

Suzuki V-Strom 650

Strom-Lite

By Kevin Ash
Frank Ratering photos

Smaller versions of big bikes rarely generate much attention when they're first announced, and so it was when Suzuki unveiled the V-Strom 650 just before the Milan Show in September—you might not even remember it! Which just goes to show how unfair life can be, as this middleweight V-Strom is not only a better bike than its 1000cc

big brother, it deserves to steal sales from a whole range of other middleweights.

That shouldn't have been too unexpected, as the heart of this latest V-Strom is basically the same 650cc, 90-degree V-Twin engine which has had its praises sung ever since the original SV650 was launched back in 1999, and in the V-Strom the motor is just as lively and endearing to ride as the SV. Suzuki says the changes to the engine have enhanced the midrange at the expense of some high rev horsepower, a regular claim from many manufacturers which translated usually seems to mean a perfectly good engine has been made dull and lifeless.

Not this time, fortunately, although there's no reward for revving the motor to its 10,500 rpm redline as it will have been feeling laboured for the previous 1,500 rpm. So dab on the light and positive gear lever earlier, as the needle reaches 9,000 rpm, and the V-Strom feels eager and willing.

Outright performance is well shy of the 600cc supersport fours, but that's not the point. What matters is that the throttle response is crisp, the bike is plenty quick enough and it feels good. For once I was able to test the top speed legally on the road, and not because it only does 110 kmh. Thanks to the location of the launch in the Bavarian Alps south of Munich on an unrestricted autobahn, the speedo needle crept round to 200 kmh.

My GPS reckoned we were covering ground at 185 kmh, but bearing in mind it was bitterly cold—and I was dressed

Deep roots: The SV650 was a sleeper hit for Suzuki when it first emerged in 1999. The V-Strom, rigged with the same 650cc 90-degree V-Twin, leans heavily on that people's choice platform and will challenge its stablemate as a sales leader.



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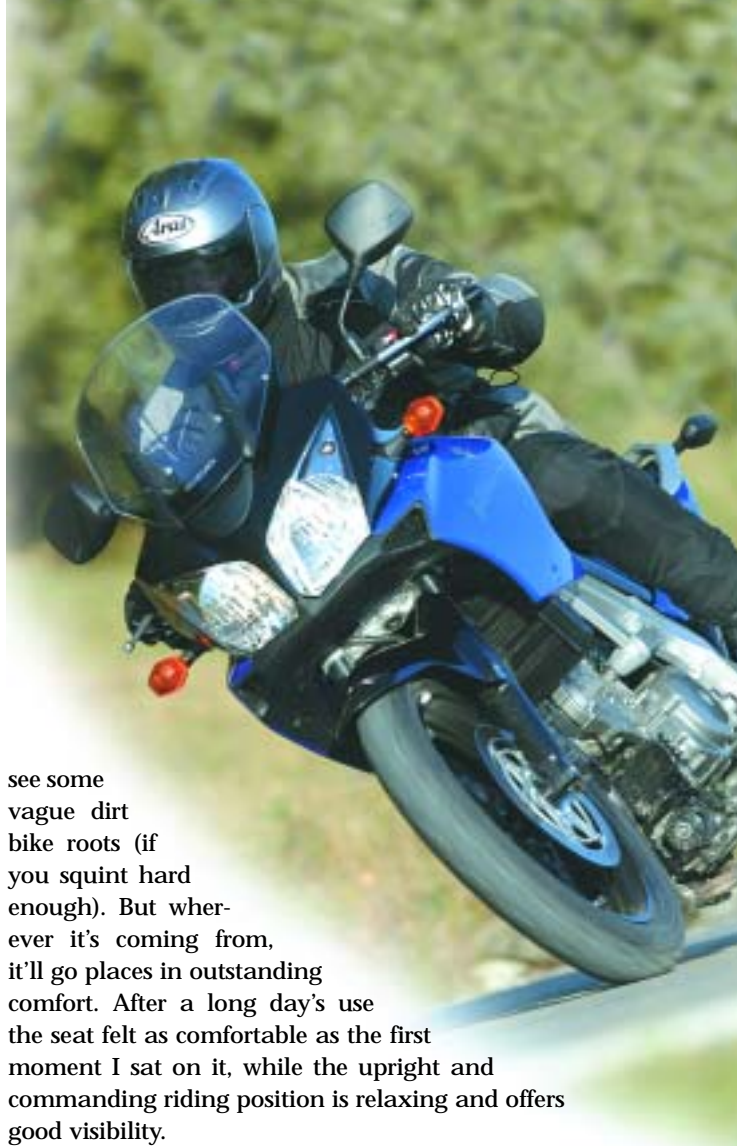
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for warmth not aerodynamics—and a true summertime 200 kmh plus should be attainable. Compared with the V-Strom 1000 the 650 does miss out on the big bike's colossal midrange torque, but it's altogether smoother and more pleasant to use, and it trickles down to very low speeds very happily. There's enough shudder and shake coming through the bars and seat to let you know the engine's flexing its muscles, but no vibration to complain about, even at steady motorway speeds. Cruise at 140 kmh with 7,000 rpm on the tach and there's no hint of the buzziness so many fours impose on you when cruising.

Suzuki's sophisticated and effective twin throttle butterfly system works as well on the V-Strom as on the company's supersport fours, feeling like the best carburetors instead of fuel injection, which is so often snatchy and harsh.

The overall smoothness is spoiled slightly by a small amount of transmission backlash which makes the bike jerky in slow-moving traffic, but it's far from being the worst in this respect. Most of the time the engine just impresses with its crispness and generous spread of torque, enhanced by lower final drive gearing than the SV650S with which it shares all its gear ratios.

So far, so fine for sporting or touring use, with excellent town manners thrown in too, and the story is much the same with the chassis. In practice, for all the talk of adventure touring or whatever (Suzuki calls the bike a sport enduro tourer, whatever one of those is meant to do ...) the V-Strom is a touring bike with a bit of spin on the styling in which you might



see some vague dirt bike roots (if you squint hard enough). But wherever it's coming from, it'll go places in outstanding comfort. After a long day's use the seat felt as comfortable as the first moment I sat on it, while the upright and commanding riding position is relaxing and offers good visibility.

Shorter riders will be disappointed it's not as friendly to the short-legged as the original SV650 (an advantage squandered with the higher perch of the current model), but it's not unmanageably tall either, at 32" (820mm) it's lower than the 1000 V-Strom, and narrower too, which helps. The small screen is set well forward of the rider, but unlike most in this position doesn't induce significant turbulence to buffet your helmet. The good news is, it's height adjustable with a two-inch (50mm) range, but it took a factory Suzuki technician 10 minutes to alter mine—very much a set it and forget it design, which is a pity when with just a little more thought a simple manual adjustment would have been so much more useful.

Still, this is better than having to buy an optional high screen, which is the route many manufacturers take, and once it's set to your taste, the wind noise isn't too loud either.

Some other features smack of having escaped the designer's attentions, such as the cheap tie-wraps attaching the switchgear wiring to the handlebars, the desperately ugly rear mudguard and the fat water hose which spoils the view of the front cylinder from the right hand side. V-Twins should look good, but instead your attention's



drawn to a length of black rubber with "Meiji R&C Co Japan 3901" stamped crudely on it in big white letters. Very pretty...

No sign of improvement in headlight adjustment either, something I complained about vigorously with the V-Strom 1000 I was running for six months last year, when altering their angle would take 15 fiddly minutes with the toolkit. The 650 is just the same, and with Ducati now offering simple on-board adjustment on every model from the ST3 and Multistrada right up to the 999 superbike, clearly there are no more excuses for anyone else, especially on a bike

with touring credentials which is bound to face a wide range of loads, and pitch up and down accordingly. What you do get though is another very important feature missing from too many bikes, and that's a serious fuel range. With its 5.8 gallon (22-litre) tank capacity and, judging by what we know of the SV650, a consumption of about 16 km/l, the V-Strom should be capable of 320 kilometre-plus stints between refills, and thanks to its excellent ergonomics they'll be very comfortable too. Plenty of time to admire the dash, similar to the 1000's but with the dated central warning lamp cluster replaced by a smart and easy-to-read LCD display. Another nice touch is how the pillion section of the seat is flush with the luggage rack, so it's easy to carry large objects across the two of them. Or pillions with very large behinds ...

The plush suspension plays a role in cossetting the rider, no question, and probably the slightly jiggly ride quality on the test was due entirely to the very cold conditions thickening the damping oil—after a high speed pounding down the autobahn even this had almost disappeared. But the quality of Showa's forks and shocks even on budget middleweights shows through as good control in cornering on the V-Strom. Admittedly it wasn't possible to really extend the bike's handling in such low temperatures, but bumpy bends taken at speed failed to faze it and all the signs are it'll cope very well in warmer conditions.

The V-Strom's combination of agility with good high speed

stability impresses, and it's here that the 650 is so much more fun than the relatively ponderous 1000. The smaller bike flicks into corners with much less effort, and thanks to its high and wide bars will probably outpace an SV650S in tighter terrain too, despite giving away around 44 lbs (20 kg) (more, if the tank's full ...). The brakes are certainly up to it, being lifted directly from the 1000, although the rear lacks useful feedback.

Panniers and a top box will be available as options when the bike comes on sale early next year, although no prices have been announced for these yet, setting out the V-Strom's stall as an effective touring bike.

But it corners well, the motor is vivacious and the upright rider's stance combined with the bike's easy and neutral low speed handling also makes it a very effective urban tool.

If anything is going to hold it back, it will be the combination of its odd looks with many riders' lingering resistance to being converted by these quasi-trail bikes. Viewed from the side it's actually quite aggressive and appealing, especially in the rich blue colour option. But the black upper fairing and front mudguard which disguise its bulk so well in



THE FACTS

Engine: 645cc V-Twin
Frame: Twin spar aluminum
Power: N/A
Weight: 417 lbs. (189 kg)
Price: N/A

Agility, a proven motor, plush suspension, Strom-Lite has it all happening. It's a better all-round bike than its big brother, the V-Strom 1000, says Mr. Ash. With saddlebags and a top box soon to be available, the V-Strom 650's stall is set out as an effective touring bike. But that headlight ...

profile dominate from the front, giving it an unfinished and gawky look not helped by the too-large headlights borrowed from the V-Strom 1000 to save

costs, but which sit awkwardly in the 650's smaller bodywork. No price has been announced officially, but it's likely the 650 V-Strom will be pitched very close to or the same as the SV650S, and at this level it's real value. Suzuki's worry surely must be that as well as stealing sales of rival bikes, it might eat into the SV650S market. Probably the V-Strom will be seen as more of a tourer, but it's still sporty enough, with better comfort and a much bigger fuel range.