fuel mileage 40 mpg

0-60 mph 2.9 sec.

1/4 mile 11.06 sec. @ 121.76 mph

Horsepower 97.0 bhp @ 8750 rpm

Torque 62.8 ft.-lbs. @ 7120 rpm

Top speed 144 mph

### Kawasaki ZRX1200R

Of these four, only the ZRX1200R Kawasaki actually invites nostalgia. In paint, in frame design, in rear suspension, this 2001 machine tries to take you back to the 1982 Eddie Lawson Replica. But we've got a secret to share with you: The real thing never worked half as well as this modern equivalent. Think of this as the new VW Beetle of naked sportbikes, a slick execution slid under a resonant appearance.

Take power, for instance. The two-valve-per-cylinder, air-cooled Z-1-based engine of the ancient original couldn't pull itself into the 11s at the dragstrip — it was a sheep in wolves' clothing, running a 12.11 at 112 mph. But this latest 1200 flat rips, laying down a 10.85-second pass at 125 mph, and producing some of the best roll-on numbers this magazine has ever seen: 2.9 seconds for either a 40-to-60 or 60-to-80-mph roll-on. It's an example of what Kawasaki engineers can achieve with a big Four when they have displacement to burn, and their goal is to create an engine that pulls everywhere rather than win a dyno shootout.

Perhaps the most amazing thing is that they found room for greater displacement in the tight confines of a ZX-11-based engine. By using a one-piece cylinder block with electro-plated aluminum cylinders, they found an extra 3mm in bore size, and somehow squeezed another 1.4mm of stroke, bringing the displacement from 1052cc to 1164cc. The ZRX's engine is blessed with more crank inertia than are most zippy new ultrasports, helping create a controllable mellowness that blends perfectly with a flat, keep-on-pulling-forever powerband that almost has you looking for the hidden turbocharger. Well done, Kawasaki.

The chassis is pretty nice, too. The new swingarm is dressed up with channels in its extruded aluminum tubes, and the conventional front fork is well controlled by its cartridge dampers. The rear shocks look

as if they're from the Reagan era, but they don't act like it; the original ELR was fitted with rigid shocks that pounded your kidneys over expansion joints as no bike has done since. The ZRX1200, in contrast, soaks up that kind of clutter with the competence of a modern sportbike. Cornering clearance is quite good, and the big, long and heavy Kawasaki can be hustled along quickly without dragging any hard parts. You do notice the bike's mass (almost 550 pounds full of gas), but the steering itself is surprisingly light until you really try to manhandle the 1200.

Perhaps the only thing on the Kawasaki that truly feels vintage turns out to be its riding position. The pegs are a little forward of where they would be on a new supersport, and the bars a little taller. But more telling, you sit on the Kawasaki, not in it, with the seat and gas tank profile distinctly flat — they just don't build motorcycles like that anymore. But after you ride the ZRX a little while and enjoy its broad, muscular competence offered up with comfort, you have to wonder, "Why not?"

### Kawasaki ZRX1200R Spec

Dry weight 514 lb.  
Wheelbase 58.1 in.  
Seat height 31.9 in.  
Fuel mileage 33 mpg  
0-60 mph 2.9 sec.  
1/4 mile 10.85 sec. @ 125.72 mph  
Horsepower 113.4 bhp @ 8230 rpm  
Torque 81.4 ft.-lbs. @ 6750 rpm  
Top speed 149 mph

### Suzuki Bandit 1200S

The Bandit 1200S is the old guy of this bunch, the machine that introduced the concept of the big-bore bargain blaster to recent motorcycling. For 2001, it gets a number of detail styling changes: a new fairing with projector-beam headlights, a taller windscreen, and a new seat and tail section. But it's recognizably the same Bandit it has been for years.

Much of its character comes from its big air/oil-cooled engine, similar to the 1157cc unit that powered the last non-liquid-cooled GSX-R1100. In the Bandit, that engine has always been mildly tuned, trading top-end power for a very strong middle and bottom-end, and this year, with revised cam timing and throttle-position-controlled ignition timing, it's even more so. Torque peaks at a mere 4100 rpm and begins to fall off significantly by 7000 rpm. Peak power is actually reached at 8750, but when you ride the bike you seldom rev it that high; after the strong midrange, the falling torque on top invites a short-shift and a return to the rich stuff. It's just as well, because the engine is a little buzzy, and is happier if you're not running it up close to redline. But torque can only go so far. With "only" 105 horses, the Suzuki is the least powerful of the Fours in this comparison. It just breaks into the 10s, with a 10.98-second quarter at 122.5 mph. It does better at roll-ons, taking just 3.2 second for its 40-to-60-mph performance, and a quick 2.9 seconds for 60-to-80 mph.

On the road, the Suzuki is big, heavy and comfortable. Its relatively large fairing offers the most wind protection of the bunch, and its broad seat will cradle you for long-distance freeway travel.

On backroads, the Suzuki is a willing partner, if not the world's best two-lane dancer. It responds a little slowly, and at full-tilt its fairly low footpeg feelers grind merrily away, bank-angle sensors that tell that you're approaching the limits of tire traction. In this world, the Suzuki doesn't do anything wrong, but it's not particularly sharp or responsive, even if it finally got radial tires this year. Strong midrange makes gear selection superfluous, and only on a downhill section of mountain road does a slight lean surge get in the way of the rider.

Of these four, the Suzuki comes closest to the old standard category. It does everything well, though few things superbly. It remains the Bargain Blaster Champ.

### Suzuki Bandit 1200S Spec

Dry weight 505 lb.

Wheelbase 56.9 in.

Seat height 32.0 in.

Fuel mileage 37 mpg

0-60 mph 2.9 sec.

1/4 mile 10.98 sec. @ 122.51 mph

Horsepower 105.1 bhp @ 8750 rpm

Torque 73.5 ft.-lbs. @ 4125 rpm

Top speed 145 mph

### Yamaha FZ1

Yamaha must have been reading this magazine when it developed the FZ1. All those years of questioning why the new standards always got slow motors paid off. While the donor YZF-R1's engine was slightly retuned for FZ1 use, it still makes 125 horsepower at 9800 rpm, still gets the EXUP valve in the exhaust system, and still knows its way down a quarter-mile stretch of straight asphalt, propelling the bike to a very rapid 10.62 seconds at 130 mph.

But the FZ1 is nothing if not an exercise in contrasts. Its motor is extremely zoomy, with a broad, flat powerband that loves to pull from the bottom or the middle, yet still revs out hard. Despite having the smallest four-cylinder motor of this group, it had the second-best roll-on times, with a 40-to-60-mph charge of 3.2 seconds, and 60-to-80 in just 2.9, tying the Kawi and Bandit for passing oomph. Its light crank — though heavier than the one in the R1 — contributes to the zippiness, with the bike picking up or dropping revs noticeably more quickly than the Kawasaki or Suzuki. The riding position, though, is the least radical of the bunch, with footpegs just slightly forward of normal sportbike position, and handlebars that are full-on sit-up-and-beg. This is the only bike for which some — not all — test riders desired a lower bar, a change an owner could readily perform, thanks to its tubular design. Likewise, the seat is exceptionally compliant, as is the suspension. This is a sportbike that's comfortable enough for superslab touring.

But a sportbike it remains, and all you have to do is find a curvy road to prove it. The 480-pound machine feels lighter than its weight, and turns and holds a line effortlessly. Smooth, strong power has it positively leaping out of corners, and the R1-sourced front brakes scrub speed equally effortlessly

when the next corner appears. And even our hardest riders failed to drag hard parts on the street.

But the contrasts keep appearing. Along with the Suzuki, the FZ1 has that essential feature of an old-time standard, the centerstand, a convenience whose desirability you forget until you live with a machine once again that has one. It also has relatively roomy and comfortable passenger accommodations — you could actually take your wife or girlfriend out for a several-hour ride without endangering the relationship (just try that on the R1).

#### Yamaha FZ1 Spec

Dry weight 480 lb.

Wheelbase 57.6 in.

Seat height 31.8 in.

Fuel mileage 35 mpg

0-60 mph 2.7 sec.

1/4 mile 10.62 sec. @ 130.02 mph

Horsepower 125.0 bhp @ 9800 rpm

Torque 72.8 ft.-lbs. @ 7570 rpm

Top speed 154 mph

#### Conclusion

All four machines in this test are desirable. As one tester noted, "If you gave me any one of them as my last and only streetbike, I'd be happy." The Ducati is perhaps the most narrowly appealing and the hardest edged; you'll have to be hard bitten by the Italian bug to justify its price and fully enjoy its trade-offs. At the other end of the spectrum, the Suzuki is an absolute bargain and a great sporty tourer, but perhaps the blandest and least refined of the Japanese machines. The big Kawasaki, in contrast, is beautifully finished and styled, and carries one of The Great Motorcycle Engines. In the end, though, it's Yamaha that has redefined the naked sportbike with its new FZ1, a machine that offers the best combination of sexiness and sensibility. Nothing standard about it.