

First Impression

2011 KAWASAKI VAQUERO For The Custom Bagger Crowd



KAWASAKI'S NEW-FOR-2011 Vaquero isn't quite a full-dress tourer, but it isn't a bare-bones classic-style cruiser, either. The Vaquero is designed to reach out to riders who appreciate the long, low and mean look of a custom-styled bagger and, as such, it slots nicely into the Good Times company's extended family of strong-performing Vulcan 1700cc cruisers.

As Vaquero is the Spanish word for "cowboy," it only seems appropriate that Kawasaki recently invited the press to East Texas to sample the machine on the backroads around Lake Conroe, incidentally the home of American MotoGP ace, Colin Edwards.

Subtle Changes

They say everything's bigger in Texas, and the Vaquero's 1700cc (103 cu. in.) motor, while not the largest state in the Union, is still plenty big. The SOHC, four-valve, 52° V-twin uses air-cooled cylinders with liquid-cooled heads, and an undersquare bore and stroke of 102.0mm x 104.0mm that claims a peak torque figure of 108 lb.-ft. @ 2750 rpm. Finished in a matte black to enhance the Vaquero's tough-guy image, the engine shares the same architecture found on the rest of the Vulcan line but incorporates a few subtle changes—some for durability and others to give the Vaquero a little more "rumble and shake," says Kawasaki.

For example, the Vaquero's top end is the first in the family to receive a revised second piston ring for improved durability and a new intake manifold with a revised shape and increased volume, which is supposed to provide more linear throttle response and an improved idle. It still uses a fly-by-wire throttle and digital fuel-injection with both an Accelerator Position Sensor (APS) and a Throttle Position Sensor (TPS) to signal the ECU in order to adjust the throttle plates for optimum response and driveability.

The Vaquero's 6-speed overdrive transmission and clutch are also changed. The Vaquero has a 2.933:1 first-gear ratio compared to the rest of the line-up's 3.077:1 first gear. The new gear makes for a less audible "clunk" when the transmission is shifted from neutral to first. New third and fourth gears with taller tooth profiles are likewise incorporated to reduce noise when shifting. The primary drive has also been altered via the removal of the lower chain guide, and the Vaquero's clutch has been swapped to a non-damper style unit (also found on the Vulcan Classic) in order to increase the "power pulse" feeling through the handlebars. Other driveline changes include a 2mm-narrower drive belt; a new 26mm carbon fiber type that is stronger and lighter than a

similar-sized Kevlar belt. Also, the Vaquero's twin-pipe mufflers get new tapered tips that accentuate the bike's long and low styling while quieting its exhaust note at cruising speeds.

The Ride

Firing up the Vaquero and heading out on the highway is a satisfying experience, as the Vaquero's responsive motor offers plenty of soul-stirring torque, especially around 3000 rpm, with plenty of overrev as the tach needle climbs toward redline, which is around 6000 rpm. That means you don't need to short shift the engine to maintain forward momentum. The new mufflers are a bit on the mellow side for our tastes, however. It would be nice to be able to hear a little more rumble from the Vaquero,

The transmission changes aren't all that noticeable, but the ratios feel well matched to the power delivery. Clutch pull isn't stiff or heavy, although we'd like more engagement range than we got out of our test bike. This was especially noticeable when trying to make tight U-turns.

But at least the Vaquero's single backbone, double downtube chassis steers lightly and holds the road with authority. Its 65.6" wheelbase with 30° of rake and 7.0" of trail make for a stable ride, but the Vaquero doesn't feel overly long. And despite its claimed curb weight of 835.7 lbs.—which is a good 20 lbs. heavier than the batwing baggers we tested in the December 2010 issue of MCN—it doesn't feel cumbersome at slower speeds, and it transitions nicely from side to side when ridden at a normal cruiser pace. We attribute part of this handling to Vaquero's frame-mounted fairing but also to the rounded profiles of the Vaquero's sure-footed Bridgestone Exedra radials—130/90-16 front and 170/70-16 rear—which ride on nine-spoke cast aluminum wheels that are also blacked out to enhance styling.

Our initial impression of the Vaquero's dual 300mm fixed front discs with solid-mounted twin-piston calipers is that their stopping power is adequate, although the lever action is a bit heavy handed and lacks feel, not unlike H-D's Street Glide. Surprisingly, the Vaquero does not come with ABS, nor is it an option.

Despite its low looks, the Vaquero cruises in relative comfort, thanks to a 43mm male-slider telescopic fork and twin shocks, which offer 5.5" and 3.1" of travel respectively. While the fork is not adjustable, the shocks feature air-assisted preload and four-way rebound damping adjustability.

The Vaquero's comfort extends to its new one-piece seat, which enhances the Vaquero's low profile look by complementing the curves of the saddlebags. Kawasaki says that the 28.7" tall seat also opens up the ergonomic triangle a little to give the Vaquero a more spacious feel. We won't argue that, as the Vaquero's cockpit presented no comfort issues on our 165-mile ride. We definitely like the Vaquero's low-profile wind deflector, which minimizes helmet buffeting. Kawasaki had us try some accessory windscreens during our ride, but all of them only seemed to create more turbulence than the stocker.

We also like the Vaquero's Vulcan 1600-derived, side-opening saddlebags, which offer easy access via a chrome handle on the side of each bag. The lockable bags feature a seal designed to keep out moisture, although we'd like to put them to the test to see if they are really as waterproof as they look. Also derived from the Voyager is the Vaquero's easy-to-use, good-sounding twin-speaker audio system, which features an AM/FM/WX radio that is compatible for use with an iPod, XM tuner and/or CB radio.

Final Thoughts

If price and performance were the only factors in determining success, we'd say that the \$16,499 Vaquero is already a home run. Ultimately, though, its appeal will depend more on how warmly it is embraced by aftermarket custom parts manufacturers. ■