

Tour Tested: Kawasaki Nomad Coast to Coast

For over five years, Kawasaki's 1500 Nomad has been one of our favorite baggers. For our first test in the June 1998 issue of *Motorcycle Cruiser* magazine, we rode Interstate 10 from end to end to see if the Nomad's got legs.

To really get to know a touring motorcycle, ride it from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Daytona Beach, FL
3/8/98 3:30 P.M.

Scott Russell just walked away with Daytona 200 win number five. Jamie and I are almost walking away from Daytona Beach. The traffic on I-95 north is so bloody thick I doubt we'll see better than second gear in the next 60 miles. According to my calculations, we've got 2700 miles to go. I'll just lug the engine in first gear and hope the traffic doesn't come to a complete stop, because then I'll have to put my foot down. I've been talking to bikers and looking at bikes for a week. Now I want to ride.

We've known for a year that Kawasaki was building a tourer based on the Vulcan 1500 Classic. We just didn't know how different the new bike would be from its sibling, a bike we've consistently rated as our favorite big twin cruiser. When the first photos of the Nomad were released, it seemed that the essence of the Classic had been retained but augmented with the addition of the windshield and hard bags. After Friedman spent a day in a pre-production Nomad's saddle (the red bike shown here and in the black-and-white photos), we knew that Kawasaki had gone the distance to build a special motorcycle. We decided to go the distance to test it.



Photography by Fran Kuhn.



We regard the Nomad's side-opening bags as perhaps the prettiest in motorcycling.

65.6 inches), gives the Nomad stability of tectonic proportions.

Reaching down from the new triple clamp, a pair of 41mm stanchions bracket an all-new, cast-aluminum wheel. The increased stiffness afforded by the wheels will be welcome if rough road conditions are encountered while carrying a full load of cargo. Also, as we've often stated, cast wheels allow the fitment of tubeless tires, which resist sudden, catastrophic deflation. In addition, tubeless tires can often be patched well enough to limp to the nearest bike shop, thereby avoiding an extended wait for help in East Nowhere. Both the 3.0 x 16-inch front and the 3.5 x 16-inch rear wheels wear identically sized Bridgestone 150/80-16 radials, adding to the bike's beefcake look. The H-rated tires are more than capable of supporting the weight the Nomad will end up carrying for long distances. Long tread life will be a benefit to all Nomad riders, but particularly so for riders in wetter climates, where a deep tread is essential to the rain-worthiness of the bike.

Madison, FL
3/8/98 7:05 P.M.

We watch the light show for almost 30 minutes before pulling over to don rain gear. Overhead, the sky flashes gray, purple, and an ominous brown, as the lightning dances from cloud to cloud. Thunder grumbles with a menace surpassing all the unbafling pipes we've endured for the past week. Jamie and I laugh at the absurdity of standing in our headlights to struggle into our gear. The wind rises as we ride into the storm we've heard about on the news for the last two days. After a few tentative drops the sky unloads, rain streaking curved arcs in our headlights, as if changing course to give us the full brunt of its force. Soon we're riding through sections of two-inch-deep standing water on Interstate 10 -- the scene occasionally frozen in relief by nearby lightning strikes. Sanity, in the form of a motel, prevails 45 miles later.



The counterbalanced engine is exceptionally smooth. The later fuel-injected models offered slightly more power, but also require premium fuel.



The floorboards are positioned farther back than on the similar Vulcan 1500 Classic.

The Nomad was built to handle more than just the interstate drone. The additional frame stiffness and cast wheels are connected by a sturdy suspension. The front suspension delivers a supple yet firm ride, exhibiting less dive under braking than its sibling. The air-adjustable rear shocks are 0.4-inch longer than those on the Classic, with all of the additional length incorporated into the longer stroke of the shocks. Although Kawasaki recommends that the air pressure in the shocks be set at zero, it can be increased to a maximum of 43 psi. Think of the air chamber as a combination of a spring preload adjustment and a variable spring rate adjuster. The higher the air pressure in the shock, the stiffer the initial rate and the more resistance there is to compression. The Nomad's shocks also offer four-position rebound damping adjustability. When riding solo, even with a fairly heavy load, we found zero pounds of pressure to be ideal. If two large-size humans were added to the cargo load, a few extra psi would be in order. To adjust the air pressure, simply remove the cover of the standard-size nipple and attach a hand pump (since compressed air can over-pressurize the shocks and ruin them). The firm, number four rebound damping setting felt about right in all riding situations we encountered.

On the road, we enjoyed the fruits of Kawasaki's labor. Expansion joints slip by almost unnoticed. Riding on Botts dots lane markers illustrates how well the suspension behaves. Some bikes physically jar the rider, but the Nomad simply lets the rider know that the dots are there. Square-edged jolts are mostly suppressed before they reach the rider. With suspension this compliant, we wondered how well the Nomad would behave on a twisty road. In a nutshell, the Nomad likes to corner. The stable steering geometry and the competent suspension keep the bike tracking on line with almost no fuss, unless large bumps are encountered mid-corner. Even then, the Nomad only expresses its displeasure at dealing with such bumps once lean angles and speeds that are decidedly un-cruiserish are reached. The high-speed wallow evident in the Classic never made an appearance on the Nomad. Since we were expecting stability, the nimbleness of the Nomad surprised most testers on their first rides. The ultra-stable steering geometry numbers made us expect the bike to require a bit of muscle to turn into a corner quickly. Not so. In fact, the bike's light steering belies its 775 pounds -- from highway speeds right down to a walking pace.

*Ocean Springs, MS
3/9/98 11:40 A.M.*

Finally starting to warm up. The sun broke out of the clouds about an hour ago. Incredible headwinds! A mini-van got blown across two lanes in front of me a while back. The Nomad just hunkers down and keeps going -- the fuel gauge drops a lot quicker, though. A guy driving a beat-up van with a leaking, 40s-era Harley in the back looked at the Nomad and said, "For a bike that ain't a Harley, that looks pretty good." His girlfriend had almost as many tattoos as the van had stickers. Both were faded to a uniform level of illegibility.

Didn't even put my feet down in Alabama.

Hauling the Nomad to a stop is an easy task, thanks to the 11-inch dual front discs and 12.5-inch rear. Panic stops require only two fingers to control the two-piston calipers. New, wider-blade handlebar levers improve comfort while braking. The 57 percent rear weight bias means that the big rear disc plays an important role in maximum braking. Add a passenger, or fill the bags, and the single-piston rear brake becomes essential to effective stops. The Nomad doesn't try to stand up while braking in a turn.

A 1470cc engine, little different from the Classic's new five-speed, generates the speed the Nomad's brakes scrub off so effectively. Air still draws through a single 40mm Keihin CV carburetor (with the new carb heater and K-TRIC throttle positioning sensor) via the freer-breathing airbox. Two hydraulically adjusted intake and exhaust valves still control the flow through each cylinder's bore and stroke, 102 and 90mm respectively. The exact same five-speed transmission puts the power to the ground. The Nomad's engine received 25 percent more flywheel effect for smooth power delivery. The alternator now generates 42 amps (a 68 percent increase) to power accessories. The oil level sight glass still requires two people (a holder and a looker) to perform a job that should only take one. Kawasaki has told us that next year the problem will be remedied. (Since the Nomad is a '99 model, does that mean we'll have to wait until 2000?) [Editor's note: In 2003, we are still waiting.] Finally, the exhaust system was redesigned to make room for the bags. Even though the bags block the rider's view of the pipes, we like the new exhaust note.



Passengers liked the riding position and the saddle, but most would like a backrest added for security.

Despite the additional 81 pounds, the engine has to carry around, we never found ourselves wanting for power. On the highway going up hill with a full load and a headwind? Be sure to downshift before trying to pass that truck. Engine vibration doesn't really enter the picture until 85 mph. More cruiser-like speeds are silky smooth. Around town, the Nomad pulls away from all cars (except fast ones piloted by pimply-faced kids) without breathing hard. The five-speed gearbox really helps in urban mode.

*Sonora, TX
3/10/98 2:47 P.M.*

I wasn't paying attention to how much the wind had picked up -- and how fast I was going -- until I needed to switch to reserve at 86 miles. Texas is a big place. Produced a bunch of stomach acid in the last 37.1 miles. Spent the last 15 hunched behind the windshield with my feet tucked back on the passenger floorboards, trying to be really small -- and light. As I pumped 4.23 gallons into a 4.2-gallon tank, an old guy with a custom Harley in the back of his pick-up approached me: "That's a nice paint job. It stock? You know, I've got over \$30,000 in my Harley -- over seven of that in paint." Paint must be expensive in Texas. On the way to the Interstate, I smelled barbecue from a little shack next to a gravel yard. Thick slices of beef, homemade sauce, and a roll. Life is good.



This bike featured Cobra's initial accessory offering for the Nomad.

optional backrest, and passengers will enjoy all-day rides as much as the rider.

The windshield drew the only consistent complaints about the Nomad. Although the windshield adjusts over two inches of travel -- which should be enough to allow the majority of riders to see over it -- the cockpit suffered from buffeting at elevated speeds. Since our 5-foot-11 transcontinental editor encountered consistent headwinds throughout his trip, he reported that moving the windshield to its highest position worked best for him. He admits he wasn't riding slow (usually about five mph above the 70- to 75-mph speed limit) but even when there was no headwind, his helmet was consistently jostled. Since buffeting wasn't a problem on the pre-production Nomad Friedman rode, we wonder if the difference in turbulence was due to the beading the pre-production bike wore around the edge of its windshield.

On the positive side, the Nomad never misbehaved in the wind, which sometimes gusted as high as 35 to 45 mph. No matter what quadrant the wind originated from, the Nomad tracked true; although gas mileage did suffer in headwinds. The trip low of 23.1 mpg (the trip best of 38.1 mpg was recorded in windless Arizona) occurred while fighting headlong into a consistent 30-mph blow. The windshield lowers delivered a pronounced increase in weather protection compared with bikes sporting a windshield only. On cold mornings, riders can effectively move their legs out of the wind by placing them as close as possible to the engine. Riders who want to ride sans windshield and bracketry, during around-town, hot-weather cruising need only remove eight bolts.



Cast wheels, tubeless tires, dual discs, a stiffer chassis, and revised steering geometry all contributed to the Nomad's success as a tourer.

first insect samples on the windshield after I emerged from behind the cold front. I guess I've got El Nino to thank for the bumper crop of flowers bursting red, orange, and yellow across the desert. Almost rode off the highway while admiring the view. I've never seen a greener spring in the Sonora Desert.

My butt hurts.

Passersby consistently commented on the Nomad's bags. They seemed captivated by their shape and the prominent chrome handles. The latches of the positive locking bags drew mixed reviews from testers. Some liked that the bags could never be opened or closed without using the key. Others said they'd prefer to simply unlock the bags at the end of a long day of riding and pocket the key. However, all the testers felt that having to physically close the bags by using the handle would help to avoid the problem of riding away with a bag ajar, dropping belongings along the way. Should a bag ever fall open, the elastic straps will retain large items inside.

Kawasaki's choice to break with the current touring cruiser trend of building top-loading bags makes loading the 35-quart bags easy, particularly when using the optional bag liners. A U-shaped top zipper allows easy loading of the liner, while a zipper across the outside-top corner of the bag enables access to the liner's interior. Three handy exterior pockets hold travel necessities like sunglasses or a camera. Not using the liners? The left saddlebag has a mesh envelope on the door for maps or other small articles. Be careful when packing these saddlebags, though. If the contents bulge out too much at the sides, the rear portion of the door may not quite seal, allowing rain access to your dainty ungerthings. Using the door to compress the bag's contents is a recipe for leakage, although using plastic bags inside of the bag liners will remedy the problem. Don't be overly concerned about potential leaks, though. In the intense Florida rainstorm, the one bag that was overfilled only collected about two teaspoons of water.

Removing the bags requires only a 10mm socket and ratchet. When reinstalling the bags, a drop of blue Locktite should be used to keep the bags in place.

If Kawasaki wanted the chassis to handle the loads encountered on touring duty, the cockpit was designed solely to maximize rider comfort. The Nomad's seat may be the best long-distance stock seat ever bolted to a cruiser. None of the testers had a complaint about the shape or density of the foam. Only during the last 400 miles of the cross-country blast was our associate editor's hiney noticeably tender -- after three days of all-day, non-stop riding. Kawasaki moved the floorboards rearward 2.6 inches, putting the rider's feet more directly below, which eases the strain on the lower back. While we did find the new floorboard position more comfortable on long rides, the new position made the brake pedal slightly more difficult to cover when riding around town. The floorboard placement also cost the Nomad a bit of ground clearance when compared with the Classic. Still, the Nomad touches down cleanly when the metal initially meets the pavement. But beware, the floorboards' support hardware will drag -- possibly levering a wheel off the ground -- if the warning of scraping metal isn't heeded. Passengers also receive the floorboard treatment. Bolt-on the



Our obnly significant complaint about the Nomad has been the buffeting around your helmet, created by the windshield.

As on most of the Nomad, the fit and finish of the windshield are exceptional. The straps on the front and back of the windshield have a mirror-finish. Only when looking closely at the brackets mounted to the stanchions can roughly chromed metal be found. Almost all the bolts visible from the saddle are either chromed or covered with a chrome cap. The polished master cylinders contribute to the shine. The controls, with their wide, adjustable levers, offer good looks and a quality feel as well. The self-canceling turn signals even garnered positive comments from the tester most ardently opposed to such frivolities. Pressing the horn button produces a surprisingly loud noise (finally!) -- enough to startle one tester the first time he had a reason to honk. The paint quality is exceptional, with only a hint of orange peel in a few places. Kawasaki's choices for the two-tone schemes elicited compliments at almost every gas stop.

*Tonopah, AZ
3/11/98 3:40 P.M.*

The temperature was 28 degrees when I left El Paso this morning. Now I'm so hot I stopped, desperate with dehydration. Drank a 20-ounce Gatorade and a half-liter of water, and I'm still thirsty. Started collecting my



Longer air-adjustable shocks accommodate the added weight of the Nomad and its likely load. The bags' curves match the fenders.

Los Angeles, CA.
3/11/98 9:38 P.M.

Useless statistics: Total mileage: 2568.2; total time to cross the continent: 3 days, 9 hours (including time zone changes); average speed (including time spent sleeping): 31.7 mph; average speed (when actually riding): 56.8 mph; number of gas stops: 24; average distance between gas stops: 107.0 miles; number of dead skunks on the side of the road: 11 (all in Texas); number of car passengers sleeping with bare feet on the dash: 4 (all women -- two with painted nails); number of vendor or race team trucks seen returning to California: 3 (Vance & Hines, Team Honda, and Motoport -- all seen in New Mexico, Arizona and California); last place I saw a motorcyclist that I was certain was riding home from Daytona: west of San Antonio (on his way to Albuquerque); number of times my dog spun in circles before jumping on me when I arrived at home: 7; length of the smooch with my lovely wife upon my safe return: Hey, none of your business!

Our time with the Nomad impressed us with how well the bike handled the varied duties a touring cruiser must perform. In boulevard mode, the Nomad looks good and handles easily. In horizon-chasing mode, the Nomad delivers all-day comfort and only lacks a bit of range to fulfill the potential of the platform. Priced at \$11,999, the Nomad is one of motorcycling's exceptional values.

High Points: Comfortable seat for long hauls, stunning looks, stable at speed, handles wind from any angle.

Low Points: Limited touring range, buffeting from windshield, overpacking saddlebags can cause them to leak.

First Changes: Arrange for more vacation time, buy bag liners, passenger backrest, add engine guards or remove mounts.



This (red) bike was a prototype we rode a few months before the actual test. The windshield and other details were different, and the engine guards were not standard equipment.

Touring features on the Nomad, like the windshield and hard bags, are so tailored and work so well they remind you that aftermarket really does mean afterthought. And I love the more upright seat position. I'm always happier sitting on a bike than in one.

I found the Nomad handled cleanly under all conditions, including the vigorous freeway speeds where the Classic's front end feels a bit unwieldy. I'm loving the new 5-speed and additional power found in both Vulcans, too. In fact, I can't think of a single thing I didn't like about the Nomad...except that I wasn't the one to ride it home.

Jamie Elvidge

A veteran tester and editor, Elvidge gets e-mail at Jamie.Elvidge@primedia.com.

Brasfield: Imagine the touring cruisers arranged as if on a dessert tray. While any one of them has the credentials to go the distance in style, they each have features that appeal to differing palates. How to decide?

The Valkyrie Tourer? Well, it's the athlete of the group—*à*—a healthy fruit cup. The Royal Star Tour Deluxe? Mud pie. Beautiful to look at, but so rich that I can never make it through an entire slice. The Road King? Coconut creme pie. I love the creme part, but honestly, my feelings about coconut vary with the phase of the moon. The Shadow A.C.E. Tourer? Tiramisu. A little lighter than the others, but quite satisfying.

The Nomad? Well, it would have to be lemon chess pie. While a relatively easy recipe, lemon chess pie must be made with a deft hand. A little too much of one ingredient, and what was mouth-watering on the first taste could become sickeningly sweet before the slice is half-finished. As I embarked on my trip cross-country, I remembered how, when I was a kid, my mother always said my eyes were bigger than my stomach. Had I fallen for the shapely crust? The delicately baked, brown top of the filling? Had I bitten off more than I could chew? Would the tanginess of the lemon turn sour in West Texas, miles from anything to drink?

After logging over 3000 miles on the Nomad, I can say that Kawasaki baked up a tasty dish. Good eats. Oh, and keep the helpings coming, I'm not full yet.

Evans Brasfield

Send your recipes to Brasfield via his website: www.EvansBrasfield.com

Cherney: "Dang Evans, what'd ya do to this thing?!" was my first reaction to the dusty Nomad we beheld at our L.A. offices last week. True, associate editor Brasfield had just ridden Kawasaki's new tourer in from the East Coast, but did he have to get it so doggone grimy?

Dead bug juice notwithstanding, Kawasaki's Vulcan 1500 Nomad is quite a looker, with sweeping, muscular lines and a striking, metallic paint job. And let's not forget those saddle, um... "pods" let's call 'em. Sleek and stylized, these hard bags had motorists doing double takes wherever we went; you could practically fit your couch in their capacious interior. Not that you'd need to. The Nomad's plush saddle is so easy on the keister, it took me three tries to build up enough momentum (and desire) to pry myself out of it. The cush seat, swept-back handlebar, and well-positioned floorboards made me want to slap some more miles on the odometer. Except for a tentative front brake (use both of 'em, like they told ya in school) and a squirrely exhaust note, this is a well-designed, serious touring machine; one I'd love to take, oh say...cross-country.

Andy Cherney E-mail your hair styling suggestions to Andy.Cherney@primedia.com

Elvidge: Kawasaki has a solid argument for fixing things that ain't broke. Their successful Vulcan line just keeps getting bigger and better. And while the arrival of the Classic in 1996 pretty much cancelled the original 1500 from my list of great bikes, the Nomad demands an additional entry.

I wouldn't call myself a touring rider, but I am a rider who enjoys high-mileage travel and prefers a bike that's up to it. When I was on the Nomad it kept whispering, "Come on, let's hit the road." I like that in a bike.

Friedman: Sure, sure, the Nomad is a seriously satisfying way to travel, but consider the other possibilities. It seems to me that beneath the fairing and bags exists an even better no-frills cruiser than the Vulcan 1500 Classic.

This thing has a stiffer chassis, cast wheels and tubeless tires, better brakes, adjustable suspension, a nicer riding position, a plusher saddle, pretty passenger floorboards and other extras, all for only \$1300 more than the Classic. I'd buy this thing even if I didn't want to tour, and just strip off that big windshield. Chrome those wheels! Pop on a set of spots and some other goodies, and you have a unique custom that's functionally better than the current King Cruiser.

And when you get Nomadic urges, just bolt up the windshield and hit the superslab.

Art Friedman

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SPECIFICATIONS

1999 Kawasaki Nomad



Designation: VN1500-G1/L
Suggested base price: \$11,999
Standard colors: Red/red, green/green
Extra cost colors: None
Standard warranty: 24 mos., unlimited miles
Recommended service interval: 6000 miles

ENGINE & DRIVETRAIN

Type: Liquid cooled, 50-degree tandem V-twin

Valve arrangement: SOHC, 2 intake valves, 2 exhaust valves, operated by hydraulic adjusters
Displacement, bore x stroke: 1470cc, 102 x 90mm
Compression ratio: 8.6:1
Carburetion: 1, 40mm Keihin CV
Lubrication: Wet sump, 3.7 qt.
Minimum fuel grade: 87 octane
Transmission: Wet, multiplate clutch, 5 speeds
Final drive: Shaft, 2.619:1

CHASSIS Wet weight: 775 lbs.

Wheelbase: 65.6 in.

Overall length: 98.8 in.

Rake/trail: 32 degrees / 7.4 in.

Wheels: Cast aluminum, 3.0 x 16in. front, 3.5 x 16 in. rear

Front tire: 150/80-19 71H Bridgestone Excedra G703, tubeless radial

Rear tire: 150/80-19 71H Bridgestone Excedra G702, tubeless radial

Front brake: 2, single-action, twin-piston calipers, 11-in. disc

Rear brake: single-action caliper, 12.5-in. disc

Front suspension: 41mm stanchions, 5.9-in. travel

Rear suspension: dual dampers, 3.9 in. travel, adjustable for air-pressure, rebound damping

Fuel capacity: 4.2 gal., (1.1 gal. reserve)

Handlebar width: 32.5 in.

Seat height: 28.3 in.

Inseam equivalent: 33.2 in.

ELECTRICAL & INSTRUMENTATION

Charging output: 588 watts

Battery: 12v, 14AH

Forward lighting: 55/60-watt headlight

Taillight: Dual bulbs

Instruments: speedometer, odometer, tripmeter, fuel gauge; warning lights for high beam, turns signals, neutral, coolant temperature, oil pressure

PERFORMANCE

Fuel mileage: 23.2 to 38.0 mpg, 34.8 mpg average

Average range: 146.2 mi.

RPM at 60 mph, top gear: 2545

200 yard, top-gear acceleration from 50 mph, terminal speed:: 65.9 mph

Quarter-mile acceleration: 15.11 sec., 84.1 mph