

Sojourn Chronicles

V-Strom DL650: The Next 5,000 Miles

by D. Brent Miller

As gas prices have soared into the stratosphere, and commuters have looked at alternative modes of transportation, many have considered purchasing an economical motorcycle or scooter. It also appears that many are looking for the one do-all, affordable and economical motorcycle. It is clear from the number of downloads from the first review, "Suzuki V-Strom: The First 1,000 Miles," that this bike continues to attract attention from the curious and seriously interested.



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Everyone looks for information that helps them make a decision about buying the next motorcycle, or perhaps the first. Even though I have been motorcycling for more than 40 years, I did exactly the same. I started researching and reading rider/owner reviews, looking for information that would match my riding desires with the next motorcycle purchase.



With that in mind, here is a continuation of that review about the bike's capabilities as a commuter and touring machine. There are a couple of items from the first review that I want to add additional information or comments.

The Liter-Bike Fallacy: The biggest obstacle to buy the 650 rather than a liter bike was my ego. It just didn't seem manly to go backwards (remember, this is my ego speaking). But the fascinating surprise about the DL650 is coming to realize it performs like a much bigger engine. It is hard to believe this is only a 650! Some of you may remember when a 650 was a big and powerful bike. We're talking 1960s here. For those of you who think you might never buy less than a liter engine, you will be at least pleasantly surprised with a V-Strom DL650, if not blown away.

Ergonomics—The Comfort of the Ride: Grips. Seat. Windshield. These are some of the things most addressed by V-Strom owners, especially the windshield.

I like a fatter grip. So, I ordered a pair of Grip

Puppies from California Sport Touring, \$8.50 including mailing, and I was a happy camper. These slip on over the regular grip and fatten it up ... just right. Secondly, on longer rides or while touring, the wrist can get tired holding the throttle. The Grip Puppies helped, but not enough. I installed a Cruise Master Throttle Lock. It took a little modification, but it works perfectly and allows the rider to rest the right wrist.

The OEM hand guards arrived and were installed in short order. These are great protection for your hands, and it makes a difference in wind and rain.





One item I am still weighing is the bars themselves. My stature requires a slight lean forward to the grips. I have considered installing bar backs or maybe a different set of handlebars. Either option will raise the bars and bring them back a little providing a more upright riding position. After 6,000 miles, I'm not sure this is needed. I'll probably decide after making that first 4,500 mile round trip to Utah, Arizona and return to home near Cincinnati.

For short rides, the stock seat, now that it is broken in, is okay. For longer rides, you need to take frequent breaks off the bike to keep your bottom from falling asleep or going numb—neither of which is a pleasant experience. Every rider is going to be a little different in their seat needs. I can ride about two hours before I have to get off. After that, I need to take additional breaks every hour or so. A different seat is in the future, probably a winter project. Let's see if Santa knows whether or not I've been good or more deserving of a piece of coal in my Christmas stocking.

With all due respect to other V-Strom owners who report "severe buffeting" from the stock windshield, I still don't know what they're talking about. Perhaps

they expect to be in a perfect pocket of air like behind the wheel of a Mazda Miata convertible. I've been riding for 40 years, and started out without a windshield. Never owned one until I restored that 1976 Honda Gold Wing more than a decade ago.

I like a windshield that takes the blast off my chest and redirects most of that air over my helmet. I frequently ride with my visor up letting a little wind hit my face. Occasionally, I take a few bugs on the face, and the top of my helmet gets hit. So, I raised the windshield one notch, and that works perfectly to lift the flow of air just enough for me. I still get a few bugs, if they come over the windshield at just the right relative angle to my riding path, but it is reduced. Putting the visor down also helps. It's a motorcycle. I'm happy.

For those who are not sure about the windshield, before you spend a lot of money on different windshields, laminar lips or Madstad brackets, give the stock one a try. Ask yourself what you want the windshield to do. Consider the role your helmet plays in the wind stream. I wear a full-face helmet, which is a big difference over the $\frac{3}{4}$ helmet I used to wear.

Commuting

Many of you are looking for a good commuter bike, and the DL650 can meet your every need for a fun commute.

I have to be honest here. I don't commute on my V-Strom. Why? I work from my home office. Oh sure, I could take off at 7 or 7:30 a.m. every day, put in an hour of riding and return to the garage before hitting the computer, but that's not realistic or practical. Every year, I have to figure out how to handle "Ride Your Bike to Work Day." Besides, I'd miss the routine of seeing my wife off to her place of employment. I have this ritual of saying "See you later," to my wife, lover and soul mate.

What I do, however, is use the V-Strom every chance I get to run errands, and that's like commuting, isn't it? What makes this efficient is the installation of Givi bags. I can carry a lot of stuff in those bags. The top box is an E450 and the side cases are the E21s. I chose to install the Givi side case brackets rather than going with the SW Motech removable brackets. I rarely take the cases off, so it's a non issue for me. It's a perfect setup for commuting.



The top box can hold my jacket and full-face helmet when off the bike, and the side cases hold a rain suit, bungee cords and other stuff in one, while the other case holds maps and whatever I can fit in there, including some camera equipment. I can also stuff my riding jacket in the side case if I need more space in the top box.

Like commuting, I ride every week for a weekend breakfast ride, and most weeks, a mid-week dinner ride. Our breakfast rides can be 80 to 100 miles round trip. The rides are spirited with a group of riders on Yamaha FJR's, Harleys, BMWs, Triumphs, Kawasaki





cruisers and sport bikes, and one Big Dog chopper. Engine size-wise, my V-Strom DL650 is the smallest in the group. Yet, it has no problem keeping up with the pack, or leading when the opportunity arises.

Touring

I have managed to do several long day rides, and two three-day tours. The first tour was without the throttle lock, which prompted me to do something about the very tired wrist before taking any more long rides. My wrist was not tired at all on the second tour, and I learned when to get off the bike to rest my weary butt.

Everybody packs a little differently based upon travel and gear needs. I almost always travel with the laptop and camera gear. Frequently, I'm also carrying professional audio gear to do interviews and make field recordings. Because I am carrying some expensive gear, these items must be carried in the lockable Givi bags. All of my clothing is carried in a waterproof duffle bag that sits behind me on the pillion seat. This packing arrangement works pretty well for my needs, because I always ride solo. My best friend, my wife, is not into motorcycling, although she will go out for ice cream or a dinner ride on occasion. Likewise, I'm not into sewing and embroidery. We happily encourage each other's hobbies and avocations. However, she does have



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seven sewing machines and is looking at a new one. I only have the one bike. We may have to talk.

If I am touring and staying in motels, hotels or at another's home, my current bag set up works just fine. But, what if I want to go motorcycle camping and do a little fly fishing? Where do I start packing the rest of the stuff?

I am considering buying another set of side cases—bigger ones for touring and camping. I am most interested in a pair of the Givi E41 Keyless Monokey. With these bags, I can double my side case capacity, and the bags will fit right onto my side racks. I already know that there is additional space on top of my waterproof duffle for another bag containing a tent, sleeping bag and pad.

With all this luggage, that brings up one other thing about the Givi bags. All Givi bags come with two keys. The E21s come in a pair, so you get four of the same key. The top box comes with two keys, and they are not keyed to the sides. So I carry two keys—one for the sides and one for the top. When I buy the larger side cases, they will come with two keys for each box. Now we're talking about carrying a lot of keys just to get into your bags. The solution is to buy a matched set of locks from Givi and swap out

all the locks so that one key fits all. Givi sells them in sets of three or five. Yes, you get two keys for each lock purchased. Let's see that's six or ten keys! With a little bad luck, I'll lose the one and only key I'm carrying at the time I really need it! Nine spares will

be at home in the key drawer.

If you want to tour two up, and plenty of V-Strom owners do, you will have to think about your packing needs and concerns. One couple wrote an excellent ride report on the Adventure Rider Forum riding from Virginia to Utah and back on a DL650, [Dave and Julie: Tripping the Southwest](#).

I thoroughly enjoyed Dave's posts. They each took one side case for their clothing needs. The top case went to motorcycle riding gear and equipment.

So how does the V-Strom DL650 tour? I can't believe it's a 650. It rides and feels like a bigger bike. The engine is just as smooth as the day I rode it off the dealer's lot, maybe smoother. It has plenty of zoom, and it is capable of going way faster than I want to ride.

The bike has had absolutely no mechanical issues in 6,000 miles—just normal maintenance. The bike's performance on two laners at 55-60 mph



is euphoric. And, it handles the interstates just as easily at 70-75 mph. It is a very comfortable bike. The bike's weight can make it prone to movement due to heavy gusts of wind or passing semi trucks. But, all bikes are subject to gusts.

As others have said, "Everything they say about the V-Strom DL650 is true, and then some." It is a remarkable motorcycle. A pleasant surprise to those who doubt all the hype, and it is truly the Swiss Army Knife of motorcycles. It does it all, and this bike, the 2008 model does it at 60+ MPG!

Feedback from the First Review

Many of you are looking for owner's reports and reviews, and I hope this second review helps you in making a decision about your motorcycling. I don't know if you will be happy with a V-Strom DL650, because I don't know what type of riding you want to do, or if the V-Strom's higher stance will fit your frame. Buying the right bike for the type of riding you

plan will give you miles of enjoyment.

I have tried to show you how I use my 650, and many readers have found this very helpful. The first review continues to be the most downloaded page on the Sojourn Chronicles web site. I expect this second review will follow in the first one's footsteps.

Several readers have written to thank me for the first article because it helped them make up their minds about buying a DL650. They said, "Everything you said about the V-Strom is true." Sounds familiar. Many have also said my thoughts on the research and buying process were very helpful in selecting the right motorcycle for them. Whatever your reason for reading, I hope you find these articles helpful.

Drop me a line or write a comment on the web page. Thanks for reading. See you on the highway.—

DBrent

To contact D. Brent Miller:

DBrent@SojournChronicles.com

www.SojournChronicles.com

