Ever wanted to be somewhere else, having more fun? Well, grab a lift on one of these and head for the horizon.

**£8000 sports tourers**

There has never been a test quite like this. Full-on science meets mile after mile of gritty, real-world blasting. Whatever the bike, however the weather, the Bike Test will deliver the believable verdict on which one you should buy. Road testing will never be the same again.

**Part one** is the top-secret Bike Test Route: 433 miles of hand-picked roads. From tyre-blisteringly fast A roads and testing back roads to gravelly dual carriageways and bashed up rush hour towns, the route will highlight the best and worst of a bike’s behaviour. **Part two** is the test track. Pushing machines to their limits around the notorious Bruntingthorpe proving ground, we measure top speed, acceleration and braking, then put in a dozen laps of the fast, bumpy circuit to pinpoint which bike handles best and why. There’s more. **Part three** is the perfect weekend: we do track days, touring… whatever’s necessary to see how each bike will cope on your dream weekend. **Part four** is dyno testing, home servicing and living with it. Only then can we reach a verdict. Believe it.

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**Ducati ST4S ABS**
- £8750, 212kg, 112bhp, 154mph
- Ducati’s slant on rapid holiday making. Not the most glamorous machine in the firm’s line-up but capable and popular. There are plenty on the roads. The old ST4 sprang from the ST2 but featured the ST1 engine.

**Aprilia RST1000 Futura**
- £7925, 210kg, 102bhp, 152mph
- Another skinning of the Aprilia litre V-twin cat, the Futura is the firm’s first proper touring bike, with the heart of a supersports. The old Futura is a figment of your imagination, mate.

**Triumph Sprint ST**
- £7499, 207kg, 108bhp, 154mph
- Five years old, the British built bike has been gnawing away at VFR sales like a dog with a meaty bone. But are its teeth still sharp? The old Sprint ST is exactly what you see before you. It’s still as unchanged as water.

**Honda VFR ABS**
- £7999, 208kg, 97bhp, 146mph
- A byword for all-round greatness, the VFR has been around for nearly two decades in various forms. But is it living on its reputation alone? The old VFR had more facelifts than Michael Jackson. From a 750 back in 1986, now it’s an 800cc VTEC beast.
The VFR still looks so right, so cool. Those headlights are works of art.

Honda VFR ABS £7999

Plusher, smarter, more hi-tech, the VFR might be too clever for its own good.

IT STRIKES ME as odd that I'm here outside the newpaperstores, loosened up, helmet in hand with a very sharp VFR to take me home. I just need somewhere to put my paper. Lift off the seat, no room there. What about a baldwin pocket in the fainging? Obviously no one has thought of this what's the become of Honda's evergreen sports tourer? Of course there's plenty of hard luggage to be added to this bike, if you've a mind to spend the money. But this VFR costs a quid shy of eight grand and I'm a bit short right now.

It's funny how some bikes evolve. The VFR has been around since '80. It has the look of a GSX-R. The engine grew by 50ccs in 1997. Two years ago, I saw this latest model and thought 'wow'. The VFR still looks so right, so cool. The engine is a work of art, the high-level exhausts as potent as a pair of AE 447s sticking out the back of an Exocet tailgate. It doesn't stop there. From the clocks to the indicators, this is a bike that has been designed. If you want a contrast, take a glance over at the Triumph and see what I mean.

I have to admit that I've never been a fan of the Triumph. I was pretty keen on the Velocette but I never got the chance to try one out. I've always been more of a Honda fan and the VFR has always been a bike that I've admired. I've always been impressed with the way that the VFR has evolved over the years and I think it's a bike that has something for everyone.

However, I have to admit that I was a bit surprised when I saw the latest model. It looked much more like a GSX-R than I had expected. I think that it's a bit of a shame that Honda has decided to go in this direction. I think that the VFR is a bike that should be more about comfort and elegance than speed and power.

But I have to admit that I was impressed with the way that the bike handled. I think that it's a bike that would be great for long-distance touring. I think that it's a bit of a shame that the bike is so expensive. I think that it's a bike that should be more affordable for the average rider.
LIVING WITH IT

A rider’s bike is most comfortable... it’s the way you ride it. Keep it on the boil for the best fun, but watch out for the brick-wall effect if you over-rev it.

Triumph Sprint ST £7499

The Hinckley triple aims to outclass the Italians and out-practical the Honda.
This is what the summer is meant to be about: clear roads, sun on your back and a blast to the seaside. Perfect.
**Ducati ST4S ABS £8750**

**Sporty, yes – but is it really comfortable and reliable enough to tour?**

**Weather**
Hosippe bar, anyone? Traffic. They come over here, clanging our behalf!

**Miles ridden by bike**
35

**Time taken**
6 hours 50 minutes

**Average speed**
62.5mph

**Fuel used**
43 litres

**Average mpg**
39

**Motorway**
Running in sixth gives good economy, vibes and a snugger all

**acceleration. Screen**
visible and bike feels buckets.

**44mph**

**Top-gear cruising**
62.5mph

**Miles ridden**
39

**Traffic**
Over here, clogging the net and the tales of woe are longer than the M1.

**Reliability**
Once an arm and a leg have been

**supplied a U-lock under the seat.**

**+**

**Photograph Chippy's desk**
Focus readers ding the Ducati in an 80mph, top-gear shootout. At

**times like these I'm glad of that dark visor.**

**Even though the engine pulls to just over**

**10,000rpm, you need 4500 on the clock for the ride**

**to become smooth enough to cover any distance.**

**You'll notice the vibes through the bars and the back of the tank, which is very tall and sits tightly**

**against, well, you know what. After a longish (120**

**mile) ride I'm as numb as a severed toe and have**

**found the first case of motorcycling RSI. I'd**

**consider using Ducati but I don't think I could**

**make it stand up in court. Ho ho.**

**For the first few bends, the suspension feels**

**mismatched. Slow exits from smaller roundabouts are when it shows up worst, running wide under**

**power. Once warm, the units come closure together but it's only doing laps at the handling circuit that**

**finally brings confidence in the front. Maybe I**

**didn't have such a race hand on for the 1000 mile**

**I covered on the road. But why should I? This isn't a**

**sporbike and shouldn't take that effort to ride.**

**The brakes feel like they're fighting you, too.**

**The fronts are strong, progressive and never over-**

**powering but the rear offers little feedback and the ABS**

**system lacks in early. This results in a pulling**

**through the lever and a stiffening of the front.**

**The ABS controller sits under the seat, pipes**

**everywhere, and robs you of storage. You can turn**

**this system off with the red button on the left-hand**

**control, but only when the ignition is on without**

**the engine running. After you turn the ignition off,**

**the system resets to ABS mode.**

**A decade after the launch of the 916, with years of**

**flip-up windshields, damaged side panels and**

**breakdown banter to draw on, the first question I'm**

**asked wherever I go anywhere on a Duc is the old**

**reliability chestnut. In 1000 miles, my only gripes**

**were that the indicators had a mind and speed of**

**their own and the LCD fuel gauge goes both ways,**

**dropping down to lows then rising to half. Neither**

**niggles will stop you getting back from an European**

**tour, though – and that has to be the most**

**important job of a distance machine.**

**WHAT DO YOU want from a touring bike?**

Comfort? Performance? Reliability? A Ducati? When the Italian firm launched the ST2 back in 1996, they were bang in the middle of their ‘Lada period’.

Everyone who’d bought a 916 spent hours on the phone to dealers sorting problems and booking rectification work. BT had a record year.

**ST4S shows its class**

**In 1998 the ST got serious. The ST4 was**

launched and brought more-reliable engines and electrics to the adventurous riders. The ST had grown up. With the engine from the 916 (and then the 996) this was a bike to brag about. It had won world titles. Even though racing and touring, as

**any clear-headed biker knows, poles a part.**

The first thing that strikes me about this ST4S ABS is the colour. Grey with red wheels? Is that the right way round? It looks classy, but a non-biking mate calls it shell. ST4S owners, you're on your own.

**Time taken**
4 hours 50 minutes

**Miles ridden**
37

**Traffic**
Here. A tour, though – and that has to be the most important job of a distance machine.

**Reliability**
Once an arm and a leg have been supplied a U-lock under the seat.

**+**

**Summary**
Once an arm and a leg have been supplied a U-lock under the seat.

**Service intervals**
6000 miles or 12 months apart.

**The 2004 ST4S gets a major update**

**and engine electrics (gpg). They’ll be in the shops for Christmas and will cost £8995 (ABS) and £8695.**

**The current non-ABS model has been dropped to £7700.**

**Ducati’s own accessories include a topbox (£292), panniers (£486) and a taller screen (£65).**

**The ABS can be turned off on the left-hand bar controls, but not with the engine running.**

**IN A NUTSHELL**

**It must be the ST4S because...**

**It sounds like a knackered cement mixer when you start it.**

**You didn’t want to break all your sporty links.**

**All Ducatis are cool right now.**

**LIVING WITH IT**

14 days of real life with a ST4S

- Pillows get a ride to remember with that big, lumpy V-twin providing the entertainment. At least the grab handle is a decent size.

- Insurance is group MJ1, there’s a key-head immobiliser and Ducati even supply a U-lock under the seat.

- Service intervals are 6000 miles or 12 months apart.

- The 2004 ST4S gets a major update with new fairing, clocks, seat, clip-ons and engine electrics (gpg). They’ll be in the shops for Christmas and will cost £8995 (ABS) and £8695.

- The current non-ABS model has been dropped to £7700.

- Ducati’s own accessories include a topbox (£292), panniers (£486) and a taller screen (£65).

- The ABS can be turned off on the left-hand bar controls, but not with the engine running.

**‘This is the most powerful bike on test and the booming V-twin waves no time in letting you know’**
Aprilia Futura £7925

It looks like a beast from another planet, but has real-world appeal

THAT’S STRANGE. Riding past the photographic studio, the lights are still on. As I roll back the huge door with the reason for this laid out before me, “I’ve never seen a bike with so many panels and screws and fiddly pieces on it, says a clearly hacked-off Riz. It’s true. Aprilia seem to have gone with the most complicated in best’ motto and the jigsaw before me looks a homogenous mess. It’s way past dark when the Futura is rebuilt.

Naked or clothed, the Futura is a strange beast. It’s kinda too designed, too angular. It’s been around for a couple of seasons and I don’t think this design was ever going to be the ‘new black’. What do you think? Chances are you just don’t know. In all my miles, I can’t remember ever seeing one on the roads, parked up or even in a showroom. For exclusivity, it’s worth a million.

From some angles it has a resemblance to the FP-1. Foggy’s World Superbikes backmarker. The long screen that runs into the headlight, flat fairing sides and the underscrew exhausts add all the mix but can’t make it handsome, pretty or even nice. So let’s talk about its personality.

From the uncontrollable roar of the choke-assisted growl at first start-up, to the smooth when of the litre mid, you know this is an Aprilia. Milles, Millos, Falcos, Caponordos and, more recently, Tuonos all share this 60° V-twin engine and there’s a little fuel remapping going on between the models. This means that the 107bhp this Futura kicks out is in a similar ballpark to the 102bhp Aprilia feel like Aprilia are giving with one hand and taking back with the other. Great details include fanned-out indicators, a tank filler that is angled so sidestand lifts get the most juice down the neck and a price to beat the others (apart from the Triumph). But then they build the thing in a very complicated manner, leave no room for a function that the Italian firm have put plenty of effort into the function of this bike, if not the form.

IN A NUTSHELL

LIVING WITH IT

How much luxury does your pillion want? The seat’s in danger of being too big and comfy. You might have to shift the homilies off before every ride.

Insurance is group NUTS but there are no security extras and no room for an understand-it lock, Ted nut.

Fairings come as standard now, but it’s as far as own-brand extra go. There is no Aprilia topbox (they found it interfed with the aerodynamics of the bike too much), the screen is so big they don’t offer more and in winter you’ll just have to wear thicker gloves if you want warm hands. Or you could look for aftermarket heated grips.

You can play ‘where’s the seat lock’ with your mates. Only the seat surmises will suit that on this dash. Kinda makes sense.

Service intervals are every 4500 miles or 12 months.

Summary

Riding is best, as you don’t have to look at it. Very comfortable over the distance with excellent weather protection as standard. But have you ever seen one on the roads?
State of the art sports tourers

Fast but assured, ride in comfort to a track and go bananas when you get there.

**THE BIG IDEA: SEATS**

One of the simplest parts of the bike, but still one of the most crucial. The seat should give the rider a confident feel that he can trust and trust is the key to any light change at the touch of a button, whereas the Ducati gets an LCD add-on.

**SWINGARM**

In the weirdest twist of logic, once that rider’s continuing career, the Aprilia ST4S is the only bike here without a mono-shock suspension. Both the Aprilia and Triumph have only one retaining nut whereas the Honda has two.

**Headlights**

Why the long face? Aprilia’s pointy end reminds us of Foggy’s race bike, the FP-1. Okay, so it’s just me that thinks that. Large light allows rapid night-time play. Honda does the car thing with a pair of headlights – bright, clear, useful. But I couldn’t find the adjuster to set them lower while parked up in a dimly lit lane. It should be easier on a tower. Ducati’s bulbs work well but are hardy cool. The Triumph’s illuminate – that’s the best you can say about them.

**Tank range**

These are touring bikes so you’d expect fantastic economy, right? Well, maybe when ridden sedately but on this test we rode them hard and they suffered – and the VFR suffered most. At just over 30 to the gallon on A roads and a maximum 37 on the motorway, it’s clear why it has the biggest tank. The Aprilia does a drink, too, it averages 36mpg, whereas the ST averages just shy of 40mpg. This just beats the ST4, which comes in at 38mpg.

**Clocks**

On bikes like these, where you’re going to spend a long time in the saddle, it’s good to have all the information you’ll need in easy sight. Triumph scores least for its bitty dash, with the clock covered by the master cylinders’ shadow and hard to read. Both the Honda and Aprilia have clear, easy to glance at displays that will change to light at the touch of a button, whereas the Ducati gets an LCD add-on.

**Left (l-r) Bright-eyes VFR has eaten the most carrots; ‘Have you seen the light?’ and ‘Who you looking at?’ Triumph’s light sees the future with Italian electrics. Or blue church windows.**

**Right Standard dials fuse both the adjuster to set them lower while parked up in a dimly lit lane. It should be easier on a tower. Ducati’s bulbs work well but are hardy cool. The Triumph’s illuminate – that’s the best you can say about them.**

**Full Tank**

Honda VFR 177 miles

Triumph Sprint ST 184 miles

Ducati ST4 203 miles

Aprilia Futura 180 miles

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**SPECIFICATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VFR</th>
<th>SPRINT ST</th>
<th>ST4 ABS</th>
<th>Futura</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engine</strong></td>
<td>998cc, dohc, 8-valve</td>
<td>998cc, dohc, 8-valve</td>
<td>998cc, dohc, 8-valve</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bore x stroke</strong></td>
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<td>98 x 66mm</td>
<td>97 x 67.5mm</td>
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<td><strong>Compression</strong></td>
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<td>11.2:1</td>
<td>11.4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fuel system</strong></td>
<td>fuel injection</td>
<td>fuel injection</td>
<td>fuel injection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bore x stroke</strong></td>
<td>72 x 48mm</td>
<td>72 x 45mm</td>
<td>72 x 48mm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**State of the art sports tourers**

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**SPORTS TOURER LANDMARKS**

1986 Honda introduce the VF750C. The model epitomises nearly a decade of sales success before any other manufacturer even gets close to challenging it.

1996 Ducati introduce the ST2. Though very sporty, the ST could have stood for Stopped rather than State of the art sports tourers.

1998 Honda up the ante with the VFR800F. The model enjoys nearly a decade of sales with the VFR750F. The 1996 ST could have stood for Stopped rather than State of the art sports tourers.

2001 The Honda ST1300. The 1996 ST could have stood for Stopped rather than State of the art sports tourers.

2002 Triumph scores least for its bitty dash, with the clock covered by the master cylinders’ shadow and hard to read. Both the Honda and Aprilia have clear, easy to glance at displays that will change to light at the touch of a button, whereas the Ducati gets an LCD add-on.
Honda VFR ABS
Packed with innovation and trickery, the stripped VFR looks busy.

Right Front brakes are good and powerful, but the ABS is a pain in the dry and the CBS link is hard to use to fine-tune. Every angle covered at the back with triangular underseat pipes.

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The Futura right through the rev range, barely making in abruptly just as the Sprint’s making full power. In typical Triumph fashion, the rev limiter cuts range. Fill in the dip at 6500rpm, the point where VTEC cuts in, and you’d get a smooth curve, like the old VFR. Acceleration through the gears and rolling on from The four tests are:

- Braking from 100mph.
- Top speed measured on a two-mile runway.
- Lapping the Bruntingthorpe handling circuit.
- Lapping the Bruntingthorpe chicane.

The best bike

Can’t remember the last test that was this close. History dictates that the VFR should be the winner – and this latest model makes all the right noises. But it seems to have lost something along the way. Maybe it’s such a jack-of-all-trades that it’s hard to see what role it fills best.

The Ducati is the sportiest and best-handling bike you’ll find, but it’s hard to be comfortable with those gear ratios or the Italian electrics. The Triumph performs strongly but doesn’t treat the rider to much luxury – and £7499 is one hell of a price for a model unchanged since 1998. When cold, feels like the two ends are fighting but, otherwise, sets up well. In equal measures.

Overall

- Practical Ducati Really.
- Good, but compromise.
- Better to ride than look at.

The best buy

These bikes, more than most, demand some skilful negotiating tricks on your part before you sign the finance papers. As an average of £6500, they represent the deeper end of the buyers’ market. Offering mostly last-generation technology with medium performance and handling (compared with the latest rocketship supersports offerings). But who’s to say, £6000 for the Aprilia? £5699 for the Ducati? £6499 for the Triumph? £6649 for the Honda? £5999 for the Triumph? £5999 for the Honda for £6649 and a 2002 Triumph for £5999. An Aprilia for £5699, the Ducati for £6499, a bargains can be had – especially if you’re (yep, cover to cover) found the following deals…

Hey, this is our test. Triumph Rocket III – gateshares speed tests.

**THE BIKE VERDICT**

**HONDA VFR ABS**

- Engine: 805cc V-twin, DOHC 8-valve, liquid-cooled
- Chassis: Unmistakably a triple.
- Brakes: ABS cuts in too early and pressure doesn’t dive alarmedly.
- Suspension: Soft. Needs more rear spring rate.
- Comments: Lovely pull out of bends, capacity equals least under heavy braking. Can be jolty on the road when cold.

**TRIUMPH SPRINT ST**

- Engine: 955cc V-twin, DOHC 8-valve, liquid-cooled
- Chassis: Feels most ‘sports’ orientated. Stands touch down at full corners.
- Brakes: Good power, foot hard and well-judged but, alas, rapid progressive.
- Comments: Good to see a bike that’s as fast as you can make it – and a fine bike overall.

**DUCATI ST4S ABS**

- Engine: 916cc L-twin, DOHC 16-valve, 5-speed
- Chassis: Racy but not as good a track bike as the Honda. Suspension: Bouncy, but well-judged and sort of lovely even when using full throttle.

**APRILIA FUTURA**

- Engine: 998cc V-twin, DOHC 16-valve
- Comments: You clever git

**THE PERFORMANCE TEST**

For the first time in living memory (well, mine), Bruntingthorpe has been totally tropical all year. Until this test, when I slashed it down and meant another day was needed to do all the speed testing. This time it was dry and allowed us to test as we should. Meanwhile.

The top speed measured on a two-mile runway. Acceleration through the gears and rolling on from 60mph in fifth gear (on a five-speed gearbox). Braking from 100mph. Lapping the Bruntingthorpe handling circuit.

**DYNO TEST**

Dyne graphs explained

We’ve got two V-twins, a V-four and a triple here, with differing engine capacities too. The two twins are an odd 2cc apart and both engines come from sportbikes, yet the fuel-injected VFR delivers the Futura right through the rev range barely making less power than the VFR’s used to. The Aprilia engine’s obviously been detuned for its sports-tourer role.

The Sprint has the fattest torque curve and performs strongly in the super-quick 4,000rpm range. In typical Triumph fashion, the new limited cut in adjustability just as the Sprint’s making full power. The VFR’s torque curve makes a mockery of VTEC.

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**THE USEABILITY TEST**

Low screen is about the taller riders.

Neutral steering and good feel to the handlebars. Brakes get grabby when hot.

Suspension dictates that the VFR should have full control of those powerful stoppers. Can be grippy when hot.

Engine

The VFR’s torque curve makes a mockery of VTEC.

The Sprint has the flattest torque curve and performs strongly in the super-quick 4,000rpm range.

Engine: 955cc V-twin, DOHC 8-valve, liquid-cooled

Chassis: Feels weird lapping the tourer than sportster in the ST4S showed its racing pedigree with the latest model makes all the right noises. But it seems to have lost something along the way.

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