

DR Sleepy's Wake-Up Call

By John Fuller
Gordon Lee photos

The large displacement dualsport category is slim; perhaps most manufacturers are liability-frightened or nervous their machines could be tied to the desecration of protected land. No one seems to know for sure, but choices are few for new dually buyers.

For those with no money woes, a good solution is to grab a KTM and enjoy a legendary bike with a little vibration. Otherwise, visit the Honda shop and learn that the motorcycle sales leader offers only one dualsport, the towering XR650L. The XR's height is enough to discourage some and

makes for a tall centre of gravity on or off the street.

Kawasaki still produces the KLR650, mostly unchanged since the mid-'80s and with a definite street bias. Yamaha seems to have given up the category entirely and hasn't built a contender since the early nineties. Thankfully, Suzuki offers the DR650SE an honest dually created as a street bike capable of traversing varying terrain.

Initially I wasn't overly excited by the prospect of testing the 2003 DR650SE because Suzuki's biggest dual sport is perhaps what some would call more of a utility bike. At least at first glance.

Revamped by the factory in 1996 the big air-cooled single was lowered, lightened and improved piece by piece with one focus in mind, to build a better DR650.

Prior to the new design in '96, the DR650 (affectionately known as DR Sleepy in some quarters) and its inner child the DR600 were best as street bikes, far too heavy and tall to work well off the pavement. So, when a replacement model was being designed Suzuki engineers decided to make the latest creation work better off road but retain or improve its street ability.

True off-road performance enthusiasts were screaming for more dirt-focused machines, but market research showed that a

dualsport was taken off road only a fraction of its life. Thus, the DR650SE was created; a bike built with the original design concept of its predecessor.

This Suzuki's feature list reveals a host of real-life attributes. Unlike some motorcycles the DR650SE has the steering lock incorporated into the ignition key switch, so one clockwise action allows preparation for engine firing. Don't bother looking below for a choke actuator though, because the SE has a handlebar mounted lever unlike a street-a-tized dirt bike or motard.

A touch of the starter button instantly commences the 100mm diameter piston pumping and a gentle putt-putt sound emits the polished stainless steel exhaust.

There's a built-in feature that allows a choice of two seat heights: standard 34.8" (885mm) and a lesser height of 33.3" (845mm). Lowering requires fork disassembly though, so it's a good idea to see the dealer.

The tach's absence is noticeable although everything else is comfortably positioned on a rubber-mounted cluster. There's the usual neutral, turn signal and high beam warning lights hanging off the ignition switch and, as expected, the left handlebar switch features a push-to-cancel turn signal button.

The engine warms-up fast—an advantage of the air-cooled design. Both the throttle and clutch pull offer easy action and the bars have a comfortable bend with colour-

matched plastic handshields gracing their ends for paw protection.

The engine still needed about 500 break-in kilometres before loosening up, so off-idle response was abrupt creating a slight surge while leaving a stop. But, the DR's street ability is great with a well-balanced, lightweight chassis (147 kg/324 lbs) and quality suspension components.

The aluminum-bodied rear shock has a piggyback reservoir that displaces the heat created from the aluminum swingarm and alloy linkage swinging through their arc. The front forks are well-matched in action to the shock and their inner tubes displace more than enough diameter to keep the front end true while cornering or under loads on rough roads. The fork is void of screw adjusters but the shock allows for compression damping.

The rubber-mounted handlebars and cleated footpegs combined with the bar-end weights virtually eliminate what little vibration this counterbalanced four-stroke single can create. When it comes time to slow things down, the double front and single rear piston calipers have no trouble keeping control while the pads pinch the semi-floating front and rigid-mounted rear disc.

A tank of fuel is 13 litres and the DR hits reserve after 175 kilometres with me on board, leaving three litres for reserve.

The engine is of a wet sump design so no freaky oil change ritual is required and the huge oil cooler should prolong reli-

The DR just wanted focus and a little direction from the rider in off-highway situations—a stipulation for any large dualsport. And bonus, the suspension kept its composure.



Hotdogs: John Fuller's demonstration of the DR650SE's broad balance point on the wheelie draws the attention of riders who seem to have points of their own to make.



ability. The air filter is foam and valve adjustment is via taps so maintenance chores are kept basic.

Chain adjustment is through cam type adjusters making it quick and easy and its 525 size is overbuilt for this application so it should last a long time. On road or off the headlight shines a good wide beam.

Locking the rear wheel takes almost more effort than lifting it off the ground with the front lever—translated, the back brake needs strong pressure to skid. Wheelie this machine and prepare to display your skill and concentration to accomplish the task.

The DR's low-slung chassis and tall gearing make wheelies tough, but once the front wheel is high enough the balance point has a wide berth. The widely spaced and tall gearing is a pleasure, allowing realistic shift intervals, fourth to fifth gear changes happen at 120 kmh comfortably and the machine's massive torque allows for lazy shifting decisions without complaint from the engine room.

The mirrors have a couple of pivot points that come into play when impacted that can save a replacement. On the road, they offer a clear view of what is behind, up to any speed I could muster (158 kmh).

The handling is light and easy on the street and the great brakes, good suspension and reasonable weight inspire some epic cornering sessions. Once the pavement ends, however, the flip side of the DR's personality is exposed.

On logging roads, the same chassis that once felt light and nimble revealed a heavier,

more lethargic nature. The handling behaved, and the DR went where it was supposed to go, it just wanted focus and direction from the rider—a stipulation for any large dualsport. On the other hand the suspension kept its composure even when dealt eight-inch potholes at 80-plus kmh.

At one point a downed tree had me searching for an alternate path and it was then I was introduced to the DR's trail manners. Experience with hardcore dirt bikes allowed me to attack the obstruction with confidence and the DR was up and over before I realized how heavy the bike is—not bad for a street type bike.

A mud section quickly overcame the stock tires and the rear started spinning and the front sliding. But nothing strange happened to my control, the bike stayed calm and we found our way through.

It was tough to find fault with the big DR, fit and finish on the machine are great with little polished brackets and good qual-

ity hardware throughout. There are only some very minor complaints about the bike. The sidestand is a little long making parking ponderous since it holds the bike at a near-vertical angle.

Shifting is a little notchy and needs a good positive engagement. Seeing the high beam and turn indicator lights is difficult while seated since the throttle cables pass directly over the dash obscuring their view. These are minor issues compared to what the DR does well.

If your focus is more off-road with less street then the big DR may not be the right choice; perhaps Suzuki's DRZ400 would be the machine you need. So, think hard about what type of dualsport riding you will really do.

The DR650SE fills my daily commuting needs and works for a weekend adventure bike.

It's more than an errand runner, less than a dirt rocket but still does a little bit of it all. Welcome to the world of dualsport, it's all about compromise. 

