

## ROAD TEST

KAWASAKI ER-6f ★ SUZUKI BANDIT 650S ★ YAMAHA FZ6 FAZER  
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# All the fun of the faired

**Kawasaki's middleweight ER-6n is a budget bundle of good looks and performance. Now the fully-faired ER-6f is here, can it cut it against those firm all-rounder favourites the Suzuki Bandit 650S and Yamaha FZ6 Fazer?**

BY LISA STEELE PICTURES BY MARK MANNING

THREE bikes, two full days' riding - which would prove the king of the faired all-rounders?



**T**HE idea that sports bikes have a hard life isn't true. Their engines, brakes, suspension and other components are designed for the rigours dished out by a rider who wants maximum thrills. Workhorse bikes get a much harder time because, despite being built down to a lower budget than sports bikes, they have to deal with all types of riding from commuting to spirited riding via touring and the odd trackday too. And in all weathers.

The definitive all-rounder is Yamaha's FZ6 Fazer: half-faired, with an engine that delivers the goods for every type of rider, from novice to experienced road thrasher. Suzuki's Bandit 650S is somewhat long in the tooth but, like the Fazer, a perfect workhorse. And now there's Kawasaki's new ER-6f challenging for the title of best all-rounder...

Three bikes, all middleweights, all offering added wind protection over their naked brothers, all within £800 of each other and all reckoning they're top banana for new riders, 'laydees' and strapping chaps. What better test to sort the wheat from the chaff than a solid road trip? We could hear the Peak District beckoning and answered the call...

### AT A GLANCE

LINING up the machines, the Fazer and

Bandit look like rivals. Large and chunky, with small fairings to show off their meaty, four-cylinder engines, they look infinitely more aggressive than the delicate little Kawasaki whose mechanical credentials are hidden behind square yardage of plastic.

#### CHASSIS

THE Fazer, we agreed on first view, has the strongest chassis. It's a pretty good-looking, well-made machine, no doubt about that.

The Suzuki aroused some passion. There was much talk of it looking "dated", "behind the game", or just plain "crap". With a design that's straight out of the '80s, it could do with an overhaul. Someone described it as "the Ford Mondeo of motorcycling". Ouch.

The Kwak, meanwhile, seems good but basic. The clean lines of the fairing may offer protection and transform this bike's looks from starter bike to genuine mile-muncher, but there's an element of Kawasaki having just bolted it all together without much thought. This is best illustrated by the fact that the oil sight-glass cannot be read without removing a fairing panel. Hmm...

#### ENGINES

HEADING off towards Derbyshire, it was obvious all three bikes have a decent amount

of available power. With two inline fours and the ER-6f's parallel twin, you'd think that the bike with 'half an engine' would lose out. Not so. The smooth, fuel-injected power delivery of the Kawasaki is pokey, accessible and huge fun to play with if you're in the mood. Like its naked brother the ER-6n, which justifiably earns respect as a 'first big bike', the ER-6f makes riding so easy. Select the wrong gear? No problem, it'll take you there anyway. Want to fly away from the lights? Fine. Roll it on in top? Let's go.

It stops well, too, as proved when a car driver ground to a halt in the middle of an A1 roundabout, the addled old git trying to work out which way to go...

The Bandit has no shortage of grunt, although it's creamy smooth with a softer delivery. Its reputation as a mad machine has waned with the passage of time but, again, it's useable and fun.

The Fazer, meanwhile, with its R6-derived engine, proves peaky. It's got oodles of searing drive, but by God, you've got to work it. It's all at the top end, which is fine on a motorway but a pain anywhere else.

On reaching Matlock, we head for the welcoming warmth of a chip shop and compare riding impressions.

#### PERFORMANCE

THE Bandit has power and feels good with it. It's masculine but quiet with a tendency to make you go 'wahaay!' while careering round bends or slicing through traffic. Dreadful brakes, though.

The ER-6f is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Boy, you can throw this thing around. Light and incredibly nimble with a great gearbox, top throttle response and good brakes, it's much more capable than it looks. More importantly, its twin-pot engine never suffers against the two fours. It doesn't have the same screaming insanity at the top end as the Yamaha, but it gets up to 110mph easily, with plenty more to go – not a sniff of breathlessness about it.

The Fazer is hard work in comparison. The clutch is heavy, the throttle's got too much play in it and the overall mass of the bike means it feels lardy at anything other than high speed. You have to work it, and this gets tedious after a while. On the plus side, it's got masses of top-end power and by far the best brakes of the three.

By evening, we reach our B&B, then it's an evening at the pub. Heated debate rages, as actually riding the bikes has exploded any preconceived ideas we had about them. Somebody raised the subject of another,

*Continues over*



BEEFY Yamaha (left) and Suzuki (centre) make Kawasaki look a bit twee



BANDIT (left) has easily accessible power; on the FZ6 you work harder



THE destination: Matlock Bath and a chance to chat after a good ride



THE ER-6f takes a tail pack well, thanks to strong twin grab rails



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absent rival: Suzuki's SV650S. Almost universally popular, the V-twin is another option: sporty, middleweight, fairing... The thing is, it's already been trounced by the Kawasaki (MCN August 24, 2005 or go to [www.motorcyclenews.com](http://www.motorcyclenews.com)).

Sleep follows food, followed by dreams of rolling country roads and three bikes making their pilots smile...

### HANDLING

THE Kawasaki's a marvel. "Nimble as a 250" was one comment that sums it up perfectly, after a twisty ride across rugged countryside. It's the lightest bike of the three - and feels it. Terrific fun for experienced riders, brilliantly reassuring for novices; quite an achievement.

The Bandit and Fazer are remarkably agile, given their extra weight, but the Fazer suffers from feeling harsh yet lardy at low speed. Not such a plus point, especially if your map reading and

U-turns leave a lot to be desired.

If you're commuting, the Kawasaki and Suzuki will shine as much as if you're out blitzing back roads with your mates on them. Around town, the Fazer suffers.

The combination of weight, heavy clutch and slack throttle make stopping and starting much more of a task than on the other two. Plus its power is all at the top end, so urban riding's a wheezy, laborious chore. After early promise, its popularity is waning...

### COMFORT AND PRACTICALITY

THE poor Fazer, out-shone in so many ways, doesn't do too badly in the comfort stakes. The wide bars and substantial screen mean it's roomy on the move. But you get numb butt cheeks, as the seat's very hard, so points are lost. If you're thinking of a long trek, take a cushion.

The Bandit is similarly spacious but doesn't have the rock-hard seat problem,



KAWASAKI (left) is "nimble as a 250"



### KAWASAKI ER-6f

ANALOGUE clocks and no fuel gauge (just a fuel warning light) are very old-fashioned and the preload on the rear shock is the only element of the suspension that's adjustable. Those twin grab rails are very pillion-friendly, though.



while the ER-6f is a lot more tucked in. The bars are narrow and the screen is ineffective unless you're crouched right down behind it. It'll also run out of leg room for taller riders way before the others do. Great news for smaller folks, though.

The Fazer and ER-6f do well in the 'tying a tail pack to the pillion perch' test, with their strong, twin grab rails. The Bandit's single unit means luggage keeps pushing forward into the rider - not great. The Bandit also scores for being the only one with an easily-adjustable seat height (between 770-790mm).

As for taking a pillion, all the bikes scored well on leg room, but the Kawasaki's narrower, forward-slanting seat and the Fazer's harder, higher passenger position meant the Bandit was best overall.

#### EQUIPMENT AND VALUE

WITH the main aim of a ride (getting to your destination in one piece) being achieved, you can look into the nitty-gritty things that can make or break your enjoyment of the experience. The lack of fuel-injection on the Bandit, for example, emphasised its antiquated image, plus the lack of an adjuster on the clutch lever could prove a pain for smaller hands.

The front suspension was pretty soggy, too, but the bike comes equipped with adjustable preload at the front and rear (the rear also has adjustable rebound) so you can tweak it to your requirements. The bike's analogue speedo wasn't popular, but its electronic fuel gauge was.

The Fazer continued to disappoint with its clunky gearbox at low rpm (the Bandit's isn't a whole lot better). The fuel injection is a touch jerky at low speeds, not helped by that heavy throttle or the (non-adjustable) clutch lever, which is

heavier than a pregnant shire horse but, when it bites, it bites unnervingly suddenly. Its electronic clocks are OK, although the rev counter is hard to read. Also, the front suspension isn't adjustable, although the rear preload is.

So, to the new Kawasaki... With adjustable brake and clutch levers, the controls are easy for everyone, but we weren't keen on the analogue clocks and the fuel light (no gauge). Like the Fazer, only the rear preload is adjustable.

There's no doubt that the addition of a fairing makes a bike more user-friendly when you're doing distance. The main reason for choosing between faired and un-faired is usually based solely on looks, however, and none of these bikes suffer too much from the added bodywork. In fact, the ER-6f looks like a completely different bike - and much-improved, if you're not keen on the naked version's

**'The ER-6f is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Boy, you can throw this thing around'**



BANDIT (left) is pretty agile, considering its weight. And look - it's sunny, too!

## SECOND OPINION

**DEK CRUTCHLOW,**  
road tester and ex-racer



THE Bandit's way behind the game. I mean... carbs, for heaven's sake. It's like going out, in this day and age, and buying a black and white television: you just don't need to. It's badly sprung and bland to ride. I didn't like it. It felt like I had something antiquated between my legs (ahem) and it looks horrible.

The Fazer's OK, but the gearbox is awful and the seat's too hard. I've been on comfier race seats. What's more, there's too much play in the throttle and, initially at least, the fuel injection jumps about a bit. It might have a lot of power, but it's not there when you need it: it wouldn't pull you out of bed.

I'd jump on the ER-6f, given the choice of the three. It can easily cope with both commuting and touring, the suspension's well set up and it's got good drive, especially for a twin. Looks good, too.

## VERDICT

AFTER a hectic two-day trip, plenty of miles and a load of junk food, we wave goodbye to the Peaks. The journey back is a battle to stay warm and, keen to get home, we push the bikes just a little more. By now, we don't mind which one we ride: we just want to get there in comfort, quickly and, above all, safely. And that's the upshot. All these bikes are quick, capable and excellent confidence-inspiring workhorses. The deal-breakers are in the detail...

The Bandit and Fazer both came in for some serious criticism. After two days of riding, the Yamaha turned out to be the bike nobody wanted the keys for. It may be the class leader (and the most expensive bike in our test) with its strong engine and tough bodywork, but in the real world, where sports performance is best left to sports bikes, the heavy clutch, lazy throttle, peaky power and rough gearbox work against it.

As for the Bandit, it was its geriatric appearance and its lack of crisp fuel injection that let it down. The styling's a personal thing, however, and if it's a more traditional look you're after, it might just be your thing. It's the cheap and cheerful alternative and, for the money, you could do a lot worse.

Clear winner is the Kawasaki. It surprised us all with its mix of nimble handling and substantial but easy-to-use power. The fairing's clean lines make it a proper little sports tourer and, at under five grand, it's a bargain for all.



### YAMAHA FZ6 FAZER

REV counter is hard to read, but despite a bum-numbing seat, the Fazer is pillion and luggage-friendly thanks to its pair of grab rails.



### SUZUKI BANDIT 650S

ANALOGUE speedo didn't win any fans, but electronic fuel gauge did. Rear end has adjustable preload and rebound, but there's only one grab rail.



### KAWASAKI ER-6f

★★★★★

COST:

£4895

(£5295 with ABS)

POWER:

71.1bhp

WEIGHT:

178kg

TORQUE:

48.8ftlb

Available: now

Colours: black, silver

New for 2006: new model

Insurance group: 10 (of 11)

Info: Kawasaki UK, 01628-856750

FUEL: 15.5 litres

RAKE: 25°

SEAT HEIGHT: 770mm

TRAIL: 106mm

SEAT HEIGHT: 790mm

TRAIL: 108mm

WHEELBASE: 1410mm

#### TECHNICAL SPEC

Engine: liquid-cooled 649cc (83mm x 60mm) 8v dohc four-stroke parallel twin. Fuel injection. Six gears.

Chassis: steel diamond frame. 41mm forks, single rear shock with adjustable preload. Brakes: 2 x semi-floating 300mm front discs with twin-piston calipers, 220mm rear disc with single-piston caliper. Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 160/60 x 17 rear.

### SUZUKI BANDIT 650S

★★★★★

COST:

£4599

POWER:

76.4bhp

WEIGHT:

204kg

TORQUE:

43.7ftlb

Available: now

Colours: black, blue, red

New for 2006: ABS as standard

Insurance group: 11 (of 17)

Info: Suzuki GB, 0870-608-1305

FUEL: 20 litres

RAKE: 23°

SEAT HEIGHT: 770mm

TRAIL: 95mm

SEAT HEIGHT: 795mm

TRAIL: 108mm

WHEELBASE: 1440mm

#### TECHNICAL SPEC

Engine: air-cooled 656cc (65.5mm x 48.7mm) 16v dohc four-stroke inline four. Carburettor. Six gears.

Chassis: steel double cradle frame. 41mm forks adjustable for preload, single rear shock with adjustable preload and rebound damping. Brakes: 2 x 290mm front discs with twin-piston calipers, 240mm rear disc with single-piston caliper. Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 160/60 x 17 rear.

### YAMAHA FZ6 FAZER

★★★★★

COST:

£5299

POWER:

96.5bhp

WEIGHT:

187kg

TORQUE:

46.6ftlb

Available: now

Colours: silver, blue, red

New for 2006: new colours

Insurance group: 12 (of 17)

Info: Yamaha UK, 01932-358000

FUEL: 19.4 litres

RAKE: 25°

SEAT HEIGHT: 775mm

TRAIL: 95mm

SEAT HEIGHT: 795mm

TRAIL: 108mm

WHEELBASE: 1440mm

#### TECHNICAL SPEC

Engine: liquid-cooled 600cc (65.5mm x 44.5mm) 16v dohc four-stroke inline four. Fuel injection. Six gears.

Chassis: aluminium beam frame. 43mm telescopic forks, single rear shock with adjustable preload. Brakes: 2 x 298mm front discs with twin-piston calipers, 245mm rear disc with single-piston caliper. Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 180/55 x 17 rear.