

The Long Ride of the Valkyrie



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# Past Forward

**Kawasaki Vulcan  
1500 Drifter**

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# Drifting backward, looking forward

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**S**tyle. It was definitely all about style. The Loews Miami Beach Hotel and its sister building, the St. Moritz, Art Deco restoration madness down at the beach on Ocean Drive and Collins Avenue - the heart of the historical Deco preservation district of South Beach - the ambience of this introduction was geared toward the glamour of the 1940s, precisely the era to which the new Vulcan 1500 Drifter owes its form.

What we sure weren't in Florida for were the roads. While southern Florida may have sunny skies, warm water, white sand, beautiful people and some fabulous Art Deco architecture, the topography is limited to F-L-A-T flat.

In fact, when it came time to plan some photo shoots during the day, we took a moment to discuss finding a turn, because that's usually where we like to shoot our "action-packed" pictures.

"Well, I think there's a turn about 17 miles up the road here - straight up the road."

And when our guide said "a" turn, that's what he meant.

Hell, when we got there, we thought about taking pictures of the empty corner, just because it seemed more rare than the manatee.

"What's that thing called where the road like veers to the side, or something?"

"That's a turn, Billy, a rare civility involved in a delicate symbiosis with a thing called 'hill'."

"Dad, what's 'hill'?"

"It's a place where the earth leans toward the sky like a Wayne Gardner high-side."

"Is anything that high?"

So, no, we weren't really there for the roads, but we were there to ride.

We spent the first day on strictly local cruising, with a few stops for photo-op-type stuff. After the mandatory 50 U-turns for passes by the photographer's lens, we headed straight for Ocean Drive. What's more important is a cruiser than being seen?

People asked, "What kind of bike is that?"

Then you tell them it's a Kawasaki and they repeat what you just told them with this perplexed, somewhat incredulous tone, "Kawa...saki?"

"Yep."

Even in my chrome-dome full-face space helmet and plastic jacket, they was lots of finger-pointing and the like. Or maybe it was because of the space helmet and plastic jacket. No matter, people like the Drifter, for when it was time to stop for a slow-to-arrive dry chicken sandwich and soggy fries at the Clevelander (the heart of Ocean Drive and heavy with parked motorcycles) to get away from the bike and see how it did on its own, crowds were spending less time on the fully customized, any-of-chrome, S&S-equipped, apo-tanger sideshows than they were the skinned fenders, sand-cast-look engine silencers (redesigned for easier oil filling and level sighting), and blacked-out trim of the Drifter. (Note: It would be impossible to get through this story without using the word "Indian," so there it is. To say the Drifter owes a lot of its look to the fabled American marque would be an understatement. Derivative or not, people dig it.)

The latest addition to the Vulcan line is the Vulcan 1500 Drifter. No one said "Harley clone" the whole time.





The fork offset and angle of the shocks are unique to the Drifter in the Vulcan line and fall between the Classic and Nomad specs. The floorboards, however, are located where the Nomad's are, for better long-distance comfort. The front brake is a solid, 300mm disc.

Okay, Kawasaki, mission accomplished.

Oh, yes, but we did say we were there to ride. Well, then, let's ride. With day one in the books, followed by another fine meal and the Australian journalists once again trying to kill us all with beer and tequila chasers, it was up early the next day for a 250-mile cruise from sea to shining sea, all the way from the Atlantic coast to the Gulf coast via, in part, Highway 41 through the Everglades, otherwise known as Alligator Alley.

The starting procedure was simple: Insert key, turn key, push starter. There is a fast-idle lever, but it wasn't necessary in the mild climes of Miami, El-Ei-Lay, and shouldn't be, according to Kawasaki, unless it is extremely cold out or you are at very high altitude. (Altitude? Definitely not a problem here.) Properly done fuel injection is nice this way. The Drifter is equipped with a new digital fuel-injection system that figures out the fuel dosage using all the usual environmental info (air pressure, temperature and the like), as well as bike-related stuff like throttle position, intake pressure and water temperature (the Vulcan is liquid-cooled). Dual 36mm throttle bodies are fitted to separate intake tracts, and the injection system works in concert with a two-plug-per-cylinder digital ignition system.

Although Ricky Gadson obviously won't be hitting the drag strip with the Drifter, it does seem to offer somewhat more vigorous acceleration than your standard carbureted Vulcan 1500. In any case, rideability is what matters, and that was good, the Drifter taking crawl speed in the fifth of five slick-shifting gears without a hiccup, no matter what we did with the throttle. Kawasaki tells us that, through higher compression, fuel injection and other engine mods, there is 85 ft.-lbs. of torque available at 2500 rpm, compared to the Vulcan Classic's 83 ft.-lbs. at 3000 rpm.

The pulse of the engine goes through a couple of phases, with you feeling the big 102mm, 9.0:1-compression pistons (use 90 octane or better) jumping up and down through their 90mm stroke at low revs; then it gets slightly smoother through the middle of the rev range. At high engine speeds and near the electronic rev limit, it's just smooth. So you can appreciate the visceral sensation of chuffing around town, without getting vibed to death at high speed as you rip across Florida to get back to the hotel pool after a nice lunch and an air-boat ride at the Rod and Gun Club.

The chassis dynamics are just what you would expect from a 670-pound cruiser with a 65.2-inch wheelbase and 32°/160mm rake-and-trail numbers. The watchword here is *stable*. The ride was unusually good for a bike of this ilk, with damping rates nicely done front and rear for a comfortable degree of plushness. The twin rear shocks have air-assisted preload adjustment, and four no-tool settings for rebound damping. The 41mm fork is what it is - no adjustments available or needed. After impressing

the crowd gathered at the airport vintage-airplane photo stop with our floorboard-scraping antics, we all agreed there was plenty of ground clearance for nonsquirrels.

The rear brake pedal looks like it came straight off your dad's old Buick, and equally vintage in appearance is the big rocker shift lever. Not so vintage are the controls - both the brake and clutch levers are adjustable for reach, and the turn signals are self-canceling. The gauge cluster (with electronic fuel gauge and FI warning light) is similar to the one used on the 1500 Classic, though the finish, like much of the rest of the Drifter, is black.

In fact, about the only major expense of chrome you will find on the Vulcan is the fishtail exhaust system. This is a heavily muffled affair with a big, black, unattractive collector (that will house a catalytic converter in California models) tucked under the rear of the engine. The aftermarket manufacturers are currently working on getting the fuel injection to work with custom exhausts if you want to up the decibels, although Kawasaki has made the tip of the exhaust pipe replaceable if you want to change that element of the look.

One of the more awkward elements of the styling comes when your eye meets the passenger seat that seems to be floating in space over the rear fender. It seems to be floating in space because it is. In order to keep the fender profile hugging lowly the tire profile, the fender is mounted to and articulates with the swingarm itself. Not exactly a boon to reducing unsprung weight, it was necessary to get the look right - at least for the fender. That leaves the passenger seat to be fixed in place as part of the pilot's seat. Riding in packs as we were, it was odd to see the whole fender and taillight jumping with the wheel over the varied contours of the road.

There were several accessorized bikes on the ride (see the cover, for instance) that were equipped with single seats that both suited the bike better as well as our butts. The stock seat was on the soft side, leading to "hot spots" after about 40 miles or so.

The other difficulty the moving rear fender has created is in designing saddlebags for the bike, since fixing the bags on the fender or its subframe, for instance, isn't really an option. Since loading up a few days' worth of gear on what would essentially be the swingarm isn't the route Kawasaki's engineers think they would like to take, they are still in the process of designing the bracketry that will allow the attachment of bags while letting the rear fender perform its boogie dance unencumbered. We hope they deliver soon, because this is, functionally, a bike that ends up being a very pleasant ride, and one that can be had for \$11,499.

We heard that the Chicago Athenaeum (that's just a big word for "collection"), a museum that celebrates excellence in architecture and design, has added a Vulcan 1500 Drifter to its permanent collection. That's cool, but if they don't ride it, they're blowing it.



Hydraulic valve-lash adjusters and automatic cam-chain tensioners, not to mention shaft drive and electronic fuel injection, keep maintenance to a minimum on the Drifter.



A multi-reflector headlight shows the way.



The gauge cluster should look familiar to anyone who rode some Vulcan Classic seat time. It is equipped with an electronic fuel gauge.



The passenger seat isn't mounted to the fender, in any way, because the fender is mounted directly to the swingarm, and so moves. That would make the fender an uncomfortable place to sit.



The standard exhaust tip is this fishtail design, though Kawasaki is making different style tips available, such as a turnout.