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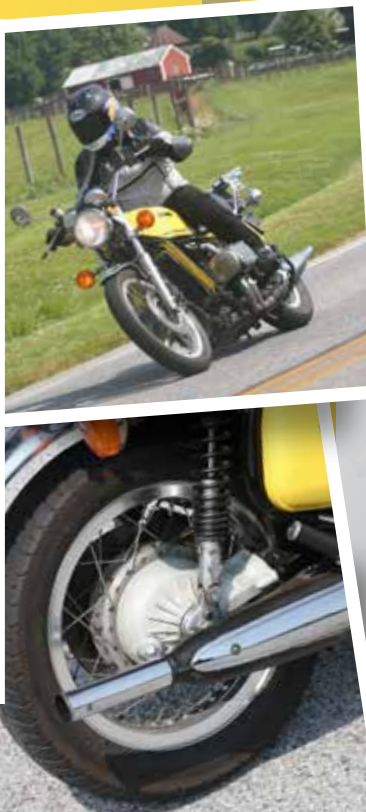
Gold Rush



50 years ago, the Honda GL1000 Gold Wing swooped in to essentially invent long-distance luxury touring. But there have been plenty of bumps along the way.

Honda stunned the two-wheeled world at the October 1968 Tokyo Show by revealing its in-line four-cylinder CB750, the first series production Superbike of the modern era. But barely six years later – and five decades ago on September 21, 1974 – the Japanese company unveiled something completely different and almost as significant at Cologne’s IFMA Show: the GL1000 Gold Wing. It was the first in a family of bikes which continues in production today, albeit in six-cylinder 1833cc guise versus the original flat-four 999cc model. More than 650,000 motorcycles later, the Wing continues to be a cornerstone of Honda’s range. Yet initial sales of the GL1000 were frankly underwhelming, with less than 5000 finding American owners in 1975, far fewer than hoped for in the model’s debut year in its target market. As much as anything it was because nobody in Honda appeared to really know who the bike was aimed at. It seemed to be positioned as a step-up in performance compared to the CB750, which was already suffering by comparison with its

cubed-up rival, the 903cc Z1 Kawasaki launched in 1972. The 999cc Wing trumped that, as the largest capacity Japanese motorcycle yet built. But at that time, motorcycle touring as we know it today was in its infancy; with the exception of shaft-drive BMW boxers, the available bikes weren’t especially practical for covering thousands rather than hundreds of kilometres at a stretch. But then a funny thing happened: customers started purchasing the GL1000 in increasing numbers, and taking it for long rides. As these became longer and longer, and more and more people started copying their neighbour or friend or blokes they met in a cafe in clocking up the kilometres, and purchased a GL1000 to do it with – suddenly Honda had a hit on its hands, thanks to this customer-led repositioning of the Wing. It had almost accidentally invented a whole new long-range luxury touring model sector in the two-wheeled firmament – much as the BMW GS would do with adventure touring a decade later. To do so, in December 1972 Honda had assembled its finest array of the great and the good, a team of its top designers led by Shoichiro Irimajiri, who’d





SOICHIRO HONDA PARKED THE BIKE, SAID THAT IT WAS “PRETTY GOOD” AND WENT HOME!



headed up creation of the uber-successful four-, five- and six-cylinder Honda GP road racing engines of the 1960s. This team was tasked with developing the so-called King of Motorcycles, a means by which what was by now the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world could flaunt its technical prowess. The prototype they called the M1 was born of an ambition to impress, not as the result of focus groups or marketing studies. It was to be a fast, comfortable GT model, superior to all others yet conceived in smoothness, performance and quality.

To explore extremes, the top-secret M1 prototype featured a 1470cc liquid-cooled flat-six engine with shaft final drive, features that duly adorned the Gold Wing line in years to come. The official goals called for a very compact and light machine with extremely high performance. It was to weigh 210kg, with power targeted at 61hp (45.5kW) at 7500rpm and maximum torque produced relatively high up at 5500rpm. Most telling of all was the quarter-mile performance goal of 12.40sec – quicker than Honda's CB750.

Once the M1 was created, to general in-house acclaim – remember, this was a top-secret project – a customer model could now be built, based on this concept. However, Soichiro Honda himself, close to retirement from the company he had built, still favoured air cooling for its simplicity, and believed that engines larger than 750cc might be rejected by the public as too big, especially with six cylinders. The M1's liquid cooling was a radical idea back then, too, but Honda's engineers knew the operating temperature of air-cooled engines fluctuated with air temperature. This was unacceptable: the M1 must proceed unaffected and utterly reliably through the hottest weather, and at the highest speeds, with the highest loads. With liquid cooling, it would do just that.

Because of the M1 engine's exceptionally low centre of gravity, the prototype felt lighter than its true weight of 210kg. Although a by-product of the layout, this trait was so well-liked by testers it became a focus of the whole design, because it made carrying greater weight practical. The engine designers weren't bound by traditional two-wheel thinking, and quickly revised their design to position the transmission under the engine instead of behind it, allowing the flat-six engine to clear the rider's shins, while putting the controls comfortably within reach. Such innovative thinking also led to the GL's 19-litre under-seat fuel tank.

The M1 opened the way to the present universal acceptance of largely maintenance-free, liquid-cooled powerplants in bikes of every kind. Before it could do that, though, it had to pass muster at the

highest level. According to in-house legend, *Oyaji* (the Old Man, Soichiro Honda himself) appeared unannounced at the Honda R&D Test Centre late one evening. When he saw what his engineers had created, he said with his characteristic directness that it “looked like a bat”, with its two blocks of horizontally opposed cylinders. He hopped on the big machine, started it and rode out into the darkness. In due course he returned safely, parked the bike, remarked that it was “pretty good” and went home!

Using lessons learned from the M1 project, the team switched to a smaller engine design. The gestation period for the first flat-four GL1000 Gold Wing spanned just two years from concept to production. But when it was introduced at the 1974 Cologne Show, few of those who first saw the bike fully understood what it was, or might become.

Its straight-line performance was second only to the Kawasaki Z-1, the premier Superbike of the day, and the GL's power peaked high in the powerband. Yet it was also judged too heavy, too long and too bulky to rank as an out-and-out high-performance model. But despite a slow start in showroom sales, the GL's stellar qualities gradually became apparent to long-distance riders who'd tried the alternatives and found them wanting. Owners learned the new Gold Wing would carry all the luggage they needed on longer trips, plus a



1. The 1972 M1 prototype had a birdcage-like tubular frame
2. Except for the engine size, much of the M1 was transferred to the 1974 production model
3. The completed prototype looks production-ready, but management had a change of heart over engine size
4. What should be the fuel tank is a compartment that provides easy access to electrics, air filter and coolant reservoir
5. Typical Honda headlights and indicators of the period
6. American-style handlebar
7. Car-like fuel gauge
8. A strong, vibration-free engine is the hallmark of the original Honda Gold Wing





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HONDA GL1000 GOLD WING TIMELINE

In the world of motorcycling, technology presses forward at such a furious pace that very few models survive a span of 50 years.

1972 M1 Prototype

A design team is established, led by Shoichiro Irimajiri, who had headed up design of the Honda GP road racing engines of the 1960s.

1975 GL1000 GOLD WING

The original Gold Wing was much more than just a new motorcycle, powered as it was by a revolutionary 999cc liquid-cooled horizontally opposed four-cylinder engine.

1976 GL1000 GOLD WING LTD

A second new model marks the Gold Wing's second year as Honda graces the GL1000 Limited Edition with an assortment of special features.

1979 MARYSVILLE PLANT

With more than 80 percent of Gold Wing production being exported to North America, it was logical to explore building a plant to manufacture them in the US.

1980 GL1100 GOLD WING

Five years of continuous consumer input culminated in the introduction of the GL1100 Gold Wing, its most supple, comfortable ride to date. A page had been turned.

passenger, all in comfort, and Honda's already well-established reputation for reliability meant they wouldn't be stranded far from home.

The GL1000's liquid-cooled flat-four engine, with two valves per cylinder, had perfect primary balance, with the contrarotating alternator counteracting the torque reaction of the 180° longitudinal crankshaft when the throttle was opened. A single overhead camshaft for each bank of cylinders was driven by silent-running toothed belts, like the Moto Morini 3½ which had pioneered this format on two wheels in 1973. Running a 9.2:1 compression ratio, the engine measured 72 x 61.4mm for 999cc, and in production form delivered 78bhp/56.9kW at 7500rpm (at the crankshaft), with peak torque of 83Nm/61.2ft-lb at 5500rpm – figures comparable to the 81bhp/73.5Nm Kawasaki Z1. A quartet of 32mm Keihin downdraft CV carbs fed the cylinders via a rudimentary airbox – fuel injection had been considered, but rejected as needing further development. The five-speed gearbox was under the engine, with shaft final drive the first on any Japanese motorcycle.

This engine was housed in a tubular steel duplex cradle frame, with a 37mm Showa fork offering 123mm of wheel travel carried at a 28° rake, with 120mm of trail. The 19-inch front wire wheel and 17-inch rear delivered a not unduly rangy 1545mm wheelbase while offering good space for a passenger, with twin rear shocks giving 84mm of wheel travel – which, on the first series K0 model, provided short-lived damping from the start, and were invariably quickly replaced by aftermarket items, usually Konis. The twin front 276mm Nissin steel discs with twin-piston calipers were adequate

in the dry, but lethal in the wet – so much so that an owners' petition was organised to persuade Honda to do something about that! The rear 294mm disc with its single-piston caliper was actually larger than the front discs, in recognition that most American riders back then, and Harley riders in particular, predominantly favoured using the rear stopper over the front ones.

At a claimed 265kg dry, the GL1000 was no featherweight, but with the weight low down it was much less noticeable, and favoured high-speed handling over bumpy surfaces.

Despite Honda's engineers creating a torquey midrange performance tune, the Gen One GL1000 Gold Wing was capable of surprisingly scintillating performance for the day, with 1975 magazine tests showing it ran the quarter-mile in 12.92sec from a standing start (though only a couple of times before the clutch burnt out!), with a terminal speed of 104.52mph – second only to the Kawasaki Z1, and then not by much. Top speed was 129mph (208km/h), if only after quite a long run-up. Still, the new model had definitely made its mark.

Finding an original-spec early K0 version GL1000 to ride nowadays was very difficult, because the model took time to catch on, so the early versions are relatively rare. But it was a surprise to find one which today earns its keep in Pennsylvania



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- Day-long, interstate touring comfort despite the lack of a fairing
- Honda launched a classy LTD version in 1976
- The Gold Wing is part of Retro Tours' largely seventies fleet
- Joel Samick helped revive the Gold Wing we tested
- Honda had a lot of explaining to do to potential buyers to convert them to the many car-like features of the Gold Wing in an era of mainly twin-cylinder motorcycles

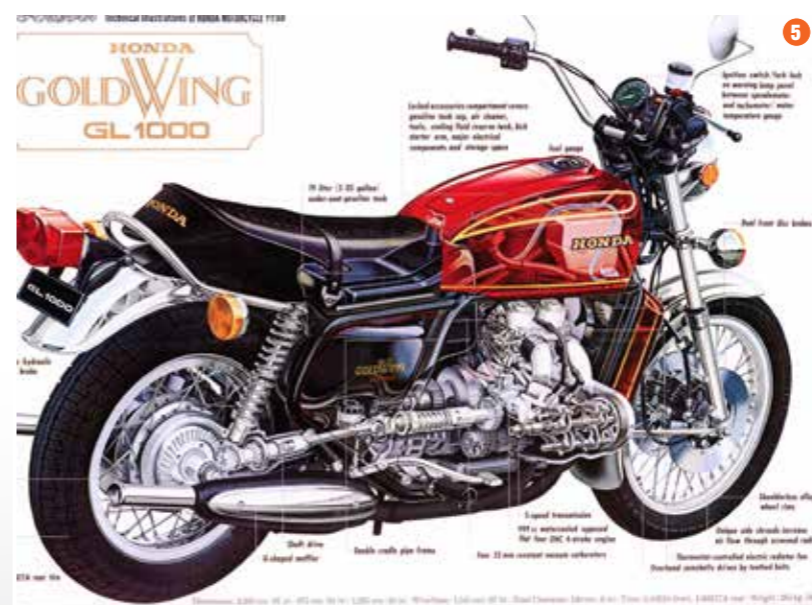
“THIS BIKE HAD SAT IDLE IN UNHEATED STORAGE FOR OVER 30 YEARS”



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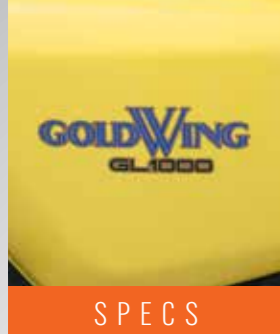
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as one of the fleet of street classics, mostly twins, available for hire from Retro Tours (retrotours.com) for rides guided by its founder, Joel Samick. We'll let Joel explain how he came to acquire the 1976 Gold Wing on which I spent an enjoyable day riding round Pennsylvania with him:

“My friend Jeff Cordisco decided that an early Gold Wing might be fun. He enjoys the hunt, and this one took him to Upstate New York, where this one-owner bike with just 8000 miles on the clock was hiding in an old warehouse between some tractors and stuff, behind a boat on a trailer with two flat tires! The bike had sat idle in unheated storage for over 30 years, so it was a real time capsule. Just getting it out into the daylight was a challenge, and it was totally covered with what we call Farkels, an acronym for Fancy Accessory Really Kool and Likely Expensive! This guy had got addicted to accessorising his Gold Wing, which was really common back then – so it had a full Windjammer fairing, a radio, saddle bags, a top box, crash bars, an extra light rail round the back, extra mirrors and all kinds of other stuff on it. This was common back in the day, but it's ironic in a way as Honda never intended the GL1000 to be a dresser. It was more of an answer to the Kawasaki Z1 – a smoother, more comfortable and more sophisticated superbike. It was only after American riders festooned their Gold Wings with touring accessories, spawning a lucrative new decked-out touring-bike market, that Honda decided to go after that. So Jeff paid \$1000 for it and brought it home.

“After stripping off the accessories, a box stock, low mileage, second-year Gold Wing was revealed! Of course, it needed just a bit of work to get it back on the road. The carbs were corroded beyond salvage – their aluminium bodies were actually rotted through. The under-seat fuel tank was heavily coated with rust and solidified fuel remnants. The hydraulics were clogged and seized up. The tires were cracked down to the carcass. This was going to be one tough resurrection.

“Jeff paid me a lot of money to sort some of these things out and did quite a bit of work on it himself. Once we had it running, we agreed that it would be prudent to replace the cambelts, which had been sitting in one position for over 30 years! The heads came off for a clean-up valve job and to replace the head gaskets, which had hardened, allowing coolant to enter the combustion chambers. The water pump seal leaked, so a new pump was installed as well. New tires, tubes and brakes were added to the mix. He spent like \$2000 refurbishing it and, finally,



ENGINE
Capacity: 999cc
Type: Air-cooled SOHC horizontally-opposed flat-four four-stroke with two valves per cylinder and belt-driven camshafts
Bore & stroke: 72mm x 61.4mm
Compression ratio: 9.2:1
Carburation: 4 x 32mm Keihin CV
Output: 78bhp/56.9kW at 7500rpm (at crankshaft)
Maximum torque: 83 Nm/61.2ft-lb at 5500 rpm
Transmission: 5-speed constant mesh with shaft final drive and electric start
Clutch: Single-plate dry with HyVo chain primary drive and transfer gears

CHASSIS
Tubular steel duplex-cradle frame
Suspension: Front: 37mm Showa telescopic fork with 123mm of wheel travel
Rear: Tubular steel swingarm with 2 x Koni shocks with 84mm of wheel travel
Head angle/trail: 28° with 120mm of trail
Wheelbase: 1545mm
Weight: 265kg dry
Seat height: 800mm.

BRAKES
Front: Twin 276mm Nissin steel discs with two-piston calipers
Rear: Single 294mm Nissin steel disc with single-piston caliper

WHEELS/TYRES
Front: 100/90-19 Bridgestone BT46 on 1.85" wire-spoked aluminium rim
Rear: 130/90-17 Bridgestone BT46 on 2.50" wire-spoked aluminium rim
Fuel capacity: 19 litres
Top speed: 129mph/208km/h (Cycle World magazine road test 1975)
Year of manufacture: 1976
Owner: Joel Samick, Retro Tours, Kennett Square, Pa., USA, www.retro-tours.com

the 8000-mile Honda was fit for use again, looking rather fine in canary yellow.

"Riding this bike is like taking a magic carpet ride: it defines smoothness. We literally balanced a nickel coin on the edge of the crankcase and revved the engine. The nickel never moved. With the Koni rear shocks the suspension is comfortable and capable enough for all but the most spirited street riding. The triple disc brakes are excellent for 20th century hardware – more than up to the task, except in the rain where you gotta take care. The bike weighs in at 600 pounds wet, but never feels heavy. My wife Lynn and I have done a couple of trips on it, one to North Carolina to visit some friends. It was a pretty long highway trip because we only had a short timeframe, so we couldn't take all the back roads we prefer to ride on. The GL1000, of course, excels at that kind of thing – to go 70 or 80mph all day, piled high with baggage, it was great. The ride is enjoyable in the extreme: Honda quality has a way of doing that. But things have come a long way since this original Gold Wing, so you need to ride it to discover the bare essential roots of the modern touring motorcycle."

So I did. The only flat-four, four-stroke motorcycle I'd ridden before was a 1938 Zundapp K800. The GL1000 Gold Wing's engine was similarly completely devoid of vibration. The magic carpet ride cliché is actually completely applicable, since even by today's standards it's smooth and effortlessly efficient to ride. Fifty years ago the Honda must have seemed a motorcycle from another planet compared to the British and Italian parallel-twins which then ruled the big bike marketplace before the arrival of the Japanese fours, and Laverda and BSA/Triumph triples. Thumb the starter button and the flat-four engine immediately catches alight, settling to a 1200rpm idle speed that's equally devoid of vibes.



1. Large rear brake disc catered to the riding style of Americans in the 1970s
2. Historic rego keeps old classics like this on the road at a minimal cost to the owner
3. Front discs caused angst to owners on the first year of the model but were soon refined
4. Useful storage area
5. The Gold Wing has curiously appeal to a new generation



coolant header tank and the storage space for the emergency kickstart lever in case you've flattened the battery.

There are many innovative features on this bike. For example the constant beep when you activate the direction signals until you turn them off. (Why don't we have these today?!) Plus the big mirrors give a good view behind, and don't vibrate.

While thanks to its fairly long wheelbase you wouldn't exactly call it agile, the Honda flicked from side to side through a series of hillside bends really well – that low cee-of-gee was certainly a factor here. And presumably thanks to the contrarotating alternator I honestly forgot I was riding a bike with a lengthways crank – though it does pay to remember you've got a shaft final drive, even if it doesn't rise and fall on the suspension as such European bikes of the era did. The Bridgestone BT46 tyres Joel had fitted gave good enough grip for me to deck the hero tabs on the flip-up footrests, but ground clearance was never an issue.

Joel had fitted Koni shocks immediately on acquiring the 8000-mile bike, and with 19,284 miles now on the clock these still functioned well despite the restricted wheel travel over some of the less than ideally surfaced Pennsylvania roads we came across. The Showa fork worked okay but felt a little stiff – it didn't like successive jumps, as if the rebound setting was excessive. Too bad – they're non-adjustable. Suspension is one thing that's come on by leaps and bounds in the past 50 years since this bike was built, and the same goes for the brakes, although to be fair these were okay in the dry conditions I rode the Honda in, and stopped it well from high speed – the big rear disc was especially effective.

Derided by many as a 'two-wheeled car', the Honda Gold Wing has divided opinion for the past half-century. But I defy anyone who wouldn't be seen dead on one to ride a first-generation GL1000 like this one.

This 1976 bike from the second sales year is still a K0 model identical to the Year One version, which sold so poorly that Honda had plenty left over for Year Two – when they started to disappear from dealers' floors in double-quick time, as sales finally took off.

Put your prejudices to one side and you may just appreciate what an innovative and impressive motorcycle Honda's first Gold Wing luxury tourer was – and still is.

THE HONDA GOLD WING HAS DIVIDED OPINION FOR THE PAST HALF-CENTURY

I wish I'd had a nickel to balance on the crankcase, but it's all digital these days!

The left-foot, one-down gearchange is smoother and crisper than any other shaft-driven motorcycle of the era (ie, BMWs or Guzzis) that I recall ever riding, and the light clutch action makes using the Wing in traffic untiring. It picks up smoothly from 2000 revs on full or part throttle, and the torque response gives more than acceptable performance by the standards of 50 years ago. Apparently the flat-four will rev safely to 8500rpm, but there's no point in doing so. Instead, just ride the torque curve peaking at 5500rpm and enjoy that magic carpet ride. At 60mph/100kmh there's just 3700rpm on the clearly visible right-hand tachometer with a temperature gauge at the bottom, while 75mph/120kmh comes at 4600 revs. The Gold Wing feels completely unstressed at these sorts of speeds, and a brief dash up the rev scale to 7000rpm revealed total stability cruising at 100mph/160kmh, without getting too blown about thanks to the lack of a screen.

I found the riding position relatively relaxed, although the US-market handlebar was a little higher than I prefer. The Gold Wing delivered a really upright posture, which wasn't tiring, and the seat was pretty comfy, too. The dummy fuel tank, with its flip-out panels on the left and on top, collectively houses the electrics, air filter,



Effortless and comfortable touring experience on a groundbreaking model.



PROS AND CONS



Brakes and suspension soon make you realise how far technology has come in 50 years.