

REVIEWING THE UPDATED HONDA  
CM400A AUTO-TRANS TWIN



# “A” Is For Automatic

BY PATTI CARPENTER

Lots of interesting things happened in the world of motorcycles between the summer of 1977 and the spring of 1978. I guess you could call that time period the “Year of the Superbike” without exaggerating too much. During those months, Kawasaki brought out the 1000-cc Z1-R; Honda introduced the big six-cylinder CBX; Suzuki’s GS1000 made its debut — and Yamaha’s XS Eleven came on stage for the first time.

Of course all this monster-bike news was given a lot of coverage in most of the cycle magazines. It was pretty obvious that the horsepower race had gone up another notch. Meanwhile, several other noteworthy machines which were introduced at approximately the same time were quickly left behind as public interest shifted to the new, “zoomier” creations.

Among the machines which suffered by comparison during the Year of the Superbike were the Honda Hawks, which had been introduced earlier in 1977. The Hawks were an all-new commuter series based on a two-cylinder, 400-cc design. Honda had hoped that the Hawks would fly pretty high. They were introduced with heavy advertising campaigns and considerable magazine coverage. But, as it turned out, they never got too far from the nest. Instead they joined several other small-displacement machines which were left in the shadows by the overwhelming interest in the new high-performance bikes.

Although the most original member of

the Hawk family — the automatic transmissioned 400A twin — was never intended to be a world conqueror, it was expected to make a nice niche for itself in the small-to-mid-displacement street category. Sad to say, it too fell short of what was expected. Fortunately (in my opinion), Honda recognized that there are other things that are important besides large cc figures and 100-plus horsepower ratings. After all, Honda began their motorcycling history by popularizing small-displacement machines. With this in mind, the Hawks were given some new feathers for 1979, and told to fly again.

Honda calls their birds of a different feather, the “Custom Twins.” There are two models available: the five-speed, standard transmission version (CM400T), and the Hondamatic model (CM400A) which is the subject of this report. The “CM” stands for “Custom Model,” the 400 refers to the displacement, and the “A” is for “Automatic.”

The Custom Twins have been given a new look from front to back. Pull-back handlebars, a fashionable, teardrop fuel tank, a stepped saddle, short mufflers with a “megaphone” look, black ComStar wheels, and a fat, 16-inch rear tire add up to a complete facelift treatment for the machine.

As many riders have been discovering with the various semi-chopper configurations that have become the rage in the past three years or so, these changes do much more than simply alter the way the bike looks. The pull-back handlebars permit the rider to sit comfortably upright behind a windshield (which, on a 400-cc motorcycle, should be on the smallish side); the new, comfortably well-padded saddle is made to be sit upon instead of just looked at. Best of all, the saddle on the Custom Twin is a reasonable 29½ inches rather than the long-legged 31½-inch height on the early Hawks. This

makes for a pleasant sense of security and permits both feet to be on the ground at stops. The fatter tires (a 3.50 x 18 front, and a 4.60 x 16 rear) improve overall comfort and handling ability, especially on those occasions when dirt roads or road construction zones pop up during a trip.

The engine and transmission remain almost identical to the first Hawks hatched. The engine is a vertical twin with a 395-cc displacement (70.5-mm bore, 50.6-mm stroke). Two 28-mm constant velocity carburetors mix the air and gasoline. According to the owner’s manual, “any” gasoline can be used in the 400. I used leaded regular and unleaded regular exclusively during the 2,210.6-mile Impression ride. The ignition system is an electronic, CDI unit which keeps tuneups to the absolute minimum.

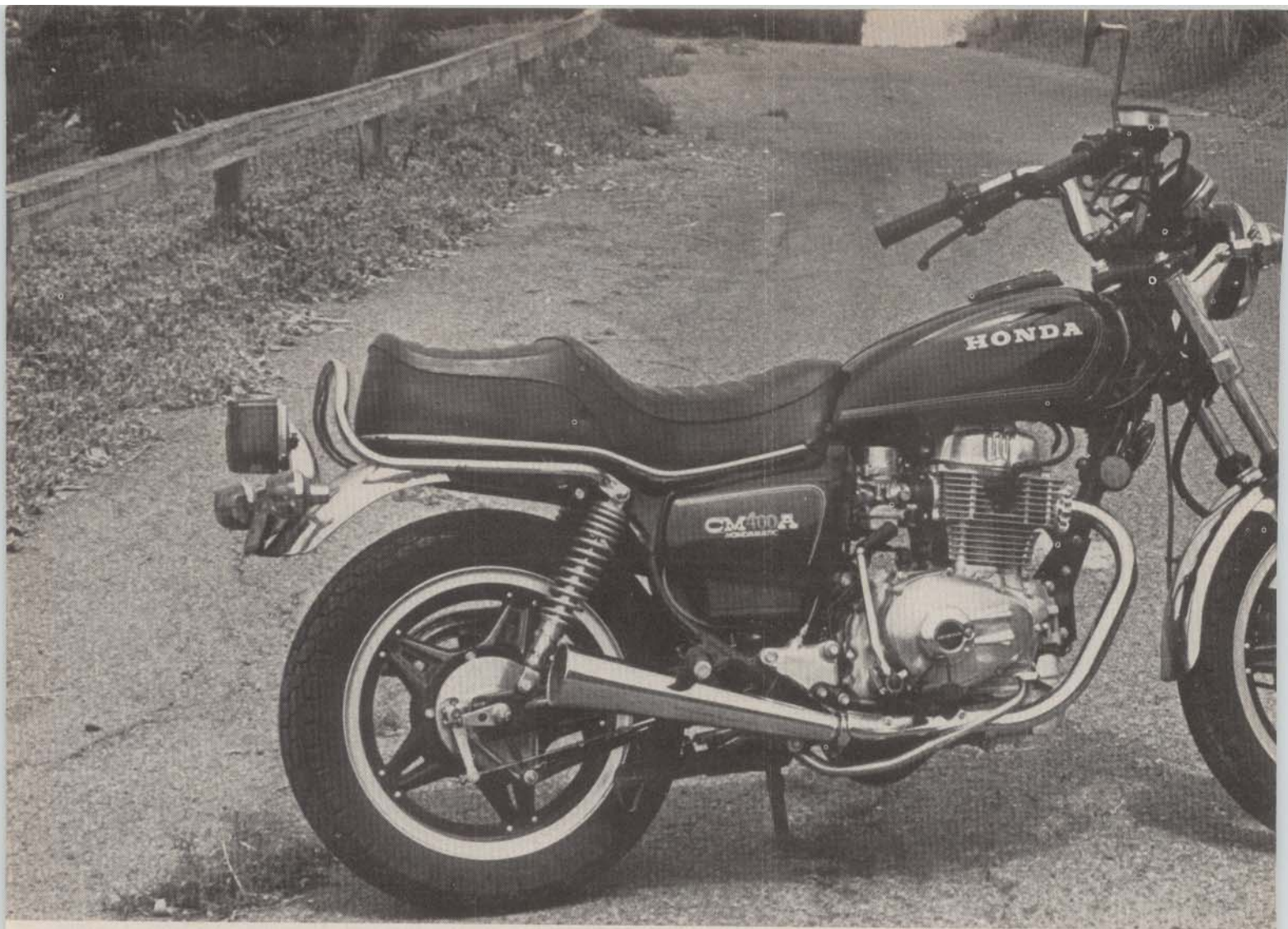
The automatic — excuse me — “Hondamatic” transmission is also the same as the one introduced in late 1977. It is a two-speed drive operated by a left-foot, heel-and-toe shift lever. Down for neutral, up for low drive, up again for cruising drive. Indicator lights in the right-hand instrument gauge keep you informed about gear position. The usual clutch lever position on the left handlebar is a parking brake on the CM400A. This has a positive lockout mechanism to keep the rider from accidentally pulling the brake while the bike is moving.

Other features include the disc brake on the front of the drum brake on the rear. (I still believe this is the best combination for touring, although most of the larger bikes have gone to a three-disc arrangement.) The starter is electric, but a backup kick starter is still standard equipment. The CM400A has a fair-to-good headlight and the ComStar wheels which made their first appearance on the 1977 Hawks.

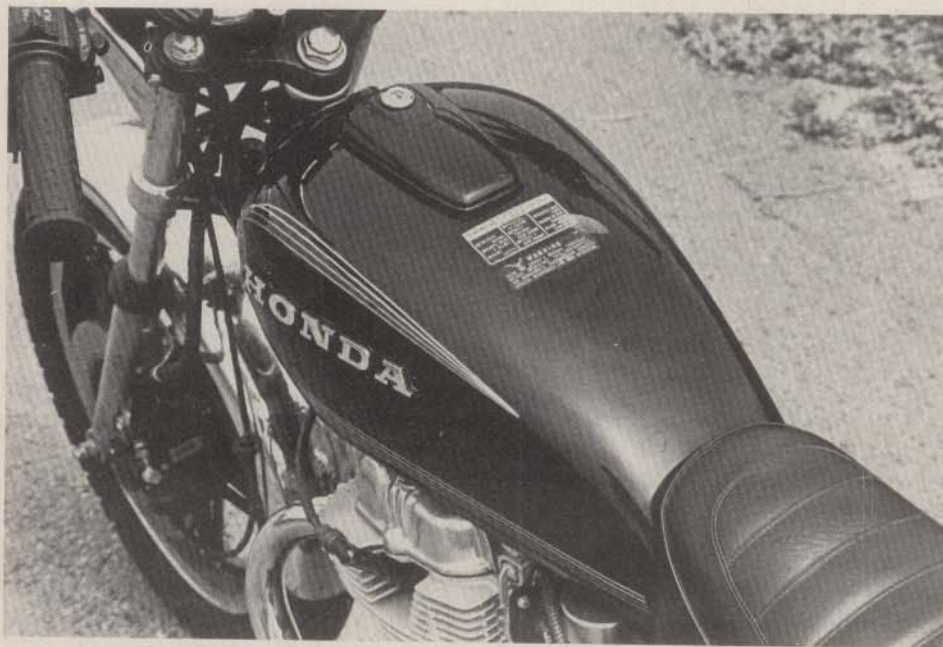
Since this was only an Impression ride instead of a full-fledged Rode Test, I

*(Opposite page) The pleasantly undulant terrain along California’s justly famous Highway 1 brought out the highly satisfactory handling response of the CM400A. On roads like these, small-displacement machines can stay with anything this side of full-bore road-race machinery.*





*Vital statistics . . . wheelbase: 56.1 inches — seat height: 29.5 inches — ground clearance: 5.5 inches — dry weight: 392.5 pounds. Shorty mufflers manage to meet noise pollution requirements while looking good and sounding almost like a motorcycle should.*



*Worst Feature: The CM400A's gas tank is shapely, but doesn't hold much fuel — only 2.6 gallons will fit inside. The filler opening is much too small for efficient, spill-free gasoline transfer.*





didn't put nearly the mileage on this 1979 machine that I did on the 1977 model. This one was used more in keeping with Honda's original commuter ideas: around town errands and riding back and forth to work. Mostly stuff like that. But since I long ago discovered that these smaller bikes are almost always underestimated as legitimate solo tourers, I also found some time to use it as touring transportation. In this role, the CM400A took me to six of the "Sunshine Tour" checkpoints (a report on the MoSEC Sunshine Tour is elsewhere in this issue), running up about 1,500 touring miles in the process.

The Custom Twin is easy to ride. It gets you where you want to go with very little effort on your part. The Hondamatic transmission moves from low to high drive smoothly, without any noticeable jerk or catch. It roars a bit more than it seems like it should for the speed the bike is traveling sometimes, but this does not seem to affect either overall touring performance or gas mileage.

As with the early Hawks, the CM400A was a gas saver. High tankful earned a very satisfactory 68.5 miles per gallon. The low tankful wasn't all that terrible at 43.6 mpg. As with most small-displacement machines, low mileage is usually the result of uphill stretches or speeds in the 65 to 70 mph category. The 43.6 mpg tank came on the ride from Carson City, Nevada, to Bridgeport, California — a stretch that includes a 3,000-foot climb in about 65 miles at open highway speeds. Overall average for the duration of the test: 50.8 miles per gallon. (All figures are corrected for a one-percent odometer error.)

Since I'm talking about gasoline, I guess I'd better mention what I consider the one huge glaring mistake that went into the new design. That is the new tank. Even though the bike has been redesigned to have a "Saturday Night, sexy, low-profile, high style, boulevard bike" image (that description comes from the advertising literature, by the way), a gas tank that only holds 2.6 gallons is pretty marginal these days. There were a few tense moments on the road when I didn't know if I was going to be able to make it to a station. Twice I had to resort to the extra gallon I had been too chicken to leave home without.

But the biggest faux pas (and I mean that in its "social error" meaning) is the tiny filler opening. The CM400A will run on any available gasoline — the problem is getting it into the tank. The locking gas-cap cover is a nice size, but the actual filler opening is only 1-3/16-inch in diameter — about the size of a fifty-cent piece.

Also the filler cap is secured with a small brass chain, which attaches inside the filler opening, making it even harder to manipulate a gas nozzle properly, let alone see what you're doing. As a result, I quickly learned to have lots of rags or paper towels on hand at the gas pump, even when using the smaller diameter nozzles with unleaded gasoline. Wasting gas by spilling it all over everything is not only a modern-day social blunder — it's messy and embarrassing.

Honda's reputation for building reliability into their motorcycles has become a cliché over the years. It was almost a refreshing change when a retaining nut on the left exhaust pipe clamp worked loose and disappeared early in the test, leaving me banging and popping noisily up the freeway, thinking I was about to explode or something. It was easily fixed at the first stop. A 10-mm nut was "borrowed" from the right turn-signal clamp, and no harm done. But it did give me the opportunity to report a genuine, honest-to-goodness mechanical failure — even if it was a small one — instead of making the usual "nothing went wrong" report.

Other than that loose nut (no jokes, please), nothing went wrong during the 2,210-mile ride.

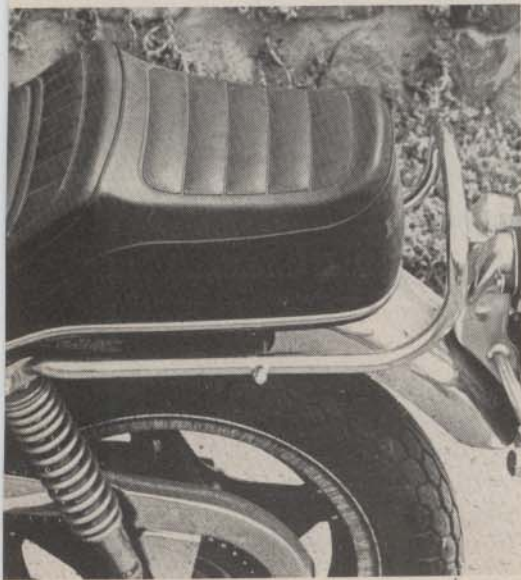
Actual riding, handling and touring characteristics of the 1978 Custom Twin are about the same as the older Hawk models, with the exception of rider comfort, which has been vastly improved. The 395-cc engine has what I would call "adequate" power for most solo riding tasks. (The ads say, "plenty of power," but the adjective "plenty" is a bit strong. "Enough" or "adequate" would be more appropriate — and truthful.)

Almost all of my traveling is done in company with larger bikes. Most of the time that presented no problem for the CM400A. It can keep up a steady 60 to 65 mile-per-hour pace as long as the gas holds out. On a mountain grade, or when passing other vehicles, there was adequate, but not "plenty" of power. At times, I had to wait for the right moment to go around someone. In these circumstances I am happier when there is a bit more oomph than the CM400A was able to come up with. In town, the Hondamatic does precisely what it was designed to do — it makes everything easy on the rider with no fiddling with a clutch lever.

Long-distance comfort has been the big winner as far as the new model is concerned. The little 400 is big-bike comfortable for touring. The handlebar/seat/footpeg relationship is excellent. The rider sits in a relaxed position, with arms bent at just the right angle at the elbow.



*Best Feature: A toss-up between the pull-back handlebars and this exceptionally comfortable, contoured saddle. Honda is finally discovering how to build seating arrangements that will permit long-distance riding. As a result, the CM400A's saddle is "big-bike comfortable."*







The CM400A's engine is a 395-cc, vertical, parallel twin with a single overhead cam operating a three-valve configuration (two intake, one exhaust per cylinder). Power output of the Hondamatic version is rated as "adequate" for the displacement category.



For 1979, the emphasis is on good looks. But those "cosmetic" changes also substantially improve the CM400A's comfort rating.



During the Impression Test, Patti Carpenter logged some 1,500 touring miles on the CM400A by using it to visit six checkpoints on the MoSEC "Sunshine Tour." This is one of them: Pfeiffer Big Sur campground on California's Pacific coast.



The Hondamatic transmission is a two-drive-range unit with torque converter operated by a beel/toe lever on the left side of the machine. Three safety features are built into the system. The engine can be started only while the bike is in neutral. Actuating the sidestand while the bike is in the drive mode shuts the engine off. The parking brake lever (on the left hand-grip) has a manual lockout feature to prevent operation while bike is moving.



The bend at the knee is not excessive — a common problem with smaller bikes — and the cushiony saddle permits high mileage riding without creating pain.

I almost forgot one big improvement on the Custom Twin models: the side-stand is easy to reach with your boot heel; it doesn't try to hide underneath the muffler as the old Hawk version did. It also holds the machine at a proper angle when it is in use. The older stands held the bike at a near-vertical position, which meant hunting for suitable places to park at times if you didn't want the bike to flop over.

If there is one area where the CM400A is superior to just about anything else called a motorcycle, it is its overall versatility. This is really a do-anything (except race) street machine.

During its stay at my house, it was by far and away the most-used bike in the garage. At one time or another while the CM400A was in my keeping the garage was sheltering a 750-cc BMW, a 550-cc Honda Four, a Harley-Davidson Roadster and a Yamaha XS Eleven. But even with all that expensive, high-powered machinery in there, the bike that was taken out most often for just about everything, was the little 400. In addition to the checkpoint touring, it was used almost every day for something or another. Among other things, it was used to make a short, one-day run to Mexico, it went out on numerous local errands, and (in what has to be the most original bit of road testing ever performed by a bike magazine) it even served as the official follow-up vehicle at a local, six-mile footrace!

It is a great commuter for short hauls — just jump on and go. Ride to the store, do your errands, take off on a weekender — or strike off on a 10,000-mile voyage without worry. The CM400A can handle the job, whatever it is.

Perhaps more than any other bike around, the CM400A would also make an excellent choice as a first bike. It's just the ticket for a beginning rider who would rather avoid the added complication of learning how to get up and down through a five-speed gearbox, and who wants an easy handling, comfortable-riding machine.

In other words, in this era of limited (and high-priced) gas rations, the CM400A Hondamatic would make a perfect "second car." It will get you anywhere you want to go, economically and comfortably. Not every "touring" motorcycle can make the same claim. I, for one, hope the new version flies high, wide and handsome.

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