

# REPLACEMENT FOR DISPLAC



# EMENT

**The New Breed  
of Leaner  
Muscle Bikes**



## COMPARISON

**DUCATI DIAVEL VS.  
H-D NIGHT ROD SPECIAL VS.  
TRIUMPH ROCKET 3 ROADSTER VS.  
STAR VMAX**

WORDS: BILLY BARTELS PHOTOS: KEVIN WING

**S**ome people just want to go fast. Though the word 'cruiser' inspires scenes of casually motoring (at low rpm) into a fading sun, we sometimes forget that the genesis of the modern bad boy, leather-wearing miscreant are the dudes from classic flicks like *Easy Rider* and *The Wild One*. In a certain sense, today's sportier cruisers and muscle bikes are the true descendants of the stripped Harley and Triumph bobbers of that era, while your typical long, lay-back cruiser is more akin to what Grandpa might have ridden back then.



Ducati Diavel



H-D Night Rod Special

Like refugees without a country to call home, these masterfully engineered bikes have no magazine to cradle them and support their usually fanatical riders. Most riders with a need for speed fold themselves onto a race-replica sport bike, or go for the bland efficiency of a big sport-tourer. For those that want to capture the rebel spirit without significant discomfort, and require a dose of cool, modern styling, as well as attitude, these diverse bikes are the ones that fit the bill. We here at *Motorcycle Cruiser* have offered ourselves

(and our licenses) to the gods of speed to test what really shouldn't be tested on public roads. We were lucky to get 'er done without even one arrest.

Needless to say, all these bikes are dubbed cruisers mostly because somebody in the marketing department said it was so. After 25 years as a Yamaha, the VMAX was craftily shunted over to its Star (cruiser) brand, presumably because that would make a better fit for a stylistically-detailed, fast, sit-up bike retailing for near \$20K. With its high-revving, liquid-cooled V-twin, the V-Rod has

been Harley-Davidson's Next Big Thing going on 14 years now, and is absolutely unique in their lineup. Triumph's Rocket III Roadster, with its liquid-cooled 2300cc triple, is the pinnacle of muscle if ever there was one. And the Diavel? Geez, it's so not a cruiser! But if Ducati calls it a cruiser, who are we to argue. It sure is unique, and definitely cool, so might as well slot it in with these other power mongers. These are the biggest, fastest, nastiest, or most sophisticated engines their respective manufacturers make, and they've all been

wrapped in undeniable style. So let's get it on.

### LIKE A VELVET GLOVE CAST IN IRON

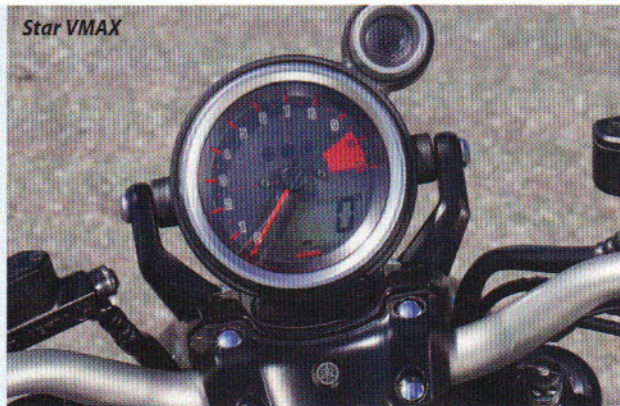
Obviously, these are all very different machines, reflecting their company's preferences, ideas and design philosophies of what a power/sports/muscle cruiser should be. The wonderful thing about cruisers is that while there may be some goals in mind (go fast, have fun, etc.), there are no rules, save the ones imposed by the DOT and EPA. These bikes are creative; their designers made illogical devia-



Triumph Rocket 3 Roadster



Star VMAX



tions from pure performance for style, and unconventional deviations from tradition for performance. Any one of them would look totally in their element in a Bike of the Future display from the 1960s.

Any restrictions with cruisers tend to be subjective, and this group has a number of both similarities and differences compared to traditional cruisers. Last decade's taste for super-fat rear tires is a staple of this group, as is a futuristic take on custom styling. But most of these bikes decided to go their own way. In the real world,

shaft and chain final drives are on the outs, but those systems can be found in three of four bikes here. Long and low is a popular style these days, but these bikes tend toward the taller side. In fact, none of these bikes are particularly friendly to shorter folk, and the Diavel is the only one that comes close. Three quarters of these bikes also have throttle-by-wire controls (only the Triumph uses traditional cables), and all feature liquid cooling.

Ducati's Diavel looks the least cruiser-y of the lot. According to Ducati, the design-

ers took the heart of what they saw as a cruiser and applied it to a Ducati, while apparently ignoring the part of the cruiser definition that says one should look like a 1950s-70s era American machine. It's longer, lower, and has a more relaxed riding position than Ducati's sport bikes, but also adds different style. Side-mounted radiators and air intakes recall both motocross bikes and the VMAX, while large, integrated turn signals replace what would be cheap rubber-mounted units. A single-sided swingarm—a staple on Ducatis—remains rare

on mainstream cruisers. Like its Ducati stablemates, the Diavel has a trellis frame, a tail section, and 17-inch wheels. And it still looks like Ducati... but is that necessarily a bad thing?

Unlike with the Diavel, the VMAX's designers had a cruiser heritage to draw upon: their own. As the second motorcycle model to call itself VMAX, this version had a lot to live up to. The original was a legendary power cruiser in its day, but after two decades, it was definitely getting long in the tooth. Star kept the original lines and themes, while thoroughly





cially the digital “tank” mounted screens on the VMAX and Diavel. The VMAX screen was pretty darn cool when it was introduced back in ‘08, but it’s hard to read at its funny angle and casts a horrible yellow color. That said, Mr. MAX’s display boasts a huge tachometer with inset digital speedometer, a fuel gauge that you can watch move in a downward direction while riding, and a host of the usual stuff like gear, trip, time, and range indicators.

It’s like the Ducati designers said “we need one of those too, only readable.” But the Ducati takes electronics to a whole new level with Ducati Traction Control (DTC) running the show in the engine compartment. Derived from traction control/engine management developed on the racetrack, DTC can affect both power delivery characteristics, as well as keeping tires hooked up in case of an unexpected loss of traction. The host of electronics on the Diavel are controlled via a pair of directional buttons on the left cluster, as well as the turn signal canceling switch. Riders who compulsively hit the cancel switch will have their secondary display replaced by the DTC mode selection screen. The Diavel also has a host of mileage, temperature, and trip time information, but forgot to include a range (Distance to Empty) meter and fuel gauge. Please, Ducati, don’t make us do math!

The other two bikes are much more conventional, with less flash and wizardry. The Rocket III has a pair of round analog clocks for speed and tach, with a pair of small, inset LCD displays with all the usual bells and whistles. The traditional bars and gauges (and overall layout of the RIII), make it easy to switch things up if you’re keen on customizing or adding accessories. The Harley’s ‘Rod has a central speedo, flanked by tach and fuel gauge. There’s a tiny LCD inset in the speedo that gives the rest of the readouts (range, clock, trips), and all are easy to read at a glance. Both the V-Rod and

updating the underpinnings, thus creating a modern sporting machine with the nastiest engine of all time. Unlike many cruisers, it has a very it-is-what-it-looks-like-but-let’s-make-it-beautiful vibe to its components. The hand-polished air intake leads to visible throttle bodies framed with a gorgeous machined motor mount. A huge, businesslike radiator proudly hangs from the front of the motor like it belongs there. Interestingly, the VMAX sports the only conventional fork (albeit a fork coated in friction-killing titanium oxide). It looks very high-end and very Japanese, with a flair for the dramatic; one tester said it looks like a Transformer.

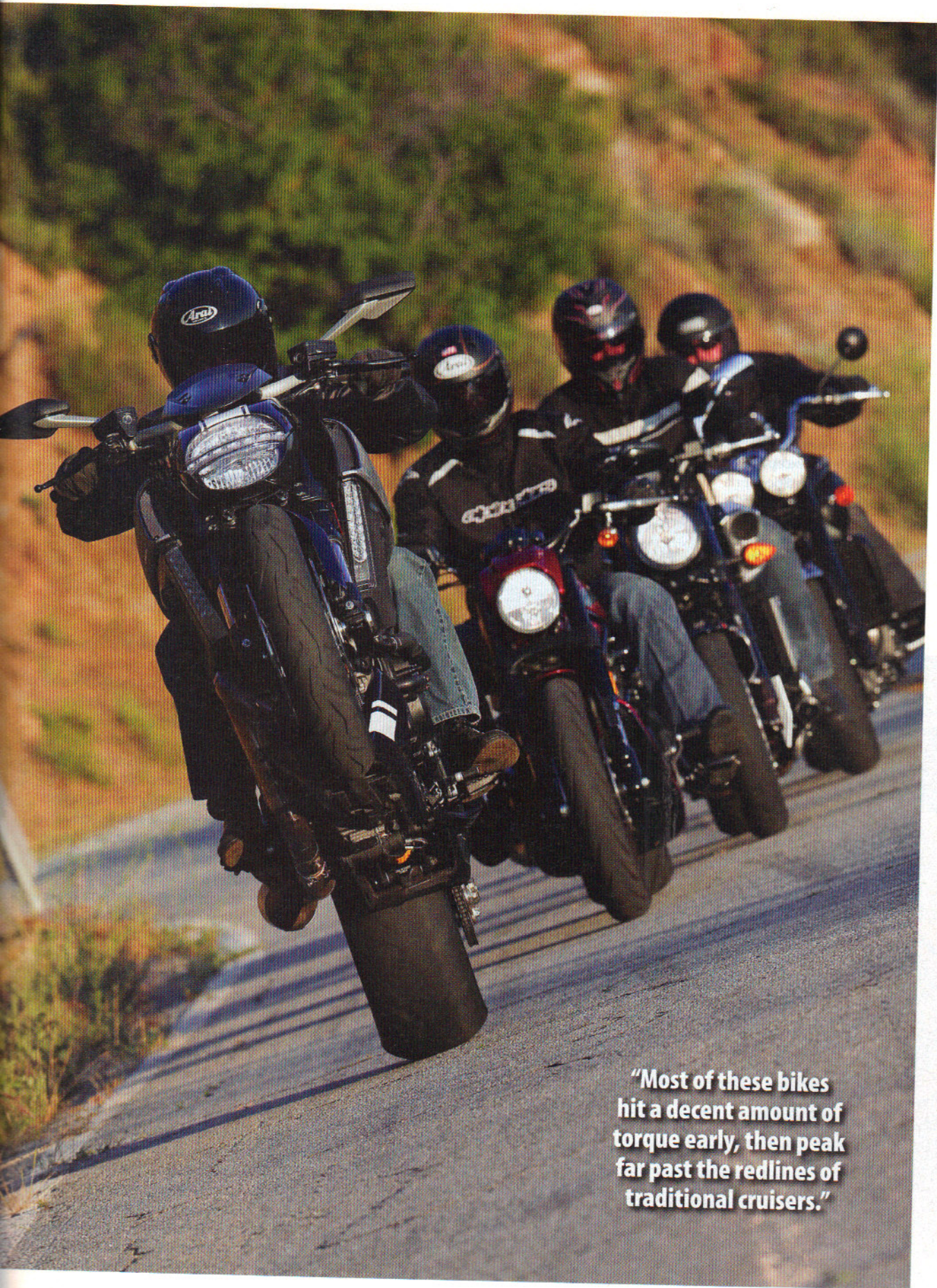
You say you want a Revolution? Harley-Davidson’s first production liquid-cooled bike was a shock to the Harley faithful, and a shrug for the rest of the world. Redesigned two years ago to be the less extreme counterpart to the V-Rod

Muscle, the Night Rod Special is the spiritual descendant of the original ‘Rod. It was “Special” at first to celebrate a larger motor, blacked-out components and a wider tire than the base model (all of which are on both V-Rods now). It’s also the closest thing to a race replica you’ll find in this magazine, with Harley-Davidson’s NHRA Pro Stock racebikes loosely based on it. With a long and low profile and deeply scooped seat, its drag racing heritage clearly shows. The ‘Rod’s feet-forward and reasonably-bent handlebar riding position is the most conventional cruiser stance in the test, and typically top-shelf Harley-Davidson levels of finish on this sharp-looking machine meant that we all loved to look at it.

The Night Rod might sit like a traditional cruiser, but Triumph’s Rocket III Roadster makes the most nods to tradition in the shapes, styles and materials it uses. While a big inline triple might not seem

like a traditional cruiser mill, it’s styled like the supersized version of one of the inlines of the ‘30s, with big intake horns invading the left side of the 6 gallon tank. Somewhere in the last decade or so, Triumph decided to hook their fortunes to motors that were either parallel twins or inline triples, in keeping with the company’s history of unique configurations. Somebody else decided to break with tradition, and make the biggest inline they could muster, stuffing it into a chassis longitudinally... and the Rocket III was born. The current incarnation—recently updated by removing the torque limiter in the lower gears—is the Roadster, a stripped-down playbike that contrasts with the more utilitarian RIII Touring. In this crowd, the III looks like a tank, outweighing the Ducati by 280 lbs. and the other two by about 150.

Electronics are commonplace on these machines, espe-



**"Most of these bikes hit a decent amount of torque early, then peak far past the redlines of traditional cruisers."**

the Triumph require taking a hand off the bars to toggle between functions, unlike Ducati and Star.

### SOME SMOKE UP YOUR CHIMNEY

In many ways the motors are the heart of these bikes. Several of our testers reported feeling like their daily rides were sluggish and unexciting after stepping off this quartet. That's probably because, when accelerating from a stop most regular cruisers hit their torque peak early, then taper off. Most of these bikes hit at least a decent amount of torque early, then continue to build to a peak far past the redlines of traditional cruisers. The Triumph is the exception here, with a more traditional cruiser curve, but with about double the torque output of most bikes. Generally speaking, the Diavel and Rocket III will do wheelies, while the VMAX and V-Rod tend to spin the rear tire, though you can get all of



HELMET: ARAI XD-3  
JACKET: RIVER ROAD PECOS MESH  
GLOVES: OLYMPIA SHORTY DEERSKIN  
BOOTS: DR. MARTENS 10-HOLE



HELMET: BELL RS-1  
JACKET: ALPINESTARS T-FUEL  
GLOVES: ALPINESTARS SCHEME  
JEANS: ALPINESTARS AXIOM  
BOOTS: ALPINESTARS HARLEM

them to do either with the right amount of coaxing.

The VMAX has *the* motor of the test. It's got great torque from low in the range, and it just keeps coming on. In fact, if you can keep it under the 4500rpm threshold where the power really comes on, it feels much like a well-tuned, powerful, conventional bike... but what would be the point of that? The big 1679cc V-four comes with a pair of proprietary Yamaha technologies that boost the top end. There are variable throttle body openings along with mechanical exhaust restrictors, both of which conspire to give that nice, responsive low-end power, that gives way to a mind-blowing top-end rush. Accelerating onto freeway onramps, we had to dial it back to keep from ending up deep in the triple digits. The VMAX requires restraint at all times, whether going straight or in the twisties. It's not a lot of physical work to ride, but rather mental, to keep yourself in check. Even half throttle on



HELMET: ARAI SIGNET-0  
 JACKET: ALPINESTARS GUNNER WATERPROOF  
 GLOVES: ALPINESTARS SP-5  
 PANTS: ICON STRONGARM 2 ENFORCER  
 BOOTS: ALPINESTARS WEB GORE TEX

sound and feel is what makes it a cruiser (don't tell Star and Triumph that), and having one ready to go probably hastened the Diavel's creation. What Ducati calls an L-Twin is really just a 90-degree V-twin rocked forward. The electronics used to keep the racebike hooked up on the track does the rest. There are two basic settings that can be tweaked via a fairly easy-to-use menu system: power delivery and traction control. It's most comparable to the VMAX in Sport mode, with hair-trigger power delivery and very little traction intervention (meaning some wheelies and wheel spin is possible). It's akin to the Night Rod in Touring mode, with milder power delivery and more traction control, while it's something like a regular cruiser in Urban mode, with limited power (100 hp on the Diavel!), mellow delivery, and hair-trigger traction intervention. And those are just the stock settings; all these

this bike can get you into legal trouble, and none of the experienced riders in this group ever really got used to it. All this horsepower has a downside, with the VMAX's small tank and an SUV-like 26 mpg giving it by far the shortest range, at about 100 miles.

The Star's transmission was imported straight from sport-bikeland, with a short throw and easy engagement that left one of our long-time testers wondering what was wrong with it. Though it sports a five speed, switching gears on this torquey beast is mostly to change the sound of the motor, or to keep it from the scary upper revs. Sound from the quartet of oversized tailpipes is like a growly, raspy symphony; it sounds as rowdy as it is.

Unlike Star, Ducati didn't have to develop a one-off motor to power their foray into cruisers, they just pulled one from the race department. The Testastretta 11 degree is a version of the motor that was raced in World Superbike until 2011. To many, a V-twin's



HELMET: SHOEI NEOTEC  
 SHADES: STAR VETO  
 JACKET: ICON BRAWNSON  
 GLOVES: ALPINESTARS SCHEME  
 BOOTS: ICON REIGN





parameters can be tweaked to fit how you ride. Though it has the smallest motor in the bunch, the Diavel puts out the second highest horsepower, and has the best power-to-weight ratio. It also gets a test-best 36mpg; that's less than most cruisers, but just barely.

The Diavel isn't the only one with a six-speed transmission, but it's the only one that found false neutrals between the higher gears on a regular basis. Engagement requires a firm stab, which our stable of cruiser riders was used to, and the hydraulic clutch required a firm pull. Exhaust sound at idle, as well as at most rpm, is surprisingly loud, with the advanced electronics apparently quieting the thing down only occasionally. The growl is not the same as a narrow-angle

V-twin but it's still a pleasing sound all its own.

Triumph somehow made the unconventional conventional on the Rocket III Roadster. If you told us when the Rocket appeared a decade ago that someday it would be the most "normal-feeling" cruiser in a shootout, we'd have laughed. But despite being an inline triple, it manages to do just that once it's rolling. At a stop, it's got a disconcerting pull to the right when the throttle is blipped. Though the Rocket doesn't possess the "lumpy" delivery of a twin, there's something fun and impressive about being able to access so much power at such low rpm so smoothly, without any shuddering. Twist the throttle harder and the torque just keeps on coming, though not to the sky-

high revs of the other bikes, and without the top-end rush. Some of us reveled in the low-end smoothness and short-shifted it, while others liked the way it felt at revs above 4000, and the motor would go either way. It's a regular cruiser but with way, way more torque.

The Rocket's five-speed transmission has a light clutch lever pull and an easy long-throw shifter that feels sloppy, but it never missed a shift. With its shorter redline and massive bottom end it almost felt like it needs a sixth gear, but then you'd only get into serious trouble by winding it out more. The even-firing inline engine sounds fairly automotive, but in a deep, throaty way that was ultimately pleasing to us.

The Night Rod's Revolution engine doesn't have any of

the superlatives of the others; it's just a high-revving, strong powerplant that's overshadowed in this crowd since it brings the least horsepower and torque. That said, it's still a hoot to ride. A slightly disappointing bottom end (relatively speaking) gives way to a very satisfying rush at about 4500rpm. It responds so well at high rpm that some testers reported never leaving third gear, which will take you past 100mph if you let it. Throttle and clutch effort are noticeably high, leading to some rider fatigue in traffic.

The transmission goes clunk like a Harley-Davidson is expected to, but shifting the 'Rod is quite a bit smoother and lighter than on a typical Big Twin. Sound is very mild, to the point of obscurity (it has



**"As much as we like to obsess over the engines, out on the highway is where it all comes together."**

a typical narrow-angle V-twin sound), but it does put out a nice intake honk when hard on the throttle.

### **RUSSIAN ROULETTE ON THE HIGHWAYS**

As much as we like to obsess over the engines, out on the highway is where it all comes together. And it did for the underdog Harley: sitting deep in the low machine, close to the ground, with extremities out in front, you feel fast sitting still, or going fast. In fact, even going moderately fast, it seems like you catch the most wind on the Night Rod Special, which keeps you out of trouble since 100mph actually feels like 100mph. Fast in Southern California means freeways (or at least to get out to somewhere good to ride), with their

legendarily high speeds and bad state of repair. The 'Rod's suspension is magic, and when you factor in its super-stable high-speed handling, it owns the open road, soaking up the big stuff and little stuff alike. Though the Diavel and VMAX had a ton of suspension setting options, we never got either of those to the comfort level of the 'Rod. Despite a reach for the pegs that made shorter riders absorb more exhaust heat, the 'Rod was overall the most comfortable ride of the set. Meaty grips on reasonable bars suited everybody, and a trim midsection and short reach to the ground was nice too.

The other fairly unsophisticated set of springs belonged to the Rocket III. And it too did a fairly good job at soaking up the bumps, but, as in so many

other things, it was hampered by its weight. On the open road is was on the cushy side, but big, high-speed hits would get it moving around, which is pucker-inducing on a machine this big. Ergos are nicely laid-out, with neutral sit-up seating like the majority of bikes here, and a wide bar with big grips rounding out the package. However, it's on the tall side, which, along with its heft made shorter riders (and some not-so-short riders) feel pretty insecure at low speeds. Navigating traffic, similarly, was a total pain with a bike this big. The two best bikes in tight, slow situations were the flyweight Diavel, and the surprisingly nimble Night Rod, while the VMAX felt tall and jumpy, but way better than the Rocket.

As we pointed out earlier,

speed control and mindfulness were key things to keep in mind on the VMAX. The suspension and overall chassis stiffness made for bumpy times on the freeway, as it bounced and deflected off uneven surfaces. Unlike with the V-Rod and Rocket, there was no happy medium, as softening it up only made backroads adventures way more wallowy. Another tall and wide machine, the MAX was only saved from pissing off short riders by its relative lightness compared to the Triumph. Relatively narrow bars with skinny grips seemed to not mesh with the wide stance dictated by the wide engine/seating area, and a couple of riders reported cramping in either the wrists or hips. The wide, flat seat was hard, and not even comfortable for short jaunts, though some



praised the back support.

As the Rocket III was cursed by its weight and size, so the Diavel was blessed by its lack thereof. Though also stiff as delivered, we were able to find a somewhat happy suspension setup that smoothed out the freeway, while still appealing in the twisties. All that power in a light, quick-steering chassis is mighty nice for getting around cars. The ergonomic pick for our shorter crowd, the Diavel was a bit cramped for taller riders, especially those over 6ft. 2 in. Like the VMAX, the Ducati has a motocross-inspired tapered bar. Unlike the 'MAX, everybody found this one comfortable, with a perfect bend and placement. The Diavel is also very trim across the middle, so though tall, it's an easy reach to the ground. The seat was only so-so, with a sportbike-inspired shape that doesn't translate to cruising, with a bit too much tailbone pressure. One sportbike trait that translated nicely were the adjustable levers (also found on the VMAX and Rocket III).

The tight packaging on the Diavel didn't translate to good times for passengers, as there's nothing between the end of the seat (hidden by a cowl in our photos) and open air, though the seat itself is decent in comfort. But that was nothing compared to the Night Rod, which should be up for some sort of comedy award for calling its pillion a place for a person. The VMAX was a little better for bringing along your honey, but also suffers from really high pegs and a small, hard seat. The winner (from a passenger's perspective) was the Rocket III Roadster, with its super size finally coming in handy. Its low pegs and a generous spread made for better passenger accommodations than the others, hands-down.

#### **JUST PASSING THROUGH, HUH?**

Heading out of town was our goal all along with these machines, and they didn't disappoint. We were concerned about both the Rocket III and

the VMAX, but the Rocket is actually quite capable on back roads. Some liked revving it and using the considerable engine braking to control things and keep the shaft engaged, while others liked lugging it and tractoring out of corners from under 2000rpm. The first approach was more effort-intensive and faster, while the slow-down and cruise method kept those intimidated by its size content. The trouble is that it's not a particularly forgiving ride, and getting all that mass back in line is not an easy thing, so half of our testers decided slowing down was the way to go.

Speaking of stress, the VMAX was a surprise for many. With that ungodly motor and big-boned stance it was assumed that it'd be a tank in the corners, but if anything it was eager to get on the side of the tire, changing directions readily and needing only subtle handlebar direction. Hamfisted riders will be penalized, as this bike can and will light up the rear wheel on corner exits. For us, though, Mr. MAX was a consummate gentleman, always having plenty of torque to ease out of corners fast or slow. This bike is not a problem in the twisties; when you remember to just crack the throttle coming out of turns and shift early and often, it's a rewarding experience. However, many of us felt guilty for riding it in such a safe and sane manner.

Ducati's Diavel shined on back roads, though riding it hard required a shift in riding technique. While most cruisers are content to have you just push them around turns, the Diavel wants a little more commitment than that, with weight shifts and handlebar input in harmony. The bike is so communicative that it individually taught us all how to ride it very quickly. While the VMAX will cause you to ride too fast on the freeway, the Diavel is that bike in tighter stuff. The light weight that we keep mentioning worked on curvy roads very well, with the easiest side-to-side transitions of the bunch, and it made us all want to push

## SPECIFICATIONS

	2013 DUCATI DIAVEL	2013 HARLEY-DAVIDSON NIGHT ROD SPECIAL	2013 STAR VMAX	2013 TRIUMPH ROCKET III ROADSTER
Base price	\$18,995	\$15,449 (as tested w/paint, ABS/ Security \$16,969)	\$19,990	\$14,999
Colors	Red, blue, black	Red, black	Purple	Flat, or Gloss Black
Warranty	2 years, unlimited miles	2 years, unlimited miles	1 year, unlimited miles	2 years, unlimited miles
<b>ENGINE</b>				
Type	liquid-cooled 90° V-twin	liquid-cooled 60° V-twin	liquid-cooled 65° V-four	liquid-cooled inline 3-cylinder
Displacement, bore x stroke	1198cc, 106 x 67.9 mm	1250cc, 105 x 72 mm	1679cc, 90 x 66 mm	2294cc, 101.6 x 94.3 mm
Valve train	OHC, 4 valves/cylinder	OHC, 4 valves/cylinder	DOHC, 4 valves/cylinder	DOHC
Compression	11.5:1	11.5:1	11.3:1	8.7:1
Fuel system	EFI	EFI	EFI	EFI
Transmission	6-speed	5-speed, slipper clutch	5-speed, multiplate slipper clutch	5-speed
Final drive	Chain	Belt	Shaft	Shaft
<b>CHASSIS</b>				
Overall length	88 in.	93.1 in.	94.3 in.	98.3 in.
Wheelbase	62 in.	67 in.	66.9 in.	66.7 in.
Wet weight	527 lbs.	666 lbs.	683 lbs.	807 lbs.
Seat height	30.3 in.	26.7 in.	30.5 in.	29.5 in.
Rake/trail	28°/ 5.1 in.	34°/ 5.6 in.	31°/ 5.8 in.	32°/ 5.8 in.
Wheels	14-spoke cast alloy	5 split-spoke aluminum	5-spoke aluminum	5-spoke aluminum
Front tire:	120/70-17	120/70-19	120/70-18	150/80-17
Rear tire:	240/45-17	240/40-18	200/50-18	240/50-16
Front brake	dual 320 mm discs; dual 4-piston calipers	dual 300 mm discs; dual 4-piston calipers	dual 320 mm discs, 6-piston calipers	dual 320 mm discs; dual 4-piston calipers
Rear brake	265 mm disc, 2-piston caliper	300 mm disc; 4-piston caliper	298 mm disc, single-piston caliper	316 mm disc; 2-piston caliper
Front suspension	50 mm inverted fork (adjustable); 4.7 in. travel	43 mm inverted fork; 4 in. travel	52 mm cartridge fork; 4.7 in. travel	43 mm inverted fork; 4.7 in. travel
Rear suspension	link style monoshock; 4.7 in. travel	dual coilover shocks, preload adjustable; 2.9 in. travel	link-type monoshock, fully adjustable, 4.3 in. travel	dual coilover shocks (preload adjustment); 4.1 in. travel
Fuel capacity	4.5 gal.	5 gal.	4 gal.	6.3 gal.
Instruments	LCD speedometer, tach, engine temp and clock; TFT display w/ dual tripmeters, gear, fuel range, air temp, voltmeter, trip time and engine management	Speedometer, tachometer, fuel gauge and digital odometer, dual tripmeters, clock	Digital speedo, tachometer, fuel gauge, dual tripmeters, shift light, gear indicator, temperature, stopwatch	Speedometer w/digital odometer, dual tripmeters and clock; tachometer w/digital fuel gauge and gear indicator
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>				
Horsepower (claimed)	162 bhp @9500 rpm	125bhp@8250 rpm	174hp@9000 rpm	120hp @5300 rpm (measured)
Torque	94 ft.-lb.@8000 rpm(claimed)	85 ft.-lb.@7000 rpm	113 ft.-lb.@6690 rpm	140 ft.-lb @3200 rpm
Average fuel mileage	36.2 mpg	33.4 mpg	26 mpg	27.5 mpg
Average range	163 miles	167 miles	104 miles	173 miles

some more. It's only at full lean that you can feel the huge 240 tire out back, which occasionally made it want to stand up when you picked up the throttle, but it's easy enough to get it back to your chosen line. Both the VMAX and the Diavel were very easy to coax into a different line.

We knew the Ducati was going to be a joy on sinuous roads, but the surprise was how good the Harley was. It requires the same sort of shift in riding technique as the Diavel, but isn't as communicative about it. For those that figured it out, it was nirvana; those that didn't

came away less impressed. As we discovered on the freeway, once set on a line, the Night Rod wants to stay there, with very neutral handling helping it out. Its super-long wheelbase and low center of gravity help. It's the only bike in this group to have anything like limited cornering clearance, but proper body positioning alleviates this. The Rod surprised many who thought the long, low, fat-tire machine would handle like a chopper.

All the bikes here sport ABS, a welcome safety feature for most testers. As with so many other performance categories

in this test, the Ducati and Star lead the way. Both have radially-mounted master cylinders sporting four and six pistons respectively. Any performance advantage the VMAX might have is probably negated by greater weight, but both bikes binders' feel responsive and powerful. The Night Rod Special was also very good, but just not in that league. The Rocket III was again hampered by weight, and also, less sticky tires.

### EVERYTHING WE DO IS HARD

More than one tester pointed out that all of these bikes are

excellent, and we're splitting hairs on a strong class of performance motorcycles (that happen to be cruisers). If you're someone who likes a little sport in your cruise, one is bound to fit the bill. More than one tester said they'd buy any one of these bikes, given the opportunity.

If it sounds like we've been piling on Triumph's Rocket III Roadster, the truth is that, to a man, we all enjoyed it. It's an awesome and well-engineered piece of "what if?" Triumph wanted to get into cruisers, and instead ended up creating a niche within a niche for

# RIDING POSITIONS

## RICKY TALBOT 5 ft. 6 in., 160 lbs., 29 in. inseam

The overall winner on this one was easy for me...the Ducati Diavel. From the performance to the technical sophistication to the look, it was by far the best choice.

The VMAX—well what can I say. The thing hauls ass! There is so much torque it's unbelievable but it also surprised me with how well it handled the twisties. I found the seat to be a bit too hard and uncomfortable, and I didn't like the display on the tank, as it was difficult to look at. The Night Rod is a smooth and solid bike that did well in most conditions, and I appreciated its nice low stance. The forward controls were a bit of a stretch for me, to the point where they were uncomfortable. That said I felt comfortable enough actually riding the Rod in all conditions; on the freeway, splitting lanes, and settling into back roads.

Compared to the others, the Rocket 3 seems like a cruiser on steroids. It doesn't seem to be as performance-oriented as it is just brutally powerful, though I felt it handled fine. Despite its 800 lb. weight, I also managed to wheelie it—wow, so much torque.

But I still think the Ducati is best; as a matter of fact I think it's in a different league. It is totally comfortable and ergonomically, correct for me. The V MAX came in second for me, while close behind is the Harley.

## BILLY BARTELS 6 ft., 190 lbs., 33 in. inseam

So often, we choose a motorcycle because it's the coolest/fastest/"best" one we can afford. But in the world of performance machines, more is not necessarily better. I like a bike that I can dominate, not one I'm intimidated by. I like to occasionally twist the throttle to the stop, and I don't want to end up in a ditch when I do.

The Triumph Rocket III is huge, and to me it's way too much. I've enjoyed the sublime power of the Rocket III Touring on long trips, but the Roadster does nothing for me. That leaves the other three, and of those, the VMAX is also too much. Trust me, I totally respect the engineering that went into this fabulous machine. The problem was that I was con-

stantly checking myself to make sure I didn't get arrested... or worse. It's actually a pussycat to cruise around on with light, responsive handling and good torque down low, but I rarely feel like I'm using most of the potential of the bike.

The Diavel and Night Rod Special are in a dead heat for me. Most of the superlatives end up in the Diavel's favor, and all of those are balanced by the DTC and ABS. If Sport Mode were the only way to ride it, I wouldn't be a fan, but since I can kick it over to Touring when I'm out for a laid-back ride, everything is great. The only problem is that I'm too big for this machine; the V-Rod feels more like home.

The Night Rod Special wins the garage test. But it also wins big on price, and it makes me want to keep it or buy one. Unless I need to transport a passenger. Seriously Harley, what's up with that?

## BRAD OLSHEN 5 ft. 10 in., 180 lbs., 32 in. inseam

I jumped at the chance to test these bikes, I've been a cruiser guy that rides fast for years and I wanted to check out the machines that are basically made for me. The Diavel is the Bike of the Future, and I would buy it at any price! Its weight is perfect and I like the seat and riding position of the Ducati because I can reach the ground (same goes for the Harley). If I bought it, the first thing I'd do is black it out, then strip it and figure out how to customize it. Ducati didn't quite get the look I'd want, but the machine makes up for it.

The VMAX had a great seat with good support, and I was super impressed with the MAX's throttle response and power in all gears. Scary fast. I was also impressed by its handling in the corners and although it's super bumpy on the freeway, I love the power.

The Harley has the best look of the bunch, with the blacked-out powder coat and Candy Red paint. It also has the best suspension, with an incredible ride on both freeway and street. In fact, I think it's the best bang for your buck.

Sitting on the Triumph made me realize the riding position is simply too tall. I felt it was too bumpy on freeways but the ride mellowed on smoother surfaces.

All four bikes brought some impressive technology to the riding experience, and I would buy every one if I could. This was one of the best test rides I have ever been on. **CR**

guys who like something just this side of a Boss Hoss. For a few of us there wasn't a bike in this group that was as good of a cruiser as the Rocket, as we could lug around and let the monster torque of that 2000+cc engine pull us around the bends. It's also the only bike most of us would take for a long trip (with or without a passenger); it's got the range, comfort and capacity to pull it off. Best of all it's priced better than any of the others, and pound-for-pound, that's saying a lot.

Duking it out for second were the VMAX and V-Rod. There is no doubt that in measurables the Star simply destroys the Harley. The VMAX is a superb piece of machinery, but

our crew of veteran riders just didn't feel man enough to truly ride it properly. The VMAX finished a runaway first place over the V-Rod Muscle last time we did a Muscle Bike test; the Muscle came in second despite loud complaints about its horrible ergonomics. This time we scored the redesigned Night Rod Special, specifically selected for its very adaptable layout, and it did fit all our testers. Despite the deficiencies in the measurables, the Night Rod Special managed to hang on to something we hold very dear around here: It's still a cruiser. Its superb suspension was a nice bonus, too.

While the MAX was the cool new thing last time we did this,

we realize that it represents a niche within a niche, and we can only recommend it for truly advanced riders who want to go very fast for short distances. It's a brawny machine, with subpar mileage and truly crazy amounts of power, which was only brought into focus through the safety features of the newest shiny toy, the Diavel. It's excessive and insane. In other words, it's a spectacular motorcycle.

Our winner, the Ducati Diavel, may be very non-traditional in its styling, but we all agreed it did most things right. You could have a mellow, sporty ride like the Harley-Davidson, or something more wild like the VMAX, and in either case

you'd still have a lighter, more nimble ride on the Ducati. Also, it fits smaller riders without being a traditional "entry-level" bike...which is probably why many end up riding sport-bikes. It's a high-performance, high-end machine that short people and beginners can ride. Yeah, we said it—even a beginner could ride this bike.

Granted, that beginner should have a huge amount of self control, leaving the DTC in Urban mode for a year or two. We wouldn't even recommend a full-size cruiser to a beginner, because of weight, but this bike doesn't have that problem. Bikes like the Diavel could change motorcycling. And we'd all be better off for it. **CR**