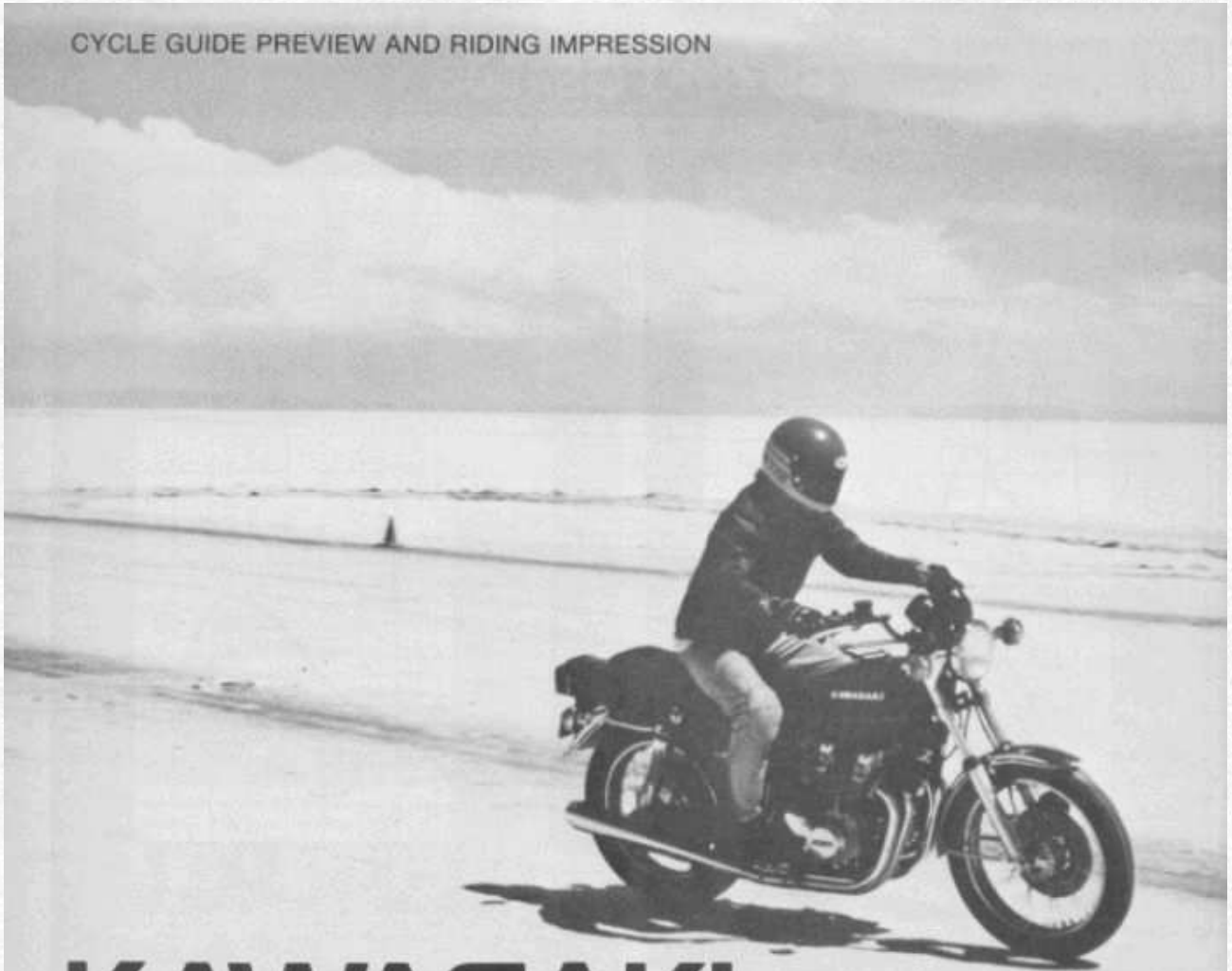


# KZ650 Road Test ~ Cycle Guide - November 1976

CYCLE GUIDE PREVIEW AND RIDING IMPRESSION



## KAWASAKI KZ650 FOUR

What looks like a Z-1, is nearly as fast as a Z-1, handles better than a Z-1 and costs a bunch less?

If you had to pick one thing, one specific characteristic that best describes how Kawasaki got to be where it is today, the choice would be easy: Performance.

The company didn't grow to be a major power in the motorcycle field selling docile trail machines or dual-purpose enduros or putt-putt street bikes. No, sir. It was the likes of screechy-fast 350 twins, lightning-quick 500 triples, asphalt-searing 750 two-strokes and, of course, the King of the Superbikes, the big, booming Z-1. *That's*

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how Kawasaki earned its name.

Within the past couple of years, however, the Big Green K made several moves which seemed to indicate that the performance days were over. The awesome H2 750 triple was phased out in favor of a more utilitarian 750 four-stroke twin, which became a running mate for the economical, commuter-oriented KZ400 twin. Even the once-feared H1 500 triple was toned down to "just another motorcycle." It indeed looked like Kawasaki had

deserted performance people.

Not so. The latest streeter from Kawasaki, the KZ650 Four, is definitely not a "commuter special," as we found out during a recent press introduction for the bike. We had a chance to ride the 650s at the Bonneville Salt Flats, at the Fuji International Speedway in Japan and on over 300 miles of mostly two-lane roads that snake through the English countryside. And we came away impressed with the motorcycle's overall performance.



PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL DEAN



At Bonneville we learned of the bike's speed capabilities. One of the four box-stock KZ650s reached just over 120 mph, while the other three ran consistently in the 115- to 119-mph range—using unleaded gas and at an altitude of 4400 feet!

Several hours of flogging some other stock 650s around the high-speed Fuji race course verified the Bonneville speed results, in addition to demonstrating the bike's steady, predictable handling and confidence-building stability.

And the spirited "tour" through the central British farmlands further demonstrated the bike's comfort, handling, smoothness and stability.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the KZ650 is that not one bit of radical thinking or technological wizardry has

gone into it. "It's just a straightforward design," said one of Kawasaki's technical people, "engineered to be powerful but economical, tractable but exciting to ride, and to handle easily and in harmony with the power output of the engine."

The engine displaces 652cc, has a 62mm bore and 54mm stroke, with a 9.5:1 compression ratio. It features a one-piece, plain-bearing crankshaft as opposed to the Z-1's built-up roller bearing crank. The one-piece design is simpler, less expensive to manufacture and recondition, and reduces mechanical noise slightly.

The double overhead cams push directly on the valves like on the Z-1, but the 650's valve clearance shims fit *under* the tappet cups instead of above them. This arrangement obviously demands more man-hours for adjustment, since the cams and tappets must be removed to change shims, whereas the Z-1 arrangement requires only the depression of the tappet. The tech people claim the 650's tappets are quieter-running, however, and that putting the shim beneath the cup allows for less frequent adjustments and a reduced chance of the cam "spitting out" a shim at very high rpm.

Four 24mm Mikuni carbs feed the 650, and a four-into-two exhaust dumps wastes while keeping noise down to a very pleasant level. An electric starter is, of course, standard, with a safety interlock that only lets the starter function if the clutch lever is squeezed all the way in, even in neutral.

The steering is quick for a big bike, as evidenced by the 27-degree steering angle and 4.3 inches of travel. The claimed weight is 465 pounds dry—which seemed accurate while we were riding the bike—and the center of gravity feels a tad lower than with most four-cylinder bikes. A single disc brake with the caliper mounted ahead of the left fork slider stops the front wheel, and a single-leading-shoe drum brake whoas the rear.

Styling-wise, the KZ650 looks just like a 9/10-scale Z-1. . . . er, KZ900. . . . er, KZ1000 (which is the 1977 version). That was a tactical move precipitated by the immense success of the Z-1. The marketing people figured that since they had a good thing going, they might as well *keep* it going by making the 650 look like a "baby" Z-1.

Now for the clincher: The KZ650, a motorcycle designed to run as well as a good 750, feel as light and nimble as a 500, be as smooth and comfortable as the best of the fours and as economical as most low-performance machines, is going to sell for just \$1995.

From what we could gather during our rides, the KZ650 meets those design objectives nicely, but we'll have a full-scale test very soon to give you the complete low-down on every facet of the bike's character. One thing is for sure: If the KZ650 turns out to be as good as we believe it to be so far, it will be the performance buy of the year. **E**