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# TwoWheels



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*Road Test*

# KATANA 750

The Emblem  
Of The  
Sword

Is the new-wave Flash  
really sharp enough to  
slice drifting  
silk knickers?

Kel Wearne



**B**Y now you've seen a Katana. If you haven't you need a guide dog. A lot of you will have ridden one; many have bought one; just about all of you have talked about them. The Katana splits motorcyclists into two groups; it attracts and it repels; it is ridden and it is ridiculed. But Katanas do not slip around unnoticed.

The bike is more than Flash. It is offered as a very serious version of FAST. Where every previous road machine from Japan has centred on the middle ground of design consideration, compromised by American hegemony passion for smoothness, Katana offers few concessions to "soft".

Think for a moment how significant the American market is. Even Europe was compromised: The well-balanced early model Jota 1000 Laverda epitomised high speed steering stability and handling (definitely all at the "fast" end of the compromise scale), but was bastardised in the name of lighter and easier around-town handling and steering.

Thankfully American models have now diverged from those we get and those which are acceptable in Europe. The Katanas, like the lighter Z750 Kawasaki, are there for function. They're also as far removed from mainstream Japanese as the XV Yamahas are from being megabikes.

The Katana evokes a response which indicates there is a place for specialised end-of-scale and not middle-of-the-road machines, from the Big Four. But the gestation period has been immense. The world is ready for limited edition Japanese machines; perhaps the Big H started it all by making a few hundred very special race-oriented CB1100Rs. These, looked at with some scepticism initially, assumed collector item proportion with an assured price. The Honda triggered the response; something better than mega, faster than hyper. The Road Replica Six Hour Special whetted the appetite.

But then there was nothing to buy. Honda did not catch the wave. It did produce the *candy* version complete with full fairing but it is merely conventional macho street image and not quite the real thing. The Star Wars image, space-invader gladiator-combat bike was available at Suzuki dealers' showrooms.

You probably all know that the 750 Katana has anti-dive brake-fork design, a sidecover mounted rotation-type choke, solid alloy clip-on bars and a further improved GSX750 engine. You may not know the 750 Katana has cobby welding, a pillion seat that's silly, the finest neutral steering to be offered from a Japanese manufacturer to date, and suspension straight off the original 1967-68 Norton



Commando (the first of the superbikes by the way), albeit with greater fork rear unit adjustment; but only in degree of Hard, not degree of Comfort.

You may also not know that the 750 is the gem of the Katana line-up — flash and fast with panache; all without the brutal schizoid nature lurking just under the throttle of the 1100; and closer to cafe than the nice and clean but prosaic 650.

### The powerplant

Suzuki, not known for radical innovation, made the Katana as a complete package. The engine of the GSX750 was never a slouch, but like all four-valvers it produces more at the upper end than in the low rpm side of things. To create the fastest 750 production bike available the engineers lightened the valve gear, removed some weight from the

flywheel generator, added new cams, better valve seats, new IC ignition, new four-into-two black chrome exhausts system, and 34 mm Mikuni CVs (up 2 mm). The engine has a one-piece crank and retains bore and stroke of 67 x 53 mm

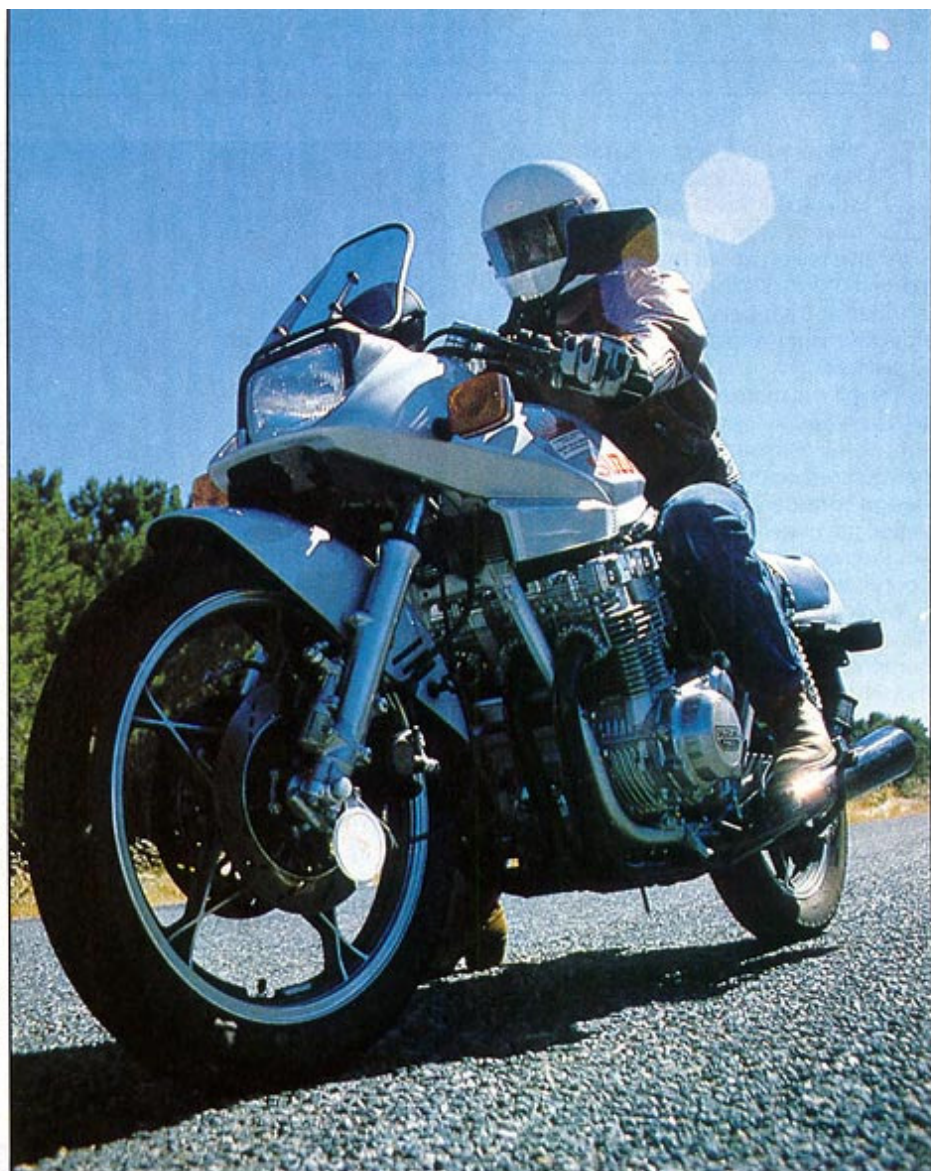
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*"The gestation period of a beyond-the-middle-of-the-road machine has been immense. And the 'space-invader gladiator-combat' bike is a Suzuki. Somehow Honda missed the wave."*

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(displaces 747 cm<sup>3</sup>). There are new pistons rings, higher compression (9.8:1) and a claimed power increase of two kW (60.4) at 9200 rpm.

The bike starts easily and idles whether



cold, cool or warm. It retains similar characteristics mentioned in our three-way 750 comparo (TW Dec. '80), getting into action from 5000 rpm on. City use was predominantly third gear which is past the harsh vibe area. It registers 80 km/h at 5000 rpm in third. Vibration was only noticeable around the 4000 rpm range and on trailing or closed throttle when the 750 emitted rattles, pings and a host of tinny noises. There's no complaints with the gear box, although changes were easier and smoother if made at over 5000 rpm.

The Katana project did not get tied up in idiot lights and quartz chip technology — the instrument pod is compact with a multi-colored speedo/tacho similar to the Suzuki Hustler of many years back. The needles unwind in opposite directions from the centre and you no longer get an image of two parallel needles at a glance.

### In the city

The most often asked question was "What do you think of it?"

My answer, like all the rest, was qualified! "The Katana is fine if you are

sitting on it or riding it and you don't have to look at it."

The Katana is a nice enough bike to ride given a number of assessable advantages and disadvantages but its appearance offends my idea of how a bike should look. Such subjective views are the key to motorcycle individuality but why are motorcyclists automatic "knockers?"

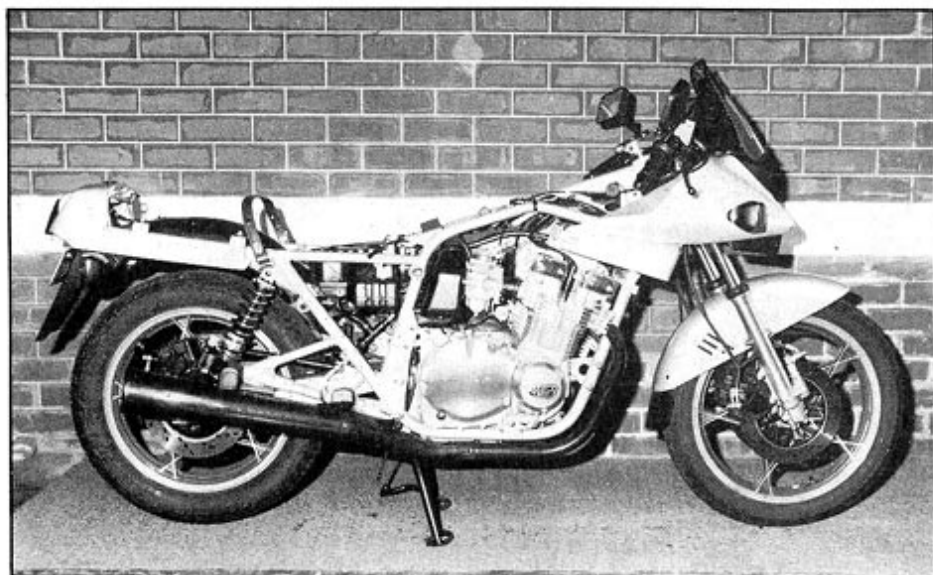
The Katana design came from Hans Muth who once headed the BMW design team. The concept originated in the Bavarian beer halls of European creativity; aimed at a new Agusta before the great MV Agusta lineage succumbed to the guillotine. And it is that same spark of individual no-compromise which brings the passion back. Of all things within motorcycling, passion is the finest. The most energetic. The most vital. Fuelled by individual taste, group pressure, peer pressure, social imagery, media moulding and cellular response, motorcycling without passion is like action without taking off the pantyhose: you can feel it but it doesn't do all that much. So score the Katana nine and a half out of ten for rousing response. It is the boldest, blatant

passion-evoking example of technology and style Japan has produced.

In two weeks I heard only two absolutely unqualified accolades about the Katana yet they were parked at every street corner, bottle department and lined up mirror to mirror at half the traffic lights around Perth.

Ironically, for many riders the Katana 750 will have practical advantages over the conventional cousins. The first one being the low seat: you can plant your feet on the ground anytime. The riding position is obviously all cafe and that means developing the ability to grip the tank firmly with one's knees to take weight off and spell the wrists. This alternating technique will help save attacks of "Katana cramps" in shoulders and wrists around town.

The footpegs, although set back, provide an ideal position to lever the weight off your butt for harsh jolting bumps. Instruments and controls are all the you-beaut Japanese quality. Dog-leg levers make for simple two-finger riding. The clutch is light to the extreme. But the front brake lever on three Katanas ridden

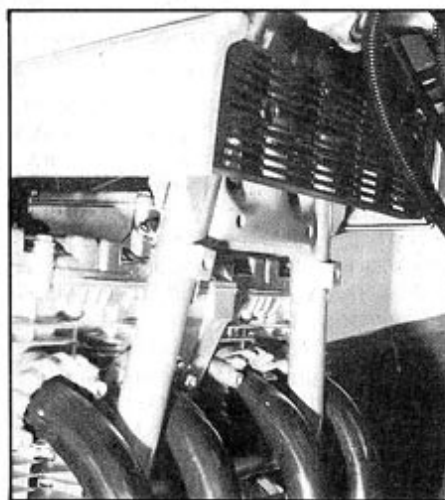
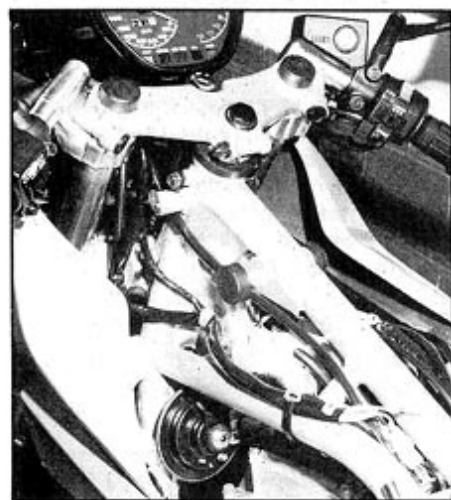


Left: Frame design incorporates lower seat height and more rigid triangulation. Under-seat area is crowded — all space within the frame is used.

Below left: Air forks have four-way adjustable pre-load. Note additional gusseting around the steering head.

Centre: Styling vs practicality. Cheap plastic grille, supposedly to direct air over rocker covers. Screw holes are there for the non-existent oil-cooler.

Below: Anti-dive forks are practical and work to the rider's advantage.



had long travel and could be pulled in to the throttle grip. This means two-finger braking to the point of lockup is virtually impossible.

Initial feel from the 750 brakes was a little disconcerting: A result of the lack of nose dive characteristics one is trained to expect. Even under firm application the nose hesitates before depressing about half what a rider anticipates. This gave me a day's false feedback until adjusting. The stopping distance was within the normal range for superbikes; just a loss of feel compared with other bikes. Perhaps the lever is pushing too many valves for the anti-dive?

But no, it turns out the brakes have been designed for the average rider and not the guns. The brakes allow one to take ungainly fistfuls without immediately finding the thin red line to lockup (unlike Brembos) and this is a safety item. Apparently the master cylinder holds the key to long lever travel. For those who want the firmer feel and less tolerance to rider-controlled input, a change of master cylinder will do the trick (see your friendly race dealer).

The 750 Katana is certainly no lightweight despite its appearance yet steering around town (from trickle to 80 km/h) is light and accurate without the dead feel one gets from most big Japanese road bikes or the crank-it-to-the-limit requirement of Dukes.

A comment here on the mirrors. These rectangular jobs are easy to adjust, provide adequate safe coverage either side and don't become affected too much by vibration. Rate them near the best. Because of the cafe riding position, the use of mirrors in city traffic is vital.

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*"The Katana project did not get tied up in idiot lights and quartz chip technology and the 750 is the gem of the line-up, offering the finest neutral steering to date from a Japanese manufacturer".*

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By sitting into the bike with your chest almost touching the high tank, one has the impression of low centre of gravity. That, combined with the low, narrow feel,

makes movement through traffic neat, bordering on fun. The Katana is nowhere near as uncomfortable around town as it looks. It requires adjustment.

It is not a pillion machine. The 750 has a one-colour seat of smooth vinyl, with a scalloped rider's position. Pillions must lean well forward and grab the rider because there is nothing else to grab. Under brakes the pillion slides up over the rider and under acceleration the pillion can slide off the bike. It is barely acceptable. Both the 650 and 1100 do not have the same problem with the slippery vinyl but a bike of this nature must have a decent grab rail or handles (such as the Yamaha XS 1100RH).

### Out in the country

An hour on the 750 Katana without the right relaxation technique and you will have Katana cramps between the shoulder blades. The seat, which initially felt tough, does not get any worse and after a few runs you will become used to it, especially taking weight onto your thighs and relaxing and stretching.

If you fall into the trap of staying in one

position for too long the weight of your wrists will make it hard to get them back to shape on a longish run. Pillions? Forget it; send 'em by bus or car.

Does it go? Yes, over 7000 rpm and the 750 becomes a howling banshee and the undulating humpy goat track roads start to make you see why girls like jockeys (strong thighs from taking all the riding weight). Using the third firmest (of four) fork spring preload settings and preload three (of five) on the rear units and damping two and three, the 750 handled most roads well. Short choppy bumps disturb the 750; hitting these under heavy braking the bike will kick up at the back end!

If you are not taking weight on your feet and thighs the Katana can get hectic on rough sections. However, this will be at speeds in excess of what others can manage without rider skills.

For those not experienced with such suspension be warned to stay loose and light, for the 750 can hop around a great deal on rough corners. Ground clearance is plain excellent!

The small shield lifts the main air pressure from a rider's head, although there is still substantial helmet-buffeting over 160 km/h. Vibration was not noticeable apart from the tingling through the bars — an hour's ride at moderate pace will numb your hands and fingers, especially the braking/throttle hand. Could be a problem in cold weather.

## Handling

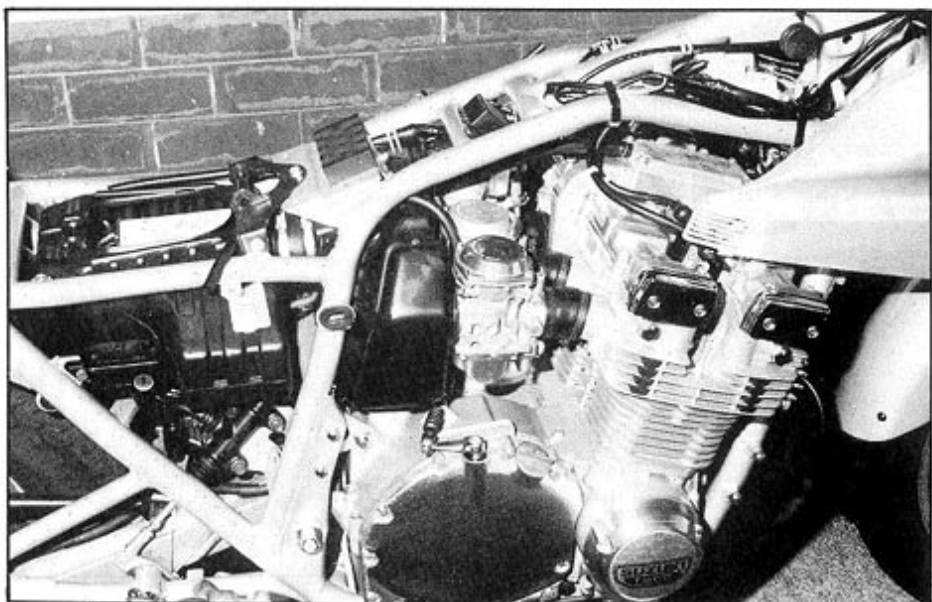
The Katana frames are slightly modified from conventional GSX models with changes to the steering head geometry. The 750 shares the same frame as the 1100; wheelbase of 1520 mm (58.9 in) and fork rake of 28.5 degrees and a longish trail of 116 mm (4.5 in).

It's when you are on your favourite "Rodney Roadracer" road that the 750 will delight riders and reveal that it is more than an exceptional looking Japanese bike.

The narrow feel, the neutral steering and the firm suspension allow far more stability, steadiness and control.

When pressed on fast, rough roads (similar to the rough portions of the Putty road or the uneven and sometimes cobby Mundaring Weir road) the Katana 750 will move offline and the rear end start that harsh hopping most of us know well. The bike is deceptive; there is real weight involved in "flicking" it from side to side and the neutral steering and balance are significant advantages. The ultimate test comes down to brakes.

The soft brakes (as tested) combined with the weight, do not make this a bike to try and out-brake a Ducati or Guzzi or even a modified Japanese machine. You can get into corners very hot on the



Air filter feeds a plenum chamber which assists breathing. Induction noise is low. Motor would look better in matte black.

Katana. It is nice to know that the ground clearance and general handling dynamics will take you through quicker than on any standard Japanese machine. But it is not the ultimate.

The Katana 750 has one advantage which is vital when one considers the brakes. That is, when leaned over during a corner one can use the front brakes, without the 750 standing vertical and heading straight ahead, (the standard practice of other Japanese machines).

The Bridgestone Mag Mopus tyres do not let the bike work to its utmost. The Bridgestones have a high slip factor and in the coolish weather (between 16 and 24 degrees C) we had a lot of trouble riding within the limitations of these tyres. But at least they gave you plenty of warning.

It is difficult to judge the manner in which most Katanas will be ridden. There will be a host of owners who want the appearance rather than the punch; those who want to string things out and those who want to enjoy riding a well mannered and well balanced bike.

The Katana traits at speed are not necessarily those which will be explored by the average owner. If, however, you have a GSX 1100 and have worn the pegs to the frame and need a supply of alternator covers in the garage just from street riding, then the Katana will require pluristic thinking — it will enhance much of what you did on the GSX roadster but require caution in some circumstances (or mods to let you through).

The final part of the 750 handling is that it is very good when the going is smooth but requires concentration to maintain the same pace when the road is rougher. It is more direct and purposeful than other Japanese machines though and capable of stretching a rider's ability.

At more moderate pace the Katana is supple and dead accurate. The rear units still jolt the rider but one can live with it. The steering requires little effort — one does not have to force the issue to get it down nor work at holding it up from oversteering and falling into turns.

## Observations and conclusions

The Katana tank height precludes use of a decent tank bag, so travellers are faced with throw-over saddlebags, or

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*"It is a bike which brings the passion back. Motorcycling without passion is like action without taking off pantyhose: You can feel it but it doesn't do all that much".*

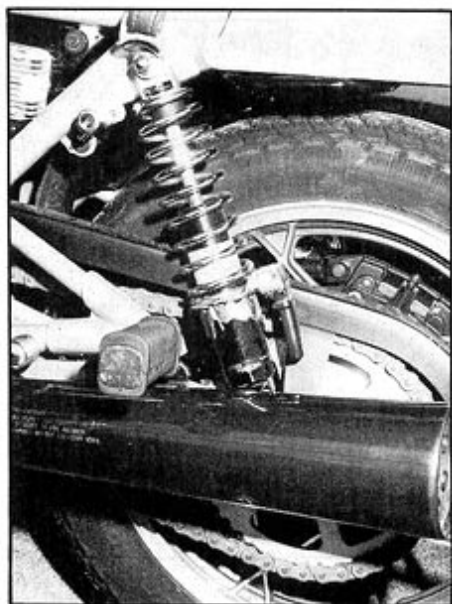
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strapping a bag to the pillion section of the seat, thereby improving the "push back" for long rides — and despite appearances, people will ride this bike interstate.

The headlight adjustment requires more time than it should. The adjustment to suspension is in contrast simple and rapid. The instruments are adequate and sensible although I'd still add an oil temperature gauge and a head temperature gauge.

In styling the Katana Suzuki has again under-emphasised the most important single element in any motorcycle — the engine. Some matt black or maybe even some of the orange, on all or part of the engine would add more character, and macho to the bike. Suzuki machines still look too nice; not aggressive or mean like the Kwakas.

The Katana is far better to be on than



Pre-load adjustment lever is not before time. Shock settings are firm to hard.



Japanese OE tyres continue to improve, but could be better still.

look at and much of the offhanded dismissal by people comes from those who have never ridden a Katana. It may be that the styling reflects the potential of modern motorcycle technology but it also emphasises the complete domination of all aspects of motorcycling that the Japanese have. It is depressing to think that no European manufacturer could produce this machine, that cafe riding will not demand commitment to and experience of European marques. On the positive side, the Katanas demonstrate that the Japanese may be on the threshold of individual designs.

Despite its willingness to rev the 750 returned excellent fuel consumption. The worst was 14 km/l (39 mpg) and the best was 19.3 km/l (54 mpg). A range of 350 km from the 22-litre tank is quite feasible.

Observations include nice paintwork, poor welds and thin frame paint in spots; nice, neat seat finish, top forks, ugly wheels (although we had a look at a wire-wheeled 1100 Katana), reasonable black

chrome system, very good mirrors, bars and controls.

The exterior design includes a black "grid" under the steering head. There is no oil cooler, but threaded holes are there. One should be standard on such a machine for our climate

The price of \$3499 for the 750 Katana is \$400 more than a standard GSX750EX roadster and the bike is worth it.

As a marketing exercise the Katana is brilliant, providing a composite coalescence of sublime speed (at the right edge of technology and along with suitable modern Star Wars-type styling). Naturally this new wave imagery has some drawbacks; if you pack the meanest handgun in town then chances are you'll have to show the world (and yourself) you can actually use it!

And therein lies the path to an unhappy tale because there is no doubt that induction into cafe street racing can be fine on a lumbering, handlebar-banging 900 or the average big-bore which makes

no pretence of hiding its weight. But this is vastly removed from the delicate touch of a serious Ducati or Morini. If you ride a Katana you had better be severely realistic enough to know that looks and performance and balanced chassis/engine dynamics do not necessarily make a racer.

So we've seen them, watched them, argued over them but do the Katanas match their appearance?

Are they the new wave Flash? Are they sharp enough to cut drifting silk knickers?

*"At moderate pace the Katana is supple and dead accurate. At speed the firm suspension will jolt and move the bike but the neutral steering remains. Compared to other Japanese machines the handling is very good indeed".*

We said the Z750 Kawasaki was a turning point for the Japanese — the opposite to the direction of style and form by being simple, light and efficient. The Katana, no matter what you think of it, marks a similar transformation. The bike heralds something different — something people have been complaining about for years with the Universal Japanese Motorcycle. It may not be the best, but the Katana 750 is certainly the nicest, fast bike from Japan that I have ridden. It conjures up visions of — but is not really part of — the ivy league of Rickmans, Martins and such. Yet it possesses the beginning of a start; if successful, the Japanese just may develop lightweight and versatile machines for specialist road riders which could match the European dynamics. Weight paring will require higher priority.

As it is the 750 Katana proves the edge of the sword is poised. The next couple of years could see the final cut . . . \*

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# KATANA 750

## Second Opinion

THAT FIRST day in Sydney's traffic with the Katana gave me an indication of what to expect. The seat was hard and my wrists carried all the weight of the top half of my body. The footpegs transmitted a little vibration. Every time I stopped and thought about it, the Katana was impractical. But I was slowly falling in love. On the open road though, the bike feels perfect. The wind supports your body, your knees tuck into the tank and you very much feel like part of the bike, not just an object on top.

The Katana is immediately noticeably different from the GSX in front geometry. At last Suzuki has reverted to a more sensible steering head angle. This change accompanies re-introduction of in-line axle forks with an anti-dive setup, and while it's a little heavier in town, at a touring pace (140-220 km/h) the bike steers with such precision that it soon lets you forget what speed you're really doing.

The anti-dive on the front forks works well but you really only notice it (and need it) when you are boy-racing or in a panic

situation. The bike has more clearance than previous models and some of this could be attributed to the anti-dive working as you brake into corners.

The Katana we rode was certainly faster than the GSX although it's only the cam timing that's been changed. The engine is now stronger in the mid-range and revs that bit harder in the top end. I went for a quick ride to Cowra (about 120 km past Bathurst) and on some of the straights leading to Cowra the speedo was reading 225 km/h. I don't know how accurate the speedo is but I know that I was going — FAST.

The gearbox is bulletproof (like all Suzuki gearboxes) and the clutch never gave us any trouble either.

The bike handles as if it is on rails. The faster you travel the better the Katana holds its line. Fast sweepers were taken faster and faster each time.

The brakes give a good feel and are quite solid at the front lever. The rear brake did cause the rear wheel to chatter a fair bit but once I softened the damping



the bike squatted down and stopped in some very respectable distances.

A lot of people buy bikes because they're practical but the Katana is not practical in the real sense of the word. You would not enjoy the bike if you commute every day in traffic, but on weekends it would more than make up for any inconvenience it caused

Let's change the old saying: Now it's "What the eye sees the backside grieves — but the heart appreciates!" \*

Alan Blanco

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