

BREWED IN THE UK BY TOTAL IDIOTS

Crazier than a hatful of mad monkeys, sexier than a sneak glimpse up Helena Bonham-Carter's skirt and cooler than a six-pack in the fridge. And that's just the blokes. Welcome to the whacky world of 600 super spurts, where the next bike is only as good as the one that comes after it, and the one before it ain't worth shit.



THE SIX



The latest, bestest, newest,
brain-outiest 600s are here.
Yamaha's all-singin', all-
dancin' YZF600F Thundercat
goes up against Kawasaki's
loony-toon ZX-6R and
Honda's hardy CBR600
perennial, while Ducati's 748
goes for broke. Piss-up in a
brewery, anyone?



PACK

100% vol.

THE SIX PACK

The testers

Jill Strong: pair of week-old, skinny, violet knickers. Usually found gripping the seat of a bent (as in crashed) ZZ-R600 with shot tyres and bugged suspension, but equally at home gripping more exotic machinery. Jill's a vegetarian, so expect terminal flatulence.

Key Smith: should be a pair of tartan boxers (used to be Scottish and once rode a BMW R80R as personal transport) but has gone soft down south, opting for a fetching pair of violet gregs. No skids but plenty of slides. Note evidence of ginga pubes.

Gus Scott: black boxers, stained off-grey by showing spunk in the face of adversity. Gus is a plumber, so you won't have a tough time guessing where he keeps his tool. Likes to push the front as hard as the rear.

Simon Hargreaves: pony pair of gurlie white briefs with tragically over-stretched elasticated waist. McDonald's and high-fibre lifestyle can lead to an over-damped rear-end shock and unpleasant chuff-nuts.



The tests

M-way: 400 miles of M4 and M5.
A-road: wibbly wobbly, up and down A39 between Bridgewater, Devon, and Porlock, plus assorted hooliganising around Exmoor.
Track: all day and 200 miles at Castle Combe in Wiltshire — one of the fastest, bumpiest tracks in the UK.
Performance tests: ordeal by Bruntingthorpe and the incredible Burgerman's dyno.

Yamaha YZF600F

With a moniker like Thundercat and letters like YZF,

you'd be forgiven for thinking the new 600cc Yam is a smaller, lighter, faster version of last year's FZR600R. You might think it's got an alloy frame and swingarm, six-pot brakes, usd forks, fug-all weight, obscene power and steering sharp enough to cut the throat of every CBR and ZX-6 in the land.

And you'd be wrong. A glance at the spec confirms that where Kawasaki went for the performance end of the CBR600's jugular, Yamaha have made a bid to open the all-round, sports-tourer vein. Where there should be alloy there's steel, where there should be usd there's rwu, and where there should be thin air there's acres and acres of plastic. This ain't no race rep.

First thing to hit you about the Cat is its looks. Incredibly ugly or incredibly different is up to you, but not even the most visually-challenged can call it beautiful. I thought it was an abomination at first, like Yamaha had built their own Suzuki RF600, but after a couple of days I changed my mind (now there's a surprise). From the side it looks okay in a bulbous, puffed-up kind of way.

'It's worse head-on,' said styling guru Jill. 'It's the headlight — they make a huge great plastic surround, then use a poxy single headlight in the middle of it. Why not a double headlamp, like the Thunderace?'

If looking at the Cat gives you a headache, ferchrissakes don't take it to bits. The bodywork is the most complex we've stripped for a fairing-off shot — worse than the previous record holder, an RC45. The panels inside the fairing fall to a million pieces, with different screws holding it all together and a forest of plumbing, wiring and connector blocks lurking underneath. Wonder how long a top-end service takes? And best not mention the on/off fuel switch under the tank which you can only reach by taking the tank off, and which is easy to forget about until you gasp to a halt a few miles down the road...

So whassit ride like then? It feels good — very good. The riding position is the most natural thing this side of waking up with a stiffie — you slot instantly into relaxed cruising mode, which is hands spread out to



Où est la chat? La chat est sur la back wheel. A bit too soft and bouncy to get really silly, but just the thing for popping to the S of F and back for some fags. Like yer do...





wide bars with lots of leg and bum room. And check out the upright speed figures to see how effective the new fairing shape is. It might be ugly but it works — the Cat's 6mph faster than the ZX-6 and CBR with rider sat bolt upright.

The Yam is seriously comfy — you can plug on as far as the 19 litre tank takes you (around 160 miles 'til the fuel warning light comes on — no reserve tap). Even the seat is good.

But the sombre, grey clocks ain't so clever and the surround is multi-section, crap plastic. The moulded, one-piece gunmetal finish of a ZZ-R, or the ZX-6's neat, polished alloy, is miles classier. Normally we don't bother with details like this but the Yam's a mini-tourer and, after a couple of hundred miles in shite weather, little touches like coloured clocks make a big difference.

The Cat's chassis is built for maximum comfort, minimum stress. The softly-sprung shock and forks are multi-adjustable — on stock settings (middle of the range) they're ever-so-slightly underdamped, which means superb ride quality. 'Has this been set up for a ride to the South Of France?' asked Gus.

'The Yamaha shoos over bumps on the

▲ Ugly headlamp city but at least it's got a smile on its face. Which is nice...

'Squirmy, soft, wiggly worm, gizza fag' — Gus on the Yamaha

▼ 'The Beast of Exmoor is a big Cat,' says Arthur C. Clarke, famous sci-fi novelist and he of the Mysterious World.



THE SIX PACK

M-way like a... like a... like a magic carpet,' struggled Kev. Perhaps one day he'll tell us what 'shooms' means.

'It's nice on the road, is this,' continued Gus. *'It feels longer than the FZR (it isn't) and it's very soft. I'll bet we have to up the damper settings at the track.'*

He wasn't wrong. A couple of laps of Castle Combe's fast, bumpy circuit were enough to tie the Cat in big, undo-able granny knots. The rear end was the biggest prob — it was low and soft, and was still sorting itself out from one yump by the time it got to another.

After the start/finish straight is a righthand kink, taken on the stop in fifth, with a series

The Thundercat isn't a pepped-up FZR. Well the engine is, but chassis, styling and riding position are for real world needs and not winning races (although that's not to say it won't, with that motor). Gus was sad: *'What have they done to the FZR? It's a completely different bike. Goodbye FZR...'*



SPECIFICATION YAMAHA YZR600F

Price£6,995
Colour options.....red/white,
silver/yellow, dark blue
Warranty 2 years, unlimited mileage
Importer Yamaha UK Ltd (01932 358000)

Performance*

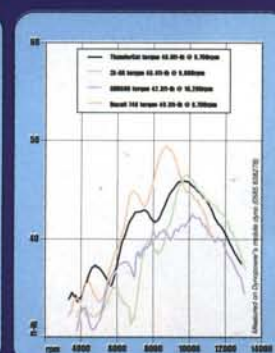
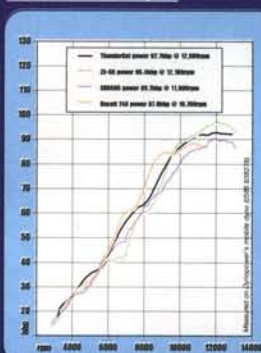
Max speed, prone 153.3mph @ 13,600rpm
upright 142.0mph
SS ¼ mile 11.47s @ 120.4mph
Fuel cons 45.4mpg (M-way)
36.2mpg (twisty road)
26.1mpg (track)

*dry, sunny, warm, hot... and a headwind

Engine

Type.....inline DOHC four, 16 valve,
water cooled
Bore x stroke.....62.0 x 49.6mm
Displacement 599cc
Compression.....12:1
Fuel system.....4 x Keihin CDK36
Ignition system.....digital
Redline 13,000rpm

POWER/TORQUE



SEAT HEIGHT

805mm (31.7in)

Rear end

Shock.....Monocross, adj.
preload, rebound
and bump
Tyre 160/60 ZR17
Disc.....1 x 245mm
Caliper 2-pot

Front end

Forks....41mm rwu fork, adj. preload,
rebound and bump
Rake/trail 25.0°/97mm
Tyre.....120/60 ZR17
Discs.....2 x 298mm
Calipers.....2 x 4-pot

Frame

Type: steel
Deltabox

WEIGHT

Dry: 187kg (422lb)

WHEELBASE

1415mm (55.7in)





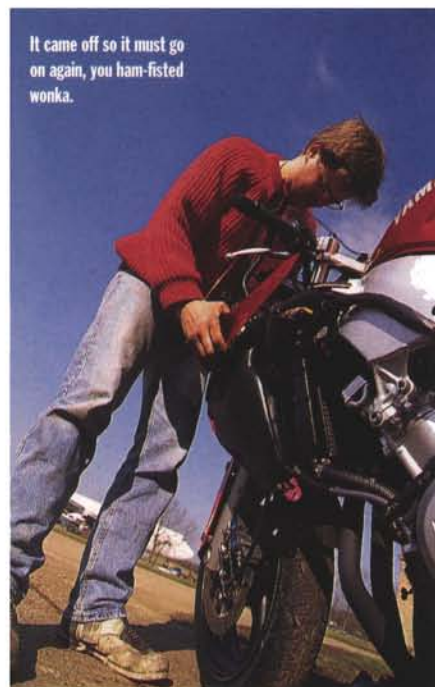
of deep, wallowy ripples on the way in and out. They're the sort of thing you come up against every day down yer country lane, but on a track they're a bit of a shock, like. They caused hassle on all the bikes, but where the ZX and CBR threatened to tankslap, the Cat promised a weave that'd make a textile worker on acid proud. And only on the Cat were the bumps reason to back off.

'The Yam gets really out of shape,' said Gus. *'It's like you've just caught an eel and you're trying to hold on to it but the bastard won't stop flapping about. The back*

is so soft it sets the front off, and the bike takes ages to settle down.'



Into the pits. The Yam's rear preload had an inch of static sag, so we upped it three clicks to one off max to stiffen the back and give more rear ride height. Bump damping felt about right, but rebound was too quick so we increased it 'til it felt good — up four clicks to six off max. Back on the track the difference was noticeable and, while it didn't calm the Cat completely, it made life a lot more fun without sacrificing ride quality.



It came off so it must go on again, you ham-fisted wonka.

There are no complaints about the Cat's brakes — new, four-pot, one-piece cast jobbies. Brakes always used to be a Yamaha weak point — not any more. Plenty of power with tons of feedback — you can feel the pads pinching on the discs as they bite.

'Braking for the hairpin, I was suddenly glad I didn't have any knackers to crush against the tank,' said Jill.

The clutch, another Yamaha bug, remains as grabby as ever. During the standing quarters I could hear the plates squealing in anguish as Kev launched the Cat off the line, and during the start/stop of a photo session in Devon the clutch got hot and bothered in traditional Yam fashion.

The rest of the engine makes all the right noises — literally. On top of millions of internal changes (detailed last month — new, lighter block, forged pistons, new valve springs, bigger, watercooled oil cooler, 36mm carbs (up 2mm), smaller ignition rotor, lighter fuel pump and redesigned exhaust), the Cat uses Yamaha's first real stab at ram-air to push peak power up 6bhp from the FZR's 87 to the Cat's 93bhp.

And it sounds lovely, super, grrrrreat. Stick your ear next to the Cat's inlet duct and blip the throttle — waaaaa... It sounds as nice on the go too, and boy, does it rev like a bastard. Power is smooth and instant — more driveable from low down than the ZX-6 or the Honda. It's a world apart from the old FZR — more like the endless rev range of an FZR400 with twice the power.

'There's lots of poke there,' said Kev, *'but it's completely different to the FZR — where the older bike had a hollow, empty growl when you cracked the throttle, the Cat howls and goes.'*

The effortless motor and brilliant fairing make cruising at 120mph on the Cat more than possible — it's a doddle. And is it better than a CBR600? Yes, at what it does. It won't go round corners as fast, but it's quicker in a straight line, it's more comfy, better two-up and has better ride quality, brakes and gearbox. The Honda stuffs it on agility, high speed cornering and build quality. Now, about that alloy-framed, usd, six-pot YZF600R next year...



What you see is what you get, which is this...



Lapping it up

Best times round Castle Combe

	Gus	Kev
ZX-6R	1.06.36	1.07.74
CBR	1.07.49	1.07.81
Cat	1.08.68	1.09.11
748	1.08.93	1.08.92

Simon and Jill didn't record times: it took two of them to figure out how to use the stopwatch.

Proof the ZX-6 is boss hawg at the track. Anything which gets within one and a half seconds of the lap record on road tyres and stock everything else can't be bad — and shows how far road bikes have come, even in a few years. The CBR runs the Kwack a close second — it's less stable than the Kawasaki and its lack of top end makes the difference. It's still a contender but it doesn't feel as fast, or as safe, as the ZX-6. The Thundercat is out of its depth at a track — it's not playing the same game anyway. If we timed a race to Marseilles and back, the Cat would win. As it is, the suspension's too soft and the riding position too relaxed to cut it, although the motor's potent enough.

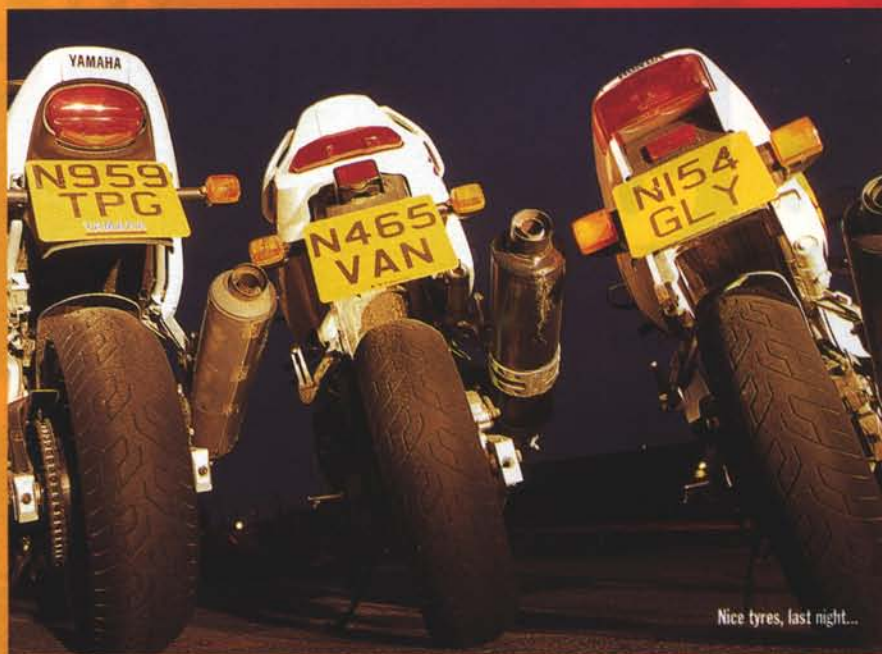


Spare tyres

We normally test bikes on the tyres importers supply them with because that's what you get. But this time we fitted the same tyres to all the bikes — it seemed like a good idea to use Dunlop D364s because they're as sticky as you can get for the road and, at the fag-end of winter, the last thing you want on a track is stock rubber slipping and sliding around. Besides, you can't split differences between sports bikes if tyres are the limiting factor. And if Dunlop offer to pay for the track at the same time, how can we refuse?

To make sure the Dunlops didn't alter the bikes' handling characteristics we rode them all with their stock tyres on first. The difference the D364s made was stunning — grip, grip and more grip, even on damp, slimy roads. But there's a price — after a day at the circuit and 1000 road miles the rears were nearly illegal.

Tyres are the most important bolt-on goodies anyone can buy. Forget tinted screens and flash paint jobs — if yer tyres are crap then so's the rest of the bike.



Bricks

- Riders of Bridgewater (01278 446709) for stripping the Duke
- Stuart the plumber for not running off with the Ducati when we left him the key overnight
- Castle Combe circuit for the fastest, hairiest circuit in the UK
- Trev for letting us abuse his ZX-6R mightily

Conclusion

It's unanimous — Kev, Gus and Jill all said they'd buy a ZX-6 because it was the fastest, most mental, and therefore the most fun. It's staggeringly quick, handles and stops better than the rest and is as practical as anything. Go get a test ride, now.

The Thundercat excels at what it does, which is 'shoom' (© K. Smith) you from A to B in complete comfort, no fuss, etc. It don't go round the bends as well as the CBR or ZX-6, but if you do loadsa miles and can't stretch to a big tourer, try this instead.

The CBR is, shock, horror, same as it ever was — good on the track, good on the road. It falls between the balls-out ZX-6 and the balls-in Cat, but isn't quite as good as either at what they do best. The only thing stopping it getting a major revamp into a Blade-style, ZX-6-eater is the fact Honda still sell all the CBR600s they can make. If it ain't broke, etc.

SH