

Honda Silver Wing—Redefining the Term “Scooter”

CONSIDER FOR A moment that you may not have truly lived until you’ve pitched a scooter into an uphill right-hander at 90mph and then *accelerated* out. And isn’t there really something to be said for going clutchless in the grinding snarl of urban traffic? And how about 55 liters of lockable, easily accessible storage space—plenty for two full face helmets—or enough gear for a couple of weeks on the open road. And while “scooter touring” seems like an oxymoron, it’s not at all nuts to think of taking Honda’s impressive 2002 Silver Wing coast-to-coast.

First impressions of the Silver Wing generally fall into two categories: The kind of people who offered up some positive version of, “Wow, cool!” and those who said, “What’s the point?” and even, “It’s goofy.” Objectively, it does look like a super-futuristic Helix on steroids. But judging this machine by its looks (and the limited purpose its step-through frame implies) would be a mistake of prejudice and ignorance. This is a fun, fast, responsive motorcycle that retains the convenience of a scooter.

Pull in the left (integrated) brake lever, thumb the starter and the well-sorted digital EFI has the 582cc liquid-cooled, four-stroke, parallel twin running instantly, effortlessly. The pleasant, rhythmic thrum emitted by the Silver Wing is almost Wankel-like; something akin to an early RX-7 with a holed muffler. It’s a sound that portends something big. While we were unable to put the Silver Wing through MCN’s usual exhaustive performance testing, our highly skilled pantsseats tell us this thing is *quick*. Honda claims 50 peak horsepower and 37 lb./ft. of torque is transmitted through the V-Matic belt drive to the chubby little Bridgestone rear tire. Perhaps because one subconsciously assumes that scooters are gutless, it sure feels like it squeezes out a lot more juice than Honda claims, although that’s unlikely.

The Silver Wing’s DOHC four-valve motor makes so much power—enough to cause the 500-lb. machine to burn rubber and perhaps even to wheelie off the line—it would scare the pants off the average scooterphile, and inevitably lead to crashes and pesky lawsuits. So, Honda’s braintrust decided to head that off by building in a speed-sensitive ignition retard to slow things down a bit for safety. The ECU advances the timing a little at 10mph, more at 20 mph, but you don’t get full advance until the Silver Wing is rolling at 30 mph. That’s kind of a shame, because the power is a bit flat until it comes in, after which it’s really quite zippy. Will an aftermarket rise up to support Silver Wing hotrodders with chips, pipes, big-bore kits and the like?

But even in its muted stock configuration,



we were most impressed by full throttle roll-ons from 50 to 70 mph, because that’s where the Silver Wing makes lots of power very quickly—enough to perhaps put an inattentive passenger at risk of flying off the back. As speeds escalate quickly into extra-legal levels, we thought another higher “gear” would have been nice, because the willing engine gets a bit busy. It’s spinning at 5000 rpm at 65 mph, and at 80 mph is buzzing at 6500 rpm. But it pulls hard all the way to where it felt like a rev limiter hit at about 8250 rpm—just shy of its 8500 rpm redline. On a flat road, this had our 170 lb. rider and his backpack flying along at an indicated 111 mph. And at that speed, the aerodynamic bodywork, tall windscreen and naturally low C. of G. combine to provide a stable and smooth platform. We were surprised at how thirsty the engine was, however, as it made only 35 mpg during our hard-charging. A number that only improved to 38 mpg under more normal usage.

Wind protection comes up a bit short of what Honda claims is a bubble of “quiet luxury.” We found that since the fairing and windscreen are rather narrow, the air pocket collapses suddenly to the sides, creating quite a bit of cockpit buffeting and noise. I’m only 5’ 8” tall, but had to tuck down and forward to find quiet air. The aerodynamics of the bike’s front end are, in fact, quite good, as evidenced by its stability at very high speeds—all it needs is a wider, taller windscreen for riders of even average height.

Of course, it would be irresponsible not to match the Silver Wing’s engine performance with brakes that are up to the task, and Honda is anything but irresponsible. The right lever gives you two of the front caliper’s three pistons pinching the large 256mm rotor. This is quite an effective way to slow the machine.

But the real power is in your left hand, as that lever activates both rear pistons and (a few microseconds later after an inline delay valve pops open) the center piston of the front caliper. Riders switching back and forth from motorcycles have to be very careful with their clutch hand when rolling to a stop, as that left lever is very potent.

The handling is a bit odd, with turn-ins being both quick and (strangely) slow—likely due to the long, 62” wheelbase and small-diameter tires (120/80-14” front, 150/70-13” rear). The underdamped front end felt sort of floaty—not really connected to the road, and gives hard-to-read feedback through the bars. The front tire twitches at higher speeds on all but the smoothest surfaces. But it will outhandle any “normal” scooter, largely because the engine and swing-arm are separated, so all that engine weight is no longer an unsprung lump flailing around out back they way most scooters are designed. Rear suspension is pure motorcycle, with dual, pre-load-adjustable shocks with 4.7” of travel.

It almost goes without saying that the Silver Wing has Honda’s impeccable fit and finish, with a host of usable, well thought-out features. We think the first people to line up for this machine are going to be the wives of Gold Wings, who may have tired of the back seat. They finally have the option of a zero-intimidation machine they can easily learn to pilot, and yet keep pace with their husbands. All they need to do is fit the communications gear (an easy aftermarket project given the two ample gloveboxes and 12v accessory outlet), some sort of throttle lock and a cupholder. Just don’t be surprised if some of the quickest Wings on the curvy roads around this year’s Honda Hoot happen to be Silver, not Gold.

—Steve Natt