

Bike The test

Sports tourers – the sporty way to tour or the comfy way to scratch? Four bikes, two distinct philosophies. Can the mighty VFR be humbled by the young pretenders?

WORDS BY KEVIN RAYMOND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIPPY WOOD

Aprilia RST1000 Futura

998cc, £7899

The Futura's bigger, softer and more welcoming than its sportier stablemate, the RSV Mille. Is it enough to make up for the VFR's 16-year head start?

Last tested
September 2001

Triumph 955i Centennial

955cc, £9299

Discontinued for 2003, but still in the dealers'. Always at home playing the sports tourer card, but has it bitten off more than it can chew here?

Last tested June 2002

Ducati ST4S

996cc, £8700

The top-spec version of Ducati's sports tourer gets the engine and forks from last year's 996, along with Öhlins multi-adjustable rear suspension

Last tested
September 2001

Honda VFR

781cc, £7849

With V-TEC variable valve timing, high-level pipes and familiar single-sided swing-arm, the VFR is the established benchmark for do-it-all sports tourers.

The one to beat
Last tested October 2002

Road testers



KEVIN RAYMOND, 36
Experience
Twenty years in the saddle, 12 as a road tester. Loves track days but also loves Alpine hairpins, so wants a bike that can do both.



JIM MOORE, 28
Experience
Sixteen years riding experience, five as a motorcycle journalist. Jim's a road rider, not a racer, and values comfort as well as handling.



TOM BEDFORD, 27
Experience
Ten years on the road and track, four of them as a road tester. Tom's looking for a bike to fit his six-foot frame and offer big thrills as well as comfort.



PETE BOAST, 38
Experience
In the past 20 years, Pete's raced everything from US flat track to UK speedway and IoM TT. He just loves bikes of all shapes and sizes.



APRILIA RST1000 FUTURA

Price **£7899** power **101bhp** top speed **155mph** Av mpg **33**

the test



IN THE DETAILS...
(from left): Brembo brakes are as good as you'd expect, some have criticised the suspension for not quite being up to them; Aprilia's trademark digital display is thankfully missing. The lilac backlighting on these clocks looks great at night; CBR600RR? Pah, Aprilia did it first. Sounds good too



Performance criteria for the test are all out of five:

★ rubbish ★★ average
★★★ good ★★★★ superb
★★★★★ exceptional

ENGINE & GEARBOX ★★★★★

The best bit of the bike. A lovely, grunty V-twin that's not been detuned too much in its transition from RSV-spec sportsbike to touring-spec Futura. The gearbox is good, too.

CHASSIS ★★★

Would have been four stars but the rear shock is soft and there's a vague feel from the front in the wet. Very easy to get on with, though.

VALUE ★★★★★

It's cheaper than the VFR, which makes it tempting, but the rumour is that it's going to depreciate more rapidly, so be careful.

FINISH ★★★

The Aprilia was looking tatter sooner than the others after our grimy, wet test, and it was harder to clean, too. Add to that the acres of slightly strange plastic – hard to keep looking nice.

WOW FACTOR ★★★

In its rather understated colourschemes it tends to merge into the background, despite its futuristic wedge shape. In a nice bright red or yellow it would be a four at least.

TOTAL ★★★★★

It only just makes four, though. The Futura is so nearly there, but it needs a little more development to bring it closer to the VFR and some brighter paint schemes to make it look a bit less like Aprilia are faintly ashamed of the radical styling.

HALFWAY ALONG the A38 near Bridgwater, I was revelling in the VFR's smooth steering, comfy seat and easy manners, and composing paragraphs in its praise in the privacy of my helmet when I realised that, actually, the VFR was 50 yards in front of me. I'd been riding the Aprilia Futura for the past ten miles. If you want a better illustration of how good the Futura is, I can't think of one. As Jim said: 'The Aprilia is very Japanese – it's as if they've taken a VFR apart to see how it works and then they built the Futura to copy it.'

Which is, of course, almost certainly exactly what happened. And they've made a bloody good stab at it, as Jim continued: 'The Futura is so easy to get on with. I love V-twins and this one's really nice. The seat's comfy, too. I was told they were crap, but it's far from that.' It certainly is.

One thing that's not VFR-like is the finish. The Futura looks a bit as if it's finished like a scooter. I don't mean it's cheap and nasty – have you seen some of Aprilia's scooters lately? It's just that there's a lot of enveloping plastic that's not body colour – the sort of thing they do on scooters to cover up unattractive bits of frame and underpinnings. That can't be the reason here, though – the Futura has a tasty aluminium beam frame that wouldn't look out of place on a sportsbike. But it's not just the amount of plastic, it's the type. Jim again: 'It almost has a different grade of plastic. Even the wheels have that mock-plastic styling to them – a very understated finish.' Tom liked the Aprilia's looks, but the rest of us were ambivalent.

Even if you don't like the looks, you can't argue with the

weather protection. Tom: 'I like the fairing – it puts the wind past your shoulders.' Unfortunately, it's not so good in side winds – you get blown all over the shop. But at least you're cossetted in sofa-like comfort while you're struggling to stay in a straight line. Jim reckoned it was, 'So comfy I could have ridden for ever last night.'

There are other little details that bug you when you spend more time with the Aprilia. Little things like a tricky-to-use trip meter and reset buttons that are difficult to get at without obscuring the display with your glove. The clocks do look good at night, though.

Side winds apart, the Futura is the best of the bunch on the motorway, with the snappiest throttle response and roll-on performance in the real world. The engine also has a

heavier, more flywheely feel to the throttle response than in its RSV Mille incarnation, which suits easy, low-speed manoeuvring – it's a cinch to crawl through town traffic. But it was at its best when the roads dried out and you could start to use the superb front brakes, smooth steering and seriously grunty engine to turn A and B-roads into playgrounds. When the rain falls it's not as nice, and takes on a little vagueness at the front.

The Futura is a bloody good bike, and an excellent stab at a VFR competitor, but at heart it's like a cover version of one of your favourite songs, performed by a tribute band. It's almost there, but there's just a little bit of something special missing. The Futura is a crucial 500 quid cheaper, but most people would find the VFR is worth the extra.

TRIUMPH DAYTONA 955i CENTENNIAL

Price **£9299** power **123bhp** top speed **164mph** Av mpg **37**

the test



IN THE DETAILS...
(from left): Triumph's brakes have always been superb. Suspension is sporty but still road-biased; Clocks are standard sports bike items. None of the VFR's bells and whistles, do you care? Fuel injection might be as common as baked beans these days, but that Union Jack isn't



Performance criteria for the test are all out of five:

★ rubbish ★★ average
★★★ good ★★★★★ superb
★★★★★ exceptional

ENGINE & GEARBOX | ★★★★★

Pretty well flawless as a fast road engine – smooth but grunty. The gearbox is smoother than on previous models, too, and the gearing's so good you don't need to use it that often.

CHASSIS | ★★★★★

Again, very well developed to provide real road riders with all the feedback they need. Only a lack of ground clearance on track days and sticky roundabouts lets it down a little.

VALUE | ★★★

There had to be a downside and this it. It's an eye-watering £1000 more than the VFR. But that's about the same as a FireBlade and, for most road riders, the Triumph would be a better bike.

FINISH | ★★★★★

Triumph have been working very hard on the finish of their bikes over the past few years and it's now as good as just about anything the Japanese can offer, and better than the Italians.

WOW FACTOR | ★★★

Even with its new big headlights, the Triumph is still not too much of a head-turner. Mind you, it might have been different if we'd had the bright yellow standard model.

THE TRIUMPH was a late arrival at the photoshoot as Tom had to get a new tyre after a puncture the previous night, but we could hear him coming from a couple of miles off, the triple's howl bouncing off the rocks in a pleasing cacophony. When Tom eventually squealed to a halt, Jim went straight off for a spin. He came back with a huge grin on his face.

'I'd forgotten how much I love these Triumphs – they're bloody ace road bikes. Such a strong engine, so much bottom end, round hairpins it just pulls so well. The brakes are fantastic. It just feels right for the road – there's no nervousness or twitchiness. It's not fair to compare it to a Blade, but as a pure road bike it's perfect.'

So is it fair to compare it to a VFR? Surely we should be testing the Sprint ST here? Well, if we were testing

mile-munching ability, luggage capacity and two-up comfort, then yes, we should have an ST. But for this test we were more concerned about the sportier end of the VFR spectrum, so the Daytona it is and we're all very happy.

The Daytona, unlike everyone else's big sports bikes, doesn't have to pretend it's at home on a race track. It doesn't have to be able to do a 127mph flying lap of the TT. All it has to do is work in perfect harmony with real riders on real roads: and it does this superbly.

It starts with the riding position. Tom: 'It's not uncomfortable, it takes the weight off your back. The gearbox is light, the controls are light – it's definitely the best bike Triumph have built.'

Then there's that peach of a motor. Pete hadn't ridden

one before: 'I was surprised at the engine. It's so smooth, there's no vibration, and it sounds mint thrashing across the hills. It's lovely, you just want to keep thrashing it.'

So we did, and we were happy. And then it rained, and we were happier still. Where the Aprilia wasn't so good in the wet, the Triumph revelled in it, as Jim discovered: 'It's really predictable, great feel, lots of feedback from the tyres. You just leave it in one gear and concentrate on nice smooth lines. It makes riding in the wet really fun.'

He also isolated another point in the Triumph's favour: 'Triumph think really carefully about gearing. It's not geared for some stupid top speed, it's geared so it's in the right rev band in normal riding, so you've got overtaking power when you want it.' It can't match the Futura in the roll-on stakes,

but it's impressive all the same – you don't need to keep tap-dancing on the gear lever and it easily outrags the VFR.

If your tastes are on the sportier side of sports touring, and the VFR's just a bit too sensible, then it comes down to the Triumph and the Ducati. It's no contest really – the Ducati is a compromised sports bike, rather than a purpose-built tool. The Triumph is a carefully developed, forgiving, highly capable all-rounder that can live with sportier tackle on the road, which you can take to track days, but which is still comfy and practical. All through this test, the same phrase kept popping up: real world. And if that's where you live, the Daytona's probably a better bike for you than a Blade, R1 or GSX-R. If you've never thought of yourself as a Triumph customer, you owe it to yourself to get a test ride.

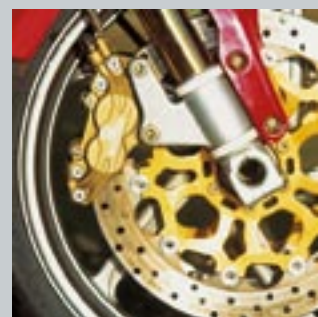
TOTAL | ★★★★★

A superb road bike that could do with a price cut to get more of them out there and spread the good word, which is that 90 per cent of sportsbike riders would be better off on one of these than on their Blades or R1s.

DUCATI ST4S

Price **£8700** power **111bhp** top speed **158mph** Av mpg **48mpg**

the test



IN THE DETAILS...
(from left): Superb brakes, brilliant suspension, but the Duke wasn't always voted the best handler; LCD display flashes up ST4S when you turn the key. Clocks are a throwback to the 916; Top-notch suspension gives flexibility but needs careful setting up for fast riding

Performance criteria for *the test* are all out of five:
★ rubbish ★★ average
★★★ good ★★★★★ superb
★★★★★ exceptional

ENGINE & GEARBOX | ★★★

The superbly grunty engine and the slick box on their own would get four or five, but the heavy, grabby clutch, stiff throttle and unforgiving transmission lose it loads of marks.

CHASSIS | ★★★

It has the potential to be a lot better – it's all quality kit – but as supplied it's just so far out to lunch it might as well have put up a sign saying 'back in 20 minutes'.

VALUE | ★★

It costs more than the Aprilia or Honda, but less than the Triumph. But the Triumph is a much better bike. Although the ST4S could be turned into a good bike, there could be depreciation problems.

FINISH | ★★★★★

Ducatis haven't always been known for their great finish, but this one seemed fine – it cleaned up easily and wasn't showing as many furry bolts as we've come to expect.

WOW FACTOR | ★★★

Well, it's a Ducati, so it'll always attract a certain amount of attention. But they couldn't have made it more bland if they'd tried, could they?

TOTAL | ★★★

It could be much better, but as standard it's disappointing. If you must have a sporty Ducati, the 748 and 900SS are cheaper and better. If you want a touring Ducati, the base-model 916cc ST4 is better balanced.

WHEN YOU FIRST climb on board the ST4S, the position feels odd – the bars are angled forward and the bike seems small and spartan after the VFR and Futura. As we headed into an icy night and a long road down to Devon, there was a rush of feet away from the Ducati and towards the two less sporty bikes – especially the Honda, with its heated grips. Yet it's surprisingly comfy over distance. The seat's a bit planky after the Futura and the first wriggles set in about the 50-mile mark, but it doesn't seem to get much worse after that and you can go right up to fuel-stop distance (a useful 160-odd miles until the light came on, which was a surprise), without needing help getting off the bike at the end.

Part of that decent tank range is down to the long

gearing, which means the Duke lopes along at an unstressed 4000rpm at 80mph. The downside is you can't pull 70mph in top without chugging – there's plenty of overtaking power from 80-90mph on the motorway, though, as well as some glorious stomp out of bends when you're in sports mode.

Which, let's face it, is where the Ducati plays nearly all its cards. It's pretty horrible in town, as Jim testified: 'I don't understand why they persist with the dry clutch – there's no need for a clutch action that heavy and it's seriously grabby, too.'

Even in sports mode, though, Tom wasn't impressed: 'I want to like it, but it just doesn't inspire me. The engine's fantastic, but the chassis feels like two ends from different

bikes. The heavy throttle is a pain – you can't feather it on wet corners. The brakes have no feel – the lever feel is really hard, it's too far from the bar and it's not adjustable.' Here you've got a bike with super-posh, multi-adjustable suspension, where you can't even adjust the brake lever.

The sums are a bit out as far as suspension is concerned, too, with a relatively stiff front and a soft rear. Initially it didn't want to steer and as the test wore on we gradually wound up the preload on the remotely adjustable Öhlins rear shock, and the higher it went the better it felt.

When the roads got passably dry, the ST4S started to get into its stride a bit more, helped by its sticky Pirelli Dragon Evo Corsas, which gave it a bit of an unfair advantage. The

drier it got the more the Ducati started to feel like, well, a Ducati – hard-edged and uncompromising.

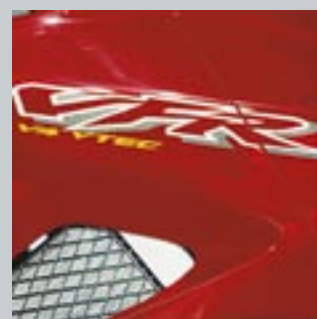
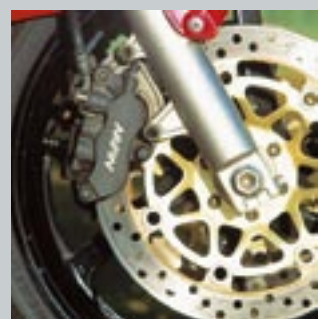
The ST4 and the Triumph are the only two here that you'd really want to do track days on, and with the suspension sorted the Ducati would win. You can't argue with a 996-derived lump firing you out of the corners and the Ducati is closer to its racetrack roots than the Triumph, which has none.

Even so, it's still a fairly long-wheelbased, slow-steering beast. Tom and Jim were wanting it to have more of the pure sporty character everyone thinks of as a Ducati trait. If that's what you want, the ST4S isn't going to deliver. As a posh alternative to a 900SS, though, it's worth a look.

HONDA VFR

Price £7849 power 97bhp top speed 148mph Av mpg 35

the test



IN THE DETAILS...
(from left): The least powerful brakes here but at least the linking is now unobtrusive. The optional ABS is superb; Clocks are comprehensive and easy to read, while the fuel gauge is amazingly accurate; The VTEC is still big news but, apart from the noise, we still aren't convinced



Performance criteria for the test are all out of five:
★ rubbish ★★ average
★★★ good ★★★★ superb
★★★★★ exceptional

ENGINE & GEARBOX ★★★★★

Gearbox is slick and the engine's smooth and growly. Only that V-TEC hiccup loses it a star, but don't let it put you off.

CHASSIS ★★★★★

Amazingly composed on the road and offers excellent feedback in all weathers. Only starts to get a bit bouncy when you really push it.

VALUE ★★★★★

Next to everything here but the Aprilia, it looks like a bargain – and it's still worth the extra over the Futura, thanks to its all-round excellence and low depreciation.

FINISH ★★★★★

Typical Honda – nice deep red paint and quality fixtures and fittings. It cleaned up nice and easy, even in the filth we were riding in it.

WOW FACTOR ★★★★★

Well, it certainly got some admiring glances on this test, with its high-level cans, single-sided swing-arm and huge headlights.

TOTAL ★★★★★

Yes, five stars. The total is more than the sum of its individual scores in the same way the VFR is more than the sum of its parts. The VFR is still king of the sports tourers, and long may it reign.

HEATED GRIPS. Every bike should have them. In fact, every bike CAN have them, but in this test it's Honda who've given themselves a sneaky advantage by fitting the VFR with their genuine accessory hand-warmers. Actually, they look more aftermarket than that – the control box is ugly and just sits like a wart on the fairing panel.

While on the subject of ugliness, the VFR was also the only one to come with hard luggage (the others were supposed to as well, but... listen, just don't ask, okay?). It's robust, swallows loads of kit and, once you get used to the slightly fiddly locking system, it works well. Sadly, with the panniers and top box removed, the racks they clip to are startlingly ugly. Still, you can't see the panniers from the seat and there's so much to be joyful about that you soon forget

them. What you've got is pure VFR. That's pure as in refined, distilled, concentrated. This is the result of 17 years of careful development of a theme pretty well sorted when it was new.

So you've got the growly V4, you've got the instantly familiar riding position, you've got the easy-to-read instruments and you've got the intangible feeling that everything is just... right. You can forget about adapting to the bike and just get on with riding it.

Which is when you find the only real criticism we could level at the VFR – there's a definite glitch as the V-TEC system cuts in on a constant throttle at about 7500rpm. It's okay if you're accelerating hard through it, but if not it hunts and hesitates. There's also a slight glitch at 4500-5000rpm, where something similar occurs. For the rest

of the time the motor's a peach – not as much midrange as the bigger twins and triple, but plenty of surge when needed.

The handling's spot-on for road use – again, predictable and easy to use. Tellingly, even in the wet there's pretty good feedback from the Bridgestone BT-020 tyres. They're not the grippiest things in the world, but you can easily feel where the limits are. Though the Aprilia feels similar to the VFR in the dry, it can't match that level of feedback in the wet and starts to feel vague. Only the linked brakes came in for some criticism, as usual. None of us liked them, but it does seem as if Honda are making an effort to make them less obtrusive.

So where does that leave us? Jim was a big Futura fan after some motorway and back-roads miles, 'But if you get on the VFR it takes you to another level of refinement. It's

a cliché, but it's the best road bike in the world,' he said.

I didn't agree – at the time. I look for a bit more character in my motorcycles than the VFR can offer, or so I thought. At the end of the test I needed a bike to make a weekend trip to France. I chose the VFR for one reason only: it had heated grips. I have to admit that 600 miles later – taking in among other delights a 40-mile long car park (M25), a 50-mile long swimming pool (A3) and a 6am, 60-mile, 130mph thrash on the D904/D650 Cherbourg to Coutances coast road – I was convinced, converted and completely sold. The comfort, the excellent lights, the ease of use, the outstanding feedback, the soulful engine – it all adds up. I've always respected the VFR, but now I've learned to love it.

Did I mention the heated grips?

the test

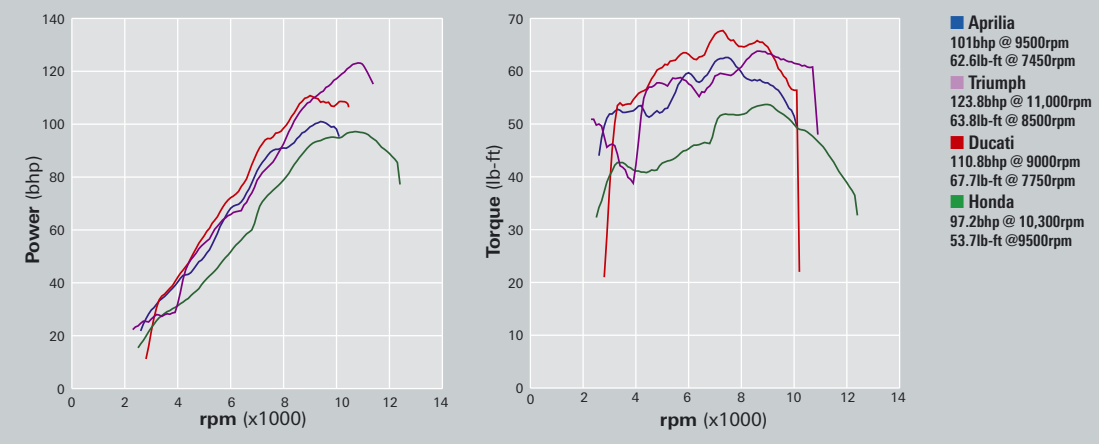


	Aprilia RST1000 Futura	Triumph 955i Daytona Centennial	Ducati ST4S	Honda VFR
Price	£7899	£9299 (standard 955i £9349)	£8700	£7849
Top speed	155mph	164mph	158mph	148mph
Standing 1/4 mile	11.85s @ 119.9mph	11.65s @ 129.2mph	11.40s @ 125.0mph	11.95s @ 114.9mph
0-60	3.65s	3.10s	3.30s	3.55s
0-100	7.95s	6.80s	7.15s	8.55s
0-130	15.10s	11.25s	12.45s	17.00s
Braking 100-0	4.25s, 323.6ft	4.70s, 335ft	4.45s, 321.3ft	5.1s, 369ft
Top gear roll on 60-90	6.05s	6.80s	6.25s	7.5s
Top gear roll on 80-120	8.65s	12.0s	9.30s	11.2s
Fuel consumption Best	40mpg	42mpg	53mpg	40mpg
Worst	30mpg	34mpg	41mpg	29mpg
Average	33mpg	37mpg	48mpg	35mpg
Engine	998cc, dohc, 8v, 60° V-twin	955cc, 12v, dohc, in-line triple	996cc, dohc, 8v, 90° V-twin	781cc, dohc, 16v, 90° V4
Bore/stroke	97 x 67.5mm	79 x 65mm	98 x 66mm	72 x 48mm
Compression	11.4:1	12:1	11.2:1	11.6:1
Fuel system	fuel injection	fuel injection	fuel injection	fuel injection
Transmission	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain	6-speed, chain
Frame	aluminium twin-spar	tubular aluminium perimeter	tubular steel trellis	aluminium twin-spar
Front suspension	43mm upsidedown telescopic fork	45mm telescopic fork	43mm upsidedown telescopic fork	43mm telescopic fork
Adjustment	preload, rebound	preload, compression, rebound	preload, compression, rebound	preload
Rear suspension	rising-rate monoshock	rising-rate monoshock	rising-rate monoshock	rising-rate monoshock
Adjustment	preload, rebound (remote preload)	preload, compression, rebound	preload, compression, rebound, rd ht	preload, rebound
Brakes front; rear	2 x 300mm discs/4-piston calipers; 255mm disc/2-piston caliper	2 x 320mm discs/4-piston calipers; 255mm disc/1-piston caliper	2 x 320mm discs/4-piston calipers; 245mm disc/2-piston caliper	2 x 296mm discs/3-piston calipers; 256mm disc/3-piston caliper, CBS
Tyres front; rear	Metzeler MEZ4 120/70-ZR17; 180/55-ZR17	Bridgestone BT-010 120/70-ZR17; 180/55-ZR17	Michelin Pilot Sport 120/70-ZR17; 180/55-ZR17	Bridgestone BT-020 120/70-ZR17; 180/55-ZR17
Wheelbase	1435mm	1426mm	1430mm	1460mm
Rake/trail	26°/102mm	22.8°/81mm	24°/102mm	25.5°/95mm
Dry weight (claimed)	210kg	188kg	212kg	208kg
Seat height	810mm	815mm	820mm	805mm
Fuel capacity	21 litres	21 litres	21 litres	22 litres
Warranty/mileage	three years/unlimited	two years/unlimited	two years/unlimited	two years/unlimited
NU insurance group	15	15	15	14
Service intervals	4500 miles/ one year	4000 miles/one year	6000 miles/one year	4000 miles/one year
PRACTICALITIES				
Touring options				
Pannier set	£333.70	£169.99 inc protectors	£486.45	£595
Tall screen	n/a	£89.99	£64.83	n/a
Heated grips	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Living with it...	Great comfort and wind protection. Off-centre filler cap means you can fill the tank with the bike on the sidestand, though a centre-stand comes as standard. The mirrors are good and don't blur even at speed.	The bike comes with a single-seat cowl, which looks cool, but fitting the pillion seat can be a bit fiddly. Bungee hooks flip out at sides. Reasonable rates of fuel consumption are possible if you don't wring its neck.	Ducati offer a touring kit consisting of a more protective top fairing, screen and raised clip-ons for £328.60. Good security with a unique-key immobiliser and a U-lock.	Though heated grips aren't an official option on the VFR, a kit of Honda parts (for £222) can be fitted, but the wiring's not the easiest. The screen diverts most but not all of the wind.
And your pillion...	Big, comfy pillion seat – pegs aren't too high, either. If you don't take a passenger, you can use the two bungee points on each side	Reasonably pillion-friendly, though it is a typical high-up sportsbike passenger seat – and there's no grab-rail.	Less of a high-profile pillion than the Triumph – but narrower. Grab-rail is behind the pad.	Typically Honda seat: no plusher than it needs to be, but comfortable. Reasonable height for ducking down behind the rider and a decent grab-rail.

All prices are on-the-road, including the pre-delivery inspection (PDI), number plates and a year's tax

Dyno graphs explained

The Triumph wins the numbers game down the pub. You'd expect that, it's a sportsbike. The Ducati engine comes from the 996 and is the best for a fast road bike (the dyno doesn't show up heavy clutches). The Duke makes most power, for most of the time and has the best torque curve too. The Triumph's 3750rpm flat spot is more dramatic on the dyno than it is on the road: but get stuck in top gear wanting to overtake at 60mph and you'll find it. The Aprilia's curves mimic the VFR's, but with a bit more everywhere. That doesn't make it faster: you just use more revs on the Honda to get the same effect. The Honda's VTEC glitch doesn't show up as sharply on the dyno as you feel it on the road. Before you dismiss the VFR as being slow, remember this is still a motorcycle that makes short work of 120mph roads.



* Bikes are measured using the EEC power standard, which gives figures approximately one per cent lower than some other, older dynos



(left): Formation refuelling is just one of the unsung skills of the *Bike* test team. As is asking for receipts (and pies) in eight major European languages (below): 'It was never this easy for Steve McQueen.' Jumping barbed-wire fences would have tested the VFR's all-round ability. (below left): Playing hide-and-seek with the RAF is a bad idea. That's a decent lean angle for a sports touring chopper, though. Is that Sheeny at the controls?



(right): Between them, these two have 30 years' racing experience and they still need to use a finger to read *The Sun*. (below right): Pete takes the VFR's all-round reputation a bit too far. Great bike, crap trawler, silly hat. (below): Pete tests the theory that eating four full English breakfasts is an adequate substitute for traction control on a slippy, winter morning.



Road testers say...



Kevin Raymond

The VFR has to win – it's so together it laughs in the face of the rest. The Aprilia is angled too far towards being a pure tourer for me. If this had been a dry test in the middle of summer, the Ducati would have scored better, but it's a flawed bike. The Triumph is a superb road bike, and deserves a bigger audience – go out and try one.



Jim Moore

The refined and versatile Honda is the best tourer, but the Aprilia gave it a bloody nose: it's well-equipped, comfortable and fun to ride; but finish is second rate. The Triumph is the best sports bike, with bags of balance, poise and oomph. The Duke is too harsh to bother the rest. Overall winner? The brilliant VFR.



Tom Bedford

The Triumph was comfy over the distance we covered and easily the most fun to ride. Honda's VFR has always been top of the sports-touring tree and this year's model justifies it yet again, though the Aprilia is hanging on its coat tails. The ST4S? Ducati should stick to race reps: the engine's a peach but the chassis's a pig.



Pete Boast

I loved the Triumph's engine and handling, but the riding position felt a bit extreme. The Aprilia's so comfy – but it is Italian, so it has some niggly faults. The Ducati's hard work in town, but great fun if you're on a fast run. The VFR's the clear winner: handling's smooth and precise, power delivery is superb. Don't like the linked brakes though.



Bike verdict

The VFR blends comfort, refinement, practicality, performance, handling, fun and desirability in a seamless package. The CBS linked brakes should be an option, not standard, and the V-TEC can be intrusive, but other than that the VFR remains the template for the perfect road bike. The Aprilia's an unashamed VFR clone and the first Japanese-feeling Italian bike. The seat's one of the best we've tried, the bike handles predictably and delivers everything you'd expect of a sports tourer. Finish isn't up to Honda standard, though. Triumph's Daytona really shines on the open road – and British roads at that. Its balance, poise, gearing and fruity motor meld together for a wonderfully rewarding riding experience. The disappointment of the bunch is the Ducati. We struggled to bond with it, mainly due to its grabby and unnecessarily heavy clutch, and strange steering. The Duke's not really a sports tourer at all: it's a comfy sports bike. Treat it as such and it starts to make sense, but if you're expecting an Italian VFR you'll be left wanting.