

ROAD TEST

KAWASAKI ER-6 ★ SUZUKI SV650S
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Budget blasters!



So how does Kawasaki's new ER-6 hold up against the affordable middleweight master, Suzuki's SV650?

BY THOMAS SCHMIEDER PICTURES BY FRANK R WEIHS

KAWASAKI would have us believe its new ER-6 is a revolutionary approach to motorcycling: a budget special that both looks expensive and refreshingly exciting in a simple, straightforward kind of way and yet, at the same time, is built and priced to suit the shallow pocket.

And, on the strength of our first ride last month, it delivers. It's stylish, fun and mouth-wateringly priced. But in the cold light of day, shorn of that PR pomp and glitzy veneer, surely there's an alternative, more pragmatic view: the

bare bones of the ER-6 are a budget, middleweight roadster twin – just like Suzuki's already popular and impressive SV650. So there's one question: how does the new Kawasaki stack up against its V-twin rival? Read on to find out...

AT A GLANCE

DESPITE the freshness of the ER-6's design and styling, once parked next to the two-year-old Suzuki SV there are a surprising number of similarities. Obvious engine differences apart (the Suzuki's a 645cc V-twin compared to the Kawasaki's 649cc parallel twin), the two

bikes share very similar chassis, cycle parts, componentry and even styling.

So, from front to back, both bikes have virtually identical front ends with similar non-adjustable 41mm conventional forks holding 17-inch wheels, along with twin discs gripped by identical four-piston Tokico calipers. The only differences here are the natty six-spoke gold wheels of the Kawa compared to the SV's ageing black three-spoke design and the ER's slightly bigger (300mm compared to 290mm) wavy-type discs.

In fact the gold finish of the Kawasaki's wheels is repeated throughout the ER-6 and makes a stark contrast to the drab blackness of the SV's cycle parts. So, at the front end, not only are the Kawasaki's wheels gold, so are the fork sliders and even the yokes. Overall, it's a much brighter, more cheerful bike to look at. So the first nod in terms of style and spec goes to the Kawasaki.

The midribs bear similar close scrutiny. With the SV you get a gunmetal-finished engine hung from an angular and black-

painted, triangulated box-section alloy frame. With the Kawa it's similar technology (although the frame is triangulated tubular steel) but wrapped up in much brighter window dressing and colours. At the rear there are two fairly sturdy, box-section swingarms (again black alloy versus gold steel), decent pillion seats and grab handles and identical 160-section rubber. What's most different is that, where the SV has an adequate but fairly run-of-the-mill rising rate linkage monoshock, the ER trumpets its old-tech cantilever monoshock by positioning it on the right hand side of the frame and, again, painting it gold. It's cheap, it works OK and it looks well trick, a theme that's repeated throughout the new Kawasaki.

But perhaps the closest comparison of all, at first, comes from the saddle. Although the Suzuki is all angles and harsh black while the ER is curves and bright colours, essentially they're identical. Switchgear and mirrors are virtually interchangeable, as are the one-

piece bars, while the instrument pod of the ER is like a facelifted version of the SV's – identical in layout. Even the 11,000rpm redlines are identical.

OFF THE THROTTLE

BUT if the ER gets the nod in terms of style and, albeit narrowly, spec, you'd think that when it comes to outright performance, the proven and impressive V-twin SV lump would at least be the equal of the ER's parallel twin. But it doesn't quite work out like that.

In terms of claimed performance, the two are virtually identical – both boasting a claimed 71bhp at peak, although the slightly revvier horses of the ER come 500rpm later at 9000rpm compared to the SV's 8500rpm. But our dyno results (see page 30) reveal the true (and surprising) difference, with the SV delivering a true 76bhp compared to our ER's slightly disappointing 68.

But while that difference sounds significant, on the road it's anything but. Both machines, in truth, are refined,

'The SV's proven V-twin lump should at least be the equal of the ER's - but it doesn't quite work out like that'



flexible, fun and versatile. Both will cruise happily at 70-85mph and both top out, with the rider flat on the tank, at an indicated 130mph, or a true 125 in real money.

On paper the Kawasaki has less punch, but in practice it's still got a decent enough dollop of midrange and its enthusiasm for revs (it'll rev far more happily and breezily to its 11,500rpm rev-limiter than the comparatively laboured, longer-stroke Suzuki), superior aerodynamics and chassis means there's little to split them. Both have deliciously slick six-speed gearboxes and light cable-operated clutches. While in terms of smoothness, the ER just nicks it again.

BY THE SEAT OF YOUR PANTS

BUT if engine performance is close, the same cannot be said for handling and rider ergonomics. Where the SV has always been a little cramped for taller riders who find their knees pushed up high around the tank, Kawasaki's designers have done wonders with the

layout of the new ER-6. In short, although skinny, the ER feels totally natural and familiar straight away. It's one of those rare bikes you gel with immediately.

On the move the Kawa has significant advantages too. Although outwardly the two machines' forks are identical, internally they're very different. The SV has always suffered from an overly soft front end which dives too eagerly on the brakes. Ridden side-by-side with the new Kawasaki this was all too obvious. Thanks to decent spring and damping rates the ER tracks the road far better and only dives severely under very hard, last-minute braking.

At the rear, too, the ER has the edge. Although the Kawasaki's budget-friendly shock is only pre-load adjustable it's at least the match of the SV's more sophisticated but rather soggy component.

As the ER's engine is so compact it enabled Kawasaki's engineers to use a longer swingarm for extra stability and to

also give the offset, cantilever-mounted shock, an easier time. What's more, that compact engine layout also allowed the positioning of the exhaust silencer immediately beneath the engine to further centralise the bike's mass and again aid handling.

The result is a package that is both compact, stable, sharp handling and secure all at the same time. All in all the ER has the more balanced and good-natured chassis. The SV, fork problems or not, has always been a sweet handler, but against the ER it seems decidedly old hat.

The ER nicks it again in the braking department. Despite identical calipers, the slightly larger, wavy-design discs have a bite and feel the SV can't match which, allied to the Kawasaki chassis' general poise and firmer front end makes it a joy to nail inside the SV into sharp corners. Oh, and an ABS will shortly be available, too - something else the Suzuki can't quite match.

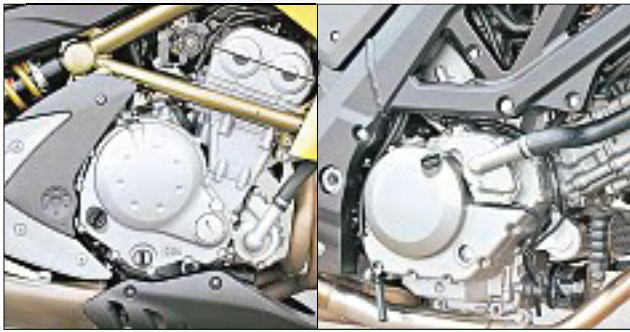
For verdict turn to page 30



THE all-new ER's chassis and brakes make it easy to stuff up the inside of the SV

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ER-6 powerplant is a 649cc parallel twin

BUT the SV has a 645cc V-twin motor



KAWASAKI'S seat will fit everyone

BUT SV's perch is cramped for taller riders



KAWASAKI'S rear end is all classic curves

WHILE Suzuki's angular looks are in your face



YOKE is coloured gold; readout is stylish

THE similarities with the SV are startling

VERDICT

AFTER our first taste of the ER earlier in the summer we were impressed but still a little sceptical about Kawasaki's bold claims.

Now, having put it side-by-side with its closest competitor - a bike which has ruled this particular sector of the market unchallenged for many years - we are even more enthralled. The ER is a fabulous piece of kit.

Its masterstroke is that it manages to offer great riding fun to novices and experienced riders at the same time. It's good natured

and easy-going but never bland or boring. It has style and neat design touches (such as the faired-in front indicators and funky front mini-fairing) yet still comes in at a tempting price.

The SV has long been a very good motorcycle with an impressively potent and versatile engine but now it has at last met its match. That said, a revised SV with some chassis tuning, improved ergonomics and updated styling would be right back up there again. Come on then, Suzuki...

PERFORMANCE TESTING

AN odd one, this. On face value the newer ER should have the much older SV beat - but both manufacturers claim virtually identical performance figures. So we tested them both on the dyno to find out the truth - and then we were

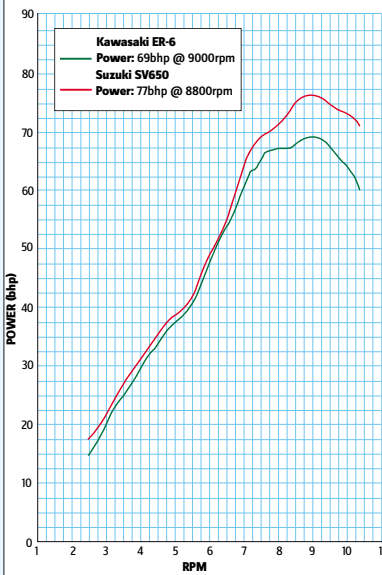
in for a surprise. Although they're very similarly matched, the sweet SV has the better of the ER throughout the rev range.

But when it comes to the riding experience (see page 28) there is very little to split them.

IT'S down on power but big on laughs



POWER



KAWASAKI ER-6

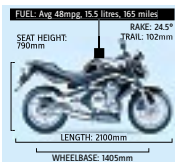
★★★★★
COST: £4500 (est)
POWER: 69bhp
TORQUE: 46ftlb
WEIGHT: 174kg

Availability: October
Colours: Green, silver, black
New for 2005: New model
Insurance group: 9 (of 17)
Info: Kawasaki UK, 01628-856750

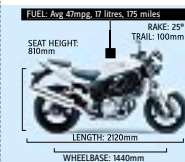
SUZUKI SV650

★★★★★
COST: £4399
POWER: 77bhp
TORQUE: 46ftlb
WEIGHT: 165kg

Availability: Now
Colours: Red, blue or silver
New for 2005: No changes
Insurance group: 9 (of 17)
Info: Suzuki GB, 0500-011959



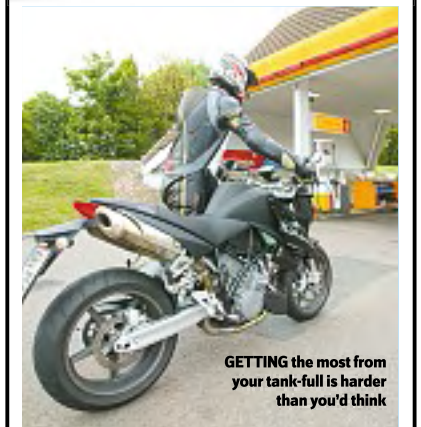
TECHNICAL SPEC
Engine: Liquid-cooled 649cc (83 x 60mm) dohc four-stroke parallel twin. Six gears. Fuel injection.
Chassis: Steel tube frame. 41mm forks adjustable for pre-load, single rear shock adjustable for rebound damping and pre-load. 2 x 300mm front discs with four-piston calipers, 220mm rear disc with twin-piston caliper. Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 160/60 x 17 rear



TECHNICAL SPEC
Engine: Liquid-cooled 645cc (81 x 62.6mm) dohc four-stroke 90° V-twin. Six gears. Fuel injection.
Chassis: Aluminium trellis frame. 41mm forks adjustable for pre-load, single rear shock adjustable for rebound damping and pre-load. 2 x 290mm front discs with four-piston calipers, 220mm rear disc with twin-piston caliper. Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 160/60 x 17 rear

TECHWATCH

BY KEVIN ASH



GETTING the most from your tank-full is harder than you'd think

Fuel economy demystified...

IT'S tempting to say as the price of fuel is rising to record highs that even us motorcyclists are beginning to feel the pinch - pity the Pan European rider as he makes a £25 down payment for his next 250 miles riding...

But there's no 'even us' about it, as most of the bikes that most of us ride aren't especially economical. We don't ride them to save money, after all, but for fun, and to achieve that we ask for crisp, responsive engines which make big power from relatively small capacities, a recipe for disproportionate gorging on fuel.

Even so, I've heard riders consider fitting smaller rear final drive sprockets to give their bikes taller gearing and improve economy... but this doesn't always work. You'd think it would, as it's fairly obvious from experience and common sense that revving an engine harder means more fuel passes through, but as is so often the case, life is a bit more complicated than that.

To push you and your bike through the air at a given speed - let's say 70mph as you're having a politically correct day today (that or your licence has 10 points on it) - takes a fixed amount of power, let's say 20bhp. There's no way around this, if you want to do 70mph, you need to have 20bhp at your rear wheel, and it doesn't matter how it gets there. On standard gearing your bike revs at 4000rpm at this speed, where the maximum power is 40bhp. You have a very linear throttle action, so using half throttle opening gives you the 20bhp you need and you cruise steadily and happily at 70mph, fearlessly admiring the square, grey Gatso cameras

and wondering what they'd look like if they were designed by Apple.

But your wallet aches, so you fit a much smaller rear sprocket, which means your

'Fitting a smaller rear sprocket to improve fuel economy doesn't always work'

engine is now revving at 3000rpm at 70mph. You're hoping for much better economy, maybe to use three quarters of the amount of fuel in line with your gearing change, but instead your bike uses slightly more. Puzzling.

The problem is, your engine only makes a maximum of 30bhp at 3000rpm, so to get the 20bhp you need to the rear wheel, you now need to hold the throttle at two thirds of its fully-open position. The engine isn't pumping so frequently, but the lumps of air/fuel mixture it's sucking in are bigger, on top of which it makes its peak torque at 4000rpm, telling you this is the point at which it's at its most fuel efficient, converting more of the energy from burning fuel into crankshaft torque than at any other point in its rev range. At 3000rpm though, the crank torque has dropped right off because the gas flow is too slow to be really efficient, and lots more of the energy is transformed into noise and heat instead.

True, the engine's internal friction drops at lower revs but, in this instance, it's not nearly enough to compensate for the efficiency drop-off and wider throttle opening.

Oh, and the motor feels gutless and bland now too.

MORE NEXT WEEK!