

# THE DRIFTER

## Cruising Florida on Kawasaki's Big Chief

*Article by Mark Zimmerman*

*Photos courtesy of Kawasaki*

**I**t was only fitting that Kawasaki, motorcycling's undisputed king of engineering overkill, selected Miami Beach, the world capitol of Art Deco, Pink Flamingos, and excess, as the sight of the press launch for its newest cruiser, the 1500cc Drifter. Kawasaki has finally outdone itself, because the new retro-'saki is without doubt the two-wheel king of kitsch.

Kawasaki has always had a bit of a "bad boy" image. Over the years, the company has built some blindingly fast sportbikes, as well as some of the industry's most outrageous cruisers. In the look-alike sweepstakes, Kawasaki's bikes win, hands down. (If you have to ask what they look like, you haven't been paying much attention these last few years.) Kawasaki has combined the two divergent schools of engineering and produced what looks like the world's newest and fastest 1950 Indian Chief. The result is guaranteed to put a shine in your eye, especially if, like me, you try not to take the cruiser genre too seriously.

It's not that cruisers aren't good motorcycles—to the contrary, most of them are surprisingly competent. However, like most motorcycles, cruisers should always be taken a little tongue in cheek (or maybe



bug in teeth), because if they don't make you smile, then they aren't worth diddly. Say what you want about the Drifter; it definitely raises the smile-per-mile quotient by a factor of 10. Of course, if you're one of those collector types, you may fail to see the humor in a 1999 Indian replica built by a Japanese motorcycle company.

### The Hardware

A bike's styling is completely subjective. You love it, hate it, or ignore it. The mechanics are another story. Stripped of its war paint, the Drifter is more or less a modified Vulcan Nomad. The engine is your garden-variety, liquid-cooled, 50-degree V-twin. The cylinders displace 90 cubic inches. The bore



Under the 1950 Indian look is an excellent, modern machine.

and stroke measurements are 102mm by 90mm. Four valves live in each head and are controlled by a single overhead cam. Dual 36mm throttle bodies, one per cylinder, handle fuel mixing. Each body contains a single injector. No cold start mechanism is provided, nor is one needed, cold starts being controlled by the fuel injection "brain." For those of us who don't reside in tropical climes, Kawasaki has provided a fast idle mechanism. Pulling out a knob located under the tank opens the throttle slightly and speeds warm-up time. Digital ignition complements the digital injection, sensors monitor intake pressure, engine rpm, throttle position, and ambient and intake air temperatures. It almost seems silly to mention it, but given everyone's penchant for retro these days, starting is by button.

The five-speed transmission is equipped with a built-in neutral finder. It not only works well, but the tranny is one of the better ones. Its heel and toe shift lever is the best I've encountered. The final drive is shaft.

The frame is your basic low-tech, double-cradle job. It does what it's supposed to. (This ain't no sportbike—if you want high tech, go buy a Bimota.) A conventional pair of air-assisted shocks control the rear wheel. Up front, a nonadjustable, 41mm telescopic front fork holds the front hoop in place. Rake is set at 32-degrees, trail at 6.5 inches. The rear shocks feature adjustable rebound damping. I found that 4 psi of air in the shocks and maximum rebound dampening

provided the best compromise between ground clearance and ride.

Tire size is a plump 130/90-16 up front and 150/80-16 out back. The front and rear single disc brakes are gripped by a single twin-piston caliper. Braking is good, but nothing to write home about. The wheelbase is 65.2 inches, long enough to give a stable ride, but not so long that turning the bike around takes a man and a boy. The seat locates you a scant 29 inches from the road and the dry weight is only 668 pounds.

### Pretty is as Pretty Does

Beauty, to flog an old cliché, is in the eye of the purchaser. Personally, I like the Drifter. The styling cues are all there. Yes, they are lifted from Indian and yes, rumor has it that Kawasaki did pay a one-time licensing fee to an undisclosed source to use the "Indian look." The sweeping lines, Art Deco fenders, fishtail exhaust, and blacked-out headlights, all products of a bygone era, still push the right buttons.

Of course, the vintage-looking electronic speedometer also houses a fuel gauge and warning lights for the engine diagnostics, which brings the bike up to speed. But that's what this bike is all about—a styling versus engineering dichotomy, one that has actually been fairly well resolved.

### The Ride

Kawasaki went to a great deal of expense and effort to fly in over 70 journalists from seven countries. The company expects the

Drifter to be a major hit in European and Pacific Rim countries, which says as much about nostalgia's hold on motorcyclists as it does about Kawasaki's marketing strategies. After the obligatory introductory dinner, we were turned loose for a day to familiarize ourselves with the bike and the local roads. Sitting on the Drifter, the first thing you notice is its light weight. From all appearances, you would think this bike would

## Kawasaki Vulcan 1500 Drifter

### Highs

- Well-thought-out details. Lever adjusters, gas cap locking mechanism, and shifter prove that someone was paying attention.
- Finish was excellent, all the blacked-out items were powder coated, the chrome was deep and even, the paint was blemish free.
- The hydraulic valve adjusters mean low maintenance.
- Accessories are already in the pipeline, sold under the Fire & Steel label, they fit and complement the bike, and are already in the dealership.
- Art Deco fenders keep you and the bike clean during inclement weather.
- Each first-year buyer gets a personalized handlebar clamp (with his or her name and the VIN number), a personalized owner certificate, Drifter video, and a cool key fob—all packaged in a commemorative case.

### Lows

- Styling could lead hard-core Indian riders to the warpath.
- Bike likely to cause accident when other riders turn their heads to stare at it.
- You still can't check the oil with the bike on the sidestand. Personally, I think it's a plot to sell spare parts. How many bikes have done the Titanic when the owner tried to hold them upright while they checked the oil in some awkward sight glass?



be fairly heavy. Around town, the Drifter's reasonable weight, wide handlebars, low seat height, and high torque (85 foot pounds at 2,500 rpm) mean that it can be ridden all day without wearing you out.

The fuel-injected engine's low-speed manners are almost perfect; at very low speeds I noticed a slight lean surge. Other riders reported a similar sensation. Perhaps a little richer map is called for. On the other hand, the bikes were far from broken in and after more miles, it may well disappear. Riding through the South Beach "gawk zone," the bike was the center of attention. I was concerned that the slow pace and hot sun would soon have the Drifter's cooling

## Design Kudos

The Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design added one of the first Drifters to its permanent design collection. Christian Narkiewicz-Laine, Director of the Athenaeum, said, "The Drifter is a work of art that goes beyond transportation. With its neo-retro style and esoteric performance technology, the Drifter embodies the essence of form and function." Good job Chris, I couldn't have said it better myself.

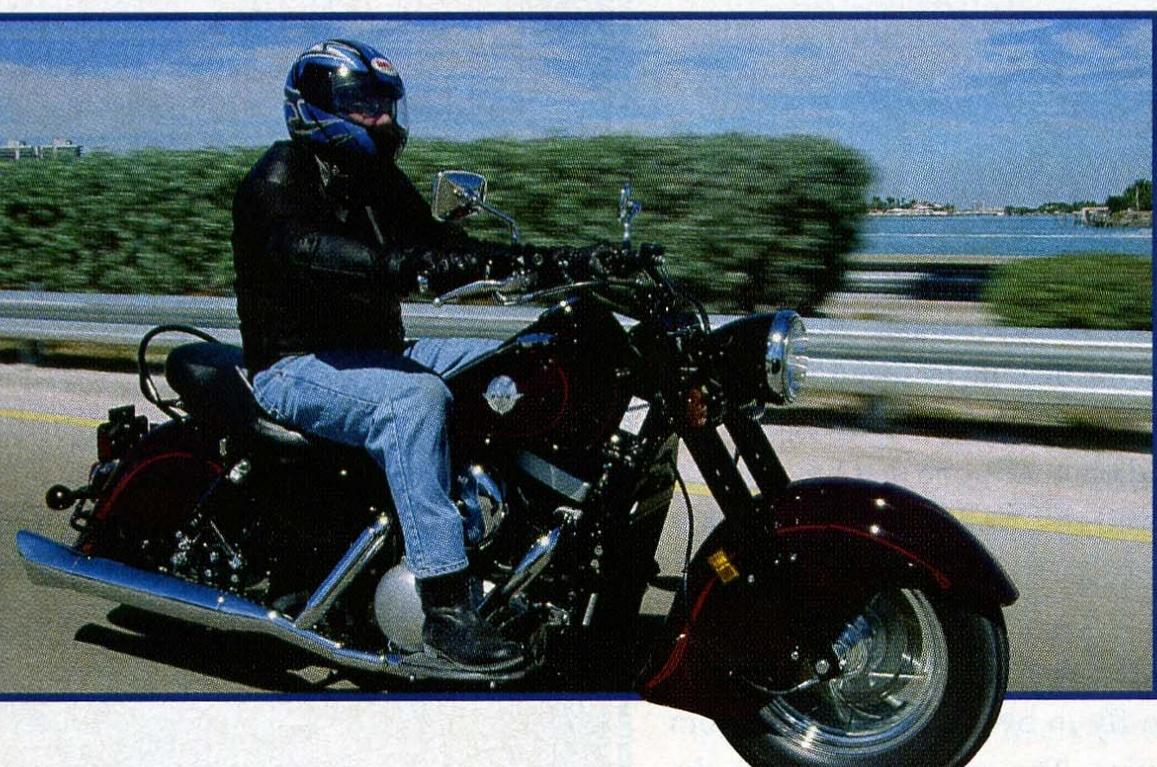
fan spinning merrily away. Fortunately, the radiator did its job and there was no sign of heat-induced detonation or any other unpleasantness. After a day of cruising the city, I was looking forward to the next day's 300-mile loop through the Everglades.

The next morning, the powers that be at big "K" decided that we'd leave in groups of 10 or so, rendezvous at selected checkpoints, and then return to our digs. I ended up joining the last group—big mistake. Someone

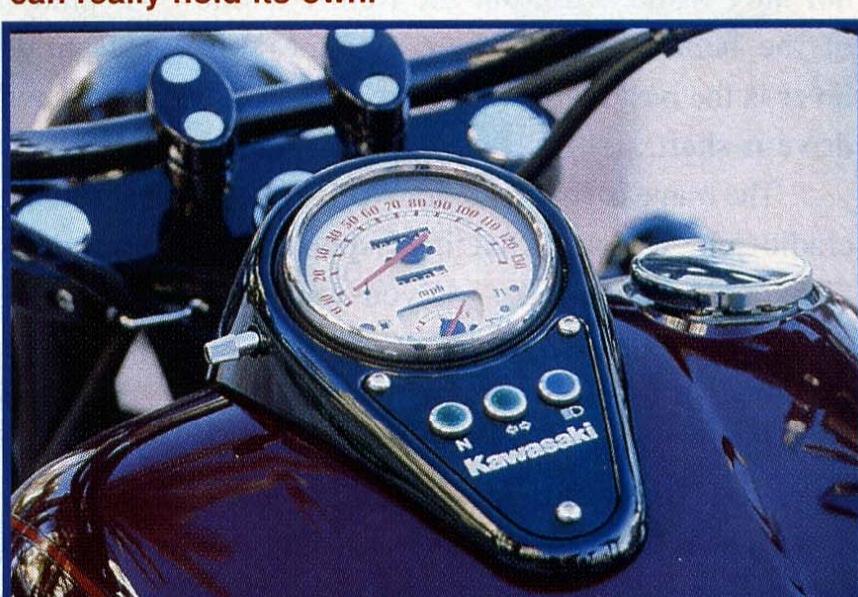


**The floorboards are comfortably located.**

(obviously not a student of history) had grouped the French and German contingents together. What the French lacked in discipline, they made up with sheer bravado. The stolid Germans simply pressed on, no doubt making snide comments about frogs in the blender or perhaps French toast. When I realized that one of our former allies was riding sidesaddle at close to 90 miles an hour, I decided to leave the group for a while and ride at my own pace.



**LEFT: Cruising down the highway, this is one bike that can really hold its own.**



**ABOVE: The vintage-looking control panel contains state-of-the-art components. Nice!**

The problem with riding in southern Florida is that it's so damn flat and straight. I managed to amuse myself by holding an indicated 80mph for the first 75 miles or so. The Drifter's high-speed manners are terrific, motoring along in the "boomer" gear, it felt solid, stable, and planted. A 65.2-inch wheelbase coupled with the generous steering head dimensions will do that. Kawasaki has provided the Drifter with a little more "oomph" than the standard Vulcan 1500, higher compression and lumpier cams provide enough pony power to motor along at some highly entertaining speeds. Engine vibration at all speeds was nil—the engine features both a counterbalancer and rubber-bushed engine mounts. Kawasaki also claims that the new fuel-injection system helps reduce vibration even further.

The bike I chose that morning was equipped with the standard dual seat. It was comfortable and allowed me more than enough room to stretch out. Normally, I'm not crazy about floorboards. Most of them make me feel like I'm on water skies. At best, I'll tolerate them, but I do prefer pegs. According to Kawasaki, the Drifter's boards are set slightly rearward and lower than the Nomad's. They were at least located where I could use them.

use a separate lever to find neutral, Kawasaki has incorporated the mechanism into the shifter. When coming to a stop, shift into first, stop the bike, then lift up. The positive stop keeps you from going past neutral. It's gimmicky, but handy as hell when cruising the boulevard.

The only chance I had to assess the Drifter's high-speed cornering ability came when I exited the freeway. The bike stuck, the floorboards dragged, it made the turn. We all know it's not a sportbike. If it handles well, sticks like a nailed-on toupee, and turns like it's supposed to, then why not drag something once in a while?

I reeled in the pack at their first fuel stop. While we took a short break, the French entertained us with burnouts and stunt riding. The Brits dazzled me with a penchant for fast food and an ability to consume it that was astounding. One of the Aussies saw some alligators in a drainage ditch, licked his chops, and said, "Brilliant, a buffet!" The Germans lounged at attention and the Japanese wandered around looking inscrutable. The rest of us just hung around, wondering when the next bend in the road would appear.

**The cool lines of the Art Deco rear fender and fishtail exhaust are reminiscent of days gone by.**

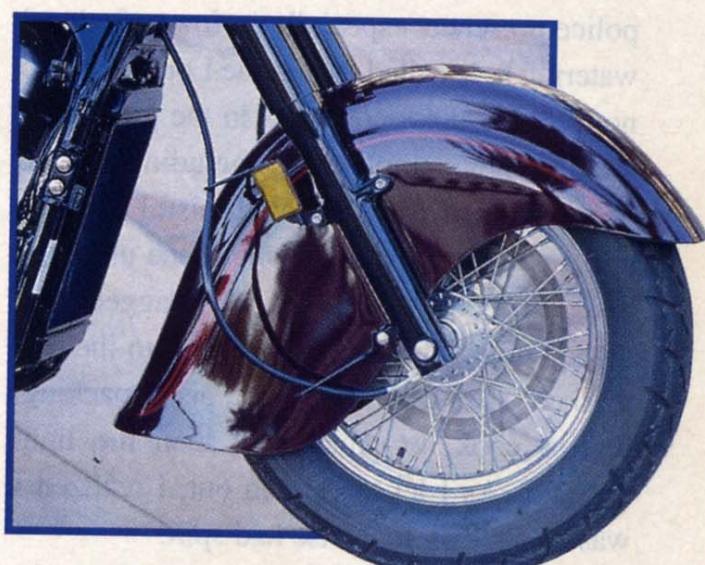
Back on the road, it was more of the same, photos at the regional airport, complete with vintage aircraft to complement the vintage (appearing) bikes. Then it was off to Everglade City, where we stopped for lunch, a brief ride on an airboat, and a bike switch. Lunch was fine, the boat ride was cool, and I swapped bikes, picking a solo-seated edition with twin spotlights. While the bike itself had been fun, the ride was actually getting a little dull, acrobatic Frenchmen notwithstanding. We'd covered about 160 miles at that point and only made three turns, and one of those was an off-ramp. Little did I know that one wrong turn would soon put me on the road test from hell.

The heel and toe shifter is another story. I've ridden lots of motorcycles with heel and toe shifters and I hate being forced to lift my foot over the shifter to catch the next gear. The Drifter is the first bike that has a properly designed heel and toe shifter. The heel portion of the shifter is aft of the floorboard and down low so you can leave the ball of your foot on the board while you rock your heel down, initiating the shift.

I didn't use the neutral finder very often, but when I did it worked. Rather than



**Check out the stylin' blacked out headlights...**



**... and the sweeping fenders.**

## SPECIFICATIONS

<b>SUGGESTED RETAIL:</b>	\$11,499
<b>DISPLACEMENT:</b>	1470cc
<b>ENGINE:</b>	Four-stroke, liquid-cooled, SOHC
<b>STYLE:</b>	V-twin
<b>COMPRESSION RATIO:</b>	9.0:1
<b>HEADS:</b>	Eight valves, four per cylinder
<b>TRANSMISSION:</b>	Five-speed
<b>FINAL DRIVE:</b>	Shaft
<b>OVERALL LENGTH:</b>	100.2 inches
<b>WHEELBASE:</b>	65.2 inches
<b>SEAT HEIGHT:</b>	29 inches
<b>GROUND CLEARANCE:</b>	4.9 inches
<b>FUEL CAPACITY:</b>	4.2 gallons
<b>DRY WEIGHT:</b>	668 pounds

Playing follow the leader, it didn't dawn on me until we hit the next gas stop that we were headed straight down the highway towards Miami. A quick eyeball of the map confirmed the bad news, eight of us had all ignored our turnoff and the only way to get back to the hotel was via the interstate. "This ought to be a real thrill," I thought as we headed south.

Compounding error with insanity, we took another wrong turn. As we headed down the off ramp, I realized that we seemed to be entering an "interesting" neighborhood and there seemed to be a rather heavy police presence, especially in front of a local watering hole called the Purple Lounge. I also noticed that the lounge was in the process of seeking new employees, including exotic dancers, security guards with pistol permits, and a cook. As I watched the scene unfold, I couldn't help wonder if the bagged and tagged object they were loading into the van marked "Coroner" had been a pistol-packing, topless cook, or what. And then the light changed. As I let the clutch out, I realized I was alone, everyone else had split.

As I caught them at the next light, the lead rider pointed to his right, directly in front of a large tractor-trailer. I thought I knew what he meant but wasn't quite sure, not until the light went green and he hammered through the gap in the traffic like a cruise missile. The next half-hour was a chase through rush hour traffic. I had to ride that Drifter like I stole it. And you know what? It was the best part of the trip. I rammed it through traffic

and pivoted it around potholes. I alternated between full-throttle second gear charges and braking as hard as I could. It was a hoot. And by the time I got back to Miami, I'd confirmed what I'd suspected all along.



### Accessorize Away

One reason cruisers have become so popular is because the owners can customize these bikes to their hearts' content, creating their own visions of what their motorcycles should be. In the case of the Drifter, Kawasaki provides the Fire & Steel accessory line for one-stop shopping. Start with the solo seat and light bar for that nostalgic look. Add the chrome or black, anodized handlebar clamp for a little sparkle. Add engine guards for some peace of mind, slash-cut mufflers to add presence, and a handlebar wire guide to tidy things up. If you still feel something's lacking, the catalog lists everything from a chrome water pump cover to a custom choke knob.

The big Drifter delivers what it promises right from the get-go. This bike is a carnival ride—it's about fun, plain and simple. On the other hand, under its retro styling, the Drifter is an entirely practical motorcycle. In fact, it's one of the best cruisers money can buy. It handles well, has an enormous, broad powerband, and is comfortable.

This do-it-all cruiser is an all-around pleasure to ride. Add the optional touring accessories, windshield, saddlebags, and so on, and you've got a cross-country retro-tourer. And given the temper of the times, the styling has a certain charm that's hard to beat. It fits in well with the current fad for nostalgic bikes and it works better than most. Sure the Drifter is a bit of a caricature, but damn few things in this life aren't. **MT&G**