



Rust Special. *World's First Test : 2016 Honda Africa Twin*

2016 Honda CRF1000L Africa Twin

RUST gets the exclusive world's first test of the brand new Honda Africa Twin. Read it and weep...



Out of
Africa!



Words: Jon Bentman. Pics: Ramona Schwarz, Herbert Schwarz and Jon Beck & Honda



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HOLY COW, my heart is thumping. Given the possession of a new Honda CRF1000L Africa Twin before the world launch by Honda – I’ve grasped the opportunity with both hands... Or at least with one hand twisted fully backwards. Yeah, I should maybe have taken those first kilometres easy, but no, at the first sign of gravel I’ve switched the traction control off and gone full gas. As many a test rider might tell you, it’s the short cut method to understanding the character of a new motorcycle. And this new Africa Twin is sporting... Seriously sporting.

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The pace it can set is certainly blistering, and fortunately it has the accuracy to go with the pace. And just as well, there were some lairy moments back there. It was as well that it stayed on the track because trees bloody well hurt if you challenge them, and there are plenty of trees here in Germany’s Black For-est. But bottom line - yeah it’s a missile.





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Long Time, No Speak

The return of the Africa Twin is long overdue. Seriously-seriously overdue in fact. Honda have been almost criminally negligent in their disregard for the adventure segment. BMW must have been laughing all these years; as amazed as the rest of us that Honda, the sleeping giant as it were, could pass by such a surefire growth sector in the motorcycle market. Okay, in the very last few years they've come at us with a revision on the Transalp, then the Crossdress... er, Cross-tourer, and added an X suffix to any number of models in a half-hearted attempt to imply adventure capability. But really it's all been far from convincing.

Wind the clock back - and we could go nuts recalling ancient history like Honda's first dirt-forays with models like the CL250 Scrambler of 1962. But we won't. Instead, we can make a mark, literally in the sand, in 1988 when Honda first launched the Africa Twin, as the XRV650, a model that paid homage to Honda's mighty NRX750 Dakar racers (which won four consecutive Dakars between 1986-89). Despite an almost clone-like appearance the XRV650 wasn't a direct copy of the works racers, choosing the then new 52° vee-twin motor (as first seen in the VT500 roadster) over the hand-built 90° vee-twin beast of a lump found in the works racers. That 650 was fairly tame, making just 56bhp - but as most old racers who know



How it happened...

We should have been booked on the world launch in South Africa (*in December*). This had been in the offing. But then Honda got tight and allocated only a few places to British journalists and we got bumped in favour of Horse & Hound (*or some such*). However, turns out we have friends in lofty places and rather fortuitously were offered an exclusive test of Touratech's show bike that they displayed at EICMA. We should make that point clear - this is a test of a *Touratech-modified Honda CRF1000L Africa Twin*. There are differences between it and the standard model on sale soon.

Where?

The test took place on the roads and trails around the Black Forest in Southern Germany. We had just one day, but then you rarely get more than that on a proper launch. And given that we've seen some adventure bikes' off-road capability launch-'tested' on what amounts to little more than a gravel car park, then actually this was a fair job. Some of the photos are from

Touratech's own product photoshoot in Southern France just days before.

Who?

Our features writer and tester, Jon Bentman is in the saddle. JB has ridden many adventure bikes over many years, starting with BMW's F650 Funduro in the last millennium. Back in 2008 he rode solo across the High Atlas in Morocco on an old XR650. In 2010 he rode the BMW GS Trophy in South Africa (*employed as BMW's own roving reporter*) and has since ridden the 2012 and 2014 editions, and is due on the 2016 edition in Thailand in just a few months.

Why?

Honda are of course a big player. The original Africa Twin was an icon of its era and is today fast attracting classic status (*at least that's what they say in the classified ads*). This new Africa Twin looks like it may well be a chip off the old block. And it might just come in at a very keen price point, in which case it may well shake up the adventure market...

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their chops will tell you, off-road that's plenty.

Two years later came the XRV750. In many ways not quite as faithful to the racers as the 650, but it read the marketplace well. Big trailie riders back then - not yet known as adventure riders, that would come many years later - were keen for the look, but liked the performance to be decidedly 'touring'. Yeah, a bike that had a youthful cut to its jib, but allowed for comfort and convenience on a long ride. There was an update in 1993, again focusing on touring capability over off-road prowess. And that was pretty much the top and tail of it. The Africa Twin from then on went year to year with just graphics changes until in 2003 it was finally dropped - by then hopelessly outclassed by the GS models from bay-emm-vay. Think about it, 2003 is going on 13 years ago, 1993 is 23



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years ago, that's way too long to go without any serious development in a segment. Why? Your guess is as good as ours.

CAN YOU DIG IT?

And so a whole lifetime has passed, but at last, like a time lord, the Africa Twin has returned. We're all older, with less hair, possibly fewer teeth - but the Africa Twin is again in a full flush of youth. It's not actually shed any pounds, the XRV750 was 207kg while the new CRF1000L is 208kg (that's claimed dry weight) - the latter number for the base model without fancy add-ons - but it's been to the gym and turned fat into muscle, so while the old vee-twin puffed out 62bhp, this

COMMUNITY

Slightly odd, to have a panel headed with that one word: community. But this is important and it will link to eventual success or otherwise for the new Africa Twin. You see BMW does community extremely well, they've created for the GS owners a brother- (and sister-) hood. There are rallies, gatherings and there's the biennial GS Trophy, and on top of this BMW consistently engage in the wider adventure community. You buy the BMW GS and you get more than just a bike.

The Japanese brands, by contrast, have been particularly slow to pick up on this aspect. For them, you buy the bike and that's the end of the relationship, save for servicing. So unless their national marketing and after-sales teams get their heads around this - and from experience I wouldn't go holding my breath on this one - they are still only offering a one-dimensional package. The Africa Twin will still sell. But we think it would sell a hell of a lot more given the right 'packaging'. Yep, the Africa Twin is a great bike, here's hoping it comes with great backup.



new one pumps nearly a full hundred horses.

And 93bhp (to be exact) is more than enough. Yeah, KTM went nuts with a full 160bhp in their 1290 Super Adventure, BMW responded with a slightly less ridiculous 125hp in the water-boxer 1200GS, but actually 100bhp is still monster grunt when off-tarmac. Romain Febvre, this year's MX1 world motocross champion, took the world to task with just about 60bhp, so 100, even with all that excess poundage, is more than enough.

This is more than evident when riding on the gravel with the Honda's throttle pinned. And here's the thing, I was testing the third variation of the new Africa Twin - that is the automatic (DCT) version, complete with all the trimmings, like ABS and traction control - and so this one is the heaviest of the three variants, a full 242kg when wet, yet still it pulled like a chav's Pitbull terrier.

Sure, if you left it to the auto-box to do its thang it would do a nanny job of changing up early and bogging the revs. But Honda, showing some wisdom, also fitted the bike with a manual paddle-shift system for swapping gears, finger operated on the left handlebar. Use your index finger to change up, thumb to change down. So you could override the auto - and I guess we're talking semi-automatic shifting here, up and down -



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and let the parallel twin howl. And does it howl? Gloriously... right up to 10,000rpm or so. It's feisty and flippin' fast.

And an auto... Like we wanted that, eh? But actually it kind of works. I tried this system on the Crosstourer and honestly I'd sooner take to driving a car than repeat that experience. But this system on the Africa Twin is a serious barrel of laughs. I've read stuff from riders saying how they've struggled to adapt to the auto set-ups, that they were reaching for the gear lever, the clutch lever etc but on the Africa Twin I never once did either, it feels intuitive right from the off.

“ And an auto... Like we wanted that, eh? I tried this system on the Crosstourer and I'd sooner take to driving a car. But this sytem on the Africa Twin is a serious barrel of laughs...”

I should add there are evidently still six ratios in this auto-box, it's not one of those constantly variable set-ups as we know from scooters, so the auto aspect is the change-mechanism and very clever it must be too (*if we had time to explain we would*). There are incidentally two DCT modes, 'D' for economy



(early up-shifts we dare say) and 'S' for 'sport performance'. I have to admit I was being pretty brutal with the poor Africa Twin so didn't fully investigate the D mode but given it'll allow you to hit 61.6mpg (say *Honda*) if you take it easy then you can see it has its uses.

All said, in full auto mode the DCT set-up made for a splendidly serene cruise, you could just glide along super-quiet, watching the scenery drift by. Then when the wind got up your tail, you could take off like an F-15. The auto still wouldn't be my first choice as I'd prefer to run without the 14kg weight penalty it comes with, but for some this will be a serious and worthwhile option. Oh yes, and it makes for almost foolproof feet-up full-lock turn capability, as it'll never stall.

Ticking the Boxes

We are jumping around a bit here, but then that's how the ride was too, as I discovered each new feature. So let's talk traction control, or as Honda call it 'Honda Selectable Torque Control'. This is a fairly comprehensive set-up with three levels of control plus our favourite setting: 'Off'. You can choose between maximum intervention, medium intervention, very little intervention, or Off. Maximum control barely lets you accelerate on the dirt, honestly. Conversely on





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the least controlled setting I found it let you lose the back end in the biggest possible way possible short of a crash. I've used BMW's traction control on their 1200GS and you can almost dial-a-slide and it holds you safely in a certain attitude. The Honda almost caught me out, it'll let you go a fair deal further, so take it easy on those first tries.

There is also a G-button (*not a G-spot, don't get confused there*) which modifies the traction even more. When engaged it offers maximum traction (and machine control, say Honda) by limiting the clutch slip.



The ABS system is linked to the traction system and in the off mode you can lock the rear wheel, which we all know to be a good thing. The ABS, which Honda call ABS (*hurrah*), I found worked very well, allowing the tyres to easily cut through the loose gravel and find bite, without ever getting the feeling you were going to lock and lose it. I did on



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one occasion blow through a corner and ended up in the adjoining field, proving both that I can be a muppet and that no system, however excellent, should be relied upon as your sole safety strategy.

Character Witness

The parallel twin motor is, I have to say, something of a gem. By setting the crank to a 270° firing pattern Honda have fooled the bike, and us, into thinking we're riding a 90° vee-twin, like a Ducati motor - or perhaps more intentionally recalling the power characteristics of the 52° vee-twin motor in the old Africa Twin. Touratech had a fully upgraded old Africa Twin for me to ride alongside the new bike and jumping between the two there was indeed a similarity. They

HONDA SAYS...

This from Yosuke Hasegawa, Honda's series large project leader for the CRF1000L Africa Twin:

"From the outset of designing and engineering our new Africa Twin, we wanted to create a full-scale true adventure motorcycle that was equally enjoyable and capable in crossing vast continents as it was on the highway and in everyday use. The legacy and performance of the previous model was a significant reference point in our thinking and after many satisfying months of research work, testing, development and riding, our CRF1000L has off-road ability that makes dirt roads a joy to tackle, with the comfort of a tourer and agility of a commuter. In other words, a model truly worthy of inheriting the Africa Twin name."



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were not chalk and cheese, even if the new model is close to twice as powerful.

The important thing here is the engine has character. It didn't quite talk to me, but I liked the feel right from the start - even with auto engaged - and the more I rode it the more I liked it. Sometimes it said 'let's go explore', other times it said 'let's hustle' - that's a perfect duality. Given a suitably fruity exhaust note - from a silencer that looks much like the BMW water-boxer's - the hustle bit was suitably satisfying.

Of course hustling really shouldn't be a part of adventure riding and while I give into the dark side all too readily, to my shame, I must say the sport capability does at least help with creating a sure-footed and adept off-road experience. And so I should mention that the CRF designation is correct. In spirit yes, but also given the technological links to Honda's off-road competition range, it is part of the 1000L's DNA. The cylinder heads in the Africa Twin do, it turns out, feature the same SOHC Unicam valve train as Honda's CRF250/450s. This set-up allows for a tighter included angle between the valves and a better combustion chamber shape, while also being a more compact, lighter design - all of which helps performance.



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21-18

Nope, not Adele's latest album... Those two numbers tell you Honda are serious. The sizes relate to wheel rim diameters - they've proven to be the optimal sizes for off-road competition motorcycling, wherever you're riding woods, rocks, deserts, mud - whatever. Okay, motocrossers use 19in rears but remember they now almost entirely ride man-made tracks. The 21in front works in the dirt better than any other wheel size for the most secure cornering, the 18in rear allows for a properly deep profiled tyre.

The compromise is that this set-up doesn't stick quite so securely to the road as a 19/17in

TOURATECH UPGRADES

As mentioned this wasn't a stock Africa Twin we tested, instead a Touratech-modified version. We understand there were at least 50 accessories attached to the base machine – too many to list, although of course very soon these will all be listed and no doubt in stock with your local Touratech distributor.

Among the items we noted were: crash bars (*most probably the best on the market for fit and finish*), radiator protector, oil



cooler protector, rear brake master cylinder protector, sump/engine bash plate (*essential for proper off-road riding*), Zega Pro 2 panniers and rack, comfort seats, upsized enduro-style footpegs, hand guards, GPS bracket - the list goes on!

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combination does. But if you want exemplary off-road manners then 21/18in is the way to go. It's what you'll find on KTM's gnarly 1190 Adventure R. Enough said.

Honda have nailed the suspension setup at the sharp end, too. The Showa upside forks offer 230mm of stroke, the shock 220mm. Again comparing it to that Adventure R - the orange bike offers 220mm travel front and rear, BMW R1200GS Adventure: 210/220mm. So bang in the ballpark.

How well the suspension actually works we'll have to see. On the gravel and trails around the Black Forest - which are quite well-graded pistes - it felt plush and secure. But we'd need another venue to find how it goes in deep sand or more choppy hard pack.

The ergos, by the way, feel spot on; totally natural, whether standing or seated. That said, let's put a caveat in here: our test bike featured Touratech bar risers, footpegs and seat and clearly our German friends had spent a while optimising their set-up. Whether the Honda seat is as optimally firm and flat we'll have to see. Likewise maybe the bars at standard height are just a little too low for sustained standing riding, if you're tallish like me.



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SECOND OPINION

Paul Guillien, CEO Touratech USA

Paul - the other guy you see in JB's photos and on the video - is joint bossman at Touratech USA and co-founder of the impressive and ever-growing state border-to-state border Backcountry Discovery Routes being rolled out across USA. His current weapon of choice is the BMW R1200GS Adventure. A good chap to get a second opinion from. Unlike JB he understands 'brevity':

I've got six reasons to be stoked for Honda's CRF1000L Africa Twin.

1 This bike can do it in the dirt. It comes with a gravel-eating 21in front wheel and ground clearance to tackle proper off-road adventures. In the last few years, entrants to the ADV seg-



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High Spec?

Well yes, this modified-by-Touratech Africa Twin has very high spec indeed, what with the Zega Pro panniers, the crash bars, alloy bash plate etc. Hey, even Metzeler Karoo 3 tyres. Your base model, direct from a Honda showroom, won't be quite so lavishly appointed. However, the finishes are as you'd expect from Honda. Nice panels, thick

paint. A decent set of instruments and controls, lovely gold-anodised rims and fork sliders. She's a pretty beast.

There are elements about this bike - like the switchgear and engine styling - that make you wonder whether it's been built at Honda's Thailand plant. There are hints of CRF250L about the details too. If so, there's absolutely no need for prejudice...

ment came standard with pavement-oriented 19in front wheels. The list includes the Yamaha Super Tenere, BMW R1200GS, Triumph Explorer 1200 etc.... Honda got it right by giving this bike a rare dirt-sized front wheel. Honda's only 21in-shod competition in the 1000cc plus category is the KTM 1190R.

2 Traction control modes can be changed on-the-fly or shut off completely. This is a critical feature when riding in sand or climbing loose terrain. The traction control switch is easy to operate and there's no need to stop riding to turn it off. The new Twin also has a rear brake ABS that can be disabled to boost grip in loose gravel and allow skid turning for those with the skills.

3 Honda reliability is legendary. Durability is critical to an adventure bike and few brands come close to Honda's reliability track record. Sure, it's too early to hand the Africa Twin an award for reliability, but the odds are very good that this Honda will set the bar for reliability in the adventure category.

4 She's a looker. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but our friends are swooning over this machine's stylish looks. The Dakar Rally lineage shines through the curves of this bike. Sym-





metrical headlights, sharp angles, rally-inspired bodywork, might just make you go weak in the knees. The Twin's gold rims hinting at HRC history, strike a chord with many of us who grew up distracted from homework by the tantalizing pages of dirt bike magazines.

5 It's little in the middle. The quest for fuel capacity, adequately-sized radiators, air boxes and other engineering challenges have created many adventure bikes with bodywork that competed for space with the rider's knees. I'm happy to report that the CRF1000L is narrow in the middle and comfortable for the rider in both the sitting and standing position. It sounds simple, but makes a big difference for rider comfort and control.

6 This motor screams! While its predecessor was a lot of things, a power-house it was not. Honda didn't disappoint with power delivery on the new Africa Twin. The dry-sump 988cc SOHC parallel twin motor winds up quickly and is downright exciting to ride. It sends impulses to your brain that make you light up the rear tyre whenever you see gravel. If you rode it blindfolded you might think it was a KTM. It's that good. You would also crash, so please don't ride blindfolded.



We (when we were TBM) had a CRF250L for 18 months and it gave exemplary service. Nothing.... absolutely nothing failed on that bike, and the engine ticked over as noiselessly on the last day as it did on the first. The Africa Twin does though, feel a peg lower than a BMW on design and execution. You know just missing that last little flourish that makes you go 'Ahhh'. Saying that, this is adventure motorcycling - engage your rugged self and stop being so critical.

To Africa and beyond...

Keep it short and succinct said the editor. Yeah, 3000 words later, I've failed. And that's because the Honda Africa Twin has succeeded. It is the bike we've been hoping for - probably more. It's a dynamic experience, and it has all the capability and design nuances that tell you that the guys that created this bike knew exactly what they were doing. They know what makes a dirt bike work. They also know what an adventure bike needs. They've even been so confident as to go maverick and offer us something we didn't know we wanted - an auto option.

The new Africa Twin is not going to blow the adventure market apart. No. That pesky BMW R1200GS is still too much of a tour de force for it to do that. Love it or loathe it, it is

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an iconic piece of engineering. Likewise, chasing down KTM's 1190 Adventure R will be a very difficult task. It's so racy you're burning possible sales all the way to claiming "I've got the sportiest adventure bike on the market".

Instead the Honda cannily slots in just beneath the pair and - super-significantly - well above the plethora of 800s (be they BMW or Triumph). Judging by the pricing that's just been announced in the USA, Honda have aimed the Africa Twin at BMW's F800GS's

jugular. It's almost the same money there, for a bike with more capacity and more power. And it's so damn pretty too, and so damn capable, and so damn Honda.... I know which I'd buy.

THANKS TO:

Touratech AG for loaning us the bike just hours before it was due to be dispatched to the EICMA show in Milan. Don't know what would have happened if we'd crashed it.

Specification 2016 Honda CRF1000L Africa Twin

Price: TBA (but we are hoping for £9995)

Engine: Liquid-cooled eight-valve parallel twin four-stroke with 270° crank and uni-cam

Displacement: 998cc

Bore & Stroke: 92.0 x 75.1mm

Max. power output: 95hp at 7,500rpm

Max. Torque: 72.2lb.ft at 6,000rpm

Gearbox: six-speed, wet multiplate clutch with cam assist shifting and slipper clutch, or DCT auto

Frame: Steel semi-double cradle type with high-tensile strength steel rear subframe

Front Suspension: Showa 45mm cartridge-type inverted telescopic fork with hydraulic dial-style preload adjuster and DF adjustment, 230mm stroke
Rear suspension: Monoblock cast aluminium swing arm with Pro-Link with gas-charged damper, hydraulic dial-style preload adjuster and rebound damping adjustment, 220 mm rear wheel travel

Front brake: 2 x 310mm dual wave floating hydraulic disc with aluminium hub and radial fit four-piston calipers (*ABS on ABS and DCT models only)

Rear brake: 256mm wave hydraulic disc with single-piston caliper (*ABS). Also lever-lock parking brake system on DCT model with additional slide type single-piston caliper

Front wheel: 2.15 x 21 90/90-21

Rear wheel: 4.00 x 18, 150/70-18

Wheelbase: 1575mm

Seat height: (STD position / Low position) 870/850mm

Ground clearance: 250mm

Fuel capacity: 18.8 litres

Dry weight: 208kg (STD), 212kg (ABS), 222kg (DCT)

Wet weight: 228kg (STD), 232kg (ABS), 242kg (DCT)

Contact: 0845 200 8000 <http://www.honda.co.uk/motorcycles>