

CLASSIC DRIVER

Ridden: Zero Motorcycles 'S' and 'DS'

Lead

Someone has probably already registered the name but, were there such a thing as an 'iBike', this would be it. Zero Motorcycles' 2012 models now have longer range and better performance; really class-leading figures that – finally – make electric bikes usable on a daily basis.

The company is based in Santa Cruz, in the heart of Silicon Valley, California - a bit of a clue as to its high-tech credentials. And I'm sure the weather is nice, too, perfect for a day-long ride on a new Zero electric motorcycle.

But "day-long ride"? Is that really possible? Well, depending on what you get up to, yes it is. In fact, since the invitation for the European launch of the 2012 Zero range in Barcelona popped into the Classic Driver inbox last month, there's been much interest in the concept, with the drawbacks of range uppermost in people's minds.

Before going into the two models available for testing in Spain in detail, let's look at the route of the day's test ride. Setting off from our hotel just outside Barcelona, we rode into the hills of the Garraf Massif, on the Catalan Coastal Range, stopping at the Buddhist monastery at La Plana Novella for coffee, then lunch by the sea at Sitges before returning to the hotel via the twisting coastal road.

All very nice, and in total some 130-140 kilometres of reasonably hard riding up and downhill, by a group of riders with abilities ranging from 'rusty' to extremely capable indeed. By the time we'd returned our bikes to the charging point set up at the hotel, most were on 'one bar' on the gauge. In other words, there were another 30 kilometres or so left 'in the tank'.





(And, by the way, when out of charge the Zero bikes don't just *STOP!* The rider can feel a waning of power, allowing a calm and orderly slow-down.)

The company states that the Zero S (the 'streetfighter-look' bike on alloy wheels) has a range of 183km, or 114 miles, so our less-than-scientific test bears that out. And the same model's top speed is 88mph (that's 142km/h). Yes, these bikes can be used with confidence – within their known limits – for commuting or having fun at the weekend.

Just finishing the whole endurance/recharging thing off once and for all, any household power point can be

used, and getting a good top-up (say 80%) on the non-dismountable battery can be achieved in a couple of hours, with maximum charge taking eight hours. You don't need to wait for the battery to be flat, either.





Nor do you need to worry about the re-charge cycle damaging the power pack in any way – like any mechanical object it does have a life, but the company rates the all-new battery at 3,000 complete cycles. That could be the equivalent of 308,000 miles, or 495,000 kilometres. It's impressive, you can't deny it, hence my comparison with Apple's iPad, where for the first time you had a rechargeable electronic appliance that wasn't going to die after just a few hours' work.

Away from the blackboard and into the saddle. Now, what are the bikes like to ride? First of all, a quick summary of the two at the launch: the Zero S is more of an urban commuter, with the longest gearing for motorway speeds, while the DS's trail bike style will appeal to those looking for something a little taller, and its lower gearing gives the strongest acceleration.

With no gears to worry about, it's simply a matter of twisting the throttle and going, much in the manner of a good automatic car. The power delivery is very linear; it's not at all like a switch, and cornering is merely a matter of maintaining the correct speed on the throttle. The lack of gears is soon forgotten.

Performance-wise, I don't know, if you think '175cc or 250cc petrol', maybe you'd be about right. And that has its benefits, as learners can ride either bike with confidence (in the UK all it requires is a completed CBT course and you can ride on L-plates with no extra test) after some familiarisation. The DS's standard saddle had me stretching my legs a touch, but there is a lower option to choose from.



No, once under way, they really do go, corner and stop like 'proper' bikes. There's a little buzzing when the regenerative braking steps in, just to reassure you that you are getting something for nothing. In addition to their virtually silent operation, the bikes generate little heat. With this, no fuel, and belt-drive, it's all very clean and tidy.

The company intends to build 1,500 motorcycles this year. That's a 50 per cent increase on 2011, with the European distributor having big plans for 2012 and onwards. All Zero Motorcycles dealers should have both a demonstrator and at least one machine in stock for immediate delivery (they are all EU type-approved, built specifically for the market).





They are not a cheap option, though. Retailing at an identical £11,975.00 for either model in 9kW/h configuration, that's the same as any one of many traditional 150mph machines. Don't forget, offsetting this, there's a variety of tax breaks, free charging, free parking, bus-lane-usage and congestion-charge benefits available worldwide.

All that said, I really like the clever engineering and just the *concept* of the Zero electric motorcycles. Wouldn't a couple of DSs be perfect to have in the garage at a holiday home by the sea or in the country? Or for that 30-minute commute, re-charging overnight, or as a paddock or marina bike?

It really came home to me as we rode away through the picturesque narrow streets in Sitges back to the hotel. Curious bystanders were treated not to the sound of a pack of angry hornets, but to a gentle bee-like buzzing, calmer and more in keeping with the environment. It was a pity there was no time to return to La Plana Novella and buy a special gold/red 'Zen' motorcycle helmet. How apt would that be?

Photos: Zero Motorcycles

Gallery

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