

Motorcycle Test Drive 2008 Kawasaki Concours 14

MSRP \$12,899

Special thanks to
Metro Motorsports, 6161 W Bell, Glendale, AZ
(Ridenow Powersports) for providing the Motorcycle

By Kirk Johnson
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THE OVERNIGHT CANYON SEEKER

About the Bike

Unlike the standard approach to introducing new motorcycles to the marketplace with yesterday's technology and tomorrow's pricing, this new Concours 14 features tomorrow's technology with yesterday's pricing. First, check out the MSRP, a little over \$12K. That's about what you would spend on a Sportster with a few upgrades. Then pile on all of the neat technical stuff and you have a really great deal. But is it something that you want to ride? I was impressed. Read on. The Kawasaki Concours 14 is classified as a sport-touring bike. I believe that the emphasis should be placed on the sport side of the classification with the ability to spend days touring while you carve out canyon runs and mountain passes. If I were going to give it a nickname, I would call it an "overnight canyon seeker."

On the touring side, the Concours is well equipped to make life sustainable, as we know it today. This includes the detachable locking hard bags with carrying handles, and a standard rear rack for an accessory rear trunk should you need more luggage capacity. The electrically adjustable windshield adds to the comfort, hiding you from the breeze and the body of the Concours parts the air around the driver and passenger as your knees tuck in aft of the side covers. The riding position of the driver is a little more aggressive than any of the Harley's, but doesn't make you feel like you're in a racing position. As far as I am concerned, these are just nice features, enabling you to spend days on the road looking for just the right canyon road that you want to talk about for the next six months.

This Kawasaki Concours 14 is so feature-rich, when it comes to the sport side of the equation, that I don't have the space to write about all of the features. The performance from that little 1352 cc engine, which is integrated with the aluminum frame, is amazing. To get the deep pockets of torque they developed a Variable Valve Timing (V V T) system where the intake cam is hydraulically advanced or retarded over a 23.8-degree range based on engine RPM and throttle position. The goal being high torque output across the power band to extend all the way to the 10,500 RPM red line. Unlike a lot of the metric sport bikes with a narrow power band, this machine runs strong from around 3k on up. Couple that with a six speed transmission and then the Tetra-Lever Shaft Drive and you have a great start for the sporty side. The engineers claim that the all new 4-link swingarm, incorporated



with the shaft drive, will reduce all bad things that are inherent with the old shaft drive bikes from the past—such as the seemingly ubiquitous shaft-jacking that occurs when you find the limits of the throttle. Does it really work? I tested it.

To complement the powertrain, and bring you back to reality, they have incorporated radial mounted four-piston front brake calipers. There is a separate brake pad used for each piston. One large pad can deform with the heat generated by hard braking, resulting in a loss of brake feel at the lever. Individual pads provide increased cooling efficiency and can absorb more heat without deforming so they maintain consistent brake feel under extreme conditions. How cool is that. The Concours that I rode had standard brakes, but they do have an ABS option if you think you need it.

The instrument cluster is easy to scan at a glance. First thing you see are the two large analog speed and tach gauges. Centered and just above the gauges is the multi-function LCD digital display that includes an odometer, two trip meters, fuel gauge, gear position indicator and a clock, estimated fuel mileage and even tire pressure read outs from the front and rear tires.

Then there is the KIPASS (Kawasaki's Intelligent Proximity Activation Start System). This is similar to the option that is offered on some of the Harley's. This option enables Concours 14 riders to place an electronic key fob in their pocket and forget about fumbling for a tradition ignition key while wearing gloves. When the rider is ready, all they need to do is press-down on the ignition key, the KI-PASS Electronic Control unit will then search for an authorized fob in the immediate vicinity (about 5.25 feet). If the ECU finds an authorized fob, it will unlock the ignition switch and enable normal function. With this device, you never have to take the key out of the ignition switch. If it is stolen, the motorcycle is just about worthless since all the electronics have to be replaced in order for the motorcycle to function. You don't want to lose the fob; they told me that it's about \$3,000 to replace the electronics in the Concours 14 to make it whole again.

Test Ride

I've heard nothing but great things about this motorcycle. Now as I swing a leg over the seat, I find out just how high the seat is. It is just over 32 inches. With only a 31" inseam, I was on my toes while in the parking lot. Bummer. After that, I couldn't find a thing to complain about. After firing up the little 1352 cc mil, I scanned the gauges, grabbed first gear and disappeared down the road for a ride that I will remember for a long time.

While working my way to some country roads, I fiddled with some of the controls and checked out the gauges. First, I wanted to see if you could adjust the rear shock with the handy adjusting knob that sticks out behind the rider's left leg. I decided that wasn't something that I wanted to mess with in traffic, but it is accessible while riding. The display for speed and tach is about as good as I have seen on any motorcycle. You even get a read out of front and rear tire pressures while moving.

It wasn't long before we were great friends. It all happened on the first on-ramp. As soon as I twisted the grip and made my way down the ramp to find triple digits, I found that I had to brake to blend in with traffic. This is a very easy bike to wear. I felt like I was a part of the machine. After merging, I grabbed a couple of lane changes and then settled in to the flow. The engine was very smooth and solid. No real peaks with RPM, there was just a very nice build from very strong 3,000 RPM launch.

It was then that I noticed a little buffeting from the 70 mph winds hitting the windshield. The turbulence from the top of the shield was hitting me about chin high. Not to worry, I easily adjusted the windshield upward with the switch on the handlebars so that the turbulence was right at the top of my helmet. How great is that? I did raise it all the way up to see what it was like. Interestingly, it felt like my sunglasses

were going to be sucked off my head. I then readjusted the shield for best fit. This is a great feature.

One thing that I did want to test was the shaft drive. For the first 20 minutes of the ride, I forgot all about the drive system on the test ride. The first thing that came to my mind was that it must be pretty good, or I would have noticed it. I guess the engineers were right about the new 4 link swingarm shaft drive being similar, but smoother than a chain drive motorcycle. So here is what I did to really test the new technology. From a stopped position, I started up slow, twisted the grip to about 2/3rds and then engaged the clutch just enough to make the transition solid without trying to spin the rear wheel. What happened was amazing. There was no shaft jacking, or lifting of the rear suspension as the drive gear tried to climb the rear gear to rotate the rear wheel, nor did it squat like a belt or chain driven motorcycle. The rear end sat solid as the front end lifted slowly, levitating the front wheel about 2 inches off the pavement. After about 6 grand it gently settled back to earth ever so softly. Then it did it again when I grabbed second gear. Damn, I love this machine, and it even has side bags for the long rides that you just have go on as you chase the sunset day after day.

Summary

This is a smooth, solid, quiet, versatile living-breathing machine that just begs you to go out and play. Performance was unbelievable, cornering solid and sincere and braking was great. The rear brake depression was a little hard. As for touring, it's a very smooth running machine – you could spend a day on the road without tiring. Technology, ahead of its time. Can't say enough about the bike and I own a Harley. How foolish am I?

Ride safe,
Kirk

