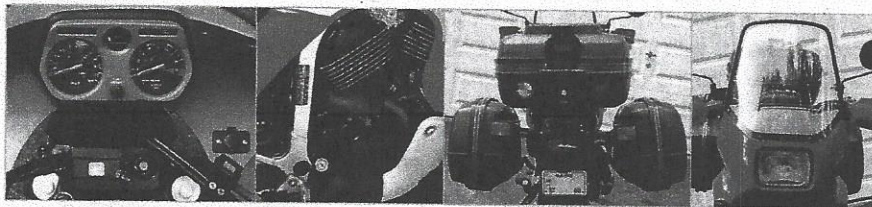


STORY BY CLEMENT SALVADORI ■ PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW TABOR

## Honda XL600V Transalp: 1989 - 1990

## RETROSPECTIVE



Year/model: 1990 Honda XL600V Transalp. Owner: Andrew Tabor, Scarborough, Maine.

**Here was a motorcycle that made perfect sense, a multi-purpose, go-just-about-anywhere bike that was at home in town, in the country, in the mountains.**

It might not be a Grand Touring machine like the Gold Wing, or super-sporty like the CBR600, or a dirt donkey like the XR600, but as a fun and useful piece of transportation it could not be beat. However, it was designed with Europeans in mind, hence the Transalp name, and Americans never quite seemed to understand its purpose.

Maybe because they never fully appreciated the Alps, that 700-mile sweep of mountains arching from the Adriatic coast of Slovenia through Italy, Austria, a bit of southern Bavaria and Switzerland, ending up on the French Riviera. These passes and valleys have thousands of miles of well-maintained paved road, with a few unpaved stretches here and there. What is needed on these roads is a quick-handling motorcycle to cope with the endlessly twisty byways, a bit of fairing to protect the rider from the ever-changing Alpine elements, with a little dirt-road pretension, like a 21-inch front wheel and a long suspension to soak up the inevitable bumps and dips.

But if you are an American going dual-purpose, what is the point of all that plastic, with a big fairing, big side covers, big skid plate? A serious boonie-basher should be minimalist, so you can fall over, pick it up and continue. Heck, you'd hate to crunch all that pretty plastic; it would be expensive.

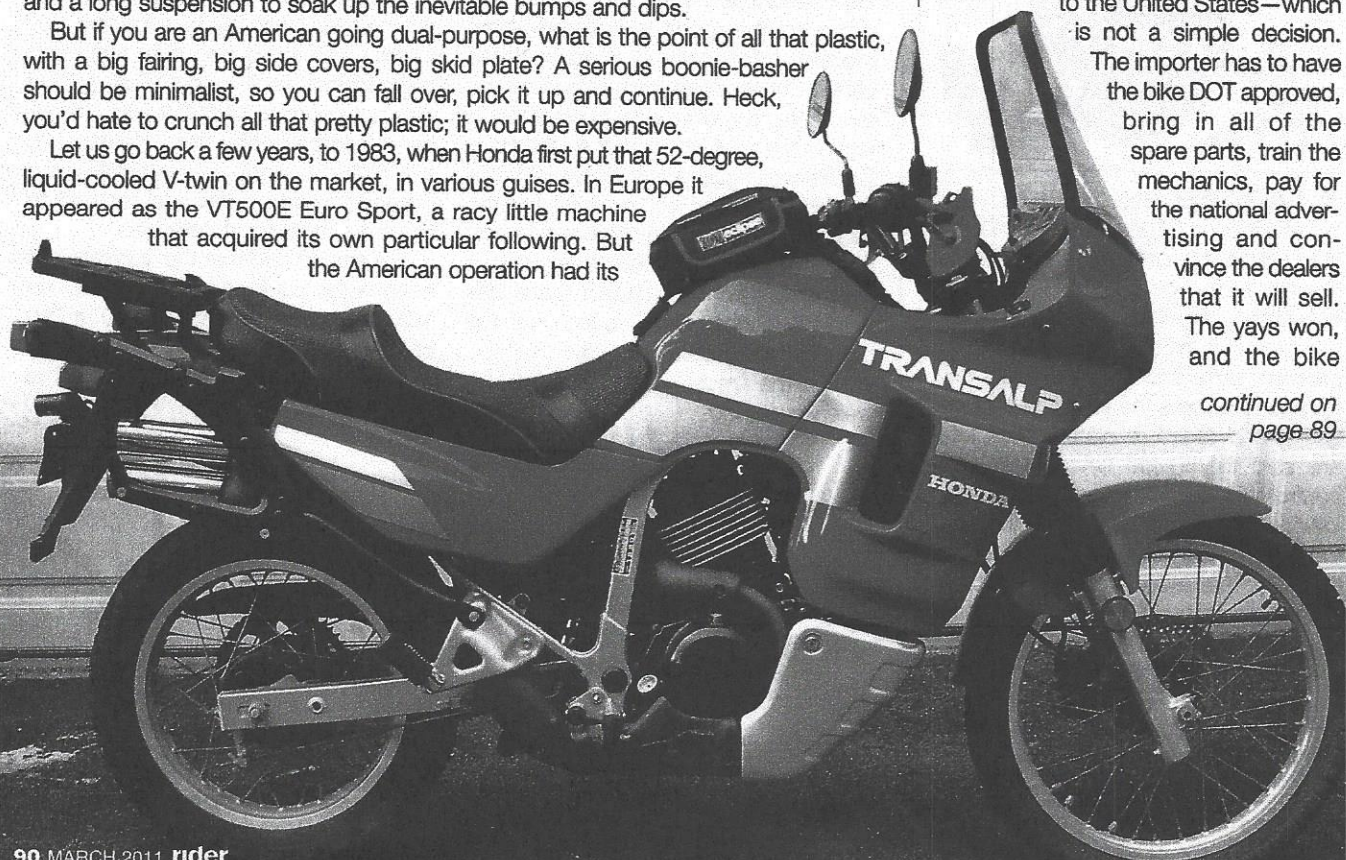
Let us go back a few years, to 1983, when Honda first put that 52-degree, liquid-cooled V-twin on the market, in various guises. In Europe it appeared as the VT500E Euro Sport, a racy little machine that acquired its own particular following. But the American operation had its

own desires, and the engine was put in both the conventional-looking VT500 Ascot and the cruiser-styled VT500C Shadow. Shaft drive was a pleasantly practical aspect on both. The Ascot lasted a mere two years, while the Shadow morphed into a 600 in 1988, with a bigger bore and stroke, and kept on selling.

The Europeans had requested the Transalp design in 1986, using the 600cc version of the engine which they bolted into a full-cradle frame with a box section swingarm and Pro-link suspension providing 7.5 inches of rear-wheel travel. Up front a 41mm fork provided almost 8 inches of movement. The payback for all this suspension travel was a seat height of more than 33 inches.

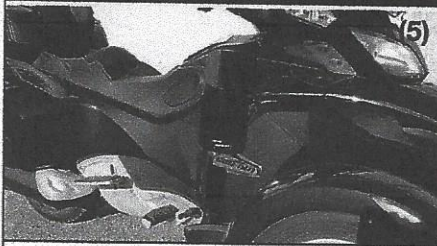
Apparently there was a great debate at American Honda as to whether or not to bring this model to the United States—which is not a simple decision. The importer has to have the bike DOT approved, bring in all of the spare parts, train the mechanics, pay for the national advertising and convince the dealers that it will sell. The yays won, and the bike

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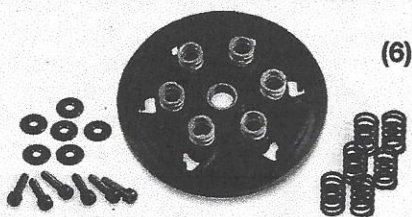


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appeared for the '89 model year. Just as we were climbing out of a middling-sized recession. The '80s had been great for innovative new motorcycle models, lousy for sales.

The core of the Transalp was that V-twin, sporting a single overhead camshaft in each three-valve, two-plug cylinder head, with two 32mm Mikunis feeding fuel into the combustion chambers. Power went through a gear-driven primary, wet clutch, five-speed transmission, and out to the rear wheel via a 525 chain, where a little over 40 horses made their presence known. And 40 horses are enough to keep just about anybody entertained, especially when the herd is roaring through the mountains.

It was probably the extensive bodywork which confused many onlookers. They were seeing double—a half fairing integrated into the 4.8-gallon tank, with a low, wheel-hugging front fender exuded sportiness, while the engine guard, up-swept exhaust, high ground-clearance, and 21-inch front wheel longed for dirt roads. But what are you going to do when mud packs in between the fender and the wheel? The Alps do not really suffer such geologic concerns; roads are carefully defined, paved or not, and going off the roads is frowned upon, morally and legally. Not so in these United States, where cotton mud can be found on many dirt roads, guaranteed to jam up the front wheel after a rainstorm.

This was no airy-fairy lightweight, tipping the scales at 440 pounds, but the overall feeling was that of a considerably lighter machine. Wheelbase, with a leading-axle front fork, was a shade less than 60 inches. Throw a leg over the high saddle, settle in, and the ergos were very friendly.

Especially the saddle, good for many hours. The handlebars are almost a yard across, with hand guards at each end.

Turn the key, push the button, and a sensible array of warning lights show up on the dash, along with the very readable speedo and tach. No chance of pulling away without kicking the stand back up, as there is both a light and a cut-out switch for the lax of mind. Pull in the clutch, down into first, and you're away—smooth, very smooth, thanks to the off-set crankpins designed to give it the balance of a 90-degree V-twin. Click, click, click, and the bike gets up to 90 mph in rev-limited fourth gear quite quickly; fifth will pull another 10 or 12 mph, but slowly. The fairing works well in keeping the wind off. It is a very pleasant highway machine, but discerning riders would look for the curvaceous byways, where it was really in its element.

Here is the turn-off to the forest road, with the drum rear brake and single disc front hauling the speed down rapidly. Discretion is advisable on the dirt curves, but the suspension handles the whoop-de-doos quite handily. The Transalp design was 90 percent paved, 10 percent dirt, and if that was your riding style, it was the bike for you.

Why was it dropped after two short years? What went wrong? First, pricing was not good; at \$4,500 it was a thousand dollars more than Kawasaki's KLR650. Second, the versatility was misunderstood; Americans seemed to like more focused motorcycles.

We should add that the Transalp has been in the European lineup ever since 1987, growing to a 650 in 2000, a 700 in 2008. And still selling well. Maybe if American Honda renamed it the Transrockies....

