

KAWASAKI SAYS THE name Versys is a combination of the words “versatility system,” and the Versys does indeed look versatile, like a proper high-style adventure-tourer in the European mold. In fact, the bike was specifically designed for the European market and was on sale in both Canada and Europe for a year before it arrived stateside.

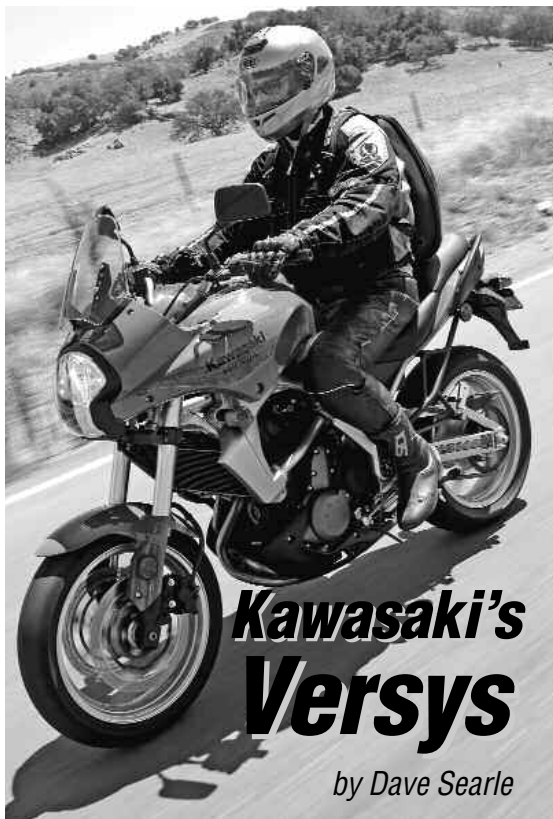
Americans are always asking for a model that’s been built for the Japanese home market or for Europe, but rarely do they make the trip across the pond. Thankfully, Kawasaki listened, as the Versys ignited more requests from Americans than any bike it’s ever built. Based on the new-for-2006 Ninja 650R, the Versys shares the basic engine, chassis, brakes and tire sizes. But if you think it therefore can’t be much different, think again. It’s a very different ride, and the majority opinion is that it’s a lot better to boot. And if the 650 Ninja was targeted at Suzuki’s SV650s, then you could say the Versys is Kawasaki’s answer to the 650 V-Strom.

Engine

When the ancient 500 Ninja twin could no longer meet the latest emissions regulations, Kawasaki’s designers went to work on a very compact 649cc parallel twin to replace it. Using everything they’d learned in the last 20 years, the new motor used siamesed cylinder bores to make it narrow, stacked transmission shafts to make it short, a cassette-style side-access transmission case for excellent serviceability and downdraft double-butterfly fuel injection for great power from its four-valve DOHC heads—all in just three-quarters the size of the old 500. Impressive stuff!

While the Ninja 650R made 63.1 hp at the rear wheel and peaked at 42.6 lb./ft. of torque, it didn’t really have a very engaging character. A little flat in the mid-range and a little buzzy on top, it didn’t quite make the SV650 cringe and go running to mommy. And just as Suzuki retuned the SV motor for more torque in its DL role and got a very fun motor that we preferred over the original SV’s tune, Kawasaki did the same with the Versys. Dropping in a set of cams with less duration (intakes from 272° to 260° and the exhausts from 260° to 252°), reducing compression from 11.3:1 to 10.6:1 and adding a crossover pipe to the headers for improved smoothness, the Versys gained as much as 20% more mid-range at 5500 rpm, and pulls a noticeable advantage over the Ninja 650R everywhere up to 6700 rpm. Even better, the power is now almost perfectly linear and dramatically more responsive. The injection throttle bodies remain the same 38mm size, the exhaust system is in the same belly mounted position for improved mass centralization and where its heat doesn’t interfere with passengers or luggage mounting.

Although no change to the engine’s counterbalancer system was mentioned, for some reason the Versys motor also runs much more smoothly than the Ninja 650R. At high cruising speeds, its engine vibration is so low that twice as many cylinders wouldn’t be an improvement! And while it does make less power above 5700 rpm (a maximum difference of about 7 hp @ 9500), on the street the Versys’ powerband is superior and its high rpm certainly isn’t asthmatic. Perfectly satisfying.



Our only complaint is that the engine’s now so responsive that the fuel injection can be called a bit snatchy. However, on/off throttle abruptness is typical of fuel injected motors, and the Versys is not especially bad in this regard. Your throttle hand will soon learn to be extra smooth to minimize the condition.

Transmission

The six-speed cassette transmission has very slick action shifting either up or down, and combined with the excellent throttle response, blipping downshifts becomes child’s play.

Unlike the Ninja 650R, which uses a simple reverse-facing shift lever that doesn’t permit changes to fit a rider’s boot preference, the Versys gets a proper linkage system. Unfortunately, the shift lever’s travel is longer than customary, so we’d sometimes fail to drop our toes enough to engage the next gear, missing a few shifts. Simply a matter of pivot points, you might be able to identify a linkage lever part on another model that could be swapped to correct it, or re-train your left foot.

One area where the Versys didn’t equal or surpass the Ninja 650R, strangely, was its clutch. The Ninja had a great clutch, with plenty of engagement power that was very easy to modulate for best performance in our quarter-mile tests. The Versys, on the other hand, when worked hard, would either slip too much or grab suddenly, wasting the run with a big wheelie. And the grabbiness was noticeable even in moderate street use.

Performance stats: Versys—1/4 mile: 12.96 secs. @ 99.15 mph; 0-60 mph: 4.86 secs. Ninja 650R—1/4 mile: 12.11 secs. @ 107.30; 0-60 mph: 3.84 (don’t underestimate the advantage of the Ninja’s better clutch). DL650 V-Strom (May 2004)—1/4 mile: 12.52 secs. @ 101.00 mph; 0-60 mph: 3.98 secs. (Note also that the DL650 may now be slightly slower due to Euro 3 emissions tuning. When the Ninja 650R was first tested back in March 2006, it was a bit quicker too (1/4 mile 11.71 secs. @ 106.04 mph; 0-60 mph: 3.16 secs.)

Chassis & Suspension

The Ninja 650R and the Versys share the same basic chassis, but you wouldn’t know it because the Ninja’s bodywork hides what the Versys exposes. A tubular steel structure that’s both stiff and light, it wraps over and around the engine’s cylinders. Although you can’t see them on the Ninja, on the Versys the exposed side beams provide a visual frame for the radiator (one that’s 40mm wider than the Ninja’s for a 12% increase in cooling capacity) while the tube junctions get stylized covers that enhance the overall design.

Where the Versys and Ninja chassis diverge most is at the back. The Versys gets a very trick-looking “gull wing” aluminum swingarm while the Ninja wears a cheaper-looking triangulated steel piece. To reinforce its rear subframe (and add to its tough-guy looks) the Versys adds a black-painted steel trellis to support the passenger pegs in lieu of the Ninja’s swoopy cast peg carriers.

To add stability, Kawasaki’s engineers increased the rake/trail, from 24.5°/4.2” on the Ninja, to 25.0°/4.3” on the Versys, which also adds a fraction to its wheelbase (now 55.7” from 55.51”).

Longer suspension travel is also part of the Versys package, increased to 5.9"/5.7" front/rear from the Ninja's 4.7"/4.9" front/rear numbers. The fork is also upgraded, an attractive 41mm male-slider cartridge unit made by Showa with billet aluminum legs rather than the Ninja's cheap-looking Kayaba conventional damper-rod fork, and now provides both rebound and preload adjustability (the Ninja's fork is non-adjustable). The Versys' rear shock is also all new, with twice the internal nitrogen gas pressure (284 psi vs. 142 psi) plus it adds rear damping adjustability to the Ninja's rear preload adjustability.

These changes should make the Versys the equal of the 650 V-Strom (suspension travel: 5.9" front and rear). But even though the Versys is lighter than the Wee-Strom, at 452.5 lbs. wet to the Suzuki's 471.5, it really doesn't favor rough going, and its rear suspension will give the rider a good beating for his trouble if he gets too adventurous. We suspect the reason is that the V-Strom uses linkage-type rear suspension to provide a progressive spring and damping effect. And while the Ninja/Versys rear shock looks stylish in its fully exposed position, direct mountings rarely work as well as a linkage-type setup, regardless of brand. We found its rear spring too strong and the rebound damping inadequate (much like the Ninja's). The fork action, on the other hand, was fine.

Brakes

Equipped with the same wheels and brakes as the Ninja, the Versys might be expected to stop as well. However, we didn't find its Dunlop D221 tires as grippy as the Ninja's Bridgestone BT020 rubber, and the bike's tall stance and resulting weight shift causes the Versys' rear wheel to lock too easily. On both models, the front brakes need a very firm squeeze to generate strong stopping power—probably due to their inexpensive construction (simple two-piston sliding calipers) and pad composition. Sliding calipers typically lack good feel and these pads seem to need high heat to work well. We got a best 60-zero stop of 127.9' from the Versys vs. 119.3' from the Ninja and 122.9' from the 650 V-Strom.

Handling

Again, probably due to the tires, the Versys' road feel is not exceptional, but the bike's relatively light weight and responsive chassis geometry make it fun to ride in any case. Coming to a stop, we found the bike's balance was also exceptional, so that many times we found it easy to come to a brief but complete halt without putting a foot down, like a trials rider.

In stock form, the rear suspension was too uncontrolled for best rear traction, but after softening the spring rate to either minimum or one notch of preload and increasing rebound to maximum, we were satisfied, at least on smooth roads.

Ergonomics

The bike has a nice upright riding position, scaled to a taller rider than the Ninja's layout. Unfortunately, its seat angles forward nearly 10° and is also cut away so much at the front (to make reaching the ground easier for shorter riders) that it lacks sufficient thigh support. The result is a seat that's good for perhaps 100 miles before you begin to squirm or decide to stop. So we also asked to try the lower gel seat, and were favorably impressed. Significantly lower (31.6"), the gel seat is scooped out so that it provides better thigh support and doesn't tilt forward, but cramps the legroom a bit for taller riders. Its price is \$399.95. And although the bike is narrow between the knees, it feels like it could have been even narrower, as the plastic frame covers make it wider than it needs to be.

The narrow windshield can be mounted in three positions 20mm apart. And while it might look too narrow for good pro-

tection, it's quite effective. Incidentally, a larger windshield is in the catalog (\$124.95). Even better, very attractive close-fitting hard bags and a top box are also offered, making the bike a very viable mid-sized sport-tourer (\$929.80 for all three with brackets).

Riding Impression

The Versys gets the basics right. Relatively light weight with a well arranged riding position, its engine offers great driveability and its transmission is very slick. The brakes are good if not great, and its handling is very enjoyable. Better tires, a good aftermarket rear shock and a change of brake pads could make it much nicer (something that's true of many bikes).

Instruments & Controls

The instruments are a new design and much nicer than the Ninja's, with a big analog tach on the left and digital speedo on the right, with either mph or kmph readouts, together with a fuel gauge and a clock as well as an odometer, two tripmeters and the usual indicators. The controls are very nice, too, the handlebar levers are multi-adjustable for reach and the foot pedals also offer a useful range of positions.

The big headlight is probably the bike's most distinctive and controversial styling feature, a little bug-like, but bright and effective. The mirrors are only fair, with a good but not great view aft.

It also comes complete with a very nice toolkit, including the spanner to adjust rear preload.

Available in a single color, the paint is a shade of red that should make Ducati jealous (and we had the Hypermotard alongside, offended by the comparison).

Value

Priced at \$6899, the Versys is much better equipped than the Ninja 650R. But you don't get extras like cartridge forks, a linkage-type shift mechanism, and a trick alloy swingarm for nothing. It's \$500 more expensive, too. Our judgment is that if you've got the inseams for its taller seat, it's well worth the money.

Bottom Line

As it is, the Versys looks like an adventure-tourer, but really isn't one. Cough up the cash for a premium aftermarket shock, slow way down in the rough, or be satisfied that in stock form it makes a great commuter, could be considered a well-dressed supermotard (like a Ducati Multistrada) or perhaps a stylish urban warrior. Or, for about a grand, it can be dressed to create a wonderful mid-sized sport-tourer. A versatility system indeed! 🍷





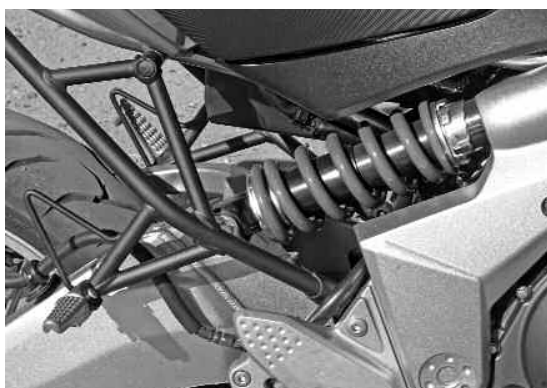
Above: In its dazzling red paint, the Versys turns heads. Its headlight is vaguely bug-like but bright and effective. The front brakes need a hard squeeze and lack feel. Fuel tank is 5 gal. (vs. the Ninja's 4.1).

Right: The 649cc liquid-cooled 4-valve DOHC parallel twin is ultramodern and very compact (just 3/4 the size of the older 500 Ninja's). Retuned from its Ninja 650R version for more mid-range torque, it is much better in terms of response and visceral character. And it runs much smoother at cruising speed too—very nice.

Below: The Versys' instruments are a major improvement over its Ninja 650 sibling. Much easier to read with a big bright digital speedo and well-marked analog tach plus a fuel gauge (which the Ninja doesn't have). Note that the abbreviated windshield has three positions. We kept ours in the top-most holes. Much more effective than it appears, a bigger unit is also optional.



Below: The Versys' seat is 33" off the ground, 1.8" taller than the Ninja 650's. It looks very good, but the comfort lasts only about 100 miles. Not enough thigh support and a 10° forward lean take a toll. The passenger end is pretty good.



Left: Both of Kawasaki's new 650s use the same chassis with a direct-mounted lay-down shock. The spring needs to be very strong to handle this mounting, and without a progressive linkage is rarely fully satisfactory. We found it oversprung and underdamped, even ridden solo—only adequate on smooth roads.



TESTERS' LOG

I like almost everything about the Versys, especially its light weight, upright seating position and comfortable handlebar that affords plenty of leverage and control.

While we tend to think of twins in the "V" configuration, I found the performance of this parallel twin very impressive. Very responsive and enjoyable through its rev range with vibration-free high rpm performance as well.

If I had to note any negatives, although the clutch did not fade, launching the Versys during our 1/4-mile testing proved a challenge. If launch rpm were too low, the engine would bog, and if too high, would result in an instantaneous wheelie. Granted, drag racing was never intended to be one of this motorcycle's strong suits, but I do wish that the results of our testing could have been a better reflection of the parallel twin's performance.

My other two suggestions: The front brake could use more initial bite, and enthusiastic riders would be happier with stickier tires that give more braking and cornering grip at both ends.

—Danny Coe

When I first laid eyes on the Versys, I imagined it might be a much more economical equivalent of my fantasy F800GS (if BMW ever builds it). My wallet started smoking!

I really liked Suzuki's G50 V-Strom, too, which seems to be its natural competitor. There's a lot of great riding that can be done on a mid-sized bike that can handle backroads without beating you to pieces or making you wrestle a two-wheeled SUV.

Like the Suzuki DL650 V-twin, the Versys motor is a genuine sweetheart, and much better in my book than either the standard SV650 or the Ninja 650R's more highly tuned versions, which give up too much mid-range for top-end that you rarely use.

The reality is that the Versys is a poser as an adventure-tourer, its rear suspension can't handle it. But it does make a very nice runabout, commuter or mid-size sport-tourer, and excellent hard bags are in the Kawasaki accessory catalog.

Bottom line: Great fun to ride on smoother roads, this is a lot of bike for the money and deserves a test ride.

—Dave Searle

2008 Kawasaki Versys

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA



ENGINE

Type:liquid-cooled parallel twin
 Valvetrain:DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.
 Displacement:649cc
 Bore/stroke:83.0mm x 60.0mm
 Comp. ratio:10.6:1
 Fueling:Digital fuel injection w/
 2x38mm Keihin throttle bodies
 Exhaust:2 into 1

DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission:6-speed
 Final drive:chain
 RPM @ 65* mph/redline: 5130/10,300
 *Actual, not indicated

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase:55.7"
 Rake/trail25.0°/4.30"
 Ground clearance:7.0"
 Seat height:33.0"
 GVWR:851 lbs.
 Wet weight:452.5 lbs.
 Carrying capacity:398.5 lbs.

SUSPENSION

Front:41mm male-slider cartridge
 forks, adj. preload and reb. damping,
 5.9" travel
 Rear: single offset laydown gas shock
 with adj. preload and reb. damping,
 5.7" travel

BRAKES

Front:two 300mm petal-style discs,
 two-piston, single-action calipers
 Rear:single 220mm petal-style disc,
 single-piston caliper

TIRES & WHEELS

Front:120/70ZR17 Dunlop D221
 Sportmax on 3.5" x 17" wheel
 Rear:160/60ZR17 Dunlop D221
 Sportmax on 4.50" x 17" wheel

ELECTRICS

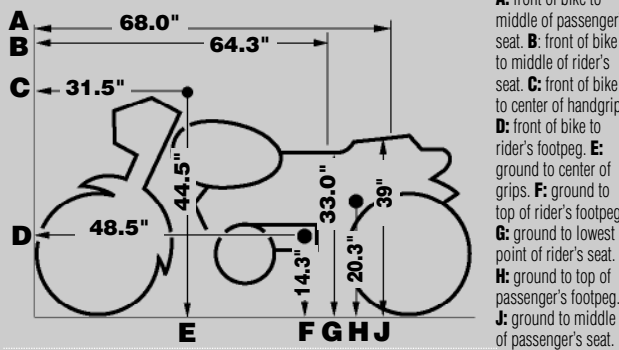
Battery:12 V, 10 Ah
 Ignition:mapped CDI
 Alternator Output: 112 W @ 4000 rpm
 Headlight:55W/55W

FUEL

Tank capacity:5.0 gal.
 Fuel grade:87 octane
 High/low/avg. mpg:52.3/31.9/46.5



ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE



MISCELLANEOUS

Instruments:digital speedo,
 analog tach, odometer, 2 tripmeters,
 clock, fuel gauge
 Indicators:hi-beam, t/s, neutral,
 oil pressure, engine temp, check
 engine
 MSRP:\$6899
 Routine service interval7500 mi.
 Valve adj. interval:15,000 mi.
 Warranty:12 mo.
 Colors:Passion Red

TEST NOTES

PICKS

- Delightfully responsive motor
- Excellent handling and balance
- Very attractive styling and good ergonomics

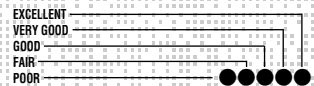
PANS

- Seat needs more thigh support and less forward angle
- Not available in California for 2008 model year
- The shift pedal throw is a bit too long

PERFORMANCE

Measured top speed117 mph
 0-1/4 mile12.96 sec.
 @ 99.15 mph
 0-60 mph4.86 sec.
 0-100 mph14.19 sec.
 60-0 mph127.9'
 Power to Weight Ratio1:7.72
 Speed @ 65 mph indicated60.8

MC RATING SYSTEM



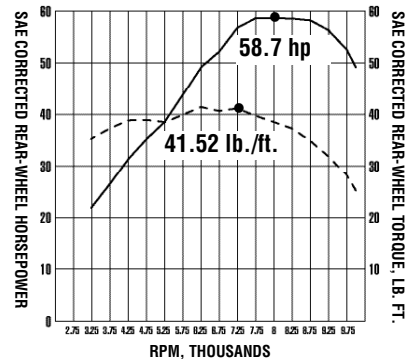
Middleweight Standard

Engine	●●●●○
Transmission	●●●●○
Suspension	●●●●○
Brakes	●●●●○
Handling	●●●●○
Ergonomics	●●●●○
Riding Impression	●●●●○
Instruments/Controls	●●●●○
Attention to Detail	●●●●○
Value	●●●●○
OVERALL RATING	●●●●○

DYNAMOMETER DATA

- Low end ●●●●○
 Mid-range ●●●●○
 Top end ●●●●○

If you can avoid being hypnotized by hp numbers, you might find that the Versys' parallel twin makes a near perfect street motor, responsive and fun to use, with an almost perfectly linear powerband and satisfying top end performance.



STANDARD MAINTENANCE

Item	Time	Parts	Labor
Oil & Filter	0.2	\$10.94 +	\$12 \$16.00
Air Filter	0.8	\$37.89	\$64.00
Valve Adjust	2.3		\$184.00
Battery Access	0.3	MF	\$24.00
Final Drive	0.2		\$16.00
R/R Rear Whl.	0.4		\$32.00
Change Plugs	0.7	\$19.90	\$56.00
Adjust EFI	1.5		\$120.00
Totals	6.4	\$80.73	\$512.00

*MCN has changed the estimated labor rate to \$80 starting March 2007