



Performance Bikes: Group Test – Naked Middleweights

Dorsoduro Factory – Honda Hornet – Ducati Monster 796 – Yamaha FZ8

Key quotes:

“The Factory’s fully adjustable front and rear were so well set up we didn’t want to fiddle”

“Special? Oh yes. There are little details everywhere. That sums up the Factory - looks good, works better”

“The Aprilia has the best bits of the bikes here and some that they don’t have. Powerful, easy to ride, by far the best suspension, comfortable, beautifully made”

“The Dorsoduro was majestic. It’s the only bike that doesn’t feel like it has been built to a price”

“The Dorsoduro is my favourite bike here, by a massive margin”

“No questions, no hesitations, no disagreements, the Aprilia is the best bike here. That’s best as in best suspension, best build quality, best handling and best-equipped and a real bike big challenger. We can also add best value for money”



Words: Kev Raymond Pics: Paul Bryant

MIDDLE WEIGHT WEIGH-IN

Fierce competition in the middleweight class has led to a surprise result – they're now a real alternative to big sportsbikes

Time was middleweight meant 600cc. But unless you're tied to race-class rules why not play with the definition a bit? Yamaha have, sleeving down their FZ1 motor and fitting simplified suspension to provide a halfway house between the budget XJ6 and the litre class. Ducati have been messing with capacity for years, so building a long-stroke version of the 696 Monster came naturally. Aprilia ignored the middleweight sector for a long time, but a new 750cc, 90° V-twin from parent company Piaggio opened up the market first for the Shiver, then the supermoto-styled Dorsoduro. This year they're joined by the Dorsoduro Factory, a tricked up version with better suspension and a load of carbon fibre. Only Honda are sticking with what they know. The Hornet's still an unfashionable but effective 599cc, putting out more power than the two bigger twins. In theory though, it should have its hands full with the FZ's 180cc capacity advantage.

All this activity in the traditionally staid and safe middleweight class has led to an unintended consequence – sub-1000cc naked rammed with midrange goodness sweetened by handling born out of diminutive mass. Hang on, isn't this how performance bikes should be? **W**



Listen lads if we don't look at it and pretend it's not there maybe the FZ'll take the hint and just clear off

Buying one

PRICE £7599
DEALS Aprilia has just finished a 0% finance promotion but they regularly run finance offers and PCP plans. Pop in and ask your local dealer what is happening or look at <http://uk.aprilia.com>

The tech

ENGINE The 90-degree 750cc V-twin runs a 'ride by wire' throttle with three fuel maps – sport, touring and rain. The exhaust is stainless steel.

FRAME The Dorsoduro's chassis is a combination of tubular steel and aluminium cast sections joined together using high-resistance bolts. The Factory gets a funky red powder-coated finish on the steel sections, the cast parts are finished in contrasting black and the aluminium swingarm is silver.

SUSPENSION/ BRAKES The Factory gets upgraded Sachs 43mm fully adjustable inverted forks and a fully adjustable laterally mounted shock. Four-piston radial Brembo calipers and 320mm 'wave' discs sit at the front and a single piston caliper and 240mm 'wave' disc cover the rear.

OTHER MODELS The stock Dorsoduro costs £6799 but has lower specification suspension/brakes and none of the Factory's carbon fibre bodywork. Other than this, and the grey rather than red frame, the bikes are identical.



We told Kev bin Larry jumping will never take off, but did he listen...?



With just nine litres of fuel to call on you need big clear readouts



'What is it about supermotos that make you want to misbehave?'

Forunately you won't have to wait long for your chance to get your own back, because the Aprilia does have one big problem. It's a supermoto so presumably Aprilia thought everyone would overdose on adrenalin for an hour or so and then get the munchies and head for a pizza. Which is presumably why they thought nine litres before reserve would do. That's fine for singles, but with a real engine like this one why would you want to stop for pizza? So when the fuel light comes on after 70-odd miles it's just way too soon. As Kev's pointed out, you'll have to plan your route by how far apart the petrol stations are. Ride it sensibly and you might stretch it to 80 or 90 miles, but if you're riding sensibly, why bother?

Johnny wasn't riding sensibly and he loved it:

It's a right laugh. That mode switch makes a difference too. I set it to 'T' for Track and it made it a lot snappier. Ummm, 'T' is for Touring and 'S' for Sports is probably what you were looking for, but then maybe it was originally set to 'R' for rain or, in this case Running in. Oh yes, this particular Factory turned up with fewer than a hundred miles on the clock. Amazingly, rather than thrashing it all of us treated it with respect – it just didn't feel right to rev the nuts off something this special so early in its life.

Special? Oh yes. There are little details everywhere. For example the mirrors look typically Italian – flat-backed, delicate, probably useless. Not a bit of it. They're the clearest here and actually show the road behind you, not just your elbows. That sums up the Factory – locks good, works better.

APRILIA DORSODURO FACTORY

Surprising.
Brilliant

SPEC Top speed: 120mph 0-60: 3.0s Power: 80.52bhp Torque: 49.61lb.ft Weight: 166kg Wheelbase: 1560mm Rake/trail: 25-degrees/108mm Fuel capacity: 17 litres

When I saw the Aprilia my first thought wasn't about the gorgeous carbon fibre, or the up-spec suspension and brakes. It was this: why isn't it a Street Triple?

I'd assumed any test of naked middleweights would include the class benchmark, so the supermoto-style Aprilia was on the back foot from the get-go. Half an hour later I was watching Kev Smith flying the Dorsoduro over a hill crest at 90mph and I swear I could see the grin on his face despite the black visor.

What is it about supermotos that makes you want to misbehave the moment you get on one? I don't know, but I like it, and I like it especially when it's got the go to back up the show.

After the others, getting on the Aprilia is a shock because it feels so much more purposeful, precise,

tight. Hit the first corner and the others steer smoothly, taking up their new corner angle with minimum fuss. The Aprilia takes the same amount of steering effort and translates it into instant lean, to the point where in the first right/left I had to pick the bike up again because I'd turned in too hard. Fortunately the Dunlop Qualifier tyres are forgiving enough to put up with chopping and changing line.

I've not ridden a standard Dorsoduro, but those who have criticise the suspension. No such complaints with the Factory's fully adjustable front and rear which were so well set-up we didn't want to fiddle. Go to a trackday and you might want to stiffen things up a bit, but on the road there's a nice compromise between it being firm enough to give feedback,

and soft enough to damp out the worst of the bumps. And bounce over 90mph humpbacks with no drama.

Now a good proportion of you won't have got further than the phrase 'trackdays' without spluttering tea and biscuits all over your tyre warmers. 'Not another bloody supermoto getting in the way of my R1 round Charlies', I hear you mutter.

Actually, no it's not another one getting in your way, it's another one that'll be snapping at your heels. If this had clip-ons and a fairing it'd be a sportsbike and it should be treated as such. And don't be surprised that having blasted past it on the straight, it gets you back on the brakes into Park and disappears on you for the rest of the lap.

APRILIA DORSODURO FACTORY

Modifying

You can always make something good even better

1. Suspension

According to MCT the Dorsoduro's forks are set too stiffly and there's too little static sag which can lead to a choppy ride and lack of confidence in the front end.

MCT's solution is to reduce the preload, fit softer springs and alter the oil level.

The shock doesn't appear to be much of an issue and anyway supermotos should spend most of their time with the rear out of line. Expect to pay around £220 to sort the front. www.mctssuspension.com

2. Exhaust

Arrow are Aprilia's official exhaust supplier and a set of titanium cans with carbon tips that keep the catalyser ring the tills at £695.72. As well as improving the sound they should release a few bhp in the midrange. GPR Exhausts also make stainless or carbon cans for £669 and £769 respectively which are road legal and come with removable baffles. Zard Exhausts do a set of very funky end cans for £839.99 in various materials. Setting up the fuelling could be an issue because there is currently no Power Commander to suit the Dorsoduro, however, GPR sell an Extreme Multi Level for £239 that plugs into the bike to adjust the fuelling. www.gpr-motorcycle-exhausts.co.uk

3. Crash protection

Supermotos have a habit of biting tarmac which means crash protection is a must. While expensive

parts such as the exhaust are tucked out of harm's way a set of Aprilia side fairing protectors (£102.17), a clutch case protector (£51.08) and wheel spindle crash bobbins (£91.94) are the smart choice. If you aren't worried about branding try R&G Racing where you'll find the same level of protection for much less money.

4. Cosmetics

Although the Factory already has a wide range of carbon accessories it needn't stop there. Aprilia sell an adjustable, and considerably neater, licence plate holder for £132.81 that bolts right on and can either use the stock indicators or LED replacements. Aluminium mirrors to replace the plastic; OE items are £132.81 a side while billet aluminium brake or clutch reservoir covers are £40.85 and come complete with 'Aprilia' branding on the lid. Aprilia also sell billet aluminium brake and clutch levers for £71.51 each that are beautifully machined for lightweight and they look great.

5. Comfort

Travelling a long distance on a supermoto is akin to being continually battered around the backside by a plank. While a Tory MP (or F1 supremo) may enjoy this the rest of us tend to shy away from such activities. A comfort gel seat for the Dorsoduro from Aprilia is worth every penny of its £132.81 asking price and should be top of your list. ■



Better for £50

SPROCKETS

Aprilia sell 46, 47 and 48-tooth replacement Ergal rear sprockets for the Dorsoduro for £61.18 each. Cheaper alternatives are available if you shop around. The bike runs a 46-tooth rear as stock.



£500

SHOCK

A Sachs fully adjustable monoshock with separate 'piggy reservoir' costs £458.78 from Aprilia. With a wide and more responsive range of adjustment it should improve rear wheel grip as well as comfort.

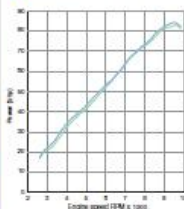
£1500

WHEELS

Supermotos just don't look right unless they have wire wheels. Talon Engineering make wires for the SXV supermoto but their largest rear rim is 5.5-inches and the Dorsoduro runs a 9-inch item. It could be possible to make a wheel to suit but they would need to see the original wheels and it will take time and cost more than the £600 an off-the-shelf set costs.

ADD AN AKRAPOVIC

- Stock bike (not PEG only) 85bhp
- With Akrapovic can 84.5bhp



Figures supplied by Akra' importer Performance Parts, www.performanceparts-ltd.com

Verdict

No questions, no hesitations, no disagreements. The Aprilia's the best bike here. That's 'best' as in best suspension, best build quality, best handling, best braking, best looking and best-equipped and a real big bike challenger. Usually, that kind of verdict comes with a big price-related caveat but in this case we can also add, 'best value for money'. In fact, the only thing you can really criticise it for is its laughably-small tank. True, it's not as practical as the Hornet and FZ if you need to carry a pillow or luggage, but it's not far off.

Vying for second place, but not really direct competitors, are the Hornet and Monster. The Hornet's the oldest bike here, and has gone unchanged since 2007. Proof then of just how right Honda got it in the first place. As usual.

The Hornet manages to juggle novice-friendly handling and controllable power, yet still deliver enough raw excitement to keep experienced hooligans happy. Push it really hard and the limits of the budget

suspension and sensible tyres start to show, but for anything up to nine-tenths it's still one hell of a bike.

The Monster 796 is pretty, petite and peppy. The bigger, lower-revving motor gives a nice dollop of mid-corner drive, but runs out of breath higher up the rev range. It's just a shame about the extra weight of the single-sided swingarm compared with the 696's conventional set-up. It's not as good in town as the Hornet or FZ, but few would deny it beats them hands down in the looks department.

Which leaves the FZ dead last. To be honest, it would have come last if it had been tested on its own. And that's a real shame because it's not actually a bad bike, it's just been spoiled by bad decisions. It would be easy enough to sort the suspension, which would be half the battle, but why couldn't Yamaha have got it right in the first place? The Hornet shows that budget suspension doesn't have to be bad suspension. The biggest problem, though, is the price. Even if the FZ was the cheapest here, it would still be last in line when we're fighting for the keys before a ride. But it's a grand more than the Ducati, 1200 quid more than the basic Dorsoduro and over £1600 more than the non-ABS Hornet. And that's just wrong.

