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HONDA TRANSALP

PURE CITY SLICKER, REAL COUNTRY HEART

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1989'S BEST
PERFORMANCE
BARGAIN

HARLEY'S XR750
THE RACER
THAT RUNS ON
BRAINPOWER

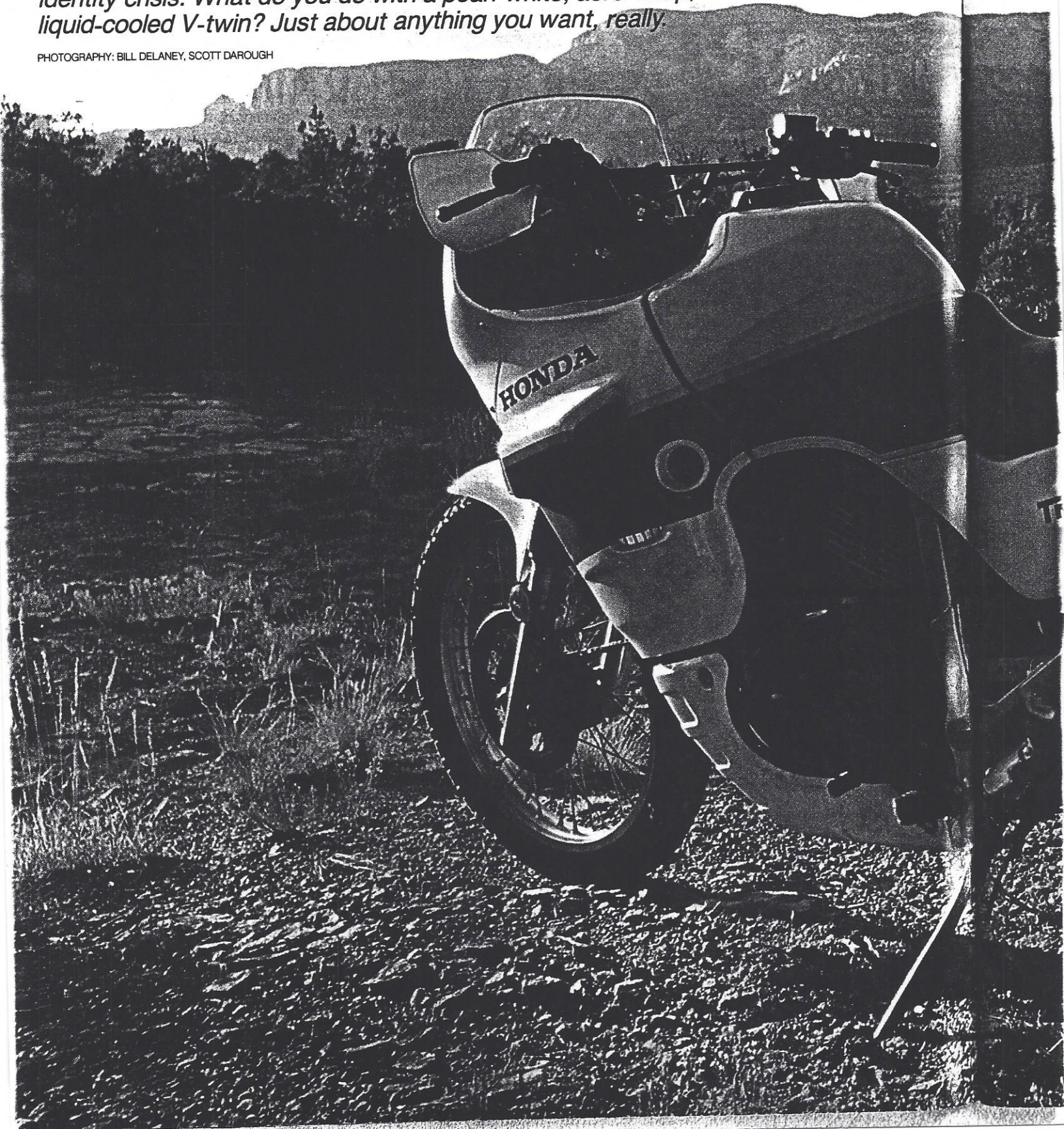


THE OUTLAW TWEAK
FOR DUCATI'S 750 PASO

HONDA XL600V TRANSALP

Honda's Transalp arrives in America with something of an identity crisis. What do you do with a pearl-white, aero-wrap, liquid-cooled V-twin? Just about anything you want, really.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BILL DELANEY, SCOTT DAROUGH



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□ Bathed in uptown neon or backwater moonlight, Honda's Transalp draws puzzled glances from anyone who sees it: "What exactly *is* that thing?"

Good question. But hand an onlooker

a spec chart and you only add to his confusion. The fully-fueled XL600V weighs 441 pounds: light by 600-class street standards, but blubbery by off-road measures. Under that pearl white,

red and blue aero-wrap bodywork lives a liquid-cooled, 583cc narrow-angle V-twin that looks much like a street-bike engine.

Saddle up. You sit 34 inches above meaty trials tires and fit between an inte-



TRANSALP

grated frame-mount fairing and a stout plastic luggage rack. Nearly nine inches of daylight separates Mother Earth and the plastic chin spoiler/bash plate which has been shrink-wrapped around the front of the engine. There are nearly eight inches of suspension travel fore and aft. Cross-braced motocross bars spread the grips 34 inches.

But as alien as the Transalp seems in American traffic, it's nothing new. These bulbous phenoms are an everyday sight on the Continent. Honda unveiled the XL600V in 1987 as a bit of European street theatre designed to capitalize on Paris-to-Dakar rally victories. This was a perfectly logical move in Europe where posers form a style-cult. The Paris-Dakar image runs deep enough in Europe to support a raft of players—mainly from Italy and Japan—including Honda's own Africa Twin, which is a more faithful rendering of HRC's no-kidding-around, 75-horsepower, 390-pound NXR750 racer.

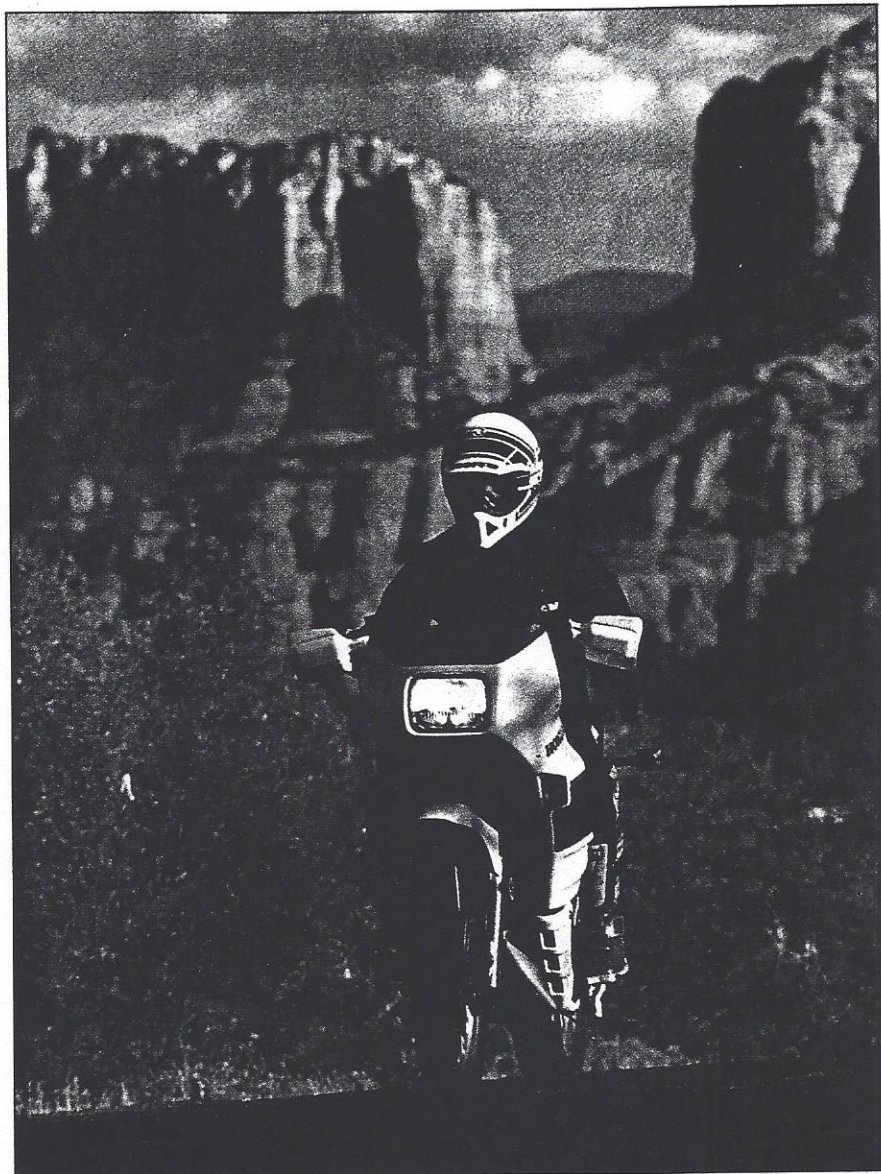
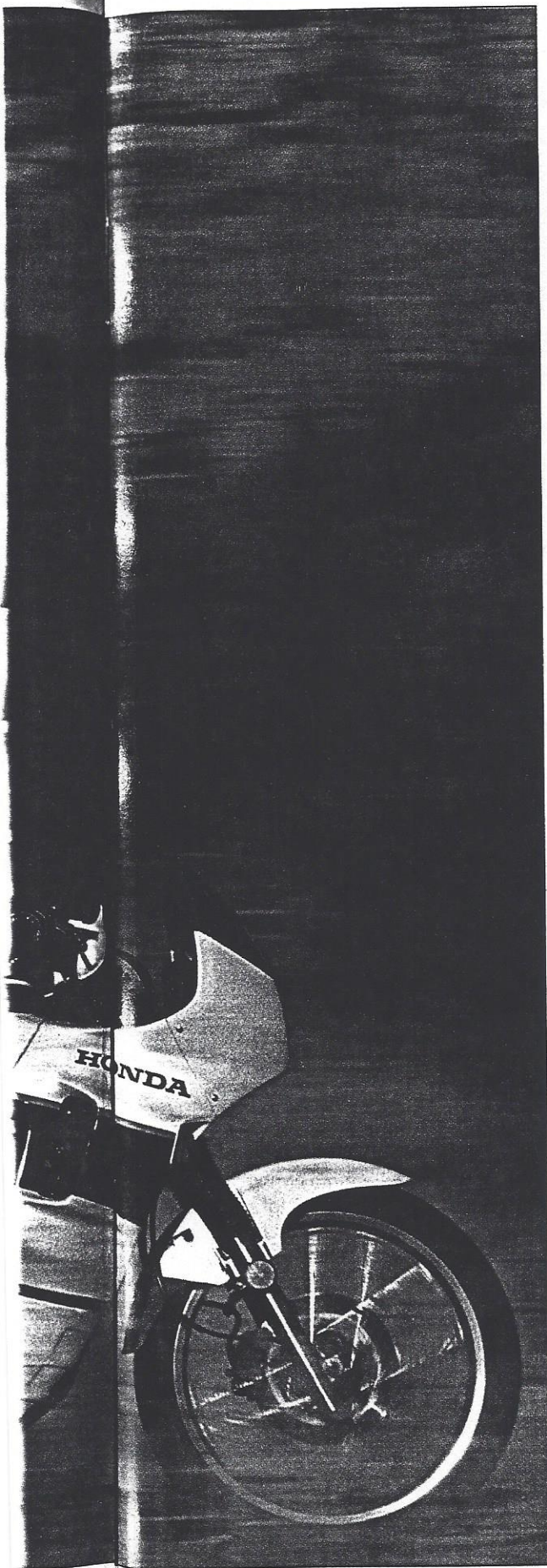
In America, Paris-Dakar imaging is about as marketable as a Walter Mon-

Hydraulic power delivery and a billowy ride make the XL600V happier on the pavement than beyond it. It's best to avoid any path where four-by-fours fear to tread.

dale campaign speech. Here, the Honda Transalp must live or die on what it is, not what it wants to be. American Honda understands this, offering the XL600V to American individualists who may want to leave middle age and middle income in a swirling cloud of dust—even if it's just for the weekend.

That familiar-looking 583cc Vee is essentially a bored-and-stroked version of Honda's VT500 Ascot engine, bolted solidly in a rectangular-section, double-loop steel frame. Cylinders, arranged 52 degrees apart, breathe through two 32mm constant-vacuum Mikuni carburetors. Compression inside the heart-shaped combustion chambers works out to 9.2:1, and two spark plugs per





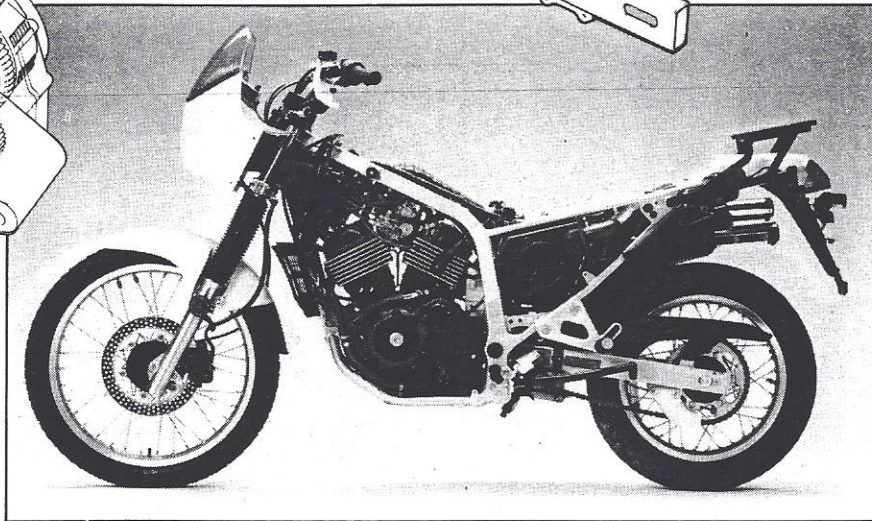
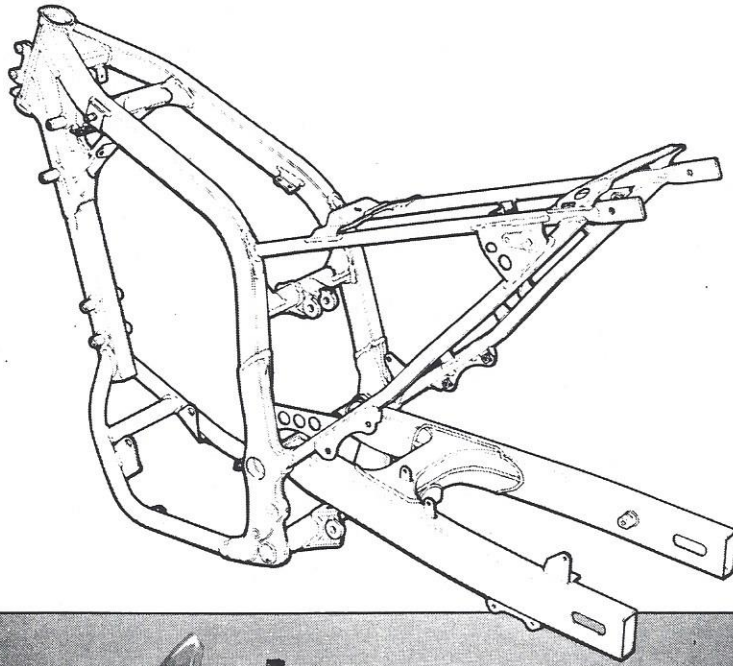
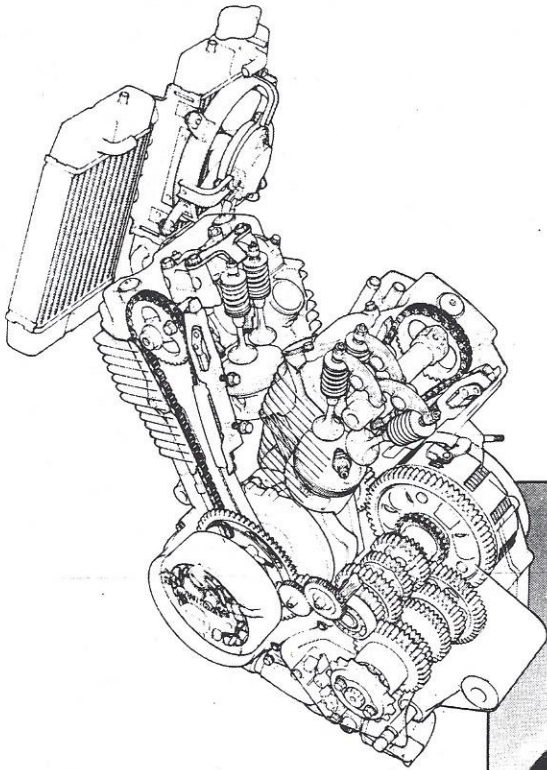
cylinder guarantee a quick, clean burn. A single chain-driven overhead cam controls three valves in each cylinder (two intake, one exhaust, adjusted by means of screws and locknuts). Clever extraction vents in the fairing draw cool air through two aluminum radiators, set in either side of the fairing.

Successful adventures begin with comfortable accommodations, and here even Leona Helmsley would like the Transalp. Wide bars, a tall seat (one inch taller than Honda's NX650; 0.10 inch taller than Kawasaki's KLR 650), and pegs placed even with the swing-arm pivot create a comfortable riding position for riders short and tall. Few other bikes give our six-foot-three staffer room enough to stretch and still allow our five-six tester to get his outstretched toes on the ground. Easily long enough for two,

the Transalp seat is wider and more comfy than the NX650 saddle, though it's too soft for more than 100 miles in one shot.

The Transalp cockpit is exceptionally civilized and streetified. The anthracite-faced speedometer and tachometer sit below a central coolant gauge and a tastefully understated lineup of idiot lights. After dark, everything is legible and well-lit. To prevent anyone from riding off with the sidestand down, Honda's Department of Redundancy Department tacked a dime-sized yellow light to the left-side handlebar clamp. Nevertheless, the sidestand ignition interlock makes that boneheaded maneuver impossible. Switches and levers appear identical to NX650 pieces, right down to the kill button, designed for thumb-contortionists.

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Up-country appearances aside, the Transalp's road manners belong in Gloria Vanderbilt's department manual. Too urbane for a kickstart lever, the XL600V fires and settles into an even idle before the starter button gets released. Brisk 50-degree mornings mean full choke, but warm-up takes only a minute or two. The cable-actuated clutch operates effortlessly, and the slick-shifting five-speed box snicks into first.

Slicing deftly through early-a.m. gridlock, the V-twin revs with the nonchalance of an electric motor, feeling much smoother and more self-assured on the street than any big single. Flawless carburetion and conservative cam timing produce a seamless powerband that makes shifting optional. Just pick a gear. As long as the tach needle reads over 2500 rpm, the Transalp outstrips the toiling mass of four-door commuter traffic.

The smooth engine encourages a rider to tap the V-twin's power, and that's good because basic test numbers reveal that the Transalp is actually slower than some big thumpers. In a pure roll-on contest, the XL600V takes 6.2 seconds to steam from 45 to 70 miles per hour in top gear. Honda's

NX650 cuts that trip in 5.4 seconds, Kawasaki's biggest KLR in 5.9.

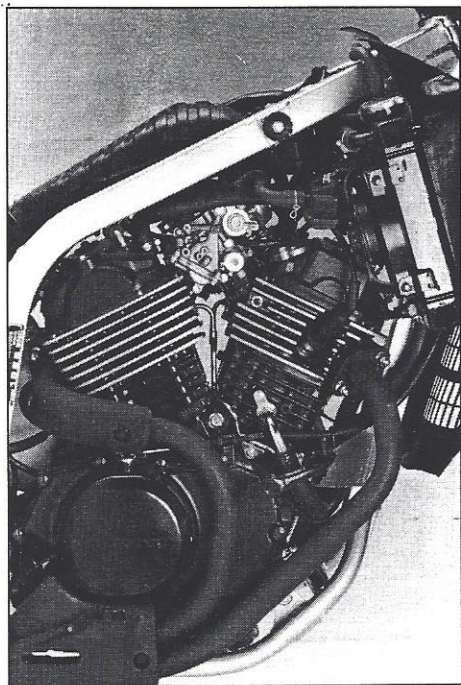
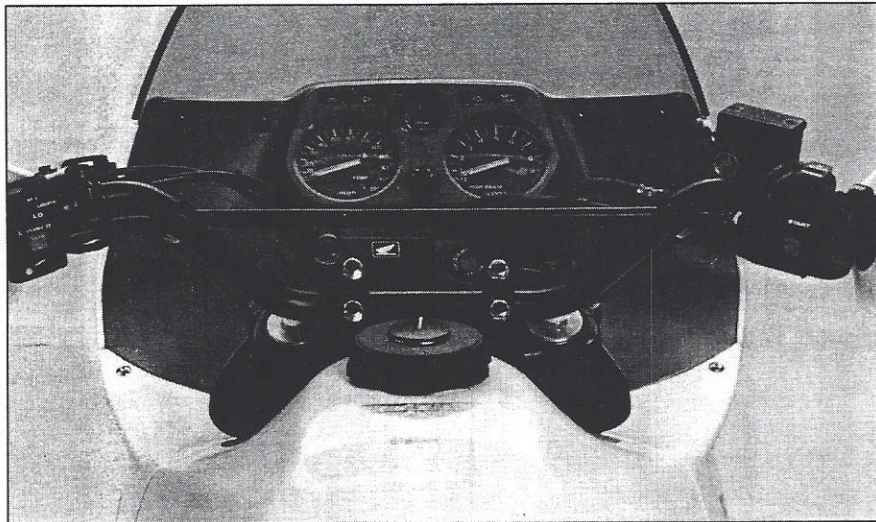
Trolling along the freeway, the Transalp has a surprisingly luxurious ride, almost rivaling the CBR1000. Some initial stiffness in fork travel lets expansion joints jolt the rider but larger expressway irregularities simply disappear. Furthermore, Transalp comfort is more than suspension-deep. The well-contoured fuel tank and fairing provide adequate neck-to-knee wind protection. Heat-sensitive staffers detected some radiation from the extraction vents and right-side exhaust headers, but otherwise, the Transalp's heat management is fine. Plastic brush-guards steer wind around the rider's hands, though the XL's guards work less effectively than the Kawasaki KLR's units. Overall, however, Transalp element protection exceeds that of any off-roadable motorcycle we've ridden.

Like Honda's other 52-degree V-twins, the Transalp chuffer uses offset crankpins to produce the perfect primary balance of a 90-degree Vee. This design exaggerates rocking couple tremors a bit more than 90-degree twins with side-by-side rods on a common crankpin. Honda's crank arrangement requires a wider crankshaft to accommodate a center flywheel and offset pins. Nevertheless, rolling along between 55 and 75 miles per hour, the XL is far smoother than a counterbalanced big single, and this makes the V-twin a more pleasing road companion than the NX650 or KLR650 thumpers. Rubber-mount handlebars and removable rubber inserts in the cleated steel pegs insulate the rider from any annoying shakes. Rear-view mirror images remain clear, and the engine throbs along patiently, projecting just enough mechanical presence to let you know it's there.

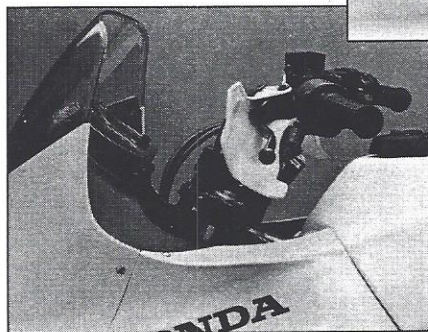
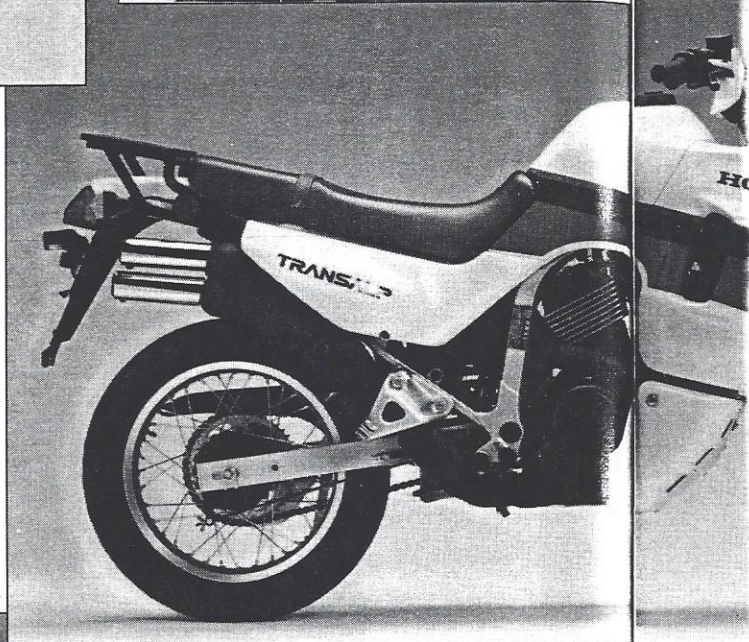


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We nicknamed the XL600V the TransPal. It has the profile of an off-road bike with the detailing of a street bike. Think of the TransPal as an after-dinner off-road limo.



TRANSALP

When the canyon walls rise and the road begins to twist, the 600's wide bars, compliant suspension and rheostatic power delivery let the Honda fly along at speeds that belie its off-road architecture. Thanks to bar/seat/peg layout, the XL positions its rider low enough so he feels part of the machine rather than perched on it. Some staffers disliked the soft-mounted handlebar, which gives rubbery steering in quick side-to-side transitions. Certainly the Transalp's town-car wheelbase does nothing to aid quick left/right/left maneuvers, and the 600's bulk hardly contrib-

utes to agility. Though 30 pounds heavier than Honda's Hawk GT and 63 pounds up on an NX650, the Transalp can nonetheless generate serious speed under an expert pilot.

The stout, 41mm fork and single-shock Pro-Link system soak up the kind of nasty, bumpy, frost-heaved pavement that makes street-only suspension skittish. Not only can the rider trust the 600 over broken tarmac, he can also be confident of the Transalp's upfront stopping power. A single 276mm rotor and potent, twin-piston Nissin caliper take most of the credit for hauling the

Transalp from 60 mph to a dead standstill in 138 feet. That's two feet more than Cagiva's 650 Elefant, but 17 feet shorter than the KLR650. The wispy rear drum, which is an all-on-or-off affair, counts for almost nothing in slowing the XL down.

Ground clearance abounds; traction does not. Both Yokohama E-703 tires get slithery when pushed hard on the pavement, but, mercifully, the rear slides before the front tire. Sheer engine power doesn't explain the marginal bite; indeed, the TA-pilot must keep spinning the engine between five and seven grand for maximum road velocity.

The Transalp's dyno sheet confirms seat-of-the-pants impressions: horsepower mounts from 12.6 at 2500 rpm to a peak of 41.2 at 7000 rpm, rising with the relentless movement of compounding interest thanks to a torque curve that's flat as plate glass. Comparisons? KLR and NX six-fifties are slightly stronger just above idle and through the middle of their powerbands, but the

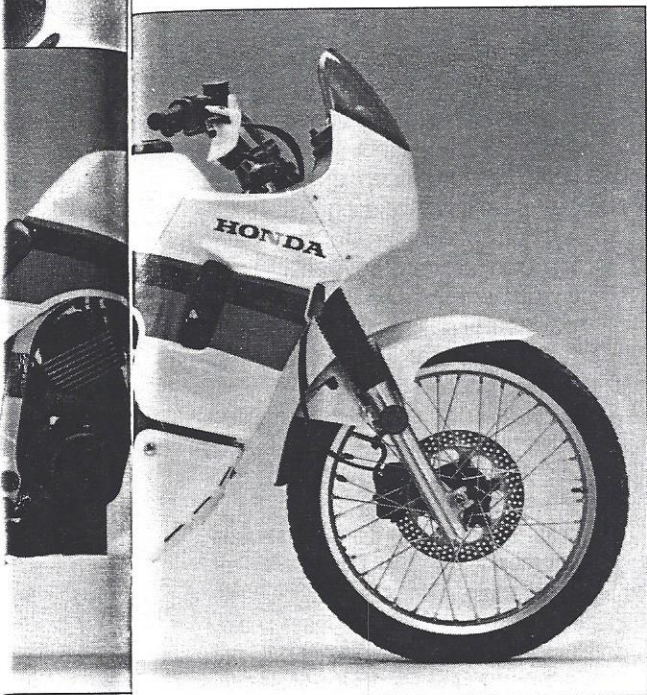
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TEST SPECIFICATIONS

Transalp winds up and punches out the single-cylinder bikes on top. The Kawasaki comes five horsepower short at an identical 7000 rpm; Honda's own NX gives up 4.6 at 6000. But at the drag strip the Transalp's horsepower, despite the bike's weight, produces an obvious advantage. The XL600V's best effort, 13.44 seconds/93.12 mph, is better than the KLR's 13.94/88.30 and the NX's 14.12/87.43 clockings.



Herding 441 pounds of motorcycle beyond pavement's dead end is risky business. Honda plays coy regarding the 600's off-road capabilities: You won't find the word "dirt" appearing anywhere in the Transalp brochure. Imagine our amazement when we discovered our Transalp had something of a back-country heart.

The XL does a passable dirt-bike imitation on smooth stretches of fire road, hanging the rear end out with predictable, dial-a-slide horsepower and a solid, dependable front end. That trustworthy front end is the Transalp's most valuable asset on smooth, fast fire roads. The strong front brake isn't overpowering for off-road duty, though the light-switch rear brake is again worthless.

Standard suspension settings (fork isn't adjustable; shock spring preload is set via threaded collar) keep the chassis balanced at a brisk, explorer pace over dirt roads. Yokohama tires demonstrate average ground grip for dual-purpose

Make and model	1989 Honda XL600V Transalp	Wheelbase	59.3 in. (1505mm)
Price, suggested retail (as of 10/12/88)	\$4498	Rake/trail	28°/4.3 in. (110mm)
Performance		Brake, front	Hydraulic, single-disc with twin-piston caliper
Standing start 1/4 mile	13.44 sec. @ 93.12 mph	rear	Rod-actuated, single-leading-shoe drum
Acceleration, 0-60 mph	4.95 sec.	Wheel, front	Spoked, 21 x 1.85 alloy rim
45-70 mph, top gears	(3) 3.55 sec., 307 ft. (4) 4.65 sec., 396 ft. (5) 6.15 sec., 520 ft.	rear	Spoked, 17 x 2.50 alloy rim
Braking, 60-0 mph	138 ft.	Tire, front	90/90-21 545 Yokohama E-703
Horsepower @ 60 mph	10.10	rear	130/80-17 655 Yokohama E-703
Engine rpm @ 60 mph, top gear	5076	Seat height	33.5 in. (851mm)
Average fuel consumption rate	54.1 mpg (22.9 km/l)	Ground clearance	12.25 in. (311mm)
Cruising range (main/reserve)	205/54 mi. (330/87 km)	Fuel capacity (main/reserve)	3.8/1.0 gals. (14.4/3.8 l)
Load capacity (GVWR less curb weight)	333.5 lbs. (151.3 kg)	Curb weight (full tank)	441.5 lbs. (200.3 kg)
Maximum speed in gears @ 8800 rpm	(1) 56 (2) 56 (3) 72 (4) 89 (5) 104	Test weight	591.5 lbs. (275 kg)

Electrical	
Power source	AC generator
Charge control	Solid-state voltage regulator
Headlight beams (high/low)	60/50 watts
Tail/stoptlights	5/21 watts
Battery	12V 12AH

Engine	
Type	Four-stroke, 52-degree V-twin, liquid-cooled with two chain-driven overhead camshafts, three valves per cylinder
Bore and stroke	75.0 x 66.0mm (2.95 x 2.59 in.)
Piston displacement	583cc (35.58 cu. in.)
Compression ratio	9.2:1
Carburetion	(2) Mikuni 32mm, constant-vacuum
Exhaust system	Two-into-one
Ignition	Battery-powered, inductive, magnetically triggered
Air filtration	Paper element, disposable
Oil filtration	Paper element, disposable
Oil capacity	2.9 qts. (2.8 l)
Bhp @ rpm	41.24 @ 7000
Torque @ rpm	32.81 @ 6000

Instruments
Includes ... Speedometer, odometer, tripmeter; tachometer with 9000-rpm redline; coolant temperature gauge; warning lights for low oil pressure, sidestand down, indicator lights for high beam, neutral, turn signals

Speedometer error,
30 mph indicated, actual 28.0
60 mph indicated, actual 57.0

Customer Service Contact
American Honda Motor Co., Inc.
100 W. Alondra Blvd.
Gardena, CA 90247
(213) 327-8280

Transmission	
Type	Five-speed, constant-mesh, wet clutch
Primary drive	Straight-cut gear, 68/36, 1.89
Final drive	#525 chain, 15/47 sprockets, 3.133
Gear ratios (transmission)	(1) 36/14, 2.57 (2) 32/18, 1.78 (3) 29/21, 1.38 (4) 27/24, 1.12 (5) 25/26, 0.96
Gear ratios (overall)	(1) 15.21 (2) 10.51 (3) 8.16 (4) 6.65 (5) 5.68

Chassis	
Type	Single-downtube, full-cradle frame; box-section steel swing arm
Suspension, front	Leading-axle fork with 41mm tubes and 7.9 in. (200mm) of travel
rear	(1) shock absorber, adjustable for spring preload, producing 7.5 in. (191mm) of rear-wheel travel

