

## 10 | NEW BIKES

## WORLD FIRST TEST

## HARLEY-DAVIDSON ROADSTER

'A Harley you can truly hustle'



STEFANO GADDA AND LIONEL BEYLOT

By Phil West  
ROADTESTER

Even the most die-hard Harley fan would probably admit that for years the American firm's Sportsters have been, well, anything but.

But that's about to change with this latest version. Called, somewhat confusingly, the Roadster, the newcomer is inspired partly by the current fashion for all things café racer and partly by those original 1950s Sportsters.

As such, although based on the familiar, current Sportster 1200 engine, a significant makeover of not just the styling but, more importantly, the chassis, has turned it into a genuine café racer that proved a surprising hoot to

thrash around the switchbacks in the mountains north of St Tropez at its press launch last week. In short: this is much more than just a Sportster 1200 fitted with ace bars, as some have suggested.

First, by using specially designed 19 and 18-inch wheels front and rear respectively, the whole attitude of the Sportster 1200 is transformed. (Current 1200s range from the balloon-tyred, 16in-wheeled Forty Eight and 1200 Custom to the 21in/16in '72'.)

Hand-in-hand with this, Harley have festooned the Roadster with proper, performance-orientated suspension and brakes, which are also further designed to emphasise the bike's more nose-down-arise-up attitude. So, the new, preload-adjustable 'emulsion' rear shocks are also longer than any Sportster predecessor, so as to jack up

the rear slightly while the similarly new 43mm inverted front fork – yes, on a Harley – is slightly shorter than before to drop the snout for a more sporting posture and sharper steering, even though the Sportster's tubular steel cradle frame is unchanged.

If any confirmation of the seriousness of Harley's intent was needed, it's then delivered by the most purposeful and contemporary braking set-up of any modern Harley. Though hardly radical in itself, the switch to a twin disc/four-piston caliper set-up is significant. To be blunt it's almost as if Harley have finally realised how good modern brakes can be.

Nor does it end there: bars are one-piece, tubular steel turned-down 'ace' bars of the type familiar (although the Harley's are wider) from Triumph's old

Thruxton 900. To continue the café racer theme, footpegs are more rearward (although hardly rearset), there's a new, beautifully made race-style seat, chopped down mudguards, a neat, multi-function single tach dial which incorporates a digital speedo and three different paint options (gloss black, satin black, metallic red or two-tone silver/black), although sadly no 'Harley

Racing' orange and black which you'd be forgiven for thinking ideal for this sort of bike. We live in hope...

However, although impressively done generally, there are a few areas which have missed out on 'sporty' upgrades. The familiar 1202cc, air-cooled, pushrod V-twin, for example, is completely unchanged from that of its cruiser siblings. In addition, the familiar, cruiser-style chunky switch-gear and, particularly, control levers and footpegs are basically unchanged, too. While for me, the humpbacked, 'Peanut' fuel tank, which was originally specifically designed to meet a cruiser aesthetic, jars with the overall look, too. Overall, though, from the saddle, the Roadster adds up to a machine which is a true revelation. After the initial shock to the system of riding a Harley

which blends familiar Milwaukee idiosyncrasies – that sticky-out air-filter, the clunky, long action gear change and more – with a café racer gait, you quickly warm to a bike that's at once novice-friendly, eager, nimble, involving and, above all, fun.

Around town, though no lightweight, the Roadster is slim, manoeuvrable and a doddle to get on with. Once the road opens up, it's better still: a bike which urges you to hustle and scratch. Though compact, even for a six-plus footer like me, the Roadster's not as dinky as I feared. Though the bars are oddly wide, it's a joy to steer – which it does quickly and precisely. And though, essentially, a heavy, vibey 'old' V-twin, the new suspension is effective and the ride is more controlled and sophisticated than any previous

Sportster. The new brakes are brilliant, too. I'll re-phrase that: they're up to modern par, praise indeed for a Harley... It's not perfect of course: those chunky, non-adjustable cruiser levers annoy slightly when something leaner and span-adjustable would be far preferable on a true sportster. The overall ergonomics aren't quite right either, being a little wide and upright, which in turn is no help in preventing the pegs grounding out, which they do slightly too easily.

Overall, though, the new Roadster is truly a credible café-racer. I like to think of it being to the Sportster what the old Triumph Thruxton 900 was to the old Bonneville. And that, at prices starting at under £10,000, is no bad recommendation in itself. A Harley Sportster? Yes, it is. At last. **MCN**

The café racer inspired Roadster looks the part – and, thankfully, it's great to ride, too



## TECH SPEC

## HARLEY-DAVIDSON ROADSTER

Price	£9695 (black), £9895 (colour), £10,145 (two-tone)
Engine	1202cc, 45° V-twin
Torque	71.5ftlb @ 4250rpm
Frame	Tubular steel cradle
Weight	250kg
Capacity	12.5l
MPG	48mpg
Seat height	785mm
On sale	June

## RIVALS

## Victory Octane, £9800

With 104bhp and added aggression, probably the Roadster's closest rival

## Moto Guzzi Bobber, £8136

More upright cruiser than sportster but style and V-twin have similarities

## Triumph Thruxton 900, £8000 (used)

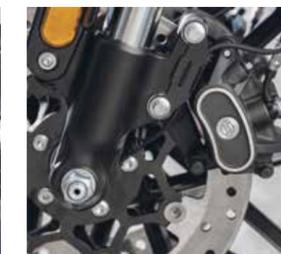
New Hog is very reminiscent of this



The air-cooled V-twin is unchanged from the Sportster. A missed opportunity?



Classic-style single tach dial incorporates a digital speedo



Twin disc, four-piston brakes – at last, a Harley with proper, modern brakes

## MCN VERDICT

Who'd have believed it? Harley have produced a genuinely sporting sportster. Minimal, 'Dark Custom', café racer style is bang 'on trend' but the real treat is that the chassis and handling changes result in a Harley you can hustle.

★★★★★

## WE LIKE

■ Neutral, easy and sharp steering, decent suspension and good brakes

## WE DON'T LIKE

■ Motor needs a bit more pep

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