

Model Comparison

Right: Buell's 1203cc V-twin makes a great wave of torque that propels the XB12Ss forward like a surfer at Wiamea Bay; liquid smooth, irresistible and intoxicating. Although the rush ebbs above 4000 rpm, in canyon riding situations, the XB12Ss easily holds its own against the Speed Triple. However, the engine management is programmed to cut fuel slowly, making engine compression braking almost non-existent. Also, the engine's vibration isolation system prevents the bike from feeling like a single piece, and more like a caged animal—unusual and distracting to some of us.



Below: The instrumentation is easy to read for the most part, but the smoked plastic cover over the indicator lights (right side) makes them less visible than we'd like. The small flyscreen does a useful job of streamlining the airflow, much better than the Speed Triple.



Above: Equally as good as the Ulysses' plush perch, the XB12Ss' saddle never gave us a moment's discomfort. Finally, Buell gets it right! Note the filler cap in the forward end of the swingarm, which serves as an oiltank for the dry-sump motor—another clever packaging solution.



Left: Showa provides the suspension components, and both ends are fully adjustable for spring preload, compression and rebound damping. The action is plush and compliant with excellent control feel. Dunlop D208 rubber is standard. However, the headlights separate high and low beam functions and their light patterns have sharp vertical cutoffs which fail to illuminate corners adequately when the bike is leaned over. The big 375mm outboard disc gives excellent control and allows a lighter wheel assembly for reduced unsprung weight.

TESTERS' LOG

I'd been so impressed with the Ulysses that I could only hope the Lightning Long would be the same and maybe better. Only its shorter travel suspension should have made it any different, and a lower seat height would be a welcome thing. Maybe it would even be my new favorite Buell.

Strangely, the change was greater than we could understand. The XB12Ss' handling wasn't nearly so neutral, but had an odd tendency to need continuous countersteering in a turn, to prevent it "falling in." It also wanted to stand up a bit under braking. Even new tires didn't change its behavior. The Ulysses handling had been perfectly neutral, and I rode them back-to-back, so I'm sure.

The shorter suspension travel hadn't spoiled the fine ride we'd praised on its taller brother and was still fully adjustable. And the seating was excellent once again, both initial areas of concern.

The weather was cool this time, and we had no problems with excessive heat radiating through the fuel-filled frame or underseat vents, but come summertime, that toaster-oven sensation will surely return.

Surfing its great waves of torque was still a treat, but ridden more like a sportbike, the engine management's lazy over-run was more of a bother and the engine's gyrations inside the chassis more of a distraction. But you could learn to live with both.

All in all, if an American V-twin sports bike is what you're after, the Lightning Long is on target.

—Dave Searle

The Lightning Long's larger chassis dimensions fit me better than Buell's more compact models. And with their slightly greater fuel capacity, I get to ride longer, and aboard the XB12Ss, I can comfortably ride a lot farther than I can on my '97 Buell S3.

The one criticism I have pertains to the fuel injection mapping. Long after the throttle is shut off the engine continues to "run on." This is more a nuisance than anything.

Even with all its changes, the Buell still retains the features that I truly appreciate: "Old technology" hydraulic lifters and belt drive. Both reduce maintenance costs and down time.

It's improved, but not spoiled.

—Walt Fulton