

CLASSIC DRIVER

Ridden: Harley-Davidson XL1200 Sportster Custom



It's pretty pointless judging Harley-Davidsons by normal road-testing parameters, writes Tom Stewart. You see, people generally don't ride Harleys because they're swift, light, economical or comfortable. Or because they handle brilliantly, or are particularly refined, high-tech, green, practical, sensible or inexpensive (though some are). For the most part - this 'new' 1200 Custom model included - they're none of those things.

So why do they ride them? Because they love Harley-Davidsons and all that they stand for. They love their style, their sound and their feel. They love their big, thumping V-twin, air-cooled motors. They love the chrome and the *Easy Rider* lifestyle that Harleys imply. And they appreciate the Davidson family's continued hands-on involvement, the brand's 108-year heritage and the manner in which the Milwaukee manufacturer steadfastly ploughs its own furrow.

Harley riders aren't objective about their bikes. Their love is unconditional. To them, Harley-Davidson isn't just a brand - it's more of a religion. That said, here's an objective review!



On some sports bikes, 70mph about coincides with the time for a change up into third gear (or maybe second). But, on this new XL1200 Custom, 70mph in top (5th) gear is comfortable, although much above it isn't. It's like an unintentional speed-limiter, where above 70mph the footpegs vibrate, the wind tries to lift your boots from the widely-spaced pegs (unless you hook them forward of the gear/brake pedals), and in clinging onto the wide 'bars you feel like a human parachute.

If pressed, the 1200 Custom will of course go faster, and without undue effort on the motorcycle's part, but the riding position, the wind and a slight feeling of instability when approaching three-figure speeds, though not alarming, is enough to prevent you from exceeding the national limit by much.







The clutch lever requires a modicum of muscle and the front brake lever requires a committed squeeze – there’s just the one disc up front and it’s not particularly effective. Gear-shifting is loud and clunky, and the Sportster’s fuel-injected 1202cc engine is no hot-rod in standard tune, but it does have ample and satisfying torque (72lb ft at 3200rpm) and its offbeat thumping coupled with the muted tone of the standard exhausts is quite satisfying.

The 1200 Custom doesn’t really do cornering in the normal sense of the word. Yes, it steers precisely enough and ‘negotiates’ corners, but lean angle and therefore cornering speed is particularly limited due to those widely spaced, foot-forward footpegs with hero blobs that scratch the road very prematurely. And if the hero blobs weren’t there, then the footpegs themselves would touch down, and after that there’s plenty more low-slung, less forgiving hardware to grind away.



Ride quality is poor. The rear suspension is both under-sprung and a little under-damped. Hit a bump, even a small one, and chances are that the rear suspension will bottom out and, without your legs and feet beneath you to absorb some of the shock, it can be quite uncomfortable.

Despite the 1200 Custom's Michelin/H-D 'Scorcher 31' bobber-style front tyre, the front suspension's arguably worse. The fork sliders do appear to move in reasonable harmony with the road surface, but hit a bump and they suddenly lock solid, or feel like they do. This can send quite a severe jolt through the 'bars to your hands and arms, so best to remove your watch before riding unless you're confident of its shock proofing.



The pillion seat is for short, low-speed trips only as it's small and slopes slightly rearward. This means that, without an aftermarket sissy bar/bumstop, the slightest twist of throttle will have your hapless passenger slowly but surely slipping off the back.

On a more positive note, there's no rev-counter and none is needed. The speedo needle isn't de-stabilised either by engine vibes or the harsh ride, and the LCD display (total mileage, trip A, trip B and clock) is handy. There's a low-fuel warning light, but a range-to-empty readout would be better. With a 17-litre tank and around 42mpg, don't expect much over 100 miles between fill-ups, by which time your bum will likely need a break anyway. The LED rear light is bright and you need both thumbs to operate the indicators - left for left, right for right. However, their self-cancelling function is efficient and other manufacturers would do well to employ similar.







The paintwork and chrome is mostly to concours standard, but some ancillary parts such as the brake disc centres and exhaust shield clips might not take kindly to exposure to the elements for long. And the tubular steel frame's black finish doesn't look like it would bear up too well to a long British winter.

So, purely objectively, the 1200 Custom doesn't have a great deal going for it. However, it is good-looking, soulful, charismatic and just fine for pottering about town or country lanes. And if that sounds a bit glib then you should know that your reviewer used to disapprove of Harleys with a passion until, many years ago, he rode one not dissimilar to this coast-to-coast across the USA - and by somewhere in the Midwest the penny had dropped and he was smitten. Well, almost.

Price in UK:

Black £8649

Colour option £8849

Two-tone option (as tested) £9099

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