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The Paris-Dakar has been responsible for many things. On the grim side, it's caused more than a few deaths and grotesque injuries, but on a less morbid reflection, it has spawned a whole new niche of the genus motorbike: The Desert Racer Replica.

Whilst apparently not every British Biker's ideal idea of two-wheeled tomfoolery, these largely laughable attempts at association with the pukka items have nonetheless captured the hearts, cheque books and consequently the top sales in a majority of other European countries.

Yamaha started the pursuit of this particular mirage way back when with the Tenere, essentially nothing more than an XT600 with a bulbous tank, a fresh set of stickers and a quasi-Gauloises paint job. Since then, successive sections of North Africa have been carved up by neo-colonial bike manufacturers, and attributed to various desert racer lash-ups, almost to the point of saturation (a rare commodity in the Sahara, come to think of it). If Africa's placenames continue to be used up at the current rate, you could well find yourself riding a Techni-Tabaradene 600 before long. But somehow I think not . . .

Not least because Honda, in their usual unsubtle fashion, have scuppered any further links to the sandy continent by naming their latest dune blaster after not one area, but the whole bloody nation! However, they have their reasons, and even though it surprises me to admit it, not all of them are wrong.

If the Tenere was the preface to the biography of the Paris-Dakar clone, Honda's XRV650 Africa Twin (to give it its full moniker) is only a sand grain short of being the postscript.

The Africa Twin isn't just another run-of-the-mill tarted-up trail iron, it's a product hot off the hi-tec altars of engineering in Honda's HRC race department. An off-road equivalent of the RC30, if you like, and a direct descendant of the works NXR750 that won the last four Paris-Dakars. As you look at and ride it, you get the well-based impression that



Honda's Africa Twin is a blooming orchid among desert-rep cacti. Pat Devereux picks it . . .



someone, not some deep-fried CAD-CAM microchip, has actually thought about its design.

The engine is neither a bored-out Transalp, nor a sleeved down NXR750. It's a 647cc 52-degree vee-twin

specifically designed for the Africa Twin. Producing 57bhp at around 8000rpm and 6.2kg/m of torque a couple of thousand revs lower (both significantly more than the Transalp), it's enough to haul the 193kgs of bike and half as

much again of rider, to an indicated 180kmh (112mph) and keep it there until you run out of juice, or your neck snaps, whichever happens soonest.

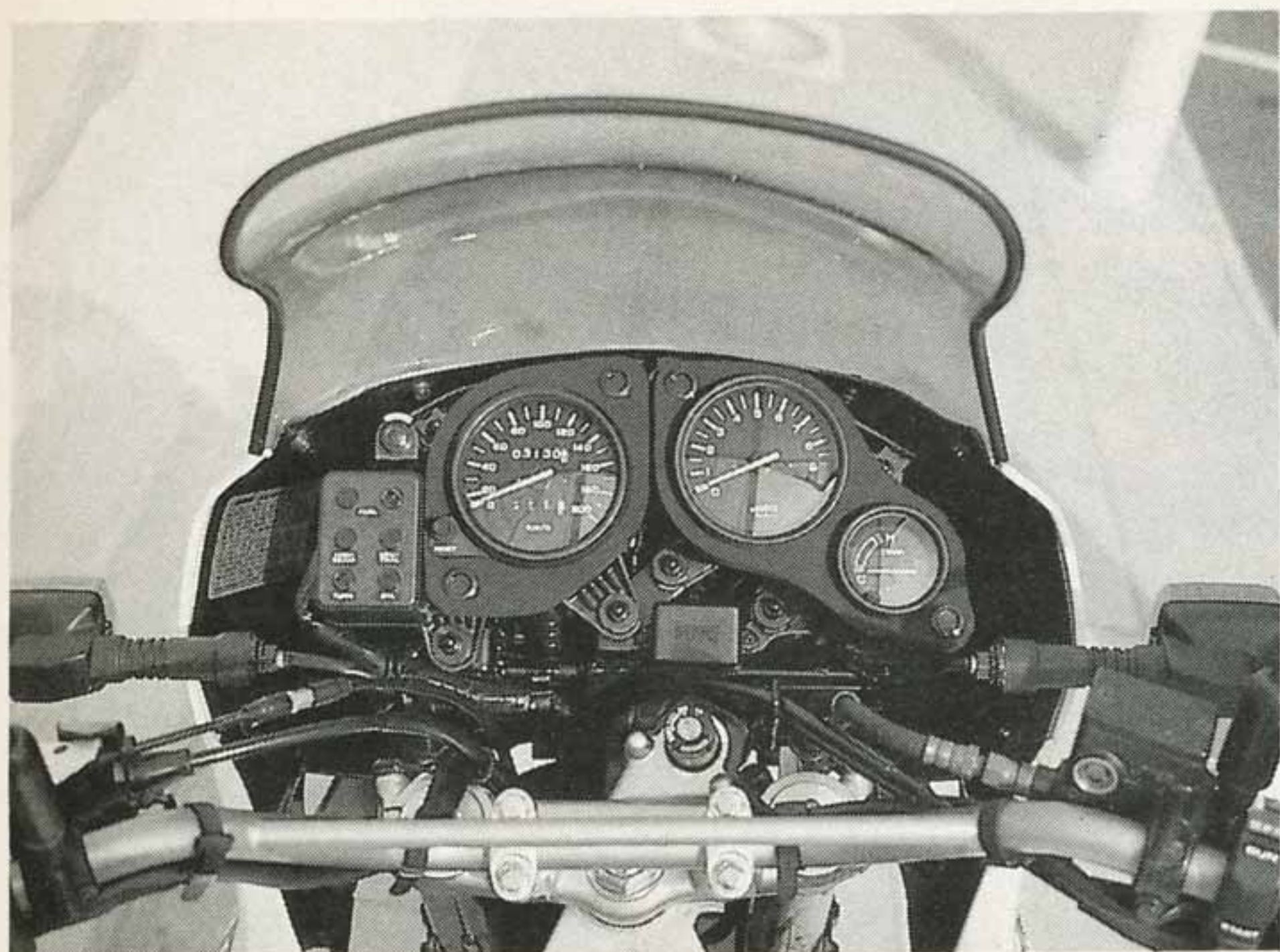
And it'll most likely be decapitation. A Paris-Dakar replica wouldn't be so if it wasn't fitted with a petrol tank that could supply the whole of the Third World for a week or two (useful if you're thinking of going to Wales), and the XRV is no exception. At 5.5 gallons it's still only a third of Eddie Orioli's '88 P-D winning NXR750, but it's still enough to cruise the Kings Road a cred-busting 147 times, if you should want to.

The slight engine vibes might annoy some and thrill others, but since they'd hardly worry anything more than a half-set jelly, they're nothing to worry about. Much like the five-speeder 'box: no doubt designed with lead-hoofed motocross boots in mind, when attacked in lesser DMs, it can on occasion appear to contain more neutrals than Switzerland until you've sussed the correct amount of gear postage.

The chasis is similarly competition-orientated. A set of lo-ong 43mm diameter stilts (with unlinked air-caps that Honda suggest you don't so much as fart into for fear of raising their internal pressure above the recommended 0psi) conspire with the rear compression damping adjustable Pro-link to raise the seat to a groin-straining 33 inches off the deck. But it's all worth it. Once underway nothing short of a bomb crater registers on your in-bum Richter scale as anything more than a minor tremor.

Unless you're cranked over, that is. When you're riding the Africa Twin, your head is nearly six feet from the road when upright, and thus it alternates through ground and skyward arcs of some four or more feet during a particularly tight and/or fast corner. Which is disconcerting enough in itself, but when combined with a chasis that wears its c.of.g low like Dolly Parton, every corner feels like your last. This is obviously untrue (I'm still here, just), but it does take some getting used to.

On the dirt, however, this controlled pessimism becomes



strained to the point of total failure, with only the HRC stickers maintaining even a modicum of faith in survival. Again, this must be just my own paranoia as 50 Africa Twins finished the Paris-Dakar last year. And they sure has hell didn't last 8500 punishing miles by merely by being nice to camels on the way . . .

With this level of panic occurring with such initial regularity, it was heartening (effing essential, actually) to know there was no shortage of brakes to keep thing tangible (and not just tangential). A shrouded 11.6 inch disc and twin-pot Nissin caliper up front, and a slightly less butch (and virutally untouched) 9.5 inch disc at the rear were as good as expected. Better probably.

But however good or bad (wot?) these main components are, they're not what really impressed me. No, it was the millions (I exaggerated, perhaps) of detail touches that really sold me on the Africa Twin: the span-adjuster on the brake lever, a grippy seat cover that allows you to

An Africa Twin pilot sits atop a sand-storming RC30

maintain a comfortable position, a stainless steel exhaust that doesn't break out in a red oxide rash at the mention of moisture. All these, a sump guard that actually has a geological and not synthetic history and grease nipples aplenty, should make for a very satisfying bike to own and ride.

Which makes it all the more of a pity that Honda UK aren't importing them, and all the more of a joy to learn that someone else does. They're still not cheap at over five grand apiece. But you do get a whole lotta bike, plus a package of extras including (as in the pics) engine bars, centre stand, tall screen, tank bag, Givi luggage rack and a light grille thrown in. What more is there to say but the guy's name is Malcolm and his number's 01-341-3868.

Oh, perhaps I should tell you it pulls ace wheelies, too. Nah, I knew you'd guessed already.

HONDA XRV650 AFRICA TWIN

Importer	See text
Engine	Liquid-cooled 4-valve longitudinal 52-degree vee-twin
Bore x stroke	79 x 66mm
Capacity	647cc
Comp. ratio	9.4:1
Carburation	2 x 32cm CV
Claimed power.....	57bhp @ 8000rpm
Claimed torque	44ft.lb @ 6000rpm
Gearbox	5-speed
Electrics.....	12V 24Ah battery

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres.....	Bridgestone TW41
Front.....	90/90-21
Rear	130/90-17
Brakes, front	296mm (11.7in) disc
Rear	210mm (8.3in) disc
Suspension, front	Telescopic, air-adjustable
Rear	Pro-link, rebound damp adjust
Weight (claimed)	193kg (424lb)
Fuel capacity	25 litre (5.5 gal)

