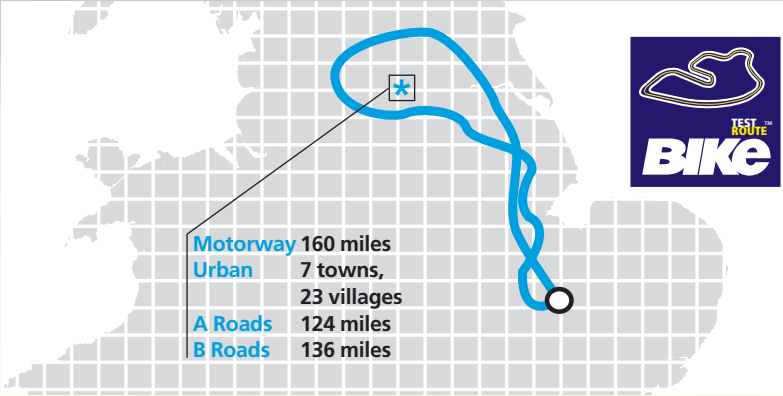


£8000 sports tourers

Ever wanted to be somewhere else, having more fun?
Well, grab a lift on one of these and head for the horizon

WORDS BY MARTIN CHILD ★ PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIPPY WOOD AND TOM CRITCHELL (STUDIO)
TEST TEAM: MARTIN CHILD ★ TOM BEDFORD ★ PAUL MILLHOUSE ★ KEV SMITH ★ BEN WILKINS



The Bike Test Route Welcome to the future of road testing

There has never been a test quite like this. Full-on science meets mile after mile of gritty, real-road blasting. Whatever the bike, whatever the weather, the Bike Test will deliver the believable verdict on which one you should buy. Road testing will never be the same again. **Part one** is the top-secret Bike Test Route: 433 miles of hand-picked roads. From tyre-blisteringly fast A roads and twisty back roads to gruelling dual carriageways and trickiest of rush hour towns, the route will highlight the best and worst of a bike's behaviour. **Part two** is the test track. Pushing machines to their limits around the notorious Bruntingthorpe test facility, we measure top speed, acceleration and braking, then put in a dozen laps of the fast, bumpy circuit to pinpoint which bike handles best and why. There's more. **Part three** is the perfect weekend: we do track days, touring... whatever's necessary to see how each bike will cope on your dream weekend. **Part four** is dyno testing, home servicing and living with it. Only then can we reach a verdict. Believe it.

Ducati ST4S ABS

£8750, 212kg, 112bhp, 154mph
Ducati's slant on rapid holiday-making. Not the most glamorous machine in the firm's line-up but capable and popular. There are plenty on the roads. **The old ST4** sprung from the ST2 but featured the 916 engine.

Aprilia RST1000 Futura

£7925, 210kg, 102bhp, 152mph
Another skinning of the Aprilia litre V-twin cat, the Futura is the firm's first proper touring bike, with the heart of a supersports. **The old Futura** is a figment of your imagination, mate.

Triumph Sprint ST

£7499, 207kg, 108bhp, 154mph
Five years old, the British-built bike has been gnawing away at VFR sales like a dog with a meaty bone. But are its teeth still sharp? **The old Sprint ST** is exactly what you see before you. It's still as unchanged as water.

Honda VFR ABS

£7999, 208kg, 97bhp, 146mph
A byword for all-round greatness, the VFR has been around for nearly two decades in various forms. But is it living on its reputation alone? **The old VFR** had more facelifts than Michael Jackson. From a 750 back in 1986, now it's an 800cc VTEC beast.



'The VFR still looks so right, so cool. Those headlights are works of art'

Honda VFR ABS £7999

Plusher, smarter, more hi-tech, the VFR might be too clever for its own good



Weather Drier than a pampered baby
Traffic Medium
Miles ridden (by bike's trip) 431
Time taken 6 hours 34 minutes
Average speed 66mph
Fuel used 59 litres
Average mpg 33

Motorway
 Settles into a very relaxed and smooth pace. Low screen doesn't defeat wind buffeting.
36.6mpg
Top-gear cruising
 70mph = 4500rpm
 100mph = 6500rpm

Town
 Light controls help slow-speed work. Bright headlights get you noticed.

Fast A roads
 Doesn't feel overly quick but finds a smooth flow. Drinks like George Best.
31mpg

Twisty B roads
 Brakes take a time to adjust to but keep the bike level under heavy braking. Neutral steering keeps the front pointing in the right direction.
33 mpg

Summary
 The VFR is in danger of becoming its own worst enemy. You expect so much that it can initially disappoint. It grows on you with time but isn't the instant hit that the older models were. Not the dominant force it once was.

IT STRIKES ME as odd that I'm here outside the newsagents, leathered up, helmet in hand with a very shiny VFR waiting to take me home. I just need somewhere to put my paper. Lift off the seat, no room there. What about a hidden pocket in the fairing? Obviously too well hidden. Is this what's become of Honda's evergreen sports tourer? Of course there's plenty of hard luggage to be added to this bike, if you've a mind to spend the money. But this VFR costs a quid shy of eight grand and I'm a bit short right now.

It's funny how some bikes evolve. The VFR has been around since Noah declared the roads dry. The engine grew by 50ccs in 1997. Two years ago I saw this latest model and thought 'wow'.

'Wow' because the VFR had always been the quiet kid at the back. Always doing well but not making headlines. And now it's as in-yer-face as the most popular boy at school dating 'your' girlfriend.

Looking at this test bike, two years on, the VFR still looks so right, so cool. Those headlights are works of art, the high-level exhausts as potent as a pair of AK-47s sticking out the back of an Escort tailgate. It doesn't stop there. From the clocks to the indicators, this is a bike that has been designed. If you want a contrast, take a glance over at the Triumph and see what I mean.

There's no mistaking that V4 growl: RC30s, RC45s and now you on this. The tickover hum sounds so well-oiled, so potent. Which makes the first few miles on the VFR a bit of a letdown. Power is so linear that the 11,800rpm redline is reached without the word 'frenzy' being invoked. And where was that VTEC they all bang on about? As it's my first time on this model, I ask Kev to ride to make sure it's okay. It is. Guess jumping onto it from the 142bhp GSX-R1000 doesn't help.

So it's flatter than you think. It pumps out 97bhp at the back, dies after 10,500rpm and the dyno records a blip at 7000rpm, when the VTEC valve trickery starts screaming for attention.

Back on the road, it's easier to detect the VTEC working on part throttle. Around seven thou, the power dips slightly then bangs back in. This is met with a loud card-in-a-bicycle's-spokes thrapp that springs from the airbox. If you go slowly enough

up the rev-range, you can feel the bike hesitate before it picks up again. Add to that a jerky throttle action round slow corners in the bottom two gears and a snatchy feel when taking up the power in higher gears and this isn't the smoothest of Hondas. Another change over the older 750.

Handling-wise, it's as neutral as a male pregnancy tester. A best time of 1min 18sec on *Bike's* handling circuit is nothing special. The CBS linked brakes, so often criticised for taking control away from the rider, work extremely well when howling into corners, banked over. The touch of rear brake applied by the CBS means the front doesn't dive so hard. However, it can feel a little slow to steer without the front digging-in.

Combining the CBS with ABS makes the VFR's stoppers your worst or best friends. In the wet they haul the bike up, in a straight line, with no panics or dramas. In the dry, I know I could outbrake the system ten times out of ten. The front skips and releases, skips and releases – but the lack of dive means proper weight isn't thrown onto the front tyre and results in an early loss of grip. Which wakes up the ABS, which locks the front lever, which makes the tyre skip... It's a vicious circle. Unless you're prone to long lapses of concentration (if so, why aren't you a coach driver?), the non-ABS VFR must be the way to go.

Comfort lasts all day, mirrors give a clear, wide, blur-free picture and the strong headlights allow for some rather funky night-time dancing. The dash tells all – engine temp, air temp, two trips, fuel gauge, time – and the optional heated grips (Honda fitted them to this test bike) work brilliantly but look about as pretty as John Prescott. Fashion dictates a low screen (which can be tiresome when you're thrapping along above the ton) and the clutch and brake levers are wheel-and-screw span adjustable.

So the VFR lives on. Sharper, more stylish and more expensive than before (the same money buys you a GSX-R1000, which has space under the seat for your newspaper). Like the foster kid who eventually finds his birth parents, maybe the new VFR should search out the 750 to see just how far its new clothes and fresh attitude have taken it. ➤

LIVING WITH IT 14 days of real life with a VFR

- People will keep asking you to take them out, as the comfy seat and addictive nature of the V4 will get to them too.
- Insurance is group NU14 (same as the Triumph, lower than the Italians). Honda's HISS immobiliser comes as standard, but there's no room for carrying extra security.
- There are plenty of options available for the VFR. Honda's include a topbox (£212), panniers (£610), the rack needed to carry them (£154), a flip-up screen (£103) and

- the heated grips (£228). Prices include fitting at your local Honda dealer. There are also plenty of non-Honda items.
- Services are 4000 miles apart.
- A non-ABS model is £500 cheaper but Honda reckon they sell twice as many bikes with the system as without it. If you're buying second-hand, expect to pay £200 more for a bike with ABS.
- The VFR is one Honda that will remain unchanged for 2004.

IN A NUTSHELL

It must be the VFR because...

The noise from the VTEC makes you feel 'on it'.

You're not worried about bits falling off it.

A full-on sportsbike isn't really what you wanted.



Weather Can't believe it's still summer
Traffic Medium
Miles ridden (by bike's trip) 429
Time taken 6 hours 44 minutes
Average speed 63mph
Fuel used 50 litres
Average mpg 39

Motorway
Relaxed ride but you'll have to cog-down for sharp overtakes. Screen is adequate but legs are a bit cramped.
43mpg
Top-gear cruising
70mph = 3800rpm
100mph = 5600rpm

Town
Howls around town, feeling faster than it is. Brakes stop sharply and is nimble enough to take on all traffic.

Fast A roads
Feels rawer than the Honda, turns a bit quicker and feels fitter in the midrange. It touches down earliest, even when solo.
35mpg

Twisty B roads
Sorted front end means late, heavy braking and quick turn-ins. Repeated braking leads to grabbiness and a loss of lever pressure.
40mpg

Summary
A rider's bike in most situations. Keep it on the boil for the best fun, but watch out for the brick-wall effect if you over-rev it.

Triumph Sprint ST £7499

The Hinckley triple aims to outclass the Italians and out-practical the Honda

'IT'S A TEAPOT,' says Paul. No, this isn't some road test *Give Us A Clue* competition. He's only saying what he sees. The Triumph Sprint bears a strong resemblance to a Suzuki GSX-F, known in the trade as a teapot. Which seems to be just what many riders want. Riding more than 50,000 miles a year, I get a good picture of what's actually out there on the roads and I've seen a good handful of these (most in this colour) in the past week alone.

Okay, it's not setting our pants on fire and hasn't the 'Max Factor' of the Honda but, like a girl with an overprotective mother, it can't date. Mainly because it's dated already. Jump on and it's lower than the Honda. Just as the sound alone will tell you that the VFR's a V4, there's no mistaking a Hinckley triple. Fire her up and take in that raw idle whirr.

Clonk into first and get used to the slow throttle action. For a tourer, it likes to be kept high in the revs, the best place to explore its 107bhp potential. But don't go looking too high for that bhp hit. Power drops away rapidly and leaves through the back door at half-past-nine on the tach.

Slow-revving nature aside, the Triumph benefits from having the best take-up of these four bikes. There's no jerkiness, no bang of power as you wind the throttle on – just a smooth, creamy delivery that pushes you forward. And that engine rasp is so addictive.

So you'll have to get used to the feel and function of this engine. And while you're at it, you'll need to work out how you can get the best from the gearbox. Race it up and down and you'll grind more teeth than pension day at the Post Office. Up to around 7000rpm, it allows clutchless changes, so long as you're positive with the lever. Above that the clutch really needs to be used. Add to this a non-adjustable clutch lever with a span to rival the Forth Bridge and even my piano-worrying fingers were having to leap for the lever.

Up at Bruntingthorpe, the Triumph gets on the pace. At 154mph, it's nearly as fast as the 996-engined ST4S and 10mph up on the VFR. Beats it round the handling circuit, too. It's just a shame that it has the worst ground clearance of the lot – pegs, stands and even belly pan go down. And

that's solo, no luggage. If you tour with anything more than a Gold Card and Kylie Minogue then you'll be needing a new belly pan when you get back. Not that I'd come back.

Through the corners it feels VFR-stable, but grabbier on the brakes. Trying to get every rpm out of the engine before it cuts out on the rev-limiter is a game of Russian roulette that you'll have to understand. Having said all that, it's a fun, involving ride that puts you in control without a hint of ABS or any such nonsense.

Comfort-wise, the large saddle is surprisingly thin underneath the rider, though the pillion gets more. After 100 miles it becomes Fidget City (population: you) as you try to get comfy. About this time, the fuel gauge – which has shown full for the first 60 miles – plummets towards the red. Luckily the light stays off until the 130s.

The dash has something of an Eighties rally-car look to it, with dials everywhere, centred on the white-faced tach and crammed 180-mile-per-optimistic speedo. With just the one trip, six idiot lights and the screw heads showing, it's a generation behind the Honda in terms of style and function. The clock looks like it's been given away at the fair (for not winning) and is hard to read in bright sunlight. Funny how you only want to know the time when you just can't quite see it.

The mirrors have a good span and are clear most of the time, only blurring towards the upper revs. Though the screen is low, it does offer slightly more protection than the VFR's, thanks mainly to the Sprint's lower seating position.

There's space for a U-lock under the seat but (unlike the Ducati owner) you'll have to provide your own. This would be a wise purchase as there's no ignition immobiliser and just using the steering lock isn't the way to keep your pride and joy. Or realistic insurance renewals (are they ever?).

The Sprint ST feels like it's got a bit of the old British stiff upper lip to its character. Kinda wants to play with the others, but if it can't then they can all bugger off. It's as English as the Queen, James Bond and coming second. And for those values alone, it's worthy of wearing the Union Jack on its flanks. God bless 'em all. >

LIVING WITH IT 14 days of real life with a Sprint ST

- ✦ Pillions get a wide, low perch with a big grab handle. Smoothest throttle response on this test makes for happiest bunnies.
- ✦ Insurance is group NU14 but there is nothing else standing between a thief and your bike. Luckily, there's room for a decent lock under the seat. Use it.
- ✦ The power-crazy among us will love the power point, located just inside the left-hand fairing panel. Tea anyone?
- ✦ Services are 6000 miles apart.

- ✦ Triumph has its own range of options for the Sprint ST. These include a topbox at £329.99 and two panniers at £599.99 (discounted to £899.99 for the lot if you buy them at the same time) and a taller screen for £109.99.
- ✦ The 2004 bike remains unchanged, but expect a comprehensive update (or even a completely new model) in 2005.
- ✦ Buy now and get a £600 voucher to spend on Triumph clothing or accessories.

IN A NUTSHELL

It must be the Sprint because...

You just want reliable, no-frills biking.

The sound of the triple gets you every time.

Christmas day revolves around the Queen's speech.

'The Sprint likes to be kept high in the revs, the best place to explore its 107bhp potential'

THE TEST





This is what the summer is meant to be about: clear roads, sun on your back and a blast to the seaside. Perfect

'Like desperados in a Western, we ride into town suited, booted and ready to conquer'

Sea you soon

Summer won't last forever, so we catch a wave and head for the coast

I CAN'T EVEN remember where my waterproofs are. The gloriously hot summer of 2003 has been a season of warm skies, grippy roads and an amazing feel-good factor. But we're at the point now when every long, dry, hot weekend could be the last before autumn gets its leafy hold on the throttle. Since the British 'like to be beside the seaside', what better way to salute this fantastic summer than a blast to the coast?

These bikes are designed for longer distances. So we pick a 350-mile route, bag-up, check the plastic and head for the Costa del Portsmouth.

With the kids back to bunking off school, the roads are as free and easy as it gets in southern England. Every fifth car has a foreign plate, every tenth a private one. Surfer dudes hang from their pick-ups and Beetles, trailers carry dinghies and jet skies to be released back into the wild, while coaches drive the Werther's Original generation to the nearest deck chairs.

Apart from the Skins on their scooter benefit day, proper bikes are the only piece of this summer jigsaw missing. Until now. Like four desperados in a Western, we roll into town, suited, booted and ready to conquer.

As the traffic thickens, the real world useability of these bikes gets thrown under the microscope. After all, there's no point going the distance if you're in pain when you get there.

There, in this case, turns out to be one of the town's less-than-finest guest houses. The fire escape is the window and we're on the top floor. The carpet's like some Sixties LSD movie, with the owners characters from the set. Breakfast is served eight 'til nine but probably best avoided. It's not going to be a day to let the bikes sit idle.

Free of luggage and leather suits, it's time to hit the front and open our account with the sea. The bikes parked up on the sand makes a rare sight. So do we, mingling with the 'I'm with stupid' T-shirts and Speedos in our jackets and lids. It's as classy as our breakfast is healthy.

The bikes draw few glances and even fewer comments. If we've come to be seen, we might as well go home now. Afternoon rolls into evening and we trundle the bikes to the b&b. The next 12 hours are a blur of drink, talking bollocks and dad dancing. Top night out, then.

The next day the bikes guide us home and I'm left thinking that doing the daytrip in a car just wouldn't have been the same deal. As I write this, the sun's streaming through the living room window and across the laptop. Fancy a blat this weekend? Could be the last chance... >

Honda VFR

The Honda attracts the most attention because it's red and looks funky. Smooth around town, its jerky throttle can be a pain. Side exhausts make it tricky to strap on a bag. The best option was to run a strap between the seat and bike and then use a cargo net.

Triumph Sprint ST

It's British and Racing Green but the Trump didn't cut it with the connoisseurs of Pompey. Easiest to trundle around town, thanks to its relaxed and smooth delivery. The engine makes a cool growl away from the lights and feels quite 'grown-up' in this company.

Ducati ST4S

Maybe it's the colour, maybe it's the shape but the general public failed to see the beauty in this beast. Sounds embarrassing, clutch out, waiting at the lights with more rattles that Toys 'R' Us. Heavy clutch and vibey tank mean you'd rather be blatting than doing all this stop/starting.

Aprilia Futura

Could have had a seafront side-show all to itself. Drew sniggers rather than attention but then gave one of the best rides this side of the Tunnel of Love. Easy to ride slow and fast, turns precisely and stops within the length of a candyfloss stick.



Weather Hosepipe ban, anyone?

Traffic 'They come over here, clogging our roads up!'

Miles ridden (by bike's trip) 425

Time taken

6 hours 50 minutes

Average

speed 62.5mph

Fuel used 49 litres

Average mpg 39

Motorway

Running in sixth gives good economy, vibes and bugger all acceleration. Screen is protective and bike feels roomy.

44mpg

Top-gear cruising

70mph = 3500rpm

100mph = 5300rpm

Town

Poor steering lock is a pain for parking in tight places and the acceleration in low gears can be rapid rather than relaxing.

Fast A roads

Legs stretched, the ST4S shows its class and makes all the right moves. But it'll cost you in fuel...

31mpg

Twisty B roads

Front end can feel a tiny bit vague here. ABS cuts in too early for really sporty action but the high ground clearance will see you through.

37mpg

Summary

Once an arm and a leg have been amputated, ST4S ownership can be great fun. Prepare for the 'character' of breakdowns.

Ducati ST4S ABS £8750

Sporty, yes – but is it really comfortable and reliable enough to tour?

WHAT DO YOU want from a touring bike?

Comfort? Performance? Reliability? A Ducati? When the Italian firm launched the ST2 back in 1996, they were bang in the middle of their 'Lada period'. Everyone who'd bought a 916 spent hours on the phone to dealers sorting problems and booking rectification work. BT had a record year.

Dogged by reliability problems, Ducati did the unthinkable and launched a tourer. The ST2 was fairly conventional, low-tech even, but that didn't stop it stopping. Check out any owners' forum on the net and the tales of woe are longer than the M1. Still, plenty were sold and plenty were mended. As the only real alternative to the VFR, the ST2 caught the imagination of riders after something different.

In 1998 the ST got serious. The ST4 was launched and brought more-reliable engines and electrics to the adventurous rider. The ST had grown up. With the engine from the 916 (and then the 996) this was a bike to brag about. It had won world titles. Even though racing and touring are, as any clear-headed biker knows, poles apart.

The first thing that strikes me about this ST4S ABS is the colour. Grey with red wheels? Is that the right way round? It looks classy, but a non-biking mate calls it dull. ST4S owners, you're on your own.

After a few cranks, the motor bursts into life and settles into a noisy clatter. Where the Honda is a moving opera, this is duelling buskers in an echoey subway. Shuuuut up, shut up! Pulling the clutch in alleviates some of the din but there's still more noise from the engine than the exhaust.

This Duke retains its sporty side: nitrided forks, Öhlins shock, a forward riding position and an air of tautness. Clocks are very Ducati Monster with an LCD panel tacked on. More Italian electrics – great! With my ears acclimatising to the racket, I select first and point her towards the Bike Test Route.

This is the most powerful bike on test and the booming V-twin wastes no time in letting you know it. Clutch out and we're gathering speed faster than the Honda and Triumph. Compared with the smooth Honda V4, this is working with cheese-wire. It has a bare-chested rawness to it, jumping through the first four gears.

If you're keen to get into top gear early, the ST4

will disappoint. You need three figures on the speedo to engage fifth or sixth in any real action. Photographer Chippy's diesel Ford Focus out-drags the Ducati in an 80mph, top-gear shootout. At times like these I'm glad of that dark visor.

Even though the engine pulls to just over 10,000rpm, you need 4500 on the clock for the ride to become smooth enough to cover any distance. You'll notice the vibes through the bars and the back of the tank, which is very tall and sits tightly against, well, you know what. After a longish (120 mile) ride I'm as numb as a severed toe and have just found the first case of motorcycling RSI. I'd consider suing Ducati but I don't think I could make it stand up in court. Ho ho.

For the first few bends, the suspension feels mismatched. Slow exits from smaller roundabouts are where it shows up worst, running wide under power. Once warm, the units come closer together but it's only doing laps at the handling circuit that finally brings confidence in the front. Maybe I didn't have such a race head on for the 1000 miles I covered on the road. But why should I? This isn't a sportsbike and shouldn't take that effort to ride.

The brakes feel like they're fighting you, too.

The fronts are strong, progressive and never overpowering but the rear offers little feedback and the ABS system kicks in early. This results in a pulsing through the lever and a stiffening of the front. The ABS controller sits under the seat, pipes everywhere, and robs you of storage. You can turn this system off with the red button on the left-hand controls, but only when the ignition is on without the engine running. After you turn the ignition off, the system resets to ABS mode.

A decade after the launch of the 916, with years of flip-up sidestands, damaged side panels and breakdown banter to draw on, the first question I'm asked whenever I go anywhere on a Duke is the old reliability chestnut. In 1000 miles, my only gripes were that the indicators had a mind and speed of their own and the LCD fuel gauge goes both ways, dropping down to low then rising to half. Neither niggle will stop you getting back from a European tour, though – and that has to be the most important job of a distance machine. >

LIVING WITH IT 14 days of real life with a ST4S

- ✦ Pillions get a ride to remember with that big, lusty V-twin providing the entertainment. At least the grab handle is a decent size.
- ✦ Insurance is group NU15, there's a key-head immobiliser and Ducati even supply a U-lock under the seat.
- ✦ Service intervals are 6000 miles or 12 months apart.
- ✦ The 2004 ST4S gets a major update with new fairing, clocks, seat, clip-ons

- and engine electrics (gulp). They'll be in the shops for Christmas and will cost £9495 (ABS) and £8695.
- ✦ The current non-ABS model has been dropped to £7700.
- ✦ Ducati's own accessories include a topbox (£292), panniers (£486) and a taller screen (£65).
- ✦ The ABS can be turned off on the left-hand bar controls, but not with the engine running.

IN A NUTSHELL

It must be the ST4S because...

It sounds like a knackered cement mixer when you start it.

You didn't want to break all your sporty links.

All Ducatis are cool right now.



'This is the most powerful bike on test and the booming V-twin wastes no time in letting you know'



'This engine has never lacked torque and it snarls as you give it some gas'

Aprilia Futura £7925

It looks like a beast from another planet, but has real-world appeal

THAT'S STRANGE. Riding past the photographic studio, the lights are still on. As I roll back the huge door, the reason for the delay is laid out before me. 'I've never seen a bike with so many panels and screws and fiddly pieces on it,' says a clearly hacked off Kev. It's true. Aprilia seem to have gone with the 'most complicated is best' motto and the jigsaw before me looks a horrendous mess. It's way past dark when the Futura is rebuilt.

Naked or clothed, the Futura is a strange beast. It's kinda too designed, too angular. It's been around for a couple of seasons and I don't think this design was ever going to be the 'new black'. What do you think? Chances are you just don't know. In all my miles, I can't remember ever seeing one on the roads, parked up or even in a showroom. For exclusivity, it's worth a million.

From some angles it has a resemblance to the FP-1, Foggy's World Superbikes backmarker. The long screen that runs into the headlight, flat fairing sides and the underseat exhausts all add to the mix but can't make it handsome, pretty or even nice. So let's talk about its personality.

From the uncontrollable rise of the choke-assisted growl at first start-up, to the smooth whirr of the litre mill, you know this is an Aprilia. Milles, Mille-Rs, Falcos, Caponords and, more recently, Tuonos all share this 60° V-twin engine and there's a little fuel remapping going on between the models. This means that the 102bhp this Futura kicks out is in a similar ballpark to the 107bhp Mille, but it has a different delivery.

You'll notice this as you engage first and set off. This 998cc engine has never lacked torque and it snarls as soon as you give it the laughing gas. You'll need barely 2500rpm on the clock for a take-off quicker (and more vertical) than a Harrier Jump Jet. It smoothes very quickly and the lack of kick higher up the range is noticed. Noticed, but not missed as it makes the midrange creamier and this, after all, is a sports tourer. Like the Honda and Ducati, it has a snatchy throttle. It's not so bad low down but sitting at about 70mph in top, rolling off then rolling on again is where it is felt.

Unlike the Duke, the ratios on the Aprilia are spot on. Each new gear puts the engine in the sweet

spot and, on the top-speed run at Bruntingthorpe, top gear flat-out was just that, with the needle kissing the redline as the speedo displayed the biggest numbers. The gearbox's operation was always firm, positive and precise.

The Futura is a bike to ride, to get to know. The miles get easier the more you do. The seat is huge, comfortable and stays that way, the riding position is spot-on all-day smiling and all the levers and pedals are where they should be, or easily adjusted to where you want them. This is the only bike to have a big screen as standard and it shows. At 100mph, the Aprilia has the best seat out of the house and a relaxation to match. If I had to get to Chez Wildy in a day, 800 miles door-to-France, I'd pick the Futura and arrive feeling as fresh as I am sitting here writing this.

As well as looking like huge tentacles from a giant man-eating octopus, the mirrors vibrate too much to show a clear picture of what's behind, but that's about the only gripe. Clocks are big, informative and have a crystal-blue display at night and little touches like the seat release on the dash show that the Italian firm have put plenty of effort into the function of this bike, if not the form.

Handling-wise, it's very Aprilia. On the road it feels the sportiest, as keen as the Duke without the dancing ends and lackadaisical front. It steers like a sportsbike but has the control not to weave when flat-out. The non-ABS brakes allow for informed rider input and haul her up smartly, if not with eye-popping candour. If you race around solo, the rear can seem light and prone to howling the hoop.

The Futura feels like Aprilia are giving with one hand and taking back with the other. Great details include faired-in indicators, a tank filler that is angled so sidestand fill-ups get the most juice down the neck and a price to beat the others (apart from the Triumph). But then they build the thing in a very complicated manner, leave no room for a lock and some details – like the belly pan bolts appearing to pinch the fairing sides – make the whole thing look cheap.

Still, learn to like the looks and this will be a bike to take you places. And you'll not lose it in a bike park, that's for sure. >



Weather When it'll rain again, I just don't know
Traffic Mostly flowing
Miles ridden (by bike's trip) 430
Time taken 6 hours 45 minutes
Average speed 64mph
Fuel used 55 litres
Average mpg 35

Motorway
The comfiest seat in the sports tourer house. Screen protects well and ratios please.
39mpg
Top-gear cruising 70mph = 4300rpm
100mph = 6000rpm

Town
Light controls and high riding position give you command of both the bike and the road.

Fast A roads
Lovely flowing pace with slick gearbox and reactive brakes. Underseat heating, thanks to the exhaust. Thirsty.
31mpg

Twisty B roads
Feels slightly tall and wide but motors on regardless. Handles like the sports-based bike it is.
36mpg

Summary
Riding is best, as you don't have to look at it. Very comfortable over the distance with excellent weather protection as standard. But have you ever seen one on the roads?

LIVING WITH IT 14 days of real life with a Futura

✦ How much luxury does your pillion want? The seat's in danger of being too big and comfy. You might have to shift the homeless off before every ride.
✦ Insurance is group NU15 but there are no security extras and no room for an underseat U-lock. Tut tut.
✦ Panniers come as standard now, but that's it as far as own-brand extras go. There is no Aprilia topbox (they found it interfered with the aerodynamics of the

bike too much), the screen is so big they don't offer more and in winter you'll just have to wear thicker gloves if you want warm hands. Or you could look for aftermarket heated grips.
✦ You can play 'where's the seat lock' with your mates. Only the real smart-arses will suss that it's up on the dash. Kinda makes sense...
✦ Service intervals are every 4500 miles or 12 months.

IN A NUTSHELL

It must be the Futura because...

You wear a Star Trek T-shirt.

You fancy going a long way in comfort.

The other sports tourers seem too bland.

State of the art sports tourers

Fast but assured, ride in comfort to a track and go bananas when you get there

SPORTS TOURER LANDMARKS

- 1986 Honda introduce the VFR750F. The model enjoys nearly a decade of sales success before any other manufacturer even gets close to challenging it.
- 1996 Ducati introduce the ST2. Though very sporty, the ST could have stood for Stopped and Towed.
- 1998 Honda up the ante with the VFR800
- 1998 Ducati give Honda the V and stick the 996 engine in the ST4. Triumph wade-in with the Sprint ST.
- 2001 Aprilia want your touring dollar and launch the Futura.
- 2002 Honda get all hi-tech and give the VFR a new variable valve timing (VTEC) engine.

SUSPENSION

It's a tricky job to please all of the people all of the time, but that's what this lot have to do. Solo, pillion, soft luggage or hard boxes, the suspension needs enough flexibility to accommodate every scenario.

ENGINE

These engines have cooler roots than Kew Gardens. The Honda can be traced back to the beautiful RC30, the Aprilia to the magic RSV Mille, the Ducati to so many 996 race wins and the Triumph to the early T595.

THE BIG IDEA: SEATS

One of the simplest parts of the bike, but still so hard to get right. The seat should give support, legs can't be too cramped and the stretch to the bars should feel natural. With riders coming in all shapes and sizes, this isn't as easy as it sounds.

SWINGARM

In the weirdest twist of logic since Elton John's continuing career, the Ducati ST4S is the only bike here without a single-sided swingarm. Both the Aprilia and Triumph have only one retaining nut whereas the Honda has four.

SPECIFICATIONS

	VFR	SPRINT ST	ST4S ABS	FUTURA
Engine	781cc, dohc, 16v, 90° V-four	955cc, dohc, 12v, in-line triple	996cc, dohc, 8v, 90° V-twin	998cc, dohc, 8v, 60° V-twin
Bore x stroke	72 x 48mm	79 x 65mm	98 x 66mm	97 x 67.5mm
Compression	11.6:1	12.0:1	11.2:1	11.4:1
Fuel system	fuel injection	fuel injection	fuel injection	fuel injection
Transmission	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain
Frame	aluminium twin-spar	aluminium twin spar	tubular steel trellis	aluminium twin-spar
Front suspension	43mm telescopic fork	43mm telescopic fork	43mm usd telescopic fork	43mm usd telescopic fork
Adjustment	preload	preload	preload, compression, rebound	preload, rebound
Rear suspension	rising-rate monoshock	rising-rate monoshock	rising-rate monoshock	rising-rate monoshock
Adjustment	preload, rebound	preload, rebound	preload, compression, rebound	preload (remote adjuster), rebound
Brakes front; rear	2 x 296mm discs/3-piston calipers; 256mm disc/3-piston caliper, CBS	2 x 320mm discs/4-piston calipers; 255mm disc/2-piston caliper	2 x 320mm discs/4-piston calipers; 245mm disc/2-piston caliper	2 x 300mm discs/4-piston calipers; 255mm disc/2-piston caliper
Tyres front; rear	Bridgestone BT-020 120/70 ZR17; 180/55 ZR17	Bridgestone BT-020 120/70 ZR17; 180/55 ZR17	Michelin Pilot Sport 120/70 ZR17; 180/55 ZR17	Metzeler MEZ4 120/70 ZR17; 180/55 ZR17
Wheelbase	1460mm	1470mm	1430mm	1435mm
Rake/trail	25.5°/95mm	25°/92mm	26°/102mm	26°/102mm
Dry weight (claimed)	208kg	207kg	212kg	210kg
Seat height	805mm	800mm	820mm	810mm
Fuel capacity	22 litres	19.5 litres	21 litres	21 litres
Fuel consumption (average)	33	39	39	35
Warranty/mileage	two years/unlimited	two years/unlimited miles	two years/unlimited	three years/unlimited
Service intervals	4000 miles/one year	6000 miles/one year	6000 miles/one year	4500 miles/ one year
NU insurance group	14	14	15	15
Price (otr)	£7999	£7499	£8750	£7925

Clocks

On bikes like these, where you're going to spend a long time in the saddle, it's good to have all the information you'll need in easy sight. Triumph scores least for its bitty dash, with the clock covered by the master

cylinder's shadow and hard to read. Both the Honda and Aprilia have clear, easy to glance at displays that will change to kph at the touch of a button, whereas the Ducati gets an LCD add-on.



Left Hitting their bonuses, Honda's Clock Department show it all Middle Triumph's Sprint gets confused with an Eightie's Dolomite Sprint Right Standard dials fuse with Italian electrics. Or should that be fused? Main image Aprilia's cool blue church windows

Headlights

Why the long face? Aprilia's pointy end reminds us of Foggy's race bike, the FP-1. Okay, so it's just me that thinks that. Large light allows rapid night-time

play. Honda does the car thing with a pair of headlights – bright, clear, useful. But I couldn't find the adjuster to set them lower while parked up in a

dimly lit lane. It should be easier on a tourer. Ducati's bulbs work well but are hardly cool. The Triumph's illuminate – that's the best you can say about them.



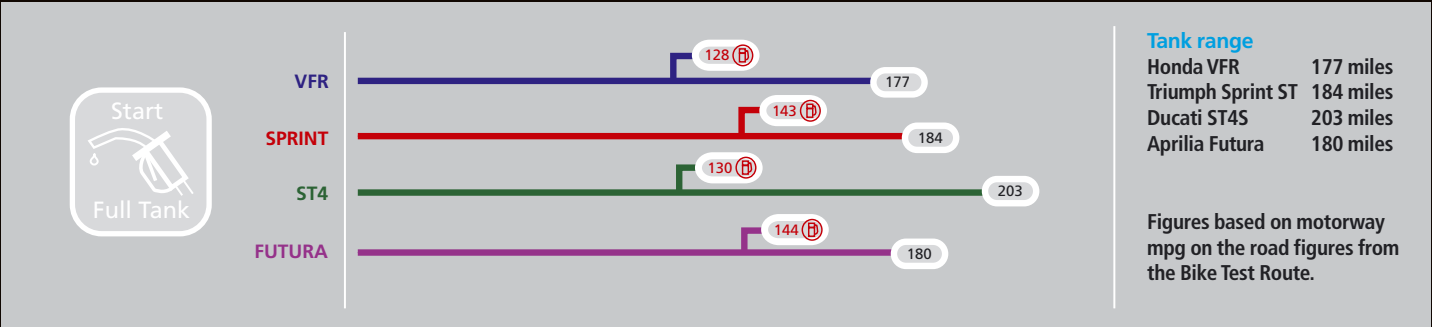
Left (l-r) Bright-eyes VFR has eaten the most carrots; 'Have you seen the light?' Chances are that the Sprint rider hasn't. You'll find stronger beams in a condemned farmhouse; ST4's setup is neither cool nor controversial. Which is a shame Right 'Who you looking at?' Aprilia's light sees the Future

Tank range

These are touring bikes so you'd expect fantastic economy, right? Well, maybe when ridden sedately but on this test we rode them hard and they

suffered – and the VFR suffered most. At just over 30 to the gallon on A roads and a maximum 37 on the motorway, it's clear why it has the biggest

tank. The Aprilia likes a drink, too. It averages 36mpg, whereas the ST averages just shy of 40mpg. This just beats the ST4, which comes in at 38mpg.



Honda VFR ABS

Packed with innovation and trickery, the stripped VFR looks busy

ENGINE

The variable valve timing (VTEC) shuts one inlet and one exhaust valve below 7000rpm for better gas speed and efficiency. They kick back in to allow full power and noise above 7k.

Right Front brakes are good and powerful, but the ABS is a pain in the dry and the CBS link is hard to use to **Far right** Every angle covered at the back with triangular underseat pipes



Ducati ST4S ABS

The usual Ducati ingredients lurk beneath the touring clothing

FUTURE

Next year's ST4 will be joined by the ST3, with a new engine. Both will wear more modern clothes will and have better instrumentation. Use that information when bargaining for your 2003 ST4S.

Right Let's see: red paint, Brembos, usd forks... is it Italian? As the name suggests, ABS is part of the deal **Far right** Big names come as standard on the ST4. That knob adjusts preload



Triumph Sprint ST

Bike-next-door looks and a solid build are values dear to British riders' hearts

FRAME

Though it shares an engine with the 955 sportsbike, the Sprint's frame is a more conventional beam unit – but then, engine output has dropped nearly 20bhp.

Right Look out – there's a giant turbine rolling down the road. Oh no, it's just the rear wheel **Far right** None of yer fancy foreign muck, ABS or links – just proper British brakes



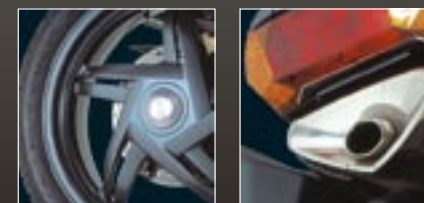
Aprilia RST Futura

More moving parts than an Action Man reunion, the Futura's a complex beast

ENGINE

If you think Triumph's build plan is modular, take a look at Aprilia. This is the same engine as the RSV, RSV-R, Falco, Caponord and Tuono. No excuses for putting it in backwards, then.

Right Another stylish, sporty rear wheel suspended on a single-sided swingarm **Far right** A single underseat can hides below the tail light. Anyone remember Dr Who's friend K-9?





PERFORMANCE TEST

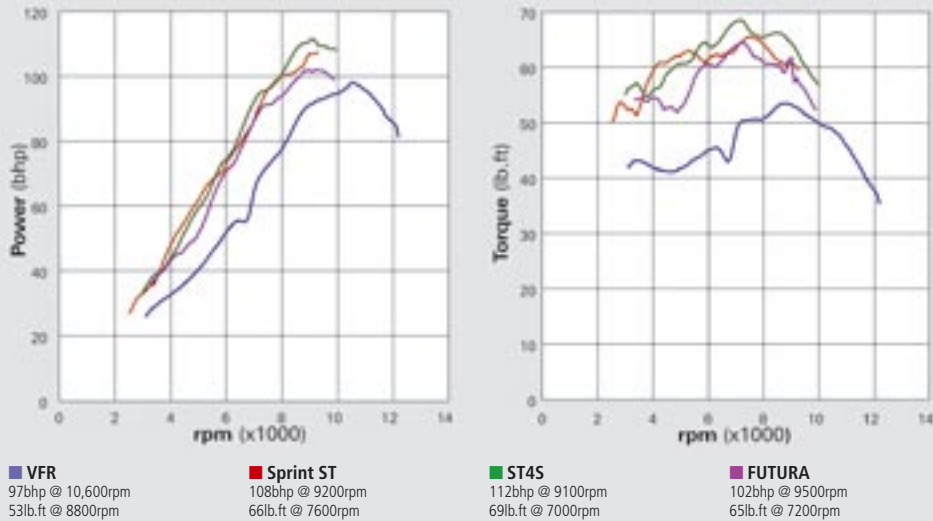
For the first time in living memory (well, mine), Bruntingthorpe has been totally tropical all year. Until this test, when it lashed it down and meant another day was needed to do all the speed testing. This time it was dry and allowed us to test as we should. Marvellous. The four tests are:

- Top speed measured on a two-mile runway.
- Acceleration through the gears and rolling on from 60mph in fifth gear (fourth on a five-speed gearbox).
- Braking from 100mph.
- Lapping the Bruntingthorpe handling circuit.

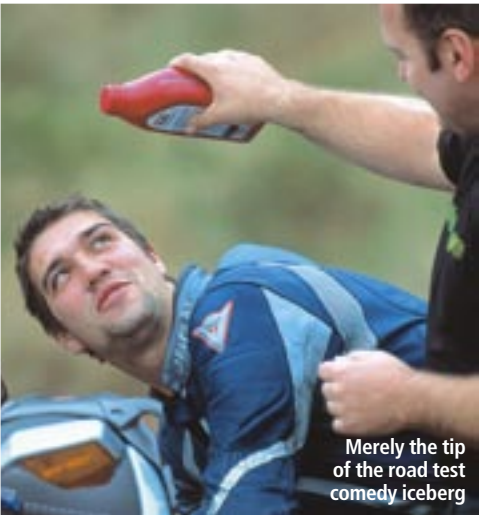
DYNO TEST

Dyno graphs explained We've got two V-twins, a V-four and a triple here, with differing engine capacities too. The two twins are only 2ccs apart and both engines come from sportsbikes, yet the Ducati trounces the Futura right through the rev range, barely making less power than the 996 used to. The Aprilia engine's obviously been detuned for its sports tourer role. The Sprint has the flattest torque curve and performs strongly in the super-useful 4-6000rpm range. In typical Triumph fashion, the rev limiter cuts in abruptly just as the Sprint's making full power. The VFR's torque curve makes a mockery of VTEC. Fill in the dip at 6500rpm, the point where VTEC cuts in, and you'd get a smooth curve, like the old VFR.

	VFR	SPRINT ST	ST4S	FUTURA
Fastest lap	1m 18.50s	1m 17.90s	1m 15.85s	1m 15.65s
0-60mph	3.98s	4.26s	3.87s	4.02s
0-100mph	8.80s	8.78s	8.37s	8.69s
60-100 (top gear)	8.56s	7.23s	8.21s	7.14s
Top speed	145.8mph	154.0mph	154.3mph	151.6mph
Braking 100-0mph	4.86s (347.4')	4.37s (320.5')	4.35s (318.4')	4.66s (338.6')
Comments:	Feels weird lapping the circuit with heated grips on but that's the comfort of the VFR. Feels more tourer than sportster in this company.	Closest to the ride of the VFR, the Triumph has a rawer edge, both from the engine and chassis. Brakes get grabby when hot.	Fast down the straight, fastest round the circuit, the ST4S showed its racing pedigree with the best ground clearance and precision turning.	Early favourite but couldn't match the Duke. Feels composed but can get 'loose' at the back when nailed out of first and second gear corners.



Go on then. Let's see you do a stoppie now, you clever git



Merely the tip of the road test comedy iceberg



Hey, this is our test. Triumph Rocket III gatecrashes speed tests

THE BIKE TEST VERDICT

HONDA VFR ABS	TRIUMPH SPRINT ST	DUCATI ST4S ABS	APRILIA FUTURA
Engine ★★★ Lovely noise but lowest capacity equals least power. Can hesitate as the VTEC kicks in.	Engine ★★★ Unmistakably a triple. Heavy throttle but strong midrange and character. Tricky gearbox.	Engine ★★★★★ Lively V-twin with poke and vibes in equal measures. Gearbox ratios frustrate at 80ish mph.	Engine ★★★★★ Feels bravest on the road. Good power, revs hard and well-judged gearbox aids rapid progress.
Chassis ★★★ Neutral steering and easy to flick through the Bruntingthorpe chicane.	Chassis ★★★ Tracks well over different road surfaces. Feels pushed under heavy braking	Chassis ★★★★★ Taut and sorted. Fastest round the track. Crap steering lock round town.	Chassis ★★★★★ Feels most 'sports' orientated. Stands touch down at full-tilt corners.
Suspension ★★★★★ Plush ride. CBS brakes mean that the front doesn't dive alarmingly.	Suspension ★★★ Can be jolty on the road but otherwise well set up for normal use.	Suspension ★★★ When cold, feels like the two ends are fighting but warms up nicely.	Suspension ★★★★★ Doesn't get flustered or wallowy even when using full throttle.
Brakes ★★★ CBS suits this bike better than most but the addition of ABS doesn't help in the dry. Good in the wet.	Brakes ★★★★★ Non-ABS gives you full control of these powerful stoppers. Can be grabby when hot.	Brakes ★★★ ABS cuts in too early and can be felt pulsing through the brake pedal. Front handles the road well.	Brakes ★★★ Offer good feel and lever pressure. Back can feel light when you're heavy on the front.
Comfort ★★★★★ Low screen is about the only bugbear. Seat is sumptuous and heated grips cheer the ride home.	Comfort ★★★ Wind protection is as VFR. Seat is a little thin and low seat height can cramp taller riders.	Comfort ★★ A touring V-Twin? Seat is fine though bars and tank get vibes (so do mirrors). Plenty of leg room.	Comfort ★★★★★ South of France in a day? No problem. All the info on the clocks and the best screen will see you right.
Useability ★★★★★ Would have five stars, but no room for a U-Lock. Don't they steal in Japan?	Useability ★★★★★ Goes where the Honda treads but can also carry a lock.	Useability ★★★★★ Ducati's 'go anywhere' bike. Take wiring diagram with you, though.	Useability ★★★★★ Physically big but will get you anywhere. Exhaust robs lock room under seat.
Finish ★★★★★ Honda – nuff said.	Finish ★★★ Basic, well-finished bike.	Finish ★★ Chassis fine, electrics iffy.	Finish ★★★ Good, but complex.
Road ★★★★★ Smooth and flowing.	Road ★★★★★ Fast and fun.	Road ★★★★★ Flowing and funky.	Road ★★★★★ Rapid and responsive.
Overall ★★★ No longer the clear winner.	Overall ★★★ Sensible performer.	Overall ★★★ Practical Ducati. Really.	Overall ★★★★★ Better to ride than look at.

The best bike
I can't remember the last test that was this close. History dictates that the VFR should be the winner – and this latest model makes all the right noises. But it seems to have lost something along the way. Maybe it's such a jack-of-all-trades that it's hard now to see which role it fills best. The Ducati is the sportiest and best-handling (when warm) but it's hard to be comfortable with those gear ratios or the Italian electrics. The Triumph performs strongly but doesn't treat the rider to much luxury – and £7499 is one hell of a price for a model unchanged since 1998. So as much as by its rivals' failings as its own merits, the Aprilia Futura inches ahead. A fine ride and well equipped, but would you want to find it in your garage every morning? And it's a couple of grand more than a Yamaha Fazer 1000, last month's Bike Test winner. That'll do all this touring malarkey, too – and be a better sportsbike.

The best buy
These bikes, more than most, demand some skilful negotiating tricks on your part before you sign the finance papers. At an average of £8000, they represent the dearer end of biking while offering mostly last-generation technology with medium performance and handling (compared with the latest rocketship supersports offerings). If you've set your heart on a sports tourer, bargains can be had – especially if you're prepared to buy last year's, unused models. There have been no real changes, except for colour, so it's a good bet. Five minutes with MCN (yep, cover to cover) found the following deals... An Aprilia for £5699, the Ducati for £6499, a Honda for £6649 and a 2002 Triumph for £5999. Which means the Futura edges further ahead. Suddenly, these medium-distance machines fall into sports 600 money and make much more sense. So choose the bike you want, grab your cash and go knock on those doors. The result will be worth it. ■