

ROAD TEST:

Kawasaki 454 LTD

Start with it, stay with it.

• All too often, the entry-level motorcyclist is faced with a beggar's choice when it comes to choosing his first bike. He can buy a small, slow motorcycle that he'll probably outgrow as soon as he gets past the here's-the-clutch, here's-the-brake stage, or he can opt for a bigger, heavier, more intimidating bike he can grow into—providing he gets through the learning process in one piece.

Kawasaki has one solution to that dilemma—the 454 LTD. Because even though Kawasaki bills the LTD as an entry-level bike, that doesn't mean it's a dull, slow motorcycle fit only for learning the rudiments of two-wheel survival. And although it's a full-size motorcycle, it won't fight you two falls out of three going up on the centerstand. Further, there's a lot about this middleweight performance-custom that will appeal to experienced riders, too, such as its emphasis on low maintenance and its powerful, high-revving motor. Indeed, if you're unaccustomed to associating the word "performance" with a middleweight Twin, grabbing a handful of the LTD's throttle will change your thinking in short order. The Kawasaki accelerates harder than some motorcycles half again its size.

The LTD owes its muscle in part to another member of the Kawasaki clan—the 900 Ninja—and proves that horsepower runs in the family. In fact, Kawasaki calls the LTD's powerplant "half a Ninja." And, despite the obvious differences, the two engines differ only slightly in specifications; the LTD's dual overhead cams are milder than the Ninja's, and its compression ratio is lower (10.7:1 for the 454, compared to 11:1). But in most other respects the LTD's counterbalanced, liquid-cooled engine is practically a Ninja powerplant split right down the middle. Bore and stroke are the same for both engines, for example, as are valve sizes, included valve angles and carburetors; the 34mm semi-flat-slide Keihin look as if they'd been pulled straight off the big four and bolted onto the twin.

But hardware isn't the only thing the 900 passed on to its smaller sibling; the LTD also inherited outstanding acceleration. There's plenty of power on tap, too, from the basement of the powerband right up to the 10,000-rpm penthouse. And yet the gutsy twin's class-leading performance doesn't cover a cantankerous nature, because the LTD starts easily and warms quickly, offering crisp car-



buretion and rapid throttle response. What's more, the engine is smooth, with only a marginal amount of vibration emanating through the footpegs. Kawasaki rubber-mounted the 454's motor in its chassis, supplementing the engine's gear-driven counterbalancer for vibration-control, and the two do a good job of isolating the rider from vibration, whether he's puttering around town or using every ounce of the "half-Ninja's" performance.

The LTD's powerplant won't make you pay for your thrills with high-dollar maintenance bills, either. Adjusting the screw-and-locknut tappets requires no special tools, and the Ninja-style automatic cam-chain tensioner needs no periodic service. Plus, the 454 uses a final-drive belt instead of a chain, and Kawasaki's experience with the system on other bikes indicates the belt will last an average of 20,000 miles before it needs to be replaced. In addition, Kawasaki claims the 40mm-wide belt needs to be adjusted only two or three times in the first 1000 miles, and from that point on is virtually maintenance-free, requiring no lubrication or further adjustment.

But economy and practicality don't have to be homely. So while Kawasaki's engineers were giving the LTD a low-maintenance personality, the stylists were busy equipping it with a high-fashion profile, decking the bike out in the latest boulevard duds. For an entry-level bike, the 454's styling makes a certain amount of sense, too, because a cruiser's marching orders should include a low seat height. And with a saddle height of 29.3 inches, the LTD keeps that part of the bargain, ensuring that riders short of experience—or inseam—can plant both feet firmly on the ground at stoplights. Still, the 454 doesn't offer the best seat in the house, and despite a trend among cruisers—Yamaha's 700 Maxim X and Suzuki's Intruder, for example—toward less extreme seating positions, the LTD's laid-back perch is one of the most radical examples of cruiser ergonomics around. As a result, the extremely forward-mounted footpegs and swept-back handlebar discourage all but the shortest hops, especially on the freeway. And the stepped seat, although well-padded, leaves a rider little room to move

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454 LTD *Continued*

around to relieve saddle fatigue.

Like the seating position, the LTD's suspension lacks versatility, too. The shocks adjust for spring preload only and the fork is air-adjustable, and although both ends of the bike are tuned for a soft, boulevard-style ride, the suspension offers mixed results. The 454 rides well over small-to-medium bumps, but serves up a slightly choppy ride over freeway expansion joints. Plus, although Kawasaki calls the 454 a performance-cruiser, the soft suspension won't encourage a rider to try jetting along canyon roads. The shocks need stiffer springs and more rebound damping for such antics, and while the fork works best at 0 psi (Kawasaki's recommended pressure) the front

end dives noticeably during hard braking. Bumping up the fork's air pressure reduces dive somewhat, but you're still left with a fork that flexes perceptibly at sporting speeds through corners, or if you clamp on the powerful front disc brake.

Steer the LTD away from the twisties, however, and its user-friendly nature all but eclipses its backroad handling deficiencies. Around town, riders of all skill levels will appreciate how easily they can thread their way through the urban battle zone. The LTD feels far lighter than its 427-pound weight might suggest, and the low-effort steering makes the bike feel pleasantly nimble. Plus, the engine's idle-to-redline powerband and clean carburetion combine with the clutch's light

lever-pull and broad engagement band to make inner-city riding a pleasure.

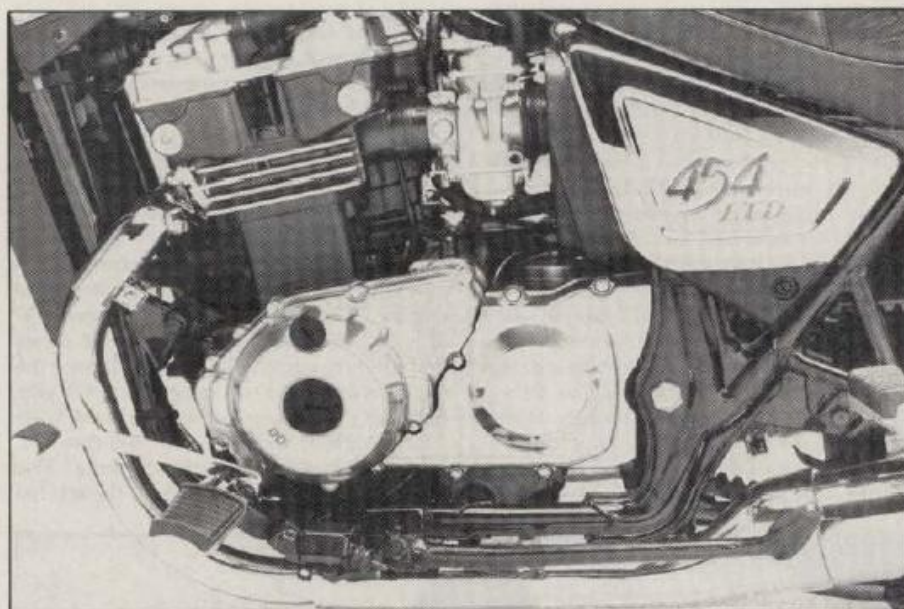
It's that accommodating, easy-to-ride nature that makes the LTD's appeal cut across the traditional lines that separate the tyro from the old hand. The Kawasaki offers the beginner a stylish, economical buy-in to motorcycling, with a high-tech engine powerful enough to keep him entertained long after he's learned the rudiments of riding. Nor will experienced riders feel short-changed; the 454 engine's Ninja heritage and resultant level of performance make certain of that. In fact, the LTD just might make veteran riders wish they could go back and start all over again.

—Jerry Smith

KAWASAKI 454 LTD

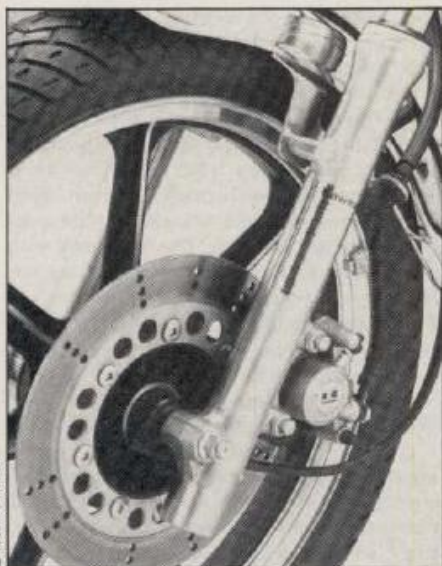
Importer: Kawasaki Motors Corp.
2009 E. Edinger Ave.
Santa Ana, California 92711

Category	street
Suggested retail price	\$1999
Engine type	four-stroke vertical twin
Valve arrangement	double overhead camshafts, four valves per cylinder
Bore and stroke	72.5mm x 55.0mm
Displacement	454.1cc
Compression ratio	10.7:1
Carburetion	two 34mm Keihin semi-flat-slide constant-vacuum
Gearbox	6-speed
Front fork/wheel travel	Showa air-spring, 36mm stanchion tube diameter/ 5.8 in. (147mm)
Rear shocks/wheel travel	dual Showa, 5-position adjustable spring preload/4.5 in. (115mm)
Weight	427 lbs. (193.7kg)
Wheelbase	58.1 to 59.1 in. (1476 to 1502mm)
Seat height	29.3 in. (745mm)
Steering head angle	31.5 degrees from vertical
Front wheel trail	5.47 in. (139mm)
Best ¼-mile acceleration	13.386 sec., 97.08 mph (156 kph)
Top speed (observed)	102 mph (164kph)
Stopping distance from 60 mph	125 ft. (38.1m)
Fuel consumption	37 to 53 mpg (16 to 23 km/l)
Warranty	12 months, unlimited mileage
Available colors	Ebony or Candy Persimmon Red



Kawasaki calls the heart of the LTD "half a Ninja"

There's nothing half-hearted about the 454's performance, though.



LTD's fork is long on style

But short on rigidity.



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