

CW COMPARISON

MIDDLEWEIGHT CRUISERS ARE THE Rodney Dangerfield of the boulevard set—they get no respect. It's true. Cruising is grounded in pavement-peeling torque, and most middleweights have less of that heart-pounding commodity than their larger-displacement counterparts. So it stands to reason the five bikes gathered here might be overlooked on the showroom floor.

But wait. These are some of the least-expensive full-size motorcycles on the market. Take Harley-Davidson's XLH Sportster 883, for example. At \$5465 in States Blue Pearl and wearing optional spoked wheels, it's the cheapest of our five-bike bunch and half the price of a Dyna Super Glide, Harley's budget Big Twin.

Other class cost-cutters include Suzuki's \$5999 Marauder 800 and Yamaha's \$6499 Virago 750. The Marauder takes the drawn-out powercruiser approach via a flat handlebar, low-slung seat, raked-out steering and custom wheels. Unlike the new-for-'97 Suzuki, the Virago has been around, seemingly, since the Ice Age. Yet it remains a popular choice among motorcycling newbies and women. Of our quintet, it's the only shaftie.

Honda's latest boulevard bike is the early-release 1998 Shadow ACE 750, a nostalgic beauty that boasts a rear tire of goliath proportions. Like the Virago, the ACE displaces just 749cc, which means its sohc, three-valve-per-cylinder

V-Twin shares the distinction of being the smallest powerplant in this comparison. In fairness, though, less may be more, as the ACE (\$6799, in two-tone Deluxe trim) makes more low-rpm torque than its bigger-bore competition.

At the far end of the price spectrum is Kawasaki's Vulcan 800 Classic. Based on the Vulcan 800, the Classic gets a flatter and lower handlebar, larger chrome headlight, textured seat cover, 16-inch front wheel and deeply valanced fenders. It retails for \$7999, \$2700 less than cruising's Big Bertha, the Vulcan 1500 Classic.

Why not include the standard Vulcan 800, given it only costs \$7199, or \$800 less than the Classic? Or for that matter, what about the old-style Vulcan 750 and Suzuki's popular Intruder 800, both of which cost less than the ACE? One machine per manufacturer, *CW* staffers agreed. Honda's Magna 750 was excluded under the same pretext. With its 80-horsepower, VFR-based V-Four, the Magna would have made the others look slow, anyway.

But enough rhetoric. Without further delay, let's discover how cruising's middleweights stack up against each other—and which bike most earned *our* respect.

Is the venerable Sportster a standard or a cruiser? That's an oft-asked question around our offices. We say *both*. The low-rise handlebar, moderately rearset footpeg location and firm suspension scream standard, while the spoked wheels, chrome trim, shotgun exhaust and

scooped-out seat suggest boulevard bike. Either way, the Sporty is too good to dismiss. It tackles the twisties with a tiger-like aggression, has acres of ground clearance and costs significantly less than any other bike in this comparison. In fact, a basic-black 883 with 13-spoke cast wheels retails for just \$5195. For a brand-new, twin-cylinder motorcycle, that's downright cheap!

Motor-wise, the air-cooled, ohv XLH boasts the most displacement, yet the rider is rewarded with snail-like acceleration—at 6.72 seconds from 40-60 mph and 8.19 seconds from 60-80 mph, top-gear roll-ons are dismal. Through the quarter-mile, only the ACE 750 had a slower ET.

Because the booming, shaking V-Twin is solid-mounted to the steel double-cradle frame, vibration is readily apparent, and downright disturbing at higher speeds. Indeed, rear-view images become unintelligible blurs. Fortunately, this shuddering doesn't seem to affect the chassis, which remains planted and virtually flex-free.

Generally speaking, cruisers aren't supposed to slice up twisties, but this one does so with *Ginsu*-like swiftness. This is attributable to relatively conservative steering geometry, a short, 59.3-inch wheelbase and reasonably firm springing and damping rates that help keep hard parts off the deck.

Dislikes, other than the omni-present engine vibes, are few. Shifts are sticky, controls are stiff and the rubber-covered folding footpegs are awkwardly positioned. As well, there are no considerations for packing a passenger. (Admittedly,

Harley sells several Sportster seat combos, and the rectangular-section swingarm has holes for footpeg mounts.)

Bottom line, though? Cruiser or standard, this is elemental motorcycling at its finest. And with extraordinary aftermarket support, strong resale values and a low, low suggested retail price, you'll be hard-pressed to find a better deal on two wheels.

One of three Hondas bearing Shadow American Classic Edition badgework, the new-for-'98 ACE 750 was, admittedly, a surprise. Based on its displacement deficit, we expected a sluggish showing from the liquid-cooled, sohc V-Twin. What we discovered, however, was a chart-topping 43.2 foot-pounds of torque at a low 3000 rpm.

Make no mistake, this performance doesn't translate into class-leading acceleration. In fact, the Honda was the slowest through the quarter-mile, and its top-gear roll-ons were nothing to write home about, either. (This comes as no surprise, given the Honda's 528-pound dry weight.) But around town, where bottom-end grunt is a real asset, the ACE responds *right now*—no clutch-lever hijinks, no waiting for the engine to come on the cam; just smooth, glitch-free forward motion accompanied by a wonderful exhaust note.

Equally palatable is the bike's ergonomic package. The broad, rubber-mounted handlebar positions hands a bent-elbow's arm length from the torso. Complementing this are



Urban Enhancement

Honda's all-new Shadow ACE 750 takes on Harley-Davidson's XLH Sportster 883, Kawasaki's Vulcan 800 Classic, Suzuki's Marauder 800 and Yamaha's Virago 750



Harley-Davidson XLH Sportster 883

Price	\$5465
Dry weight	494 lb.
Wheelbase	59.3 in.
Seat height	29.7 in.
Fuel mileage	42.2 mpg
0-60 mph	6.6 sec.
1/4-mile	15.13 sec.
	@ 90.62 mph
Horsepower	41.2 bhp
	@ 6000 rpm
Torque	41.1 ft.-lbs.
	@ 4250 rpm
Top speed	103 mph

Ups

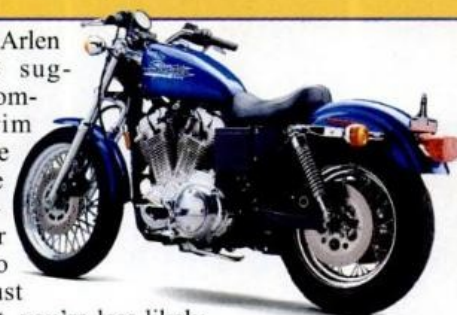
- ▲ Cheap!
- ▲ Classic styling
- ▲ Disc brakes front and rear
- ▲ Firm suspension settings

Downs

- ▼ Engine v-v-vibration
- ▼ Clunky shifts
- ▼ Footpeg location takes some getting used to
- ▼ No passenger pad

footpegs (What Arlen Ness-wannabe suggested the custom-look rubber trim rings?) that are located, in true Goldilocks fashion, not too far forward, not too far back, but just right. As a result, you're less likely to be blown out of the deep-dish saddle at highway speeds than if you were riding, say, the Vulcan. That, we like.

As expected, none of these machines is a true paragon of handling precision, but the Honda is pretty darn good. Despite the bike's long, 63.1-inch wheelbase, steering is light and neutral. Less effective, however, are the brakes and rear suspension. Despite delivering respectable stopping distances, the former-disc up front, drum at the rear—feel mushy, both at the lever and pedal. As for the shocks, spring preload is easily adjustable over a five-position range, but screen-door closers impart greater bump control. All in all,



though, nothing the aftermarket couldn't cure.

If you're seeking that final wallet-opening nudge, consider this: The standard ACE 750, offered only in black but otherwise identical to our two-tone testbike, costs just \$6299.

Few phrases can communicate the near vibe-free nature of the Vulcan 800's counterbalanced, 55-degree V-Twin. Truly, you must trundle down Main Street and over country hill and dale to appreciate how effectively Kawasaki's engineers have masked engine throb. That's not to imply this liquid-cooled powerhouse is abso-



Kawasaki Vulcan 800 Classic

Price	\$7999
Dry weight	539 lb.
Wheelbase	63.2 in.
Seat height	29.0 in.
Fuel mileage	40.7 mpg
0-60 mph	5.7 sec.
1/4-mile	14.52 sec.
	@ 91.35 mph
Horsepower	46.6 bhp
	@ 7000 rpm
Torque	40.5 ft.-lbs.
	@ 5250 rpm
Top speed	103 mph

Ups

- ▲ Smooth engine
- ▲ Big-bike looks

Downs

- ▼ Pricey
- ▼ Lack of ground clearance
- ▼ Shock spring preload unreachable



Honda Shadow Ace 750

Price	\$6799
Dry weight	528 lb.
Wheelbase	63.1 in.
Seat height	28.6 in.
Fuel mileage	37.7 mpg
0-60 mph	6.72 sec.
1/4-mile	15.28 sec.
	@ 87.55 mph
Horsepower	36.9 bhp
	@ 5500 rpm
Torque	43.2 ft.-lbs.
	@ 3000 rpm
Top speed	99 mph

Ups

- ▲ Torque tops in class
- ▲ Excellent ergos
- ▲ Responsive steering

Downs

- ▼ Spongy brakes
- ▼ Underdamped shocks
- ▼ Cheesy plastic steering-head molding



lutely buzz-free. It's just that you have to spin the engine higher, well past its 5250-rpm torque peak, in an attempt to numb fingers and toes. Don't believe us? Eyeball the images in those big rear-view mirrors as you cruise at 65 mph. Slow-going sedans and motorhomes? Crystal-clear.

Other than the nostalgic styling—appealing to nearly everyone we encountered—that's the good stuff. The detractions begin with a choppy ride. This is mostly due to what we consider an engineering flaw: The spring-preload adjuster on the centrally located rear shock absorber is impossible to reach without some sort of special tool or





Suzuki Marauder 800

Price	\$5999
Dry weight	466 lb.
Wheelbase	64.4 in.
Seat height	28.3 in.
Fuel mileage	35.9 mpg
0-60 mph	5.4 sec.
1/4-mile	14.29 sec.
	@ 91.15 mph
Horsepower	40.9 bhp
	@ 5750 rpm
Torque	42.8 ft.-lbs.
	@ 4750 rpm
Top speed	100 mph

Ups

- ▲ Brawny styling
- ▲ Outstanding top-gear roll-ons
- ▲ Slick-shifting transmission
- ▲ Bargain price

Downs

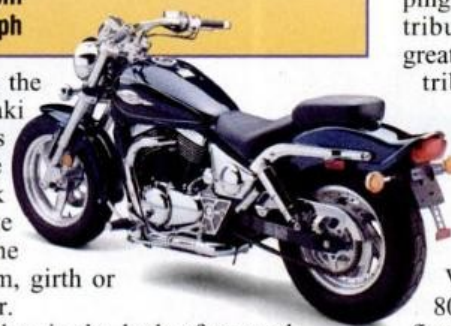
- ▼ Truckish steering
- ▼ Fade-prone front brake
- ▼ Non-folding footpegs

removing the shock from the bike. Ridiculous. Kawasaki must think cruiser riders care not a whit about ride quality because the stock setting is barely adequate for lighter riders, let alone anyone with a little, ahem, girth or who rides with a passenger.

Another attention-grabber is the lack of ground clearance. More than any other bike in this comparison, the Vulcan grounds its feeler-tipped footpegs easily, prompting one tester to comment that the feelers felt like pivot points upon which the bike was about to ungracefully rotate.

Testers also disliked the seating position. The cut-out saddle drops the rider into the bike, which is not a problem itself, but the reach to the handlebar ends combined with the stretch to the forward-mounted foot controls makes for an uncomfortable, ass-in-a-bucket ride.

Then, there's the price. The Classic costs \$1200 more than



the second-most expensive bike, the ACE Deluxe, and an eye-popping \$2500 more than our optioned-out Sportster. That's difficult to overlook, velvety engine notwithstanding.

Let's get right down to it: The Marauder has the lowest seat height of any bike in this comparison. To Suzuki's credit, though, that inseam-pleasing stance doesn't result in a butchered ride. In fact, the 800 boasts the most rear suspension travel—4.0 inches—of the bikes in this test. Of course, to fully benefit from this feature, you'll need to crank up the twin shocks' ramped spring preload adjusters to suit your weight. Otherwise, ride quality will seem as harsh as the Kawasaki's.

Built for the application, the slick-looking inverted fork is set, plow-like, waaayyy out there. Indeed, there's a whopping 35 degrees of rake and 5.7 inches of trail. This contributes to the train-like 64.4-inch wheelbase, which is greater than those of even the ACE and Vulcan. It also contributes to the bike's unwillingness to steer neutrally through corners, regardless of the lean angle or the speed with which they're negotiated. Initial inputs take little effort, but from there on, the narrow handlebar must forever be tipped in one direction or another to remain on-line.

Positive marks only for the liquid-cooled, 45-degree V-Twin, which was lifted from the Intruder 800. The 805cc engine produces respectable horsepower and torque figures, and combined with the bike's 466-pound dry weight and short gearing, acceleration is eclipsed only by the Virago. In top-gear roll-ons, the Marauder is champion.

Should you opt to toe the five-speed tranny, you'll be rewarded with one of the slickest shifters in all of cruising. Indeed, this knife-through-butter box is the opposite of the Sportster's clumsy five-speeder. Such finery does not extend to the front brake, which, despite the presence of a large, two-piston caliper, faded quickly during performance testing.

Based on performance and price (the latter being the sec-



Yamaha Virago 750

Price	\$6499
Dry weight	497 lb.
Wheelbase	59.5 in.
Seat height	28.4 in.
Fuel mileage	46.1 mpg
0-60 mph	5.3 sec.
1/4-mile	14.15 sec.
	@ 93.55 mph
Horsepower	47.7 bhp
	@ 7500 rpm
Torque	40.7 ft.-lbs.
	@ 7500 rpm
Top speed	108 mph

Ups

- ▲ Powerful engine
- ▲ Dual-disc front brakes
- ▲ Light, neutral steering
- ▲ Centerstand
- ▲ Shaft drive

Downs

- ▲ Dated, gaudy styling
- ▲ Close-coupled riding position

ond-lowest of our five), the Marauder certainly warrants consideration—especially when you contemplate all of the customizing potential Suzuki's boulevard- and dragrace-inspired accessories, from handlebar and chin fairings to studded saddlebags, represent.

An alphabetic approach to our armada leads us lastly to the Virago 750. Forgetting the 40-year-old Sportster, the Virago is cruising's elder statesman. Indeed, two-thirds of *CW*'s editorial staff were barely into their teens when the original XV750 Virago was introduced back in 1981.

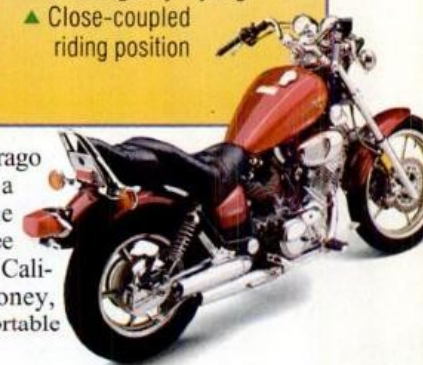
Though its styling is much different from that of the first square-edged Viragos, the four-valve-per-cylinder, 75-degree V-Twin has changed little. It's still an oversquare design with overhead cams and it's still air-cooled.

Nonetheless, the liberally finned powerplant produces the most horsepower—47.7 bhp—but at a comparatively sky-high 7500 rpm. Factor in a relatively tall fifth gear and Sportster-like weight, and the shaft-driven Virago is the quickest and fastest bike in our comparo. Zero to 60 mph comes in a scant 5.3 seconds; top speed is 108 mph.

At century-mark speeds, you'll be hanging onto the buck-horn handlebar for dear life. Which begs the question: Has any Virago owner ever seen the century mark? More importantly, why would he care to? Fact is, this bike—and the rest of its ilk—are most comfortable at around-town speeds, velocities at which the close-coupled riding position and pillowy seat seem sensible. Potholes and square-edged bumps are less likely to steal your breath away at slower speeds, too.

Regardless of the rate of forward motion, the Virago's steering is a near-magical blend of lightness and fluid neutrality. Of these machines, none steers better. It also has good ground clearance without resorting to an unconventional Sportster-like footpeg location. Praise also to the dual-disc front brakes, which date back to the Secas of the mid-'80s.

After all these years, the Virago remains a worthy motorcycle, a conclusion evidenced by the startling number of them we see scooting around the Southern California landscape. For the money, though, there are more comfortable and stylish alternatives.



AND THE WINNER IS...

...Harley-Davidson's XLH Sportster 883, by virtue of its bargain-basement price, broad-ranging versatility, booming aftermarket and innate rawness. Yes, rawness. There are no counterfeit cylinder fins or headstock covers on this bike. It's merely terrific twin-cylinder transportation buoyed by reasonable ergonomics, simple paint and tasteful styling. These days, Sportsters—at least *this* Sportster—are not the cobbly, unfinished machines of legend. Call it a cruiser for all reasons. Ya gotta respect that. ☐