

Sexing up the platform

A bagger for the catwalk

by Terry Roorda

photos by Belle Raucous

The practical virtues of a well-dressed Harley bagger are many, and include comfort, roominess, stability, weather protection, and carrying capacity, to name an obvious few. You could go on from there to list some of their appealing engineering attributes; things like air suspension, triple discs, locks on front forks and luggage, and even sound systems and cruise control. And since they also possess the rich history and soul of their Electra Glide lineage, they are the ideal all-around distance motorcycle; a bike that not only gobbles the Interstate, but garners respect in the back country roadhouses, and I say that without bias, though I am biased. The only drawback to the machines for many bikers has been the stubborn “Geezer Glide” disparagement; the long-standing perception that baggers are staid and sexless and only properly the mount of riders exhibiting those same characteristics themselves, with maybe the presumption of constipation slung in on top of it.

Being an inveterate bagger pilot myself, I’ve had to suffer the sneers and innuendo of that prejudiced mindset for many years, and this despite being quite obviously wild in my ways, oversexed, and regular in my constitution. The abuse has made



me self-conscious, and in overcompensating for the bagger stereotype I’ve been obliged to ride harder, drink later, brag louder, and pile up more warrants than my nonbagger peers—all in an effort to overcome the onus of riding a sensible machine. I’ve also had to carry all the beer and that’s the only time anyone says anything nice about me.

It’s been an ordeal I wouldn’t wish on anyone, and my fondest hope throughout it all has been that the day would come when those following behind me in the bagger tradition would at long last be admired for their wise choice in rides and no longer have to feel the sting of bagger bigotry the way I have. It’s a cruel world for the righteous.

And now, happily, that day may finally have arrived, ushered in on the slammed saddle of the



2006 FLHX Street Glide, a bike so sleek and stylish and desirable that it’s creating its own category of being within the many categories of the OEM industry. It doesn’t have an official name yet, this new genus of motorcycle, so we’ll just call it a “Sex Tourer.” Catchy, no? Now do you want one?

In finding the raw sex in a bagger, Harley had to dig pretty deep, starting with the stripping away of any and all extraneous protrusions and visual distractions on the basic Electra Glide Classic (that would seem to be the starting point), the objective being to retain as much of the functional essence of a full dresser as possible while distilling that essence into a seamlessly realized styling exercise in the best tradition of custom bike building. They axed the auxiliary light bar, chrome fender trim and running lights, rear crash bars, conventional long-stemmed mirrors, plump saddle, passenger footboards, and eye-level windscreen on the

venerable batwing fairing. They swapped out the whitewall tires and skirted front fender for the blackwalls and one-piece fender of the Road Glide, and then began to add uniquely Street Glide elements back on to the model, starting up front with a slim smoked wind deflector screen atop the fairing, and rearview mirrors inconspicuously integrated into the fairing wings. They gave the bike’s fuel tank a stretched chrome console, and mounted a lean new saddle with a perforated insert and a sculpted bucket. The Street Glide gets its Streamliner operator footboards, passenger footpegs and brake pedal from the P & A Catalogue, and a pair of “slash-down” mufflers for the sake of attitude. From there things

really get sexy with a rear fender that drops down low and puts a trio of LED light strips at street level. The license plate frame is positioned low down as well, and subtly illuminated. On the sides of the fender are vanity panels filling the gap to the panniers, hiding all the mounting hardware and the antennae base. And then on the panniers themselves there’s one last aesthetic touch that’s simple in concept but remarkably effective in cleaning up the entire look of the bike. The hinges of the bags have a color-matched powder coat finish, making them nearly invisible to the casual glance. Put another way, they’re the first thing you don’t notice about the bike.

After they’d put it all together, they then proceeded to drop the whole works by about an inch,

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giving it a seat height of under 27 inches which, when combined with the stealth mirrors, svelte saddle and abbreviated windscreen, gives the Street Glide the appearance of flying forever under the radar.

Below that minimalist wind deflector, the cockpit of the Street Glide is anything but stripped down. Like all respectable full dressers, there's a lot of information displayed in front of you. There are gauges for most anything you could possibly be curious about, and that's even before you begin to consider the capabilities of the new Harmon Kardon Advanced Audio System mounted in the middle of it all. This unit comes standard with AM, FM and Weather-band radio, and a CD/MP3 player. Oh, and a clock. It pumps 40 watts of power through new 2-ohm speakers. The LCD display panel on the front of the box reports

everything that's going on with the system, and it really starts getting a workout when you add the optional XM satellite radio to the mix. This subscription service beams down 150 channels of music and information to

wherever you happen to be, and costs about 10 bucks a month. Whatever you're listening to is identified onscreen, and if you go the next step and add the GPS unit that Harley has just introduced for the system (which you can read about on this month's Partz Page) the screen does duty as the video display for the mapping details and directional instructions. And if you get really crazy and add the Bluetooth wireless cell phone setup, the screen serves as the informational display for that as well. The thumb buttons for the basic sound system also come into play in operating these add-ons, and if you're getting the impression that this could be a whole lot of distracted activity going on in the cockpit while you're on the road and should be paying attention, you might be right. I don't know. I have no intention of ever finding out, not at my age and in my presbyopic state. I have difficulty even envisioning it.

But I still ride pretty good

It generally takes a bare minimum of a thousand miles on any bike to begin to get any kind of legitimate impression of its character. It takes that long to become truly attuned to the machine, and let your proprioceptors get good and acclimated to the ride. Only then can you responsibly assess the bike's strengths and weaknesses and subtle differences from previous models (and in some cases, to



see if it even lasts that long), but that said, some things are readily apparent from the first time you take a spin. A good example in the case of the



Street Glide is the operation of the clutch lever. The entire 2006 Harley-Davidson model lineup got lightened clutch pull—as much as 35 percent in the case of the Dynas—owing to a combination of ball-and-ramp reconfiguring and clutch spring retensioning. And in the case of the Street Glide, a 24 percent reduction in pull makes the act

of levering effortless. Another thing that's apparent and expected is the ease with which the fuel-injected Twin Cam fires and finds its happy place, and the unerring way in which it takes the throttle. From sea level to 9,000 feet I couldn't get the motor to hiccup under any circumstance, in any gear (the

same as it's been on any TC/I for the last five years, and frankly I'm tired of talking about it).

The more interesting angles to explore on the Street Glide—the ones that would take long miles to judge—were how all of the dramatic changes in fairing windshield height, seat design, ground clearance, shock travel and mirror positioning would depart from the personality and performance of your basic bagger, the expectation being that they would detract from function for the sake of form. That's how these things generally work, and that's what you'd expect.

And you'd be wrong

Especially about the seat. The designers of this perch deserve special mention, having come up with a bucket that puts your fanny farther back than the conventional Electra Glide seat so you have lots of leg stretch to the footboards, while at the same time constructing it in such a way that there is no monkey butt numbness between gas stops. For me, that's about 180 miles when I'm putting down miles. There is a trade-off here. The passenger gets every bit of the discomfort that the operator avoids, being obliged to stick on a smaller patch of vinyl, and one that cants rearward at that. Tandem buyers will still want what the dressier baggers offer in this department.

The slammed suspension with its lowered ground clearance and shortened travel should, by rights, adversely affect the corner handling and rough road compliance of the Street Glide. And it does, but not in any way that detracts appreciably from the riding experience. In spite of the limitations imposed here, the bike still swallows the curves at any reasonable rate of speed—as Harley baggers have long done, and long been under-appreciated

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Street Glide

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for—and the occasional sparks off the side stand and footboard are just bonus pyrotechnics, as far as I'm concerned.

Then there are those mirrors. They're one of the styling touches that really clean up the lines of the Street Glide and give it that hard-body appearance, and I have two comments to make here. On the one hand, they give you a good view of both hands. They reflect your gloves before anything

else, and narcissistic hand fetishers will buy the bike for that aspect alone. But once you get past that and adjust your field of vision beyond your knuckles, you realize that they still manage to do a good job of giving you a rear view—every bit as good, in fact, as the standard ovate jobs on the other 2006 baggers. They're a nonissue functionally, and a real coup stylistically.

And that brings us to the slim smoked wind deflector of the Street Glide, and in evaluating that, let me just say that windscreens are a difficult detail to get right. The ideal setup is a screen that you can

see over so your vision isn't impaired by dirt or rain or honeybee butts or the distortion at the top edge of a thick pane of polycarbonate, but one that is still high enough to scoop out a windless bubble around the rider's head. It's not a game of inches, it's a game of centimeters, and the stock windscreen on other Electra Glides—and Road Kings, and Heritage Softails—is too high for pretty much anyone not working in the NBA. And I say that as a 6-foot-4-incher. The screens on all of those bikes can—and should—be cut down to size or replaced with shorter accessory units that serve the individual rider. The FLHX is on the other extreme. For a rider of my height it's too short to prevent a sound buffeting of the head. I need about another nine centimeters of windbreak to put me into the zone. Shorter riders—much shorter—will probably find it just about perfect. What comes into play here, besides the obvious comfort factor, is the effectiveness of the sound system. Even at 40 watts, the system is incapable of delivering any fidelity to a pair of ears being blasted by the wind at 65 mph or entombed in a full-face helmet.

And there you have it, but as a postscript to all of this, I have to say that I'm preaching to the choir here. I've already seen a bunch of Street Glides riding around in my corner of the county, which is unusual since nobody around here has any money and they ride Shovels and Evos and auctioned Twin Cam police bikes for the most part. And the Street Glides started appearing within days of the model's introduction—even before I had one to test, which is really unusual. And I also know this: An old buddy of mine who has been riding hardtail Pans for the last quarter century and given me more shit than anyone about my bagger proclivity, finally bought a brand new Harley. Guess which one. ♦





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