

GOING FOR GOLD

By **ALAN CATHCART**
Photos by **KEL EDGE**

The Honda GL1000 Gold Wing debuted as a 1975 model, available in Candy Blue or Candy Red.



1976 HONDA GL1000 GOLD WING KO

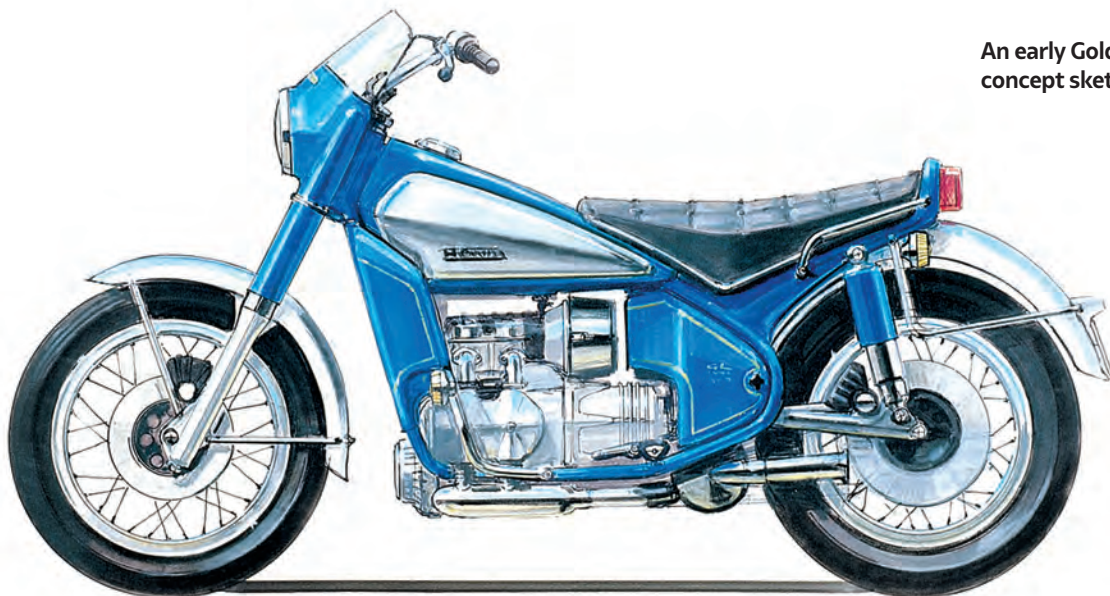
Honda stunned the two-wheeled world at the 1968 Tokyo Show by revealing its inline 4-cylinder CB750, the first series production superbike of the modern era. But six years later, the Japanese company unveiled something completely different at the 1974 Cologne Show – the GL1000 Gold Wing. It was the first in a family of bikes which continues in production today, albeit in flat-Six 1,833cc guise vs. the original flat-Four 999cc model. Now, 50 years and 650,000-plus motorcycles later, the Wing continues to be a cornerstone of Honda's range (see "50 Years of the Honda Gold Wing" on page 30). At its peak, the GWRRA global owners club boasted 80,000 members in 53 countries, split into around 800 chapters.

Yet initial sales of the GL1000 were underwhelming, with less than 5,000 bikes sold to American owners in 1975, far fewer than hoped for in the model's debut year. As much as anything, it was because nobody at Honda appeared to really know who the bike was aimed at. It offered a step up

in performance compared to the CB750, which was already suffering by comparison to the 903cc Kawasaki Z1 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. Except for shaft-drive BMW Boxers, the available bikes weren't especially practical for covering thousands of miles at a stretch.

But then a funny thing happened: Customers started purchasing the GL1000 in increasing numbers and taking it for long rides – and as the rides became longer and longer, more and more people started copying their neighbor or friend or guys they met in a cafe by purchasing a GL1000 and clocking up miles themselves. Suddenly Honda had a hit on its hands, thanks to this customer-led repositioning of the Wing in the marketplace. It had almost accidentally invented a whole new long-range luxury touring sector – much as the BMW GS would do with adventure touring a few years later.

An early Gold Wing concept sketch.



In December 1972, Honda had assembled a team of its top designers led by Soichiro Irimajiri, who'd headed up creation of Honda's GP roadracing engines of the 1960s. This team was tasked by upper management with developing the so-called "King of Motorcycles," by which the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world could flaunt its technical prowess. The M1 prototype 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 other motorcycles in terms of smoothness, performance, and quality.

To explore extremes, the top-secret M1 prototype featured a liquid-cooled 1,470cc flat-Six engine with shaft final drive, features that would adorn the Gold Wing line in years to come. The official goals called for a compact and light machine with extremely high performance by the standards of those days. It was to weigh 210 kg (463 lb) with power targeted at 61 hp at 7,500 rpm and maximum torque produced high up at 5,500 rpm. Most telling of all was the quarter-mile performance goal of 12.4 seconds – quicker than Honda's CB750.

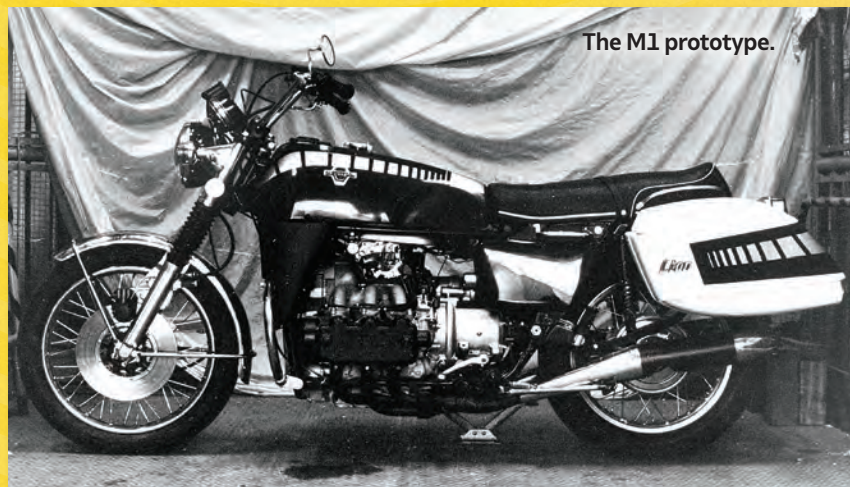
Once the M1 was created to general in-house acclaim – remember, this was a top-secret project – Honda decided to produce a customer model based on this concept. Mr. Honda himself, close to retirement from the company he had built, still favored air cooling for its simplicity and believed that engines 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, but Honda's engineers knew the operating temperature of air-cooled engines fluctuated with air temperature, and excess heat was deemed unacceptable. The M1 must proceed unaffected and utterly reliably through the hottest weather and at the highest speeds and loads. With liquid cooling, it would do just that.

Because of the M1 engine's exceptionally low center of gravity, the prototype felt lighter than its true weight. 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. This innovation permitted 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 5-gallon underseat fuel tank.

For the future of motorcycling, the M1 opened the way to the 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, *Oya-ji* (the Old Man, Soichiro Honda himself) appeared unannounced at the Honda R&D Test Center late one evening. When he saw what his engineers had created, he said with his characteristic directness that it



The 1976 Honda GL1000 Gold Wing KO in Sulfur Yellow ridden by the author is a restored barn find. It's owned by Joel Samick, who runs Pennsylvania-based RetroTours.



“looked like a bat,” with its two blocks of horizontally opposed cylinders. He hopped on the big machine and rode out into the darkness. In due course he returned safely, parked the bike, remarked that it was “pretty good,” and went home!

In all, the gestation period for the original flat-Four GL1000 spanned just two years from concept to production

due to lessons learned from the M1 project. But when it was introduced at the 1974 Cologne Show, few who first saw the bike fully understood what it was – or what it might become. Its straight-line performance was second only to the Kawasaki Z1, the premier superbike of the day, and the GL's power peaked high in the powerband. But it was judged too heavy, too long, and

too bulky to rank as an out-and-out performance model.

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 passenger, all in comfort, and Honda's

OVER THE YEARS
THE
HONDA
GOLD WING
ON RIDER'S
COVER



SUMMER 1975



JULY 1980



AUGUST 1981



JUNE 1983

Top: The Gold Wing was the first Japanese motorcycle with shaft final drive. **Middle:** With perfect primary balance, the GL1000's 999cc flat-Four engine is the epitome of smoothness. **Bottom:** A pair of 2-piston front calipers pinching 276mm rotors provide barely adequate stopping power.

already well-established reputation for reliability meant they wouldn't be stranded far from home.

The GL1000's liquid-cooled flat-Four motor with two valves per cylinder had perfect primary balance, with the contrarotating alternator counteracting the torque reaction of the 180-degree longitudinal crankshaft when the throttle was opened. The 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 78 hp at 7,500 rpm at the crankshaft, with peak torque of 61.2 lb-ft at 5,500 rpm – figures comparable to the 81 hp and 54.2 lb-ft of the Kawasaki Z1. A quartet of downdraft 32mm Keihin CV carbs fed the cylinders – fuel injection had been considered but rejected for the time being as needing further development for motorcycle use. The 5-speed gearbox was located beneath the engine, with shaft final drive for the first time on any Japanese motorcycle.

This engine was housed in a tubular-steel duplex cradle frame, with a 37mm Showa fork offering 4.8 inches of travel carried at a 28-degree rake, with 4.7 inches of trail. The 19-inch front wire wheel and 17-inch rear delivered a reasonable 60.8-inch wheelbase while offering good space for a passenger, with twin rear shocks giving 3.3 inches of travel, which on the first series K0 model provided poor damping and were often replaced by aftermarket items, usually Konis.

The twin front 276mm Nissin steel discs with twin-piston calipers were adequate in the dry but judged to be dangerous in the wet – so much so that an owners' petition was organized to persuade Honda to do something about it! The rear 294mm disc with its single-piston caliper was larger than the front discs, in recognition that most American riders back then favored using the rear stopper over the front ones. At a claimed 584 lb dry, the GL1000 was no featherweight, but with the weight low down, it was



FEBRUARY 1984



DECEMBER 1984



JUNE 1985



JANUARY 1986



JULY 1987



In its original naked form, few realized the Gold Wing would eventually become the gold standard in luxury touring.

much less noticeable and favored high-speed handling.

Despite Honda's engineers favoring a torquey midrange performance tune, the first-generation GL1000 Gold Wing was capable of scintillating performance for the day, with 1975 magazine tests showing it ran the quarter-mile in 12.9 seconds from a standing start (though only a couple of times before the clutch burned out!), with a trap speed of 104.5 mph – second only to the Kawasaki Z1 but not by much. Top speed was 129 mph but only after quite a long run-up. Still, the new model had made its mark.

Finding an original-spec early K0 version GL1000 to ride was surpris-

ingly difficult; the model took time to catch on, so the early versions are relatively rare. So it was a surprise to find one that today earns its keep in southeastern Pennsylvania as part of a fleet of street classics, mostly Twins, available for rent from RetroTours for rides of up to seven days around the northeast U.S. and Atlantic seaboard, with company founder, Joel Samick.

“My friend Jeff Cordisco decided that an early Gold Wing might be fun,” Samick told me. “He enjoys the hunt, and this one took him to upstate New York, where this one-owner bike with just 8,000 miles on the clock was hid-

ing 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 farkles, an acronym for Fancy Accessory, Really Kool, and Likely Expensive! This guy had got addicted to accessorizing his Gold Wing, so it had a full Windjammer fairing, a radio, saddlebags, a top box, crash bars, an extra light rail round the back, extra mirrors, and all kinds of stuff on it. This was common back in the day, but it's ironic in a way as Honda never in-



SEPTEMBER 1987



JANUARY 1988



MARCH 1988



MARCH 1990



APRIL 1990



Left: Soichiro Honda thought the Gold Wing's horizontally opposed cylinders resembled a bat. Right: A low center of gravity contributes to the GL's good handling.

tended 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.

“Jeff paid \$1,000 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 a bit of work to get it back on the road.” In fact, everything needed attention: the carbs, valves, head gasket, water pump, fuel tank, brakes, tires, tubes, and more.

“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! Jeff spent \$2,000 refurbishing it, and finally the 8,000-mile Honda was fit for use again, looking rather fine in canary yellow.

“Apparently, once the hunt is over, the prey loses its appeal. Once the Honda was brought back to life, Jeff was ready to move on to the next project. So after all that work, I gave Jeff back the money he'd paid me for repairs, plus some. I had come to love this bike, and I had to have it in the RetroTours fleet. Variety is the spice of life!

“Riding this bike is like taking a magic carpet ride: It defines smoothness. We literally balanced a nickel on edge

on the crankcase and revved the engine. The nickel never moved. With the Koni rear shocks, the suspension is comfortable and competent 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 600 lb 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 long highway trip because we only had a short timeframe, so we couldn't take all the backroads. The GL1000 of course excels at that kind of thing – 70 or 80 mph all day, piled high with baggage – and it was great. The ride is enjoyable in the extreme: Honda quality has a way of doing that. You need to ride this bike to discover the bare essential roots of the modern touring motorcycle.”

So I did.

The only flat-Four 4-stroke motorcycle I'd ridden before was a 1938 Zündapp K800, and like that bike, the GL1000 Gold Wing's engine was indeed completely devoid of vibration. The magic carpet ride cliché is completely applicable, since even by today's standards it's smooth and effortlessly efficient to ride. Fifty years ago, the GL must have seemed a motorcycle from another planet compared to the parallel-Twins which then ruled the big-bike marketplace before the takeover of the Japanese Fours and Laverda and BSA/Triumph Triples. Thumb the starter



JANUARY 1991



APRIL 1992



SEPTEMBER 1994



NOVEMBER 1994



SEPTEMBER 1998



and the torque response gives more than acceptable performance by the standards of 50 years ago. Apparently, the motor will rev safely to 8,500 rpm, but there's honestly no point – instead, just ride the torque curve peaking at 5,500 rpm, and enjoy that magic carpet ride. Cruising at 60 mph sees just 3,700 rpm on the clearly visible tach with a temperature gauge at the bottom, while 75 mph comes at 4,600 revs. The Gold Wing feels completely unstressed at these sorts of speeds, and a brief dash up to 7,000 rpm revealed total stability cruising at 100 mph, without getting too blown about despite the lack of a screen.

The riding position is relatively relaxed, though I found the U.S.-market handlebar with its pulled-back grips a little higher than I prefer. It delivers an upright posture which wasn't tiring during my 120-mile day, and the seat was pretty comfy too. The dummy fuel tank, with its flip-out panels on the left and on top collectively housing the electrics, air filter, coolant tank, and the storage space for the emergency kickstart lever in case you've flattened the battery, is one of the many innovative features of this bike. Like the constant beep when you activate the turnsignals until you turn them off. Why don't we have these today? Plus

button, and the flat-Four immediately catches alight, settling to a 1,200-rpm idle speed that's dead smooth.

The left-foot one-down gear change is smoother and crisper than any other

shaft-drive motorcycle of the era (i.e. 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 2,000 revs,

Above: A smooth, reliable engine and a comfortable seating position made the GL1000 an ideal tourer. Owners added fairings, luggage, and passengers. **Below left:** During restoration, accessories were removed to return this GL1000 to mostly stock form. **Below right:** Under the seat is a 5-gallon fuel tank.



DECEMBER 2000



FEBRUARY 2001



FEBRUARY 2006



APRIL 2009



JULY 2011

Top: Before the profusions of buttons on later models, the GL1000 had a simple cockpit.

Middle: Opening the false fuel tank panels reveals a storage compartment, the fuel filler, and more.

Bottom: The GL1000 stands the test of time.

the big mirrors give a good view behind and don't vibrate in the slightest.

While the GL's long wheelbase dulls its agility, the Honda flicked from side to side through a series of hillside bends really well – its low center of gravity 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 some European bikes of the era did. The Bridgestone BT46 tires Joel had fitted gave 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 upon acquiring the 8,000-mile bike, and with 19,284 miles now on the clock, the shocks still functioned well despite the restricted wheel travel over some of the less than ideally surfaced Pennsylvania roads we came across. The nonadjustable Showa fork worked okay but felt a little stiff – it didn't like successive bumps, as if the rebound setting was excessive. Suspension is one thing that's advanced 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 decent in the dry conditions I rode the Honda in and stopped it well from high speed – the big rear disc was especially effective. When in America...

Derided by many as a "two-wheeled car," the Honda Gold Wing has divided opinion for half a century. But I challenge anyone who wouldn't be seen dead on a Gold Wing to ride a first-generation GL1000 like this one. Dismiss your prejudices, and you may just appreciate what an innovative and impressive motorcycle this first Gold Wing was – and still is.



Alan Cathcart is a true mid-Atlantic man. Though born and based in Britain, he's a regular visitor to the USA and has visited 46 states so far. A Daytona race-winner, he combines track-testing racebikes old and new with clocking up the miles on the highways of the world. 🏍️



AUGUST 2015



JANUARY 2018



MAY 2018



SEPTEMBER 2020



SEPTEMBER 2021

50 YEARS OF THE HONDA GOLD WING

By GREG DREVENSTEDT

The histories of *Rider* magazine and the Honda Gold Wing have run parallel – and often intertwined – over the past 50 years.

Rider's first issue was published in the summer of 1974, and a few months later the Honda GL1000 Gold Wing was unveiled to the public.

The GL1000 debuted as a 1975 model, and sales in the U.S. began that year. *Rider* published a test of the Honda GL1000 in the Summer 1975 issue, which opened with this paragraph:

It's a bull in street clothing. A solid, low-to-the-ground animal from the breed that produced the classic 750 Four. An ultra-smooth, quick, fast, silent, powerful roadburner. A sophisticated touring machine.

Over the past half century, *Rider* has tested every Gold Wing model multiple times, and we have included the Wing in numerous comparison tests, tour tests, and travel stories. The Gold Wing became so synonymous with touring that it spawned an enormous aftermarket, and at least 50 companies have used Wings in their advertising in *Rider* over the years.

"It is possible that *Rider* owes its existence to the early Gold Wing," former EIC Mark Tuttle told me. "The touring aftermarket that sprang up in its wake filled the pages of the magazine with ads in the late 1970s and continued to do so even during the recessions of the 1980s, when the OEMs slashed their marketing budgets. Most of the other magazines were focused on sport, performance, and racing, and alternatives to print had yet to appear, making the travel and touring focus of *Rider* the best venue for companies like Vetter, Markland, Tour Rider, and many touring accessory warehouses to showcase their stuff. That revenue helped the magazine survive several nasty economic downturns in the 1980s.

"Honda was pretty quick to notice that it was missing an opportunity to provide and profit from those accessories itself, and it wasn't long before many of them appeared as factory

Tour-Testing the Honda GL 1000

Imitation, innovation and sophistication — Honda one-ups the competition with the complete touring motorcycle

Bob Mendel

It's still in street clothing. A solid, low-to-the-ground animal from the breed that produced the classic 750 Four. An ultra-smooth, quick, fast, silent, powerful roadburner. A sophisticated touring machine.

You can take your old 750 and push it over a hill. You can take your old 750 and push it over a hill. You can take your old 750 and push it over a hill. You can take your old 750 and push it over a hill. You can take your old 750 and push it over a hill.

The GL 1000 arrived at the top of the touring market, which means to compare and contrast it with a 750 is a bit like comparing apples to oranges. It offers the mobility of a 750 and the torque of a 1000. It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine.

It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine. It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine. It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine.

It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine. It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine. It's a big, powerful, sophisticated touring machine.



The Honda GL1000. It's been called the most sophisticated bike in the world.



Come ride with us.

"My idea of traveling is not so much getting somewhere, but getting to know it. Driving through a town with the windows rolled up just isn't good enough. I like to feel the road. The rest of the world, I believe when I see something that interests us. Meet the people and find out how they feel about things. That way, when I get to the other side of town, I know exactly what I was like. Dave and I have been touring for nearly fifteen years. We've met some interesting people along the way. And we've gotten to know each other better too."

Dean and Diane Thompson ride the world's most advanced touring motorcycle, the Honda Gold Wing. They do it in two weeks, two 50 weeks a year. The other two weeks, there's no talking, where you'll find them.

HONDA

equipment or options on Gold Wing models like the Interstate and Aspencade. That had a negative impact on the aftermarket's profitability and on *Rider*'s ad revenue. Fortunately for the magazine, it was soon replaced by copious amounts of Honda ads as the economy improved and the Gold Wing exploded in popularity with the release of the 1988 GL1500."

Alan Cathcart's review of the GL1000 on the preceding pages describes the Gold Wing's development, and below are some key milestones in the model's 50-year history.

1972: A team led by Soichiro Irimajiri develops the M1 prototype, a 1,470cc flat-Six precursor of the Gold Wing.

1974: The 1975 GL1000 Gold Wing KO makes its public debut at the Cologne Show. Developed by Toshio Nozue, who was also responsible for the CB750, the Gold Wing is dubbed “the ultimate motorcycle” by Honda.

1975 GL1000



1977: The Gold Wing Road Riders Association (GWRRA) is founded.

1979: Honda opens its \$50 million, 260,000 square-foot production facility in Marysville, Ohio.

1980: Honda introduces the 1,085cc Gold Wing GL1100, featuring a longer wheelbase, electronic ignition, increased fuel capacity, and less weight. An Interstate version offers a factory-installed fairing and luggage and an optional stereo-intercom system. Honda's Marysville Motorcycle Plant produces its first Gold Wing.

1982: Honda introduces the GL1100 Aspencade, featuring two-tone paint and the Interstate's touring amenities.

1983 GL1100 Aspencade



1984 GL1200 Interstate



1984: Honda introduces the 1,182cc GL1200, which has a stiffer frame, repositioned engine, smaller wheels, longer wheelbase and swingarm, and upgraded suspension.

1985: Honda commemorates 25 years in America and 10 years of the Gold Wing with the GL1200L Limited Edition, which features auto-leveling rear

suspension. The naked version of the GL1200 is discontinued. Honda opens an engine plant in Anna, Ohio, where GL engines would eventually be produced.

1988 GL1500



1988: Honda introduces the 1,520cc flat-Six GL1500, featuring a smoother transmission, increased fuel capacity, a stiffer chassis, improved brakes, and a comprehensive fairing.

1996: On July 26, the Marysville plant produces its 1 millionth U.S.-built Honda – a Gold Wing.

1997: Honda introduces the Valkyrie, a high-performance cruiser based on the GL1500 chassis.

2000: The Gold Wing's 25th anniversary. GL engine production is moved from Anna, Ohio, back to Marysville.

2001 GL1800



2001: Honda introduces the GL1800. Developed under Masanori Aoki, it has a larger, 1,832cc flat-Six, fuel injection, an aluminum frame, and optional ABS braking.

2004: Honda introduces the Valkyrie Rune, a radical-looking, heavily chromed, limited-edition GL1800-based cruiser.

2006 GL1800



2006: The Gold Wing gets in-dash GPS and heated seat and grips. The world's first motorcycle airbag is available on a GL1800.

2011: No Gold Wing model is produced as production moves to Kumamoto, Japan.

2012 GL1800



2012: The GL1800 gets a major update, with fresh styling, more luggage capacity, improved comfort, better handling, updated infotainment, and more.

2013: Honda releases the F6B, a bigger version of the Gold Wing.

2015 GL1800



2015: Honda offers a 40th anniversary edition Gold Wing with commemorative badges, a two-tone paint scheme, an embossed passenger seat, and a special ignition key.

2018 GL1800



2018 GL1800 Tour



2018: Honda introduces the sixth-generation Gold Wing, which is new from the ground up and is available as a standard model with no trunk (a replacement for the F6B) or as a Tour model with a trunk. The new GL1800 is lighter and more compact, has state-of-the-art features, and is available with an optional 7-speed automatic Dual Clutch Transmission.

2025: Honda celebrates the Gold Wing's 50th anniversary. 🏍️