

## Vulcan Vaquero



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Not sure how I'd handle telling people I ride a Mexican Cowboy, but if it was going to be true, it would be only this one: the **Vulcan Vaquero**.

### **THE LOOK**

Red and black. Black and black. A little chrome on each with a fixed fairing and side opening hard bags. That's pretty much what you see at first glance, but you have to include the 1700 cc v-twin through a six-speed gearbox and that's the basis for Kawasaki's new touring-cruiser offering.



This one's the newest kid in Vulcan's family of 1700s that includes the base model Classic, the Nomad with the windshield and top access hard bags, and the fully loaded Voyager that carries a fairing, hard bags, trunk and just about anything else you can fit on a touring motorcycle. The Light Touring model with soft bags and windshield is gone for 2011.

A couple of things immediately draw your eye and the first is the profile: overall lower than the others, accentuated by the fairing in front

and the low profile seat giving it a nice slope front to back. The next attention getter isn't so much the lack of chrome, not much there, but the presence of black....lots of it. Forks, wheels, engine cases, controls, much of what's bright bling on the other 1700's has been blacked out leaving just enough chrome for striking contrast. The result: pure badass. The corporate literature calls it "menacing", but we know what they meant. That's the look they wanted and they nailed it. Let's take a couple of other visuals before we get technical:

- They've mounted a chin spoiler that starts up in front of the tank and continues all around the radiator and it does a killer job of cleaning up that entire area.
- The fairing is borrowed from the Voyager but with amendments: low windscreen, louvers in place of spots, color-matched interior
- The bags are a return to the side-openers of past Nomad fame



- ZERO gap between bags and fender and this just might be my favorite appearance feature of this bike

## **TECH STUFF**

First impressions and visuals firmly in place and we can get to the nuts and bolts.

The 1700 cc (104 cubic inch) single overhead cam 52 degree v-twin is fed by digital fuel injection, through dual 42 mm throttle bodies. Throttle control is cabled from the throttle pipe to pulleys under the tank giving a “normal” feel to the rider, but the pulleys control the Accelerator Position Sensor sending a signal to the ECU which in turn controls throttle valves. Fly-by-wire without the disconnected feel and without the thousand dollar throttle grip. Exhaling is handled by new tapered exhausts that both perform well and look good under the bags.



More drivetrain changes include:

- New 2<sup>nd</sup> piston ring for improved durability (Vaquero only)
- New intake manifold with increased volume (all 1700s)
- Lower primary chain guide's been removed for weight and noise reduction (Vaquero only)
- Non-damper type clutch for increased engine feel (read: vibration) on the Classic and Vaquero only, Voyager and Nomad retain damped clutch



The engine also benefits from the improved ECU that replaced the original so the annoying 12 second delay at start-up has been eliminated. The new ECU is also acknowledged among owners as driving fuel efficiency from the mid-thirties to the low forties. KMC won't quote mileage just like they won't quote horsepower, but they won't argue owners numbers either.

That motor drives a six-speed gearbox with fifth and sixth overdriven like its older 1700 brethren, but there are improvements in place. First gear for example, is just a touch lower, reducing the notable “clunk” to just a bit more than a “click”. Same for second gear, much more pleasant shifting around those two. Third and fourth have been completely reground giving the gears taller teeth and greater contact area making all the gears engage smoother. Big change and only on the Vaquero...thus far. Speculation has it incorporated into the others next year, but Kawasaki won't confirm or deny.

The transmission outputs to a narrowed (28 to 26 mm) carbon fiber belt that increases overall belt strength by 40% over wider Kevlar belts. That belt in turn spins a black, nine spoke cast aluminum rim wearing a 170/70-16 radial skin. The result is smooth shifting and efficient power delivery as well as a good look to boot.

Chassis setup is much like the Voyager, likewise the suspension. Rear air shocks are now easily adjustable by lifting the seat with the cable release. Underneath you find the twin Schrader type valves and direct access.

No more struggling to engage the valves around the bags.



Also note the tool pouch and storage between the battery and air valves. Clean and easy access under that seat.

### **THE FEEL**

Once I climbed on board, several things hit me, not the least of which is the totally different feel from the other 1700s. While the original Vulcan 1500 Classic and its descendants let you sit "in" the bike, the 1700 series first intro'd in 2009 put you more on top. Kawasaki had seen all the pull-back risers on those bikes and subsequently choked up the distance from the seat to the steering head which both shortened that reach, and also sat you more upright. The Vaquero returns to that original feel by adjusting seating position/location more than anything else. I swore that the seat height was lower than the other 1700s but the measurements don't support it. Evidently the feel belies the numbers but that's ok, I really like the feel of this one. I'm about 5'9" and I don't need blocks on my shoes nor do I want risers, everything was in just about the right spot.



Odd part was a 6'2" rider told me the same thing; I guess I like to be stretched out more than he does.

Pull it up off the sidestand and the balance is good but at 835 pounds wet, this is unarguably a heavy bike, although still 60 pounds lighter than the Voyager. A little spec check tells me it's all of three pounds heavier than the 1700 Nomad and surprisingly enough not much heavier than the old 1500 Nomad which was 775 dry (add oil, fuel and coolant). Go through the new bike checklist for things like mirror visibility, grip location, switch intuition, footrest locations, shifter and brake access and everything seems pretty normal. I do like that they maintained the folding brake pedal, makes for quick access to the rear brake.

The dash layout was popular with literally everyone else, but too busy for me. The central feature is the digital display that gives you total and trip odometers, fuel efficiency, miles to empty, time of day, turn signal indicators and cruise control status, most of which I don't care about. There was one function I did find really useful: the gear indicator. The tach and speedo are relegated to analog dials alongside the digital display with the fuel gauge and engine temperature indicator bringing up the flanks. Below the main group is the music display that'll give you everything you ever wanted to know about the music you're hearing while riding.



The controls for all the various gadgetry is nicely laid out adjacent to the grips so your hands never have to leave them. You can change channels, increase the volume, check your instantaneous gas mileage, set the cruise control, toot the horn or any number of other things you might want to do while heading down the highway. Here's the right side showing the mode switches and the cruise control that worked great. Even I appreciated that and I didn't think I would.



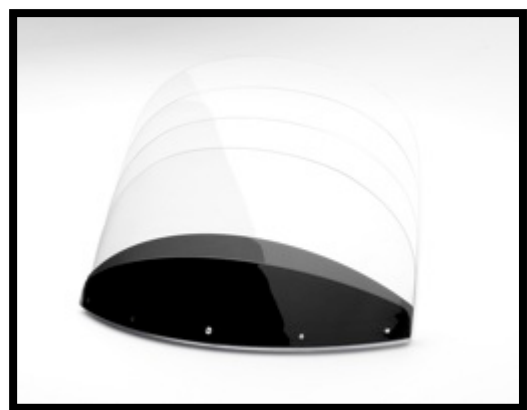
The floorboards are 30 mm forward of the Voyager's and exactly where the Nomad's are. Combined with the reshaped seating this gives you that relaxed position I like but that a lot of touring riders don't. Your feet are definitely not under you here, they're splayed out forward where many or most cruiser riders want them. The beauty of the boards though, is that you get to move your feet

forward and back and if you can't find a comfortable spot I'd be surprised.

## **LET'S RIDE**

Hit the starter and the fun really begins, this is why we're here. The exhaust note is quieter than the Voyager since there was some very vocal opposition to the V-gers throaty sound and Kawasaki listened. The rationale is that you can easily get louder from the aftermarket, but not many supply quieter than the manufacturers. Me? I liked the throatier growl. This one's not bad on hard throttle but I'd like a little more bark. Since it was about 38 degrees, we gave them some warm-up time and then grabbed a gear and hit the road. No surprises other than the gearbox really does shift smoother and quieter, especially around first and second.

One of the first things you notice at 38 degrees and moving is the low windscreen and just how good it looks. I had a full-face helmet on and thought it offered sufficient protection, but a couple of others had half helmets on and observed (complained of) too much wind. KMC was prepared and later in the day during the lunch stop, they swapped some of the stock five inchers for the available accessory heights of 6.5, 12, 14 and 16 inches which satisfied even the most demanding rider. The Voyager stocker is 18 inches and available but wasn't used during the ride.



The other benefit to the higher windshields is the ability to actually hear music and not garbled distortion, which is all I heard from the speakers. Once the higher windshields were added, the riders unanimously noted

improvement in the sound system. I kept the shorty and my full-face and didn't use the music. Keep that one in mind if you like tunes with your ride.

Visibility over, under, and around the fairing is clear and I never felt surrounded or obstructed. Some of the fully faired bikes complete with lowers make me feel somewhat disconnected from the road but this one worked well. I'm a fan of the fixed frame mounted fairings and this one reminds why. It was windy and cold and while it offered good protection, it didn't adversely affect handling and didn't translate any of the wind to the steering like batwings do. Frame mounts also put their weight onto the frame instead of the forks isolating that bulk from steering.



Also quickly noted is the reasonably snappy acceleration both from stop and while cruising. Throttle response is good and the fly-by-wire unnoticeable. Our typical cruising speed was about 50-60 and I spent a lot of my time in either fourth or fifth, I only used sixth on the interstate or when we were alone and just loping along. For me, the sweet spot was around 2800 rpm's which coincided with the torque peak. A couple of us did "accidentally" get separated from the leader once and were forced to add more than normal throttle to rejoin and I think we may have exceeded the speed limit. Not to worry, the bikes didn't complain and even seemed to enjoy the break as they effortlessly pulled both me and the six plus footer back to the pack. Plenty of power.

The varying terrain put the bikes through some minor twisties, long sweepers and hills

with no surprises and no disappointments. Handling, braking and suspension were all in line with the power and left me wanting for nothing. OK, maybe I'd like a little more power but I ascribe to the age-old saying that there's never too much, so keep my observation in context.

That non-damper type clutch.....it did send more engine vibes to the rider, at least that's the explanation I got. It wasn't objectionable, but it was definitely noticeable on both acceleration and cruising and more than the other 1700s. I didn't notice a difference on engagement or actual operation, just vibration or "power pulses" as KMC likes to call them. They calmed down with higher rpm's and less throttle, but were still there as a constant. The stock seat kept me comfortable all day with no hot spots or tailbone ache. As with all seats, that probably won't be a universally held opinion but it's mine. It also came with a slot hidden away under the grab strap for a driver's backrest that will be available soon, but not quite yet.

## **ACCESSORIES**

There's a whole list of accessories including saddlebag top and side rails, the windshields, XM radio kit, CB kit, gel seats, quick-release backrest and luggage rack, GPS mount, various accessory cables and adapters and more and they're all either available now or by the end of March.





### **BOTTOM LINES**

We never did push the Vaquero to any limits except for wide open throttle which was satisfying if not dizzying. While it won't win any speedway races against the ZX-10 or out drag the 14 in the quarter mile, the Vaq will readily compete with any cruiser-tourer on the market. Power, handling, braking and overall rideability all meet or exceed needs and make for an enjoyable experience. At an MSRP of \$16,499 and considering that includes a 36 month unlimited miles warranty, the value for the dollar is exceptional.

