

Sojourn Chronicles

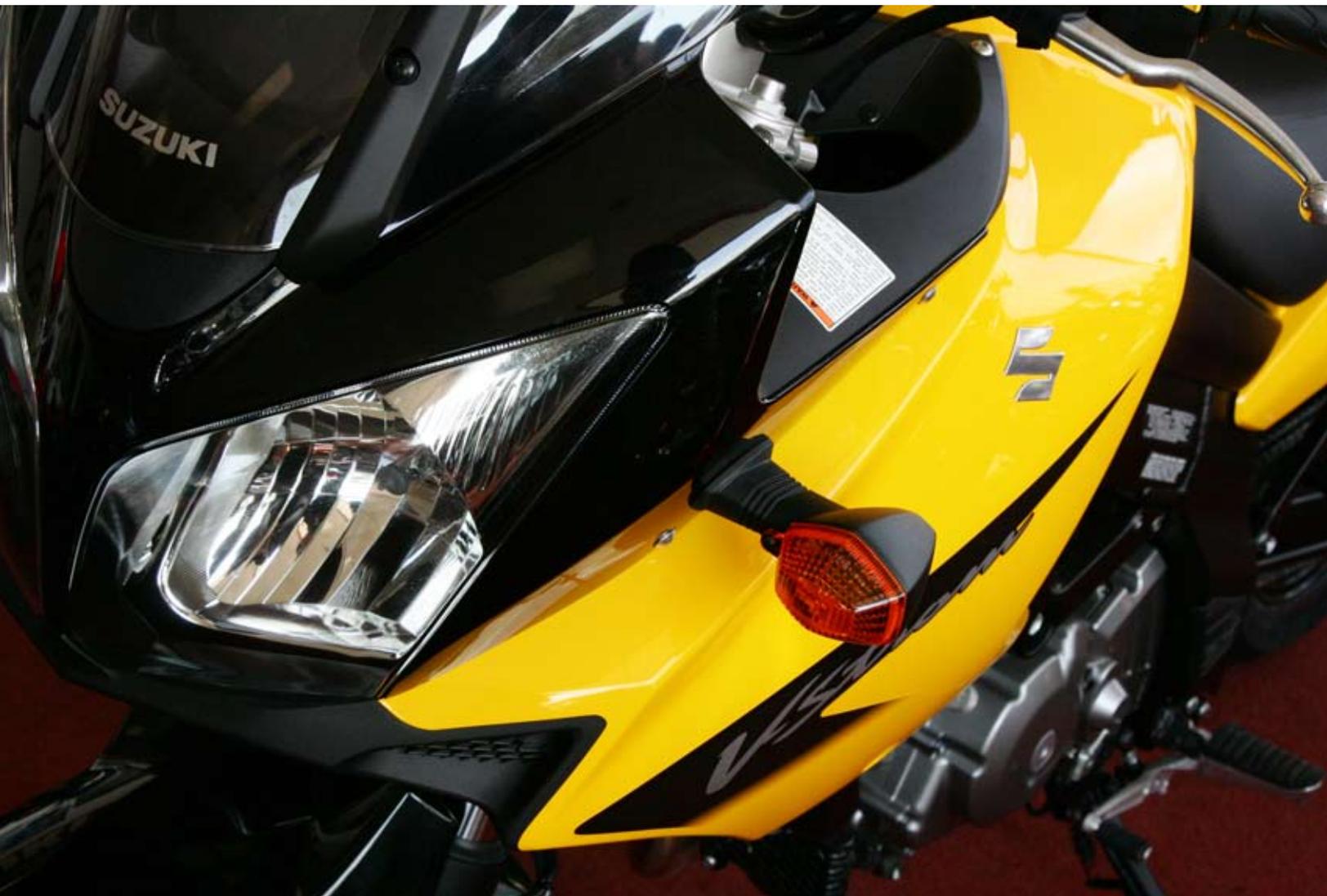
V-Strom DL650: The First 1,000 Miles

by D. Brent Miller

V-Strom



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.



First, some history. I started riding in 1965 at age 15 on a Lambretta motor scooter. A few months after getting my driver's license, I wrecked the Lambretta when a young man turned left in front of me. I wasn't hurt, but the Lambretta took a hit.

After graduating from high school in 1968, I bought my first motorcycle, a 1963 Harley Davidson Sprint Scrambler 250cc. I loved the idea of the scrambler, which had high pipes giving the motorcycle a higher ground clearance. It meant roads and trails. Turned out that H-D Sprint was the biggest piece of two-wheeled, motorized junk I ever owned. I traded it on a car. Now, the Sprint is a collector's item.

In 1970, Uncle Sam called. Nineteen months later, I returned from Vietnam a Sgt E-5 looking for some transportation. I bought a nice used Ford Fairlane and a brand new motorcycle—a scrambler. I still liked the idea of a multi-purpose motorcycle that could handle different types of roads and terrain. It seemed that the 1972 Honda CL350 Scrambler fit my needs, and so I bought it.



Over the years, I bought and sold other motorcycles, each one a little bigger than the previous. I found a god-awful, looking 1976 Honda Goldwing GL1000 sitting in the back of the Dubuque, Iowa, Harley-Davidson dealer. They sold it to me for \$500 just to get it off their sales floor. Frankly, I couldn't believe they actually had it ON the sales floor. It looked that bad. But mechanically, it was in good shape.

I refurbished the Goldwing, rode it for several years, and sold it to buy my last bike, a Honda Shadow Spirit VT1100C, which I truly loved. I thought it was perhaps the best all-round bike on the market. Thousands were built. Reliable. Bullet-proof. Highly desirable on the used market. As I started to tour on the Shadow, I found its weakness. It is not a long distance bike. It is a cruiser—feet forward riding on your tail bone. A one, two or three hour ride on the Shadow is no problem. But a 10 hour, 450 mile ride in one day is a little tiring. I'd still be riding it, if it



hadn't been for my brother who said he wanted to buy an adventure bike. That's when I started looking, and remembering why I bought those first two motorcycles—different types of roads and terrain. As much as I loved the Shadow, it did not fulfill all of my motorcycling desires and needs.

I started a self examination: What do I want in a motorcycle? What is important or a priority for my motorcycle purchase? Am I buying a motorcycle to impress others or declare a status in life? Would I rather ride or polish chrome? What kind of riding will I do? Where will I ride? How many miles will I ride each year? Will I be riding alone or two up with a passenger? There's a lot more involved: initial purchase price, cost of ownership (repairs, parts, and extras), and what a lot of people call "bang for the buck"—which is very subjective.

I realized I would be much happier buying the

motorcycle that fits the type of riding I plan to do, rather than buying the bike others think I should have.

In a nostalgic way, I'm returning to my original roots of motorcycling. I want a multi-tasker, a motorcycle that can handle different types of roads and terrain. I want a bike that has utility. I want a bike that is affordable, and economical to ride. This last criterion is becoming more important as gas crosses the \$3.50 per gallon threshold.

After months, maybe even a year of looking at a number of dual sport/adventure motorcycles, I considered several: the BMW 1150 and 1200 GS, the V-Stroms DL1000 and DL650, the announced BMW 800GS, the new Kawasaki KLR 650, the Aprilia Caponard, Triumph Tiger 1050, and the not-available in the USA Honda Transalp and Varadero.

I read ride reports from adventure motorcyclists riding in the Americas and around the world—what

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were they riding, and how was the motorcycle performing. Not that I ever plan to ride an Iron Butt, but what were the Iron Butt competitors riding, and more importantly, what finished and what dropped out from mechanical difficulties.

In doing my research, I learned there was a lot of brand loyalty, even though owners criticized issues with their bikes. My research suggested that initial purchase price did not guarantee reliability. And clearly, more expensive bikes, when the time for maintenance and repair comes, require more expensive parts and repairs. I also looked at availability of a dealership network. When I'm on the road, where is the closest dealer?



My research found DL650 owners riding these bikes up and down the Americas and occasionally two up. The first ride report that caught my attention was a magazine article that reviewed the DL650 on a trip to Alaska. When Cycle World reviewed the motorcycle and called it perhaps the most capable motorcycle available, I began to take a very hard, serious look.

Also evident: DL650 owners were like the Borg from Star Trek—"Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated." It seemed to me that many of the 650 owners were online fanatics about their bikes, and I wondered why.

The biggest obstacle was my own ego. I was thinking a "liter bike." Over the years, I kept

buying bigger bikes. A 650 seemed like a huge step backwards. I continued to review my criteria for the next motorcycle, and I continued to draw the same conclusion: The DL650 was probably my next motorcycle, but my ego kept saying, “It’s not a liter bike.” When the 2008 line up was announced with the color yellow offered for the first time, my mind was made up—2008 Suzuki V-Strom DL650, the yellow one!

In late February, after the International Motorcycle Show in Cleveland, I put a deposit on a yellow DL650. March 15th, I picked it up and rode it home. About 45 days later, I have burned three full tanks of gas, and had the 600-mile service performed at the dealer. I added Givi luggage, and taken every opportunity to ride the bike as a legitimate mode of transportation, preferring to ride the V-Strom to

run errands. With the Givi luggage, I’ve exponentially increased the bike’s utility. I’ve ridden a couple of breakfast rides, and anticipate many more this summer. I’ve not taken any long, day rides or tours—those are in the planning stages, and waiting for better weather.

As a new DL650 owner, one word describes the first 1,000 miles on this bike: WOW! Everything they say about the DL650 is true and then some. And another truth: “Resistance was futile. I have been assimilated.”

As a journalist, let me try to be a little more objective, starting with bio facts. I am 5’10” with a 30” inseam, and weigh about 200 pounds. (Okay, maybe 208. Really.) At 57, I’ve been riding for more than 40 years.

The V-Strom sits tall. Unlike the Shadow, where I could easily sit with my feet flat on the ground with knees slightly bent, the V-Strom’s seat requires me to be on my toes a little. I calculate both of my heels are about one inch above the pavement. A gentle rock to one side or the other allows me to get one foot flat on the ground. The weight of some bikes might make this

a concern, but the DL650 feels light and it is easily managed. Most of the time, I have the bike balanced using just the balls of my feet.

The seating is upright. There is a very slight lean forward to the grips. My knees

are bent and the foot pegs are directly under my seat, which gives the rider the ability to use their legs and knees as shock absorbers—something that is impossible to do on a cruiser where you take every bump on your tail bone. Riding gives a different feel than just sitting on the bike. A friend, after swapping bikes for about 15 miles, said all the controls are right there—very comfortable and ergonomic. I agree. It is comfortable. I’m still breaking in the seat, and it has been comfortable on one-hour + rides before dismounting. The true test will be on those long rides.

I like a thicker hand grip than what comes on the V-Strom, but this is easily fixed with after-market accessories. I ordered the Suzuki hand guards when I bought the bike, and am still waiting for those.



The V-Strom is a joy to ride. It is light, zippy, and has plenty of “flickability.” On curvy and twisty roads, I am totally amazed at how this bike flicks back and forth into the curves so easily. All of the other owners say it’s so. I had to ride the V-Strom to believe it myself. During that “let’s swap bikes” with my friend, Scott, I rode his FJR. I wanted my bike back after a couple of miles.

I’ve just finished the break-in period, which is to keep the bike under 5,000 rpm. But, my normal riding style is probably in the 3k-5k rpm range. Cruising down a two-laner at 55 mph, I’m turning about 4,300 rpm. On the Interstate, 70 mph indicated is about 5,250 rpm in 6th gear. Red line on this sweet little 650 is a whopping 10,500! So, 3k to 5k is no sweat. The range of the six gears seems a little short, but then I am used to a 5-speed, shaft-drive cruiser. Many owners report replacing the 15-tooth, front sprocket to a 16 tooth, thereby giving it a little more between gear changes, and reducing the highway rpms. I’ve compared miles and mph against my GPS. The speedometer is in error, as other owners have reported. It’s about 7% over stated—70 mph indicated is really about 65. The odometer is pretty close—less than 1%. I’ll be checking this on longer trips.

My last two motorcycles had shaft drive. I was not



concerned about going to a chain drive, after all, motorcycles have been driven by chains for more than 100 years. Secondly, sprockets and chains give the owner the opportunity to tweak performance. That’s something the shaft-drive owner cannot do. It’s a compromise. Chains offer lower cost to purchase a bike, but require maintenance. Shaft-drive motorcycles cost more, but are practically maintenance free.



Many DL650 owners report wind buffeting with the stock windscreen, and their frantic efforts to fix said problem with after market windshields and adapters. Frankly, I don't know what they are talking about. I've been riding for more than 40 years. I don't expect to sit in a calm pocket of air behind a windshield. It's a motorcycle. For my stature, the blast off the wind screen shoots just over my head. I still get air on my face, but not the blast. I often ride with the visor up on my full-face helmet. I want a windshield or screen that takes the blast off my chest making a long distance ride more pleasant and less tiring. The V-Strom screen does exactly that.

I have never ridden hard, nor do I plan to run this bike through the gears to red line at every stop light. That's just not the way I ride, or ever ridden. So, it's not an age thing.

The positive, absolutely awe-inspiring report is my gas mileage. The first, full tank of gas resulted in 57.4 mpg. The second was

60.4, and the third tank was 60.7 miles per gallon! To have all this fun at this economy is nothing short of incredible.

As of this writing, I have not taken the opportunity to ride the DL650 on unpaved roads. But, most agree it is a very capable bike on all types of road surfaces. That's good, because I have a couple of tours planned that include asphalt, gravel and dirt fire roads—a variety of roads and terrain, requiring a scrambler-style, adventure motorcycle!--**DBrent**

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