

Honda's original CB400F Super Sport made a rave-review hit with everyone here at Cycle, but it just didn't play worth a hoot in Peoria. Oddly, and significantly, it was precisely those features we found most appealing that seem to have generated the greatest sales resistance. We thought, for example, that the little Four's clean, understated styling was terrifically classy; folks out in places we urbanites consider the hinterlands took a single, disinterested look and said it was dull, dull, dull. And we purely adored the Super Sport's low, narrow handlebar and rear-set footpegs because they provided a riding position that helped us feel as-one with the motorcycle. It has now been established that people in Peoria are much less interested in becoming as-one with their motorcycles as they are in being as-two with friends. The first CB400F didn't really lend itself to two-up, around-town riding, didn't take kindly to encumbrances like windshields and saddlebags, and for those reasons didn't appeal to those whose interests include touring and togetherness.

Now, two years later, we have a new Honda CB400F which, though less to our liking than the first, seems better suited to the hearts, minds, and riding habits of middle-America. Honda's stylists have given the new model some flash, with an inch-wide accent stripe curled around each side of the fuel tank and the wide stripe accented with a narrower line of color coordinated with the background paint. Engineering has gotten in its licks, too, with a higher, sit-up handlebar and pegs located farther forward-measures that work to place the bike's rider in a more upright position with more seat left for a passenger.

One of the first things we discovered was that Honda's new accent stripes are on a fuel tank that has a new filler-cap arrangement. The old "F" had a very sporty and practical flip-up cap you could open with a squeeze of the fingers. The new one has a flip-up lid that covers a quarter-turn-release filler cap, and the lid is something you unlatch with the ignition key. Or, you can use anything that will fit into the key slot because there's no lock inside. So, with key or screwdriver you release the latch, flip the lid back, and unscrew the cap-which is tied to the tank with a short chain. The chain is a mixed blessing; it will keep you from losing the cap; it also keeps you from setting the cap aside while you fill the tank, and most people will be reluctant to just let the cap dangle on the chain, rattling against the tank's paint.

We're willing to admit that fond memories of the original CB400F's hunkered-down-and-ready riding position tend to color our appraisal of the new model's handlebar/footpeg layout. The new bars are higher and wider if not as handsome, and they do work better when you're just poking around town. We liked the old rear-set pegs, and prefer them to the repositioned pegs the CB400 now has. But the new position isn't too far forward, and they do help create some space for a passenger, and the trade-off will be more than acceptable to most riders.

But passengers may not like the CB400F any better than before. The bike's worst feature, from a passenger's point of view, is the way its rear pegs go up and down with the rear wheel. It may be that Honda intended this model to be a singleseater, with only an incidental capability for two-up riding. That would tend to explain why the bike's passenger pegs are mounted on its swing-arm and so far back toward the axle they jiggle at very nearly the wheel's amplitude. With Or without rearward pegs for the rider, and with any kind of handlebar, the CB400F asks forbearance from its passengers.

You'd never expect, from a quick glance or moment's sitting, that the Honda's seat would be comfortable on a longish ride. The seat isn't very deep, which means it can't contain a lot of padding, and it's rather narrow, and it certainly doesn't feel anything like a horizontal easy-chair when you first settle your backside against its vinyl cover. Yet, for reasons we can't quite fathom, it does not produce the

pan-buttocks gangrene you can get after an hour perched on more promising-looking saddles.

Honda still lags behind Yamaha and Suzuki in the area of suspension development, but this new CB400F is evidence that the gap is closing. One thing we didn't like about the original version was an almost total lack of damping in its rear suspension. The old bike's shocks served mostly as brackets to hold its coil springs, and the light oil inside the damper bodies must have been there just to keep them from squeaking. And both ride and handling characteristics included as much pogo-stick as motorcycle. We are pleased to report that the new model has a vastly upgraded rear suspension, which means an upgraded ride and steadier handling and you couldn't seriously fault the way the original went around corners.

Fitted with any reasonably gripping tires, the CB400F's speed around corners is mostly a function of its rider's weight and nerve... with the former being the most important factor. In truth, the bike is so steady under all conditions that very little nerve is needed to push it right to the limit. But it is rider weight that largely establishes that limit, as heavy riders will cause the Honda to sag down on its suspension and use up its cornering clearance. You'll know you've reached the limit when the small steel balls under the bootleg ends begin to drag against the pavement; go at it any harder and you can expect to feel the exhaust system's collector banging down. Yes, the exhaust system is all on the Honda's right side and you can turn left a bit more vigorously, but you wouldn't want to lose track of which side was which in a series of S-bends. So it's the collector-positioned vertically by rider weight-that sets the limit for cornering speed.

In the real world, which has more streets and straights than snoopy turns, the little Four's cornering behavior is less important than the way it feels in transit between your local delicatessen and the nearest picnic grounds. And it feels, in the most positive sense, like a much larger motorcycle. Some bikes of the same weight and displacement seem awfully quick and flighty to riders with mostly bigbike experience in their background, and the Four's small brother, the Honda CB360T, though less than 20 pounds lighter, feels as teetery as a bicycle in the comparison. The CB400F doesn't teeter: it runs straight and true without a lot of help from its rider, and though it will respond quickly to control commands, it never comes up with any ideas of its own.

It cannot be said that this Honda is better in its ride and handling than the best 400cc Japanese Twins. Yamaha's XS400 has the CB400F beaten handsdown for ride, largely because Yamaha has substantially solved the problem of fork sanction and Honda hasn't; the Suzuki GS400 handles a bit better and also has an edge in ride quality. The Four still does have a small performance superiority at the drag strip, and the new CB400F is a bit faster than the original. Unhappily, the bike has become somewhat less impressive at part-throttle cruising speeds, under which conditions our test machine seemed to be suffering from the results of Honda's policy with respect to emission standards (we'll flinch before they swing). Its engine came to life when the throttle slides were open far enough to get the carburetor main jets working; it was a bundle of nervous hesitations at quarter-throttle. Finally, the CB400F is more expensive than the most costly 400cc twin and this, coupled with the other factors listed here, might seem to promise early extinction for the smallest Honda Four. We don't think that's going to happen, unless the people at Honda lose their nerve; there are a couple of reasons to think the Four will not only survive but also prosper.

For one thing, the CB400F justifies itself technically in a way that is reflected in reality: it is a four, with all the benefits that follow the division of engine displacement into more, smaller cylinders. You can think of it as a matter of many hands making light work. Not only does the Four's very short absolute

stroke keep piston speed low (1786 feet/minute at 60 mph) and mechanical loadings very light, the tiny pistons and valves are inherently better cooled than those in a twin-cylinder engine. These design considerations promise a level of reliability outstanding even in the context of Honda's better street machines, all of which have been ; fairly trouble-free, if nothing else. We haven't surveyed all (both?) of the people who are riding the earlier CB400Fs, but the small sampling that has come under our scrutiny says the promise Of reliability isn't just empty theory, The examples we know about are about as dependable as a Chevy Biscayne, and a whole heck of a lot more entertaining.

Secondarily, but certainly no less import than the promise of reliability in terms of sales appeal, the little Honda Four has an advantage just because it is a Four. Folks out there in the hinterlands are apt to think of it first as a Honda Four for only \$1350 - give or take a little - and only consider its displacement as an afterthought. the fact that the bike is a 400 instead of a 550 or 750 probably is very much beside he point, for many performance-indifferent riders and we're not going to tell them they're wrong.

People who do buy themselves a bargain Honda Four by getting a CB400F, and then lumbering it with a windshield and saddlebags, will have to develop sporting left feet even if the rest of their bodies stay pure, Goodmornin' America touring-rider. Honda gave the little Four a six-speed, close-ratio transmission, and it isn't there merely to make the specifications sheet more exciting. You get the CB400F humming along the highway with 60 mph showing on the speedometer and the transmission clicked into sixth, and the tachometer will register 5000 rpm - at which engine speed full-throttle is worth about 15 horsepower. Run the bike up against a hill or a headwind, and you can start downshifting, because there isn't enough torque to lift your eyelids.

The CB400F's saving grace is that you can downshift at 60 mph. Hit it down once for headwinds, twice for mountain grades, and three times when you've popped out of a truck's draft and want to have it drafting the Honda well before the oncoming traffic arrives. The bike will run up to an honest 70 mph in third gear without exceeding the engine's redline, and the power doesn't fade even when you've stretched the revs 500 rpm past the redline. The engine doesn't get itself gathered up to make respectable power until you're seeing at least 6500 rpm on the tach, but it does give you a 3500-rpm power spread between the get-serious point and Honda's rev limit.

A nice feature of the Four is that it lets you use plenty of revs without generating any worrisome vibes, and it is a tad smoother on full throttle than when you have its slides half-open. The 400 twins will turn up a lot of crank speed, but develop mild hysteria when they do; the CB400F's engine (its balancer shaft is its crankshaft) spins like it has just been waiting for the chance.

There is a high-frequency vibration from the Four when it's running above 5000 rpm, and in this regard we bring you some good news and some bad news. The good news is that there isn't much more tingle at 10,000 rpm than you feel at 5000 rpm - and it isn't much more than a tingle at any speed. The bad news is that the tingle makes itself felt, in sixth gear, just when you gather enough speed to keep up with highway traffic. We will say that it all works out fairly well, for if you ride slowly enough to be worried about catching a Granada's bumper up your backside there won't be enough vibration to blur the reflections in the rear-view mirrors; go faster and you lose the mirrored image of what's astern but then you'll be outrunning the blighters.

Brakes? With the near-universal adoption of discs and hydraulic calipers for motorcycles' front wheels it's

absurd to speak of one bike having more sheer stopping equipment than another. All the disc brakes are so powerful that they don't leave much for bikes' rear brakes disc or drum to do, and the distance required to make a maximum-effort stop depends entirely on tire/road adhesion. So we have to judge modern brakes on the basis of progressive action, freedom from fade, and freedom from squeal and disc-ringing. This Honda rates fairly well in all those categories. Its brakes didn't make any rude noises while it visited here; the front disc was a trifle grabby when cold and applied abruptly, but was otherwise nicely progressive; and although you can fade either of the CB400F's brakes a little by working them hard they don't fade much and what you feel is a gradual reduction of braking power (quickly recovered when you stop abusing them) rather than an abrupt loss.

We found that a bit of clumsiness on the rider's part when using the rear brake hard could provoke some rear wheel chatter, but most controls were smooth. The clutch lever moves under your left hand without creaks, shudders or needing a strong-man's grip, and though the clutch itself was slightly sudden, the line between disengaged and on-your-way was not so thin as to cause anyone a problem. Shifting went neatly, without a hitch, when we were just cruising around; there were a few missed shifts that occurred when the riding pace was more forced. We had hoped that the new shift arrangement, which has the lever sprouting directly from the transmission's shifter-shaft instead of via the previous remote link-and-levers, would make the Honda's shifting crisp and positive. It didn't. The new CB400F is like other Hondas in having a gear change that works, but is notchy and vague when you're going all-out and would most like for it to score nothing but bull's-eyes.

Fuel tank capacity is down a dollop in the new model, from 3.7 to 3.5 gallons. We think it's the same tank; the reduction in volume seems to result from Honda installing a short, tube-like overfill preventer below the filler opening. This keeps you from pumping in more gas when the level rises to the overfill tube, and leaves a little clearance pocket of air trapped above the fuel everywhere but at the filler opening itself. The capacity difference isn't much, and if you ride like a responsible citizen the CB400F will still take you at least 150 miles between refills.

Living with the little Four, day to day, is made painless by several aspects of its character. Cold starts are a snap, because there's a well-thought-out interconnection between the choke and throttle butterflies. You flip the choke lever, hit the starter button, and the bike's running. Ease off on the choke and it will keep running at a fast idle while you pull on helmet and gloves, and by the time you've done that it will be warm enough to ride away without needing any choke at all. When you park the CB400F it encourages you to make use of its fork lock-by having the lock built into its ignition switch. You can simply pull the steering over against the stop, push in on the key and give it an eighth-turn counterclockwise, and the fork is locked. That's a nice feature in a world with too many creeps who rip off other peoples' motorcycles.

Routine service of the CB400F can be managed mostly without difficulty. The oil drain plug is over on the left side of the sump where it's easy to reach-and you can lean the bike against its side stand while the last few ounces of dirty oil trickle out of the drain. With all the exhaust pipes pulled over the right side of the oil filter cover, and the cover being secured by a single bolt, changing the filter cartridge is no problem. The points and condensers are under a cover on the engine's right side; leaning the bike on the side stand tilts the ignition cavity up and offers fine access for points replacement and adjustment. Changing spark plugs will give you a few entertaining moments: Honda's plug socket has a rubber grommet inside that grips the plugs' insulators and is a big help when you're trying to fish them out of their deep recesses in the head; but the plug for number-two cylinder is guarded by the tachometer drive

cable and the horn, and it will make you learn to hate and avoid - changing plugs when the engine is hot.

Similarly, you won't enjoy doing valve clearance adjustments. The intake sides of cylinders two and three can't be reached at all without first removing the fuel tank, and even when that's been done you'll find yourself struggling to hook the feeler-gauge blade into place between the valve stem and rocker tip because the throttle linkage is in the way.

You can perform most of the CB400F's maintenance chores using just the tools supplied with the bike; there are plenty of them even if they aren't top quality. You'll quickly come to appreciate, too, Honda's thoughtfulness in providing a lift-out tray, which holds the tool-roll and any small incidentals you may want to carry, serves as a lid for the air cleaner box, and keeps you from having to spread tools and screws around in the dirt when you're making some road-side adjustment. The single difficulty you'll find in this whole arrangement is getting the tools back in their little plastic pouch: the pouch is small, the tools numerous, and unless you fit them together like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle you'll never get the pouch's flap snapped shut.

But if Honda skimmed a little in the CB400F's tool pouch there isn't much evidence of skimping elsewhere. It's a well-made piece, and it works. The fact that its engine has a total piston displacement of only 408cc, and isn't highly tuned (or high-strung), imposes a lowish performance ceiling on the bike, compared with Honda's other Fours. But then it's less expensive than the others to buy and to operate. By opting for a CB400F instead of a CB750F, for example, you save yourself about \$800 before your new motorcycle leaves your dealer's showroom. There's some difference in operating cost in the matter of fuel economy, but that's really insignificant. The big saving could come when you buy insurance, and with premiums presently at a record, heartstopping high it's a factor that can't be ignored. You won't find yourself in Good Hands With Allstate if you're trying to insure a motorcycle: the local agent told us Allstate won't write coverage for bikes except for those who also want a policy for their car. The prices he quoted amounted to more than a third of the CB400F's list price, and another \$35 would have bought coverage for a CB750F. Allstate's price break is at the 250cc level, but there are other insurance companies. If you can find one with more rational rate structures the CB400F could be a real money-saver.

If not, well, there still is the \$800 you saved at the moment of purchase, and the CB400F is a Honda Four. And, as Honda has a precedent for naming its motorcycles after American towns (i.e. "Elsinore") maybe they should give the new CB400F a new name to go with its new handlebar and footpegs. They could call it the CB400 "Peoria." +