

Carve or Cruise?

By Genevieve Marie Schmitt

When I first heard the 2004 Sportster motorcycles had rubber-mounted engines, I expected they'd ride like the very smooth FXDLI Dyna Low Rider. I own a 1994 Low Rider and consider it my rolling couch because of the comfort of the ride. When I finally saddled up on one of the new 2004 Sportsters, the XL 1200C Sportster 1200 Custom to be exact, I discovered that it feels distinctively different than the Low Rider, even though both have an engine that is rubber-mounted to the frame.

In redesigning the Sportster chassis, Harley-Davidson engineers made sure the motorcycle retained all the key ingredients that make a Sportster a Sportster, namely its signature quick and nimble ride. Sportsters carve canyons with excellent flickability. While the bike is considered a cruiser, its light and lean profile enables you to easily zip into and out of corners.

The new twin cradle, steel frame and swingarm is 26 percent stiffer than that of previous Sportsters, thanks to an increase in the diameter of its main backbone tube from 1.625 inches to 2.125 inches. In addition, the engine connects to the frame via three stabilizer links, which allow the engine to move in a radial motion within the frame while limiting lateral flex during cornering. The result is a tight, planted ride with limited vibration. As with all Harley-Davidson motorcycles, you can still feel the engine beneath you; it's just that the engine vibration doesn't transfer to the rest of the bike. You can now see a clear (not shaky) image in the mirrors, and your hands and feet and rest of your body don't continue buzzing after a long 350- to 400-mile day. A new, wider rear tire (150mm, up from 130mm) adds to the solid feel of the bike.

The ride on the 2004 Dyna Low Rider continues to be one of the smoothest and most predictable in Harley-Davidson's lineup. Compared to the Sportster 1200 Custom, the Low Rider travels with more of a casual lumber. The Low Rider is heavier (623 lbs. dry weight versus 554 lbs.), has

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Rubber Mount Match-up

Two Moto-journalists Compare the Dyna Low Rider & Sportster 1200 Custom

The Sportster 1200 Custom (left) and Dyna Low Rider (right) are capable of all types of riding, but each has its strong points. For the Sportster, they are riding ease and spirited cornering, while cruising and comfort for the long haul are the dominant domain of the Dyna.

Photos by David Dewhurst

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a longer wheelbase (65.5 inches versus 60.4 inches) and a slightly longer rake steering head/trail (32.0° / 5.1 inches versus 30.1° / 4.7 inches), which means it takes a bit more time through the curves than the Sportster. Plus, the Low Rider's 25.2-inch seat height is one of the lowest offered in the Harley-Davidson line (sharing this distinction with the FXSTB/I Night Train). It's nearly one inch lower than the Sportster 1200 Custom, which at 26.3 inches is still a comfortable height for many riders. The Low Rider is pure cruiser.

The Low Rider I tested was equipped with electronic fuel injection (EFI), a new option for Dynas in 2004, which added to the stable and effortless ride. The computerized fuel injection system automatically

compensates for changes in air temperature and elevation, delivering just the right mixture of fuel/air precisely when the rider needs it. With EFI, the Low Rider sprang to life the moment I thumbed the starter button on a cold California morning, while the Sportster, with its carbureted motor, had to be choked and warmed up for a few minutes before taking off on my ride.

Out on the highway the Low Rider, with its 1450cc Twin Cam motor, has more torque than the re-designed 1200cc Evolution Sportster engine, and it could be felt as soon as I cranked the throttle. At a peak of 85 ft.-lbs. at 3,000 rpm, torque is evident throughout the entire powerband, while the Sportster's 79 ft.-lbs. kick in just a bit later at 3,500 rpm. Once both bikes are up to speed, they pretty much run neck-and-neck. The Sportster never felt underpowered, even when coming off a ride on the Low Rider. And the Sportster 1200 Custom's new 4.5-gallon fuel tank matches well with the Low Rider's 4.8-gallon tank.

I prefer the seating position of the Low Rider because I like sitting "into" the bike rather than on top of it. It gives me a better sense of the bike's center of gravity, which is very low on the Dyna. I also prefer the Dyna's footpeg position, which keeps my legs bent at a 90-degree angle rather than out front like on the Sportster 1200 Custom. The Dyna also comes standard with highway pegs so you have the option of where you want to place your feet. Both machines have a set of easy-to-reach handlebars with pull-back risers that are angled toward the rider.

When outfitted with the appropriate accessories, both motorcycles have enough power and grit to work as a long distance tourer. Bottom line: you might have more fun on the Sportster on the curvy mountain roads and prefer the Dyna Low Rider for cruising alongside the ocean.

Genevieve Marie Schmitt is the editor of Woman Rider magazine.

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Putting the Sportster 1200 Custom through its paces, Genevieve Schmitt found that the new level of comfort didn't compromise its sporty ride.