

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Learners no longer need to look like dweebs with an L on their foreheads. Honda's latest offering has the looks and the class of its VFR1200 brother. Learning has never been this good.

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With the way fuel prices are skyrocketing it's no surprise that a few manufacturers are beginning to invest R & D dollars in smaller capacity bikes that not only appeal to the learner legal brigade but will also garner favour among more experienced riders looking to save some dollars on the daily commute. In years past, practical if not overly glamorous machines like Suzuki's GN250 or dual-purpose trail bikes such as the XR250 have dominated the 250cc segment, while anyone with sporting pretensions was limited to, say, a Kawasaki GPX250 or very expensive Honda VTR250. There was of course another category – the 250 two-stroke race replicas, but while they were actually learner legal, their performance attributes and price tags weren't exactly learner advisable! This all changed a couple of years back with the arrival of the Hyosung GT250RN, a scaled down version of the Korean firm's 650 V-twin sports bike. Kawasaki soon followed suit ditching their long-in-the-tooth GPX for the Ninja 250R, which shared a family resemblance with its bigger Ninja siblings. Yamaha were next with their YZF-R125 and now YZF-R15 looking like mini R1s, which leads us to the latest 250 that looks like one of its bigger brothers – the CBR250R.

Bearing a striking resemblance to the VFR1200, the CBR arrived at our office with a little over 400km on the clock and is the first and only one in the country (hence only having two days with the bike). Not normally one for testing learner-legal street bikes due to ergonomic reasons (I'm too tall for 'em) I was actually keen on giving the new Honda a quick spin purely to satisfy my curiosity after reading through the press pack, where Honda make no bones of marketing the CBR as a bike that "may be mistaken for a more expensive machine with a bigger engine".

Swinging a leg over the (very) low 748mm seat I was pleasantly surprised at the un-cramped nature of the CBR; the raised clip-on 'bars and low-ish foot pegs doing a sterling job of providing a roomy and comfortable cockpit even for a tall rider like me. The riding position is more upright than a bigger sports touring bike, but there's enough room there to get into full tuck mode should you wish to make yourself as aerodynamic as possible. The next item to gain my attention was the rather groovy dash, comprising of a big analogue rev counter and LCD panel below with speedo, odometer, trip meter, engine temp and, most importantly, a fuel gauge. It glows with a blue hue at night and is easily read in all conditions, meaning less time staring at the dash and more eyes on the road.

Thumbing the starter button sees the 250cc single-cylinder 4-valve DOHC motor burst into life with a purposeful yet subdued rumble. Hardly surprising when you see the size of the tiny exhaust port on the end can and the fact that it wears a catalytic convertor. Selecting first in the slick-shifting six-speed box, I pulled out of the office car park and proceeded to join town traffic en-route to our open road test route. The first thing to strike me about the EFI 250cc engine was how torquey it was. Off idle and into the midrange, the wee Honda performs admirably before running out of puff near the top of the rev range. The class leading 22.9Nm of torque is delivered at 7000rpm, and the max power of 19.42 kW (26bhp) arrives shortly after at 8500rpm. While its two main rivals (the GT250R and Ninja 250R) have an extra cylinder and boast more power, the Honda is considerably lighter than both, giving it a power to weight ratio of 0.120 kW/kg – a smidgen higher than the Hyosung and only 0.02Kw/kg behind the Ninja.

Cradling the 250 single is a diamond, twin-spar steel frame allied

to a pair of 37mm forks up front and a Pro-Link monoshock out back. The chassis and suspension package was another area that impressed me greatly. The suspension settings were surprising good, providing a firm but compliant ride for my 85kg. The steering was very neutral and responded well to the minimum of inputs and combined with a competent chassis and suspension package provided a very confidence-inspiring ride. In fact I had to be careful with my input on the corners and not overdo it, the bike responded so well. The high bars also come with a generous amount of steering lock, enough that you can pretty much U-turn almost in one lane. The only criticism I have on the handling front are the tyres. The IRC tyres still had the nipples on them after 500km, testament to their longevity and the hardness of their compound. No doubt these will last forever, keeping running costs down in the process, but I'd replace them with a pair of stickier sports tyres and be happy to pay the extra cost for improved feel and handling as well as an increased fun factor.

Bringing it all to a halt is a two-piston caliper biting a single 296mm disc up front and a 220mm disc and single-piston combo out back. The front is up to the task, even if it requires a healthy tug the faster you go, and the rear is de rigueur for a 250cc commuter bike – not much good!

Overall the CBR250R impressed me no end. Performance and handling-wise it was a giggle, comfort-wise it impressed and the build quality is typical Honda – top-notch. Not only that, it's extremely frugal, (we averaged 2.6litres per 100km) will accommodate a pillion with ease and has the lowest price in class at \$7,495.

Combine all that with a bike whose styling is bang up to date and does indeed look and perform like a much a bigger machine, I'd say Honda are on to a winner with the CBR250R. **BRM**

A LEARNER'S VIEWPOINT

The CBR250R is definitely a very strong player in the game of learner/restricted bikes. I found it very easy to manoeuvre, which is a plus for us girls lacking Superman's muscles and the handling is effortless on this bike, hitting the nail right on the head with its target market. Even though the seat doesn't have a lot of padding, the CBR has a very comfortable sitting position; and helping with that is the small 13-litre tank. And yes, due to its fuel efficiency, that is big enough, considering I used less than a quarter of the tank to ride 130km. One thing that did stand out while riding in the dark on the 250 is that the headlight actually works. Low beam's not that great, but not much worse than any other bike I've been on, but the full-beam is very good. But what I really like is the fact that it looks much bigger than a 250 - an important factor when you have an image to maintain!

Charmaine



Great clock



Pea-shooter exhaust

