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KAWASAKI KLR650

Making your pre-2008 model better than new

WORDS: Brian Catterson PHOTOS: Joe Bonello

Kawasaki's KLR650 is one of the longest-running models in motorcycling history. Introduced as a 600 way back in 1984, it was upgraded and enlarged to 650cc in '87 and remained in the model line, largely unchanged, for 20 years. Finally for '08 it received a substantial makeover, with a more powerful and responsive engine, stiffer suspension, stronger brakes, firmer seat and taller windscreen. Even better, it retailed for a lowly \$5349 (since upped to \$5999) that made it runner-up in the Best Bang for the Buck category of *Motorcyclist's* annual Motorcycle of the Year competition. Yet owing to popular demand and the high cost of gas that summer, some dealers charged as much as \$1000 over retail, which made it less of a bargain. And considering Kawasaki sold some 60,000 previous-generation KLRs in the USA alone, there are plenty of older examples to be had for much less.

The question, then, is can you make a 1987-2007 KLR650 perform as well as a 2008 and later model? And if so, at what cost? Those questions set the parameters for this project.

As one look at the various owners'

forums will attest, KLR owners are among the most loyal and enthusiastic. They speak their own language, too, with cryptic references to more mods than Brighton Beach in the summer of '65. They're big on "farkles" and "farkling."

Before we could begin, we had to decide in which direction we wanted to take our

falling. Even if it doesn't actually break, the adjustment spring can stretch to the point that the balancer chain jumps, taking the bottom end with it. Mike Cowlshaw of Eagle Manufacturing & Engineering makes a replacement Doohickey and spring that prevent this from occurring. It's not a simple installation, but most mechanically

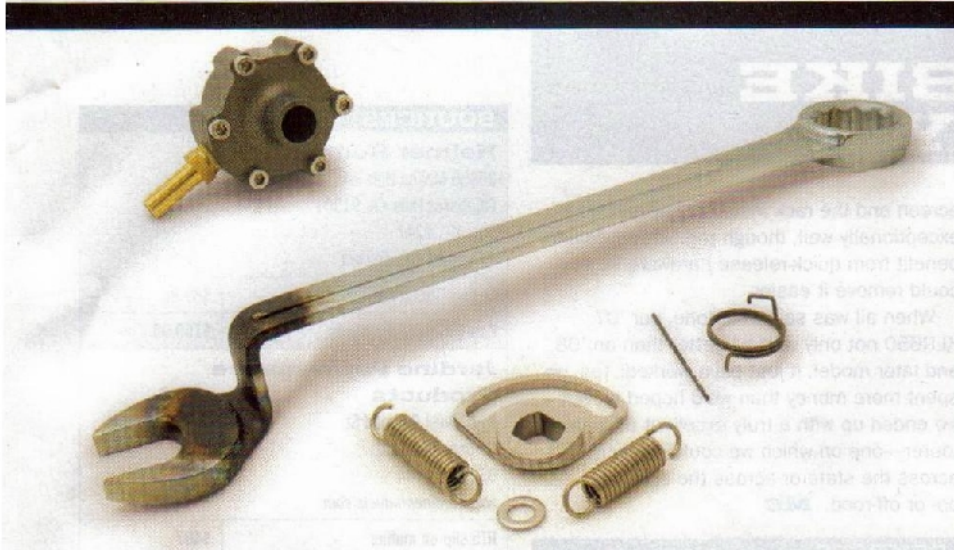
"KLR owners speak their own language with cryptic references to more mods than Brighton Beach in the summer of '65."

'07 model. Did we want to boost its off-road capabilities to make it more of a dual-sport, or enhance its on-road attributes to make it more of an adventure-tourer? Considering that KLRs are among the few bikes we routinely see in the no-man's land between major cities (along with BMWs, Honda Gold Wings and Harleys), we settled on the latter.

The first order of business was improving the KLR's reliability. The Internet is rife with tales of the counterbalancer tensioner arm—lovingly referred to as the "Doohickey"—

competent owners should be able to handle it by following the detailed instructions.

Another issue has to do with cooling. KLRs run hot in summer and cold in winter because all the coolant flows through a thermostat that doesn't open until 160 degrees. Bill Watson's Watt-Man Thermo-Bob kit relocates the thermostat downstream and adds a bypass hose upstream of that, so some coolant always flows through the engine. The result is quicker warm-up and a consistent coolant temperature of 185-195 degrees,



That's the infamous Doohickey front and center and the Thermo-Bob behind. Custom-bent 1¼-inch wrench is needed to remove and replace the flywheel.

which is less likely to lead to cylinder distortion. Watson also offers a temperature gauge overlay marked in degrees Fahrenheit instead of a simplistic range of Cold to Hot.

Reliability issues handled, we turned our attention to performance. All KLRs are carbureted, and jetted lean to pass emissions. The owners' forums are full of tuning recommendations on needle-shimming, slide-drilling and fuel screw-adjusting. Many owners have had success installing a KLX650 needle. Some have hogged out the top of their airbox; others have removed the door on the side. But the surefire fix is to install a Dynojet kit, which includes a new needle with variable clip positions, a selection of main jets, a couple of drill bits and easy-to-follow instructions. While we were at it, we slid in a high-flow K&N air filter as well.

Intake side addressed, it was time for the exhaust. Again, owners' recommendations are all over the map, many claiming the stock pipe is best, if a bit heavy. We settled on a Jardine RT5 slip-on, which consists of an aluminum muffler can and stainless pipe that

Galfer impresario Sandro Milesi's personal KLR is a good example of an off-road-biased dual-sport, with a plastic gas tank, hand guards, skid plate, cleated footpegs, rugged metal panniers and knobby tires.

PHOTO: Sandro Milesi



shed a few pounds compared to the stocker. You're not going to see massive gains on a bike that makes 37 horsepower stock, but we did pick up a couple of ponies and foot-pounds of torque. More significantly, throttle response was noticeably improved, and the engine seemed to run smoother.

With the motor sorted, we moved on to the chassis. The stock fork is pretty wimpy, and the stock shock is both flaccid and non-rebuildable, so we enlisted the help of Progressive Suspension. Their progressively wound (thus the name) fork springs and 465 shock worked wonders, giving the KLR the ride of a proper sport-tourer, with no more wallowing in fast sweepers nor diving under braking. The shock is adjustable for preload and rebound, and is also available in a 1-inch shorter length to lower the seat height for vertically challenged riders.

Speaking of braking, the KLR's front disc setup is probably its weakest point. We cured

UP CLOSE



TCI Products windscreen is a bit unusual in that it mounts on top of the stocker. Of course you have the option of removing it.



Cortech tail pack and saddlebags are a perfect fit on the luggage rack, because the rack was designed to hold them. It's a durable setup.



Not only does the rack support the luggage, it also keeps it from burning on the muffler, in this case an RT5 slip-on from Jardine.



Oversized brake rotor from Galfer requires a mounting bracket that moves the stock calliper farther outboard. Stopping power is increased dramatically.

STREETBIKE SURGERY

that by installing a full complement of Galfer components: an oversized wave rotor kit with a 270mm disc, caliper-relocating bracket and pads up front; a wave rotor and pads in the rear; and braided-steel brake lines at both ends.

While the wheels were off, we seized the opportunity to change tires. Again, there are as many opinions as there are, um, owners, and everyone has a different recommendation for brands, models, sizes and even alternate wheel setups. We stuck with the stock 21-inch front/17-inch rear rims and levered on a set of Michelin Anakees, which while more pavement-biased still work pretty well off-road.

Since we were going to be spending a lot more time sitting on our KLR, we went ahead and upgraded its seat, like on the '08 and later models. Kawasaki sells an accessory gel seat that offers greatly improved long-range comfort. Made by Saddlemen, the kit requires you to replace the stock seat cover and foam, so it helps to be handy with a staple gun. Fortunately, our testbike manager Michael Candrea used to do that for a living, so ours came out great.

Finally, to help with the bike's overnight capabilities, we installed a windscreen and luggage from TCI Products. The windscreen bolts on over the stock screen, on the theory that you can revert to the stocker for around-town and off-road riding. The luggage setup consists of a metal framework designed to hold a Cortech Tribag tail bag and saddlebags, making it an inexpensive yet durable alternative to hard bags. Both the wind-

screen and the rack install easily and work exceptionally well, though the screen would benefit from quick-release hardware so you could remove it easier.

When all was said and done, our '07 KLR650 not only worked better than an '08 and later model, it just plain worked! Yes, we spent more money than we'd hoped to, but we ended up with a truly excellent adventure-tourer—one on which we could easily ride across the state or across the country, on- or off-road. **MC**

SOURCES

Dynojet Research, Inc.

2191 Mendenhall Dr. #105
North Las Vegas, NV 89081
702.399.1423
www.dynojet.com

Jet kit	\$64.89
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Eagle Manufacturing & Engineering

2222 Commercial St.
San Diego, CA 92113
619.261.1281
www.eagle-m-e.com

Dooickey kit with torsion spring	\$138
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Galfer USA

310 Irving Ave.
Oxnard, CA 93030
805.988.2900
www.galferusa.com

Oversized front wave rotor kit	\$299.95
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Front brake line	\$54.50
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Rear wave rotor	\$129.99
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Rear brake line	\$54.50
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Rear brake pads	\$24.99
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SOURCES

Helmet House

26855 Malibu Hills Rd.
Calabasas Hills, CA 91301
800.421.7247
www.helmethouse.com

Cortech Tribag Tail Bag	\$89.99
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Cortech Tribag Saddlebag	\$159.99
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Jardine Performance Products

1220 West Railroad St.
Corona, CA 92882
951.371.1744
www.jardineproducts.com

RT5 slip-on muffler	\$407
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Kawasaki Motors Corp. USA

9950 Jeronimo Rd.
Irvine, CA 92718
949.770.0400
www.kawasaki.com

Gel seat kit	\$154.95
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K&N Engineering

P.O. Box 1329
Riverside, CA 92502
951.826.4000
www.knfilters.com

Air filter	\$51.30
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Michelin Motorcycle Tires

P.O. Box 19001
Greenville, S.C. 29602
800.346.4098
www.michelinmotorcycle.com

90/90-21 Anakee front tire	\$151.95
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130/80-R17 Anakee rear tire	\$202.05
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Progressive Suspension, Inc.

6900 Marlin Circle
La Palma, CA 90623
877.690.7411
www.progressivesuspension.com

Fork springs	\$103.95
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465 shock	\$495.95
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TCI Products

1137 W. Katella Ave.
Orange, CA 92867
714.639.4933
www.turbocity.com

Adventure Touring Windscreen	\$179.95
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Denali Rack	\$229.95
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Watt-Man

6501 E. Greenway Pkwy, #103-296
Scottsdale, AZ 85254
watt-man@cox.net
www.watt-man.com

Thermo-Bob kit	\$115
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Coolant temperature gauge overlay	\$8
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Total	\$3116.85
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Resources

www.klr650.net
www.leftcoastklrs.com
www.thumpertalk.com
www.advrider.com

