



2017

**HONDA VFR800F**  
£10,699

**104bhp, 242kg**  
Given a thorough overhaul in 2014 with new styling, suspension, wheels, heated grips, self-cancelling indicators, height-adjustable rider seats, engine tweaks and a new exhaust.

2017

**DUCATI SUPERSPORT S**  
£12,995

**113bhp, 210kg**  
Launched in February it has a rejigged Hypermotard 939 motor, a Monster-derived chassis, rider aids and a manually adjustable screen. This S model has Ohlins suspension, a quickshifter/blipper and seat cowl.

2017

**DUCATI 959 PANIGALE**  
£13,795

**157bhp, 200kg**  
The 899 grew into the 959 last year with a longer stroke engine and spawned those shotgun pipes to keep the white coats at Euro4 happy, as well as a slipper clutch, a lower swingarm pivot and styling tweaks.

2017

**KAWASAKI Z1000SX**  
£9999

**140bhp, 235kg**  
Updated for 2017 the Z1000SX sports tourer gets the Euro4 exhaust, plus a new shock linkage to lower the rear, tweaked suspension, multi-function clocks and IMU-controlled, lean-sensitive traction control and ABS.



It's hard to ignore the VFR's bulk next to the Supersport S



Both Italians are gorgeous but the Supersport S (right) is the better road bike



Old-school Zed is a properly capable contender

# THE MCN TEST

# ONE FOR THE ROAD

Is Ducati's new Supersport the ultimate, all-round sportsbike? We pitch it against class-leading rivals to find out

### The riders

**Michael Neeves**  
Age 47  
Height 6ft  
CV MCN Senior Road Tester. Rode the Supersport at its press launch.

**Bruce Dunn**  
Age 51  
Height 5ft 6in  
CV MCN Road Tester. Resident tyre and data expert.

**Jon Urry**  
Age 40  
Height 6ft 2in  
CV MCN guest tester. Ducati fan, owns a restored 1995 916.

**Joe Dick**  
Age 28  
Height 5ft 6in  
CV MCN Photographer. Rides a Triumph Street Triple RS.

By Michael Neeves  
SENIOR ROAD TESTER

**W**e were beside ourselves with excitement leading up to the World launch of Ducati's new Supersport in February. Had the famous Italian firm produced a ground-breaker? Was it going to be the real-world, everyday sportsbike we'd all hoped for?  
It's not Ducati's fault it hammered it down on the day we rode the £12,995 S model around the Montebianco circuit

and the standard £11,495 version on the surrounding mountain roads. The conditions didn't suit the new machine and failed to show it in its best light. In fact, the launch raised more questions than it answered.  
On track its 113bhp 937cc L-twin was breathless at high revs, as an engine designed with a punchy midrange would be. On the road, the wet tarmac was so slippery we spent four hours tensed-up trying not to crash, despite the Supersport's traction control, ABS and its softer power maps.  
The launch was a bit of damp squib,

but today, as you can see from the pictures, is different and we're having a second stab at finding out what the new Ducati is all about.  
It's time to see where the bike fits in and answer the questions everyone's asking. Is it a sports tourer, or a modern-day interpretation of the mighty Honda VFR800? And isn't a supersport race-replica just as good on the road?  
To find out we're taking the new Supersport S, a VFR800, Kawasaki's Z1000SX and Ducati's 959 Panigale on a trip from Bologna, down the A14 to Forlì and up over the mountains

to Florence, via the SS3 and the SS67 Passo del Muraglione. These are some of the best biking roads in the world.  
**Is it a sports tourer?**  
Kawasaki's Z1000SX is the dictionary definition of a big-capacity sports tourer. Unlike the current breed of go-anywhere adventure sports machines such as the BMW S1000XR, the SX is a conventionally-shaped motorcycle. It's low, long, comfortable and smooth.  
Updated for this year, the Z1000-derived machine is a big-seller and has captured the imagination of those

who want something sporty, but can manage big miles without breaking a sweat. It eats Autostradas for breakfast and its bulk actually helps to iron out bumps in its path. It will also roll up its sleeves and hoon through mountain roads with surprising speed and precision. The Kawasaki is also kind on your wallet, costing a quid under 10 grand, or just £95 a month on PCP.  
The Supersport feels thin and exposed when you jump on it after riding the SX and it's immediately clear the Ducati is not a sports tourer in the conventional sense. It has a three-litre

smaller tank, so you can't go as far without stopping and it's physically smaller, so it'll be a squeeze when you load up with luggage.  
But that doesn't mean you can't cover big miles in comfort. The Supersport's slim screen isn't the last word in wind protection, but it does the job, the seat is snug, there's decent legroom for tall riders and the bar position is natural. Riding tense on tricky wet roads back at the Supersport launch had fellow testers riding one-handed towards the end, shaking life back into their wrists. Today there's no such problem.

Like on the Kawasaki you get ABS, traction control and riding modes, but the Supersport S makes life even simpler with a quickshifter and autoblipper you never thought you needed, but when you go back to the more analogue SX, realise you actually do.  
Around town and on the motorway the Supersport's twin-cylinder motor is punchy, unstressed and smooth, with an added dash of burbling Italian character. The ride-by-wire throttle response is perfect and you're never left needing more go, despite being less powerful than the Kawasaki.

The only niggle is vibrating mirrors. They're fine at town speeds, but it's impossible to see behind when you go faster unless you pull the clutch in for a moment and wait for them to clear.  
**Is it Ducati's answer to the Honda VFR800?**  
This is the comparison everyone's talking about. The Ducati and Honda have a similar layout, an almost identical riding position and have separated-at-birth faces, but that's where the similarities end. The Supersport is far *Continued over*

JOC DICK



The Honda and Kawasaki are never far behind

lighter, more agile and sportier. It's Ducati Whippet v Honda Labrador.

Updated four years ago the Honda is still the dependable choice. It's the original sports tourer and even plusher and more solid than the Kawasaki. It's also the heaviest and least powerful here, but that doesn't ruin it. It's not slow and handles so well the cheery red beast is always there when you look back, even on the twistiest of roads.

Sure, it's showing its age, with its low, non-adjustable screen, tacked-on traction control buttons and weighty feel, but it cossets you in a relaxing cocoon of easy speed. Although snatchy off a closed throttle the V4 is smooth at normal speeds and sounds like a firework factory when the VTEC allows all four valves to do their thing. There's no step in power nowadays, just a transition from quiet to raucous.

You could say the Supersport is the bike the VFR would be if Honda had given it to the same development team who created the exciting new Blade. As it is, it's still a class act and thoroughly dependable, but you'll have more of a dolce vita on the sparking Ducati.

**Shouldn't I just get a proper sportsbike?**

Ducati's 959 Panigale is the ultimate evolution of the firm's supersport

**'You'll have more of a dolce vita on the sparking new Ducati'**

race replica. It's grown over the years from 748 through to 749, 848, 899 and now a machine that's bigger than the iconic 916. It's crammed full of speed, technology and handling reserves that remain untouched unless you visit a racetrack.

On the road it's at the extreme end of the spectrum, with its rigid cast aluminium airbox frame, stiff suspension and wrist-heavy riding position. It's particularly focused and machines like the Daytona 675 or new R6 are far plusher and forgiving.

The Panigale isn't actually that uncomfortable on the motorway. Pegs

are set further back than the Supersport's but there's still lots of legroom and the wide bars don't hem you in. At higher speeds the wind cushions your upper body and takes the weight of your arms and hands.

But the Panigale quickly becomes the 'booby prize' bike in this company when we leave the Autostrada and head to the second to fourth gear twists and turns that make up the magnificent Passo del Muriglione.

You can't deny the 959's brilliance on a circuit (it was faster than the old Blade SP on track when we tested them together last year) and on the odd occasion you're presented with a fast, smooth, empty curve on the road. Here in the real world you can't begin to use a fraction of the performance.

Life is easier on the Supersport S. Its chassis is more pliable, the Öhlins suspension plusher and the power delivery softer. You glide over rough terrain while you watch the Panigale bobbing in front, reacting to bumps and struggling to put its power down.

Despite its less powerful, old-tech motor and extra all-up weight, there are very few instances where Ducati's Supersport can't keep up with a Ducati supersport and only a racetrack would separate them. It has lots of usable, unthreatening grunt, superb brakes and precise, stable handling. The Ducati Supersport S is easier to ride for more of the time for more types of rider.

**WHAT HAVE THEY GOT?**

	Supersport S	Z1000SX	Panigale 959	VFR800
ABS	✓	✓	✓	✓
Traction Control	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rider modes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Quickshifter	✓	✓	✓	✓
Autoblipper	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wheelie control	✓	✓	✓	✓
Heated grips	✓	✓	✓	✓



**KAWASAKI Z1000SX £9999**

**Engine** 1043cc 16v inline four  
**Suspension** 41mm forks fully adjustable. Single shock adjustable for rebound damping and preload  
**Brakes** 2x 300mm front discs with four-piston radial callipers. 250mm rear disc with single-piston caliper  
**Kerb weight** 235kg  
**Seat height** 815mm  
**Tyres** 120/70 x 17 x front 190/50 x 17 rear



**Tank capacity** 19 Litres **Power:** 10,000rpm **Torque:** 7300rpm  
**PCP DEAL**  
**£95 PER MONTH** Kawasaki Z1000SX per month x 36, £2500 deposit £2500 final payment, 4000 annual mileage



Zed now boasts modes



Spanner-free adjustment



**DUCATI SUPERSPORT S £12,995**

**Engine** 937cc 8v L-twin  
**Suspension** 48mm Öhlins forks and single shock, fully adjustable  
**Brakes** 2x 320mm front discs with Brembo four-piston monobloc callipers. 245mm rear disc, twin-piston caliper  
**Kerb weight** 210kg  
**Seat height** 810mm  
**Tyres** 120/70 x 17 x front 180/55 x 17 rear



**Tank capacity** 16 Litres **Power:** 9000rpm **Torque:** 6500rpm  
**PCP DEAL**  
**£109 PER MONTH** Ducati Supersport per month x 36, £3215 deposit, £7610 final payment, 4000 annual mileage



Fine-tune the windblast



Classy Öhlins suspension



**DUCATI 959 PANIGALE £13,795**

**Engine** 955cc 8v L-twin  
**Suspension** 43mm Showa BPF forks and single Sachs shock, fully adjustable  
**Brakes** 2x 320mm front discs with four-piston Brembo radial monobloc calliper. 245mm rear disc with twin-piston caliper  
**Kerb weight** 200kg  
**Seat height** 810mm  
**Tyres** 120/70 x 17 x front 180/55 x 17 rear



**Tank capacity** 17 Litres **Power:** 10,500rpm **Torque:** 10,500rpm  
**PCP DEAL**  
**£122 PER MONTH** Ducati Panigale 959 per month x 36, £3531 deposit, £7935 final payment 4000 annual mileage



It's a bit much on the road



Track-ready suspension



**HONDA VFR800F ABS £10,699**

**Engine** 782cc 16v V4  
**Suspension** 43mm forks and single shock adjustable for preload and rebound damping.  
**Brakes** 2x 310mm front discs with four-piston radial caliper. 256mm rear disc with twin-piston caliper  
**Kerb weight** 242kg  
**Seat height** 789-809mm  
**Tyres** 120/70 x 17 x front 180/55 x 17 rear



**Tank capacity** 21.5 Litres **Power:** 10,250rpm **Torque:** 8500rpm  
**PCP DEAL**  
**£139 PER MONTH** Honda VFR800F ABS per month x 36, £2227 deposit £4786 final payment, 4000 annual mileage



VFR's a friendly face



Bars are so well positioned



It needed dry roads and three rivals to show its brilliance, but finally the new Supersport has captured our hearts.

The Ducati is comfortable for long distances, but not quite up there with a more opulent sports tourer like a Z1000SX, but it's not far off and on the flip side is sportier and more fun.

It's sort of like a VFR800 in terms of its riding position and the way it looks, but the Supersport S is lighter, faster, more agile and is crammed with technology. And it's every bit as fast as a race replica on the road, but with a more supple ride, less weight on your wrists and easier-to-access performance.

Take the comfort of the Z1000SX and the riding position of the VFR800F, mix it all together and add a dash of Panigale and you end up with the new Supersport. It's the sportsbike we've been waiting for all along. Better still, you can have one for a snip over £100 per month. **MCN**

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