



torqued sufficiently. Because none of the chassis specifications had changed, we had our doubts, but indeed they were right. We're happy to report this.

Effort-wise, the Honda had the lightest steering, with the Yamaha next and BMW third. In terms of high speed stability, all the bikes are very good, but splitting hairs, we give the Yamaha best marks, with the BMW next and Honda third.

While the BMW impressed at higher speeds, feeling very stable and secure—very nice crossing endless desert, for instance—at lower speeds it wasn't nearly so agile as the other two. Its Telelever front suspension actually carries geometry that would sound appropriate for a chopper, 37.25° of rake and 4.9" of trail. Tight maneuvers made its handlebars feel too narrow. Splitting lanes in close traffic (legal here in California) was too much of a wrestling match to attempt, as the steering was so heavy. Also, the extra front suspension linkage of the Telelever, while it controls dive beautifully, did remove a measure of road feel relative to the other two.

The easiest way to quantify the Yamaha's handling advantage is to note that whoever was riding it seemed comfortable at a pace the others struggled to maintain. Whether on straight stretches in blowing wind or on winding pavement, it was always the bike to catch. The difference was clearly obvious in side-by-side testing, and it was hard not to think of the FJR as the sportbike of the group.

Styling

Honda 1st, BMW 2nd, Yamaha 3rd

It was not unanimous, but the Honda gets the nod as the most stylish of the three, with a well-integrated and futuristic design. The BMW is also very nicely integrated and

attractively detailed. And, by our reckoning, although it would have to come in third, the Yamaha is hardly unattractive, and it does have a muscular sportiness about it that suits its personality very well.

On the other hand, functionally the BMW has some obvious flaws. Its K12RS-spec exhaust pipe ridiculously compromises the carrying capacity of the left saddlebag. Its taillight is quite small, and doesn't demand the attention that the larger lights of the others do. Likewise, its headlight, which uses the same system as the R1150RT with the high beam's reflector in front of the low beam's, is significantly less effective at lighting the road. The two Japanese bikes' headlights are dramatically bright at night.

But, we liked the BMW's silver-painted wheels, which are much more attractive than the ubiquitous solid black of the Japanese rims.

Also, while the ST's hard bags are the sleekest, and their volume seemed to be virtually as large as the FJR's, their semi-triangular shape is not as easy to pack, so there's something to be said for a saddlebag in a big, old-fashioned shape.

But, remove the saddlebags to explore the sport side of this hyphenated class, and the FJR and BMW look more stylish than the Honda, which cannot disguise its empty bag mounts like the old ST1100 and the FJR can. The BMW's are different, neatly integrated so they don't need special covers.

Riding impression

Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd, BMW 3rd

The FJR and ST tie for pilot seat comfort, with divided preferences among our testers for best. The ST seat is adjustable in three positions, from 30.5"–31.75" above the ground—a real plus for riders shorter or taller than average.

The K1200GT's seat is also adjustable (supposedly), by 1/2" and just at the rear edge. However, in practice it was nearly impossible to tell which of the two sockets you managed to lock it in, as it was hard to see what you were doing with the mounts and difficult to lock the seat down.

Knee room was a problem for several testers, who found the BMW was too cramped unless its adjustable footpegs were in the lower position, and that some knee contact was still an issue afterward, although the shape of the fairing was not so uncomfortable.

The Honda's knee room in the middle seat position was judged the same as the BMW's but the shape against which the rider's knees would rest more irritating. While the option to raise the seat higher can improve this, we found the highest position made the rider feel he was riding *on* the bike, not *in* it. The Yamaha has just a bit

more knee room and was the only one our 33"-inseamed tester didn't complain about. If your legs are long, we suggest you check this when you're wearing riding pants with knee pads before you buy.

Vibration-wise, the BMW has the smoothest engine in the test, sometimes fooling a rider into cruising in fifth gear, as the difference in feel was imperceptible. The ST was next, very smooth. For instance, at 70 mph it doesn't have the FJR's slight buzz in the handlebars (noticeable, but not objectionable). Again, it's one of those things we wouldn't be able to judge unless we rode the bikes back-to-back.

However, in strong sidewinds, the ST was definitely pushed around more. Its center of gravity has been made lower than the ST1100's and its more pointed nose presumably gives the complete bodywork a more forward center of pressure than the others, contributing to the effect. Also, although its windshield was rated one of the best, and its screen gave the most variation in height, if you raised it very high, the bike was definitely more affected by crosswinds.

The Yamaha's screen was typically left very low, because if you raised it high, it also became so vertical that it caused a backdraft that bothered the rider. We considered it okay in the low position, but the least effective in the group. The "return-to-bottom" self-retracting feature of the FJR's screen (whenever the key was turned off), was criticized because if a rider/passenger did find a perfect height, they had to refind it again after a stop. The FJR website www.fjr1300.info/howto/stop explains how to defeat the feature.

The BMW's screen is relatively narrow but creates a good pocket for the rider's torso. Also, because the riding position is forward, the rider is closer to the screen, which is always helpful. At least one rider felt it gave the best solo wind protection.

When you're putting serious miles on the open road, a cruise control can be a wonderful thing. Only the K12GT has one here, and that's a big plus. Why don't the others?

Also, low ambient temperatures can reduce your comfort factor considerably. Again, the BMW comes standard with heated grips, *and* heated seats. Swapping bikes throughout the day, whoever ended up on the Beemer when the sun went down was a very happy rider. There's nothing quite so cozy as a bike that keeps you warm. While heated grips are options on the others, neither offer the option of heated seats. Others will follow, it's an excellent idea.

When it's cold, the Honda's mirrors do serve to deflect airflow around the hands, to keep the gloves warmer than on the FJR.

Instruments/Controls

Yamaha 1st, BMW 2nd, Honda 3rd

The ST's instrument panel, one of the trickiest with its cool instantaneous gas mileage and average fuel mileage readouts, was unfortunately the hardest to read. Not only were these additional features lit in orange under gray tinted plastic, making them hard to make out in average light situations, but the dash had a strange affinity for dust that the others didn't, further obscuring their information. We had plenty of dust, which might not constitute average conditions, but it does happen.

We found the FJR dash the easiest to read, with an array of useful information—but missing the aforementioned extra Honda frills—all conveniently large and well lit.

None of the bikes had self-cancelling turnsignals, something we think is a significant safety feature. If someone ever cut in front because you'd forgotten to turn the signals off, you'd agree. At least the Yamaha's indicators are very large and hard to miss at the top of the dash.

In terms of hand controls, the Honda's are best, the Yamaha's second and the BMW's third. We won't go into the BMW switchgear again, but their tapered grips are also unique—a good way to find out which end fits your hand. If you like the large end best, you'll find your thumb a long way from the switches.

The foot controls made another contrast. Both the Japanese bikes had main pegs angled back slightly for comfort, while the BMW's were perpendicular to the frame and their bracketry forces the heels out parallel, too. This produced knee angularity that several found awkward and eventually painful. The K12GT offers the option of adjustable footpegs, and the higher more rearward position would be a plus for riders with shorter legs. But, its shifter refused to accommodate the move—the pedal was then too low and far away. This isn't a problem on the right side, as the brake pedal moves with its bracket.

Fore-aft foot movement, good for variation after a long time in the saddle, is better on the Yamaha than the Honda, as the ST has exhaust pipe guards behind the pegs that interfere with your heels when resting on your toes on the pegs.

Attention to Detail

Honda 1st, Yamaha 2nd, BMW 3rd

The K12GT has the least useful luggage rack of the three, smaller, narrower and rounded in a way that might make attachments less secure. Luggage capacity is another major failing of the GT, which continues to use the high-mounted right side muffler of the K12RS, making the volume

in the left bag ridiculously small.

Passenger-friendliness was something we were determined to qualify. Passengers considered the BMW's single-piece seat more comfortable than the two-piece versions on the others, because the pillion's thigh was not resting on the junction. It also has an anatomical rise at its forward end, to help hold a pillion in place, and its seat-to-passenger peg relationship was similar to the Honda's—superior to the FJR's, which was judged too short and more sportbike-like. So far, so good, however the GT's rear suspension could be felt strongly through its rear seat and pegs, preventing our pillion from relaxing and getting comfortable.

The Yamaha's passenger seat has a distinct rise at its rear edge, which also got mixed reviews. One passenger praised it for the sense of purchase and security it gave them, while another complained that it pressed uncomfortably against the tailbone.

The ST's passenger seat was voted the most comfortable with room to move around, but its flat shape allows forward movement under braking.

Windshield effectiveness for the passenger was best on the Honda. Although there was a noticeable backdraft in the full up position, the buffeting and noise were the least of the three. When in the up position, the FJR's windshield was rated acceptable by passengers. The BMW was considered noisy whether the shield was up or down, and buffeting was worse as it was set lower.

Fuel range is one of the long suits of both the ST and FJR, something you really appreciate in the sparsely settled deserts when gas stations can be so far apart. Here the K12GT again shows its sportbike bloodlines, with by far the smallest tank in the trio. Based on tank capacity and average gas mileage, the Yamaha should manage 263 miles, the Honda an inspired 320 miles (it actually has two gas tanks) but the Beemer, although rated at 5.4 gallons, ran out in 163 miles on the freeway and returned the worst consumption, just 38.0 mpg average. Worse, it wouldn't take more than 4.8 gals. after running out, casting doubt on its claimed capacity. This is a serious flaw on a bike promoted as a sport-tourer and the need to reach the next gas station in the wilderness saw the BMW stopping much more frequently when the others could go the distance.

None of the bikes is particularly easy to put on the centerstand unfortunately; all need some serious muscle.

Value

Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd, BMW 3rd

Overall, the capabilities of the machines are in inverse relation to their price, making this an easy call: The FJR is \$11,499, the

ST/ABS is \$14,449 and the K1200GT is \$17,990.

Conclusion

Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd, BMW 3rd

A very close contest, especially between the Honda and Yamaha.

If the distance between gas stations is not a problem where you live and intend to do your sport-touring, the BMW's limited range is less of an issue, but in the West it can be a real problem. The K1200GT is a beautiful bike with features unavailable on the others in this group, but it shows its sportbike heritage just a bit too much. The riding position is clearly too forward for some, and it would have been nice if adjustable handlebars (something BMW has done in the past) had been included. The lack of luggage space in the left saddlebag is inexcusable, making you wonder if the conversion from RS to GT hadn't been rushed.

Although the Yamaha won the most categories, the Honda is a thoroughly polished and refined machine with superior wind protection and passenger comfort, important points to consider. Only side-by-side, can you judge some of its shortcomings vs. the FJR. Opinions were divided as to which would earn a spot in our own garages.

The Yamaha is clearly the sportiest of the group, and its athletic personality is very endearing. It loves to be ridden hard and its ability on twisty roads needs to be experienced to be believed. Although our FJR didn't have ABS, in anything less than panic situations, its brakes are wonderful. Its price is the lowest and its natural pace is the highest. Aside from a better windshield, which isn't too expensive, it has no major flaws. That's a hard combination to beat. 🍀

