

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY // MARTIN CHILD

GOING THE DISTANCE

Possibly not the most glamorous of models ever, Honda's venerable, low-tech XR400 will always get you there. Perfect choice for the adventurer in you, then.

We like to think a little outside the box here at *ADB*. Sure, most project bikes we bring you transform a great production bike into something that's faster, better and more personal, making it quicker, fitter and goddamn sexy in the process. But, even with the magazine's long history of bike makeovers, I think I'm safe in saying that this Honda XR400 is the first project that features a didgeridoo holder as a modification. Yep, that's right, when this bike goes bush, it takes the Aboriginals' contribution to the woodwind section with it.

It's clear that Steve Crombie's *ADB* Project Honda XR400 isn't a race bike. Nor is it built for a weekend at the Watagans. Nope, this bike is built for the adventurer who's trying to break free in everyone of us. It just happens that the adventure spirit is a lot closer to the surface with Crombie. In fact, that spirit completely covers the 29-year-old like a one-man tent in a freak storm.

Armed with his need to discover the new, and his been-there-done-that mentality, Crombie's choice of steed comes down to the KISS mantra (Keep It Simple, Stupid). With a proven robust design, air-cooled reliability and a complexity even you gran could get her wrinkled head around, the XR picked itself. "But you can't buy an XR400 new!" I hear you protest. True for the enduro version, but we've been smarter than that.

Keen eyes will spot the upside-down forks on the XR, while closer inspection reveals an e-button and starter motor.

If you've spotted the slightly different frame, too, you really need to get out more ... just like Crombie.

So the base model is the XR400M, or the supermoto version. As well as the electric start and stronger forks, it also comes with a cush-drive rear hub, that saves transmission wear on those long tarmac sections that invariably get you to your starting point. Just switching to knobbies won't see you across continents, but this lot will...



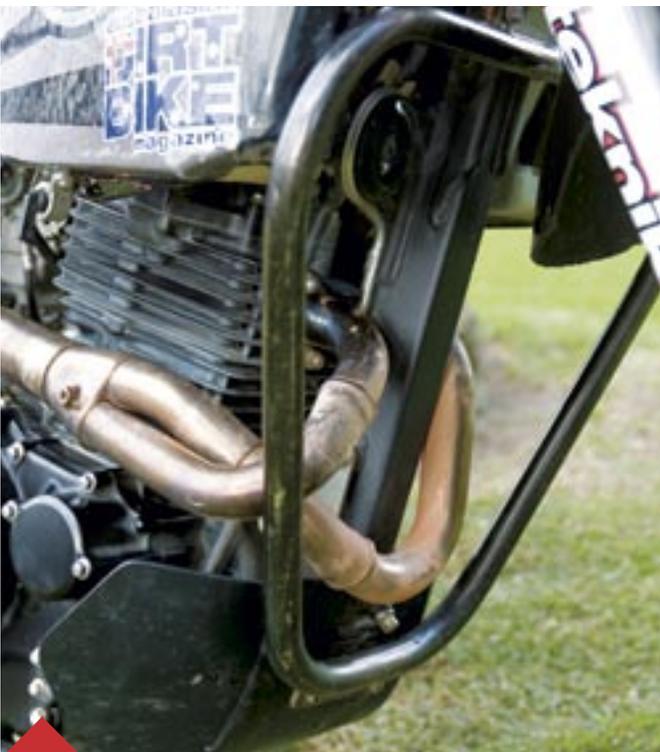
FUEL TANK

Adventure riding's all about going where other people don't or can't. That normally means that you won't find a Caltex station too often, so the standard 9-litre tank had to go. Acerbis do this oversized affair, allowing 21-litres of the good stuff to be carried. As the sides of the tank sit lower than standard, the extra weight of the fuel isn't too noticeable, and the taps on either side can access the last dregs of juice. Thanks to the low-tech nature of the engine and the 21-litre Acerbis tank, Crombie can easily get daylong rides out of the XR before needing a top-up.



BRAKES

As with the suspension, adding extra weight to your bike can affect the performance of your brakes, especially when you're picking your way down a rocky decline. Another advantage of starting with the road-based M-model is that the front disc has been upgraded as standard. It has a larger diameter (for increased stopping power), but the more important change is the thickness of the disc. This allows it to handle repeated, high-speed stops without warping. To ensure this improved feel stays constant, the XR gets treated to Goodridge hoses front and back. These eliminate flex from the lever and help deliver consistent braking performance.



CRASH & PANNIER BARS

No matter how experienced you are at off-roading, go on any long-distance adventure and you will drop the bike. The smart money says that it's best to make the bike as crash-proof as possible. These protection bars, from that wily old campaigner, Laurie Alderton, are the first things to touch down in a fall, protecting the side of the bike from damage. Another bonus is that they offer plenty of handholds, essential when your bike's tank-deep in a raging river and you need to SES it out. The bars mount to plates welded onto the XR's frame.



SUSPENSION

Fully loaded with enough essentials to travel long-distances in remote areas, the XR weighs close to 20kg more than standard. To cope with that increase, while still carrying out the dual roles of decent road comfort and genuine off-road ability, the suspension had to be re-sprung and re-valved. Teknik Motorsport was trusted with the overhaul. The result is a heavier bike that can still handle landings from five-foot jumps while having the composure for everyday road riding. To further enhance the handling package, an MSC Pilot steering damper helps keep the bars smooth at all times.



STEVE CROMBIE It's roam sweet roam for this modern-day nomad.

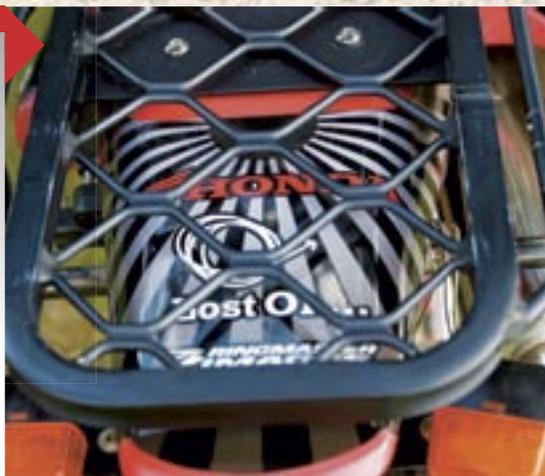
Although he has only been riding bikes since 2002, Steve Crombie's certainly made up for lost time by riding over 150,000km since then. From Sydney to Ayres Rocks and back, covering 8000km in nine-and-a-half days, to travelling to the Arctic Circle in a 90,000km adventure, the 29-year-old New South Welshman has taken his love of the wild open road to new heights with a documentary series called *Lonely Planet's: Natural Born Traveller*, to be screened on the Discovery Channel in October 2008, and then on Channel Ten in December. And the new-year will see the release of Crombie's book, entitled *Lost on Earth*. Want to know more? Go to www.loston.com





RACK

As anyone who's seen how a postie bike is set-up knows, the majority of weight on a bike is carried at the rear. This Whipps rack (along with the pannier sidebars) forms the platform for Crombie's three travel bags. There's nothing fancy about the set-up, but the positioning is critical, especially when the conditions get tough and his energy levels are low. Again, like the crash bars, the rack offers another handhold to help retrieve the bike should the GPS, or rider error, send it the wrong way. And without the rack, there'd be nowhere to hang your didge...



GPS

The bike is fitted with two GPS devices, both supplied by Magellan. The squarer of the two is the Crossover model, which has street, ocean and topography mapping. This is the easier of the two to read on-the-move but isn't bike-specific and it's not totally waterproof, so gets disconnected from the bike's power and put away when it's wet. That's when the Triton 2000 comes into play. This model is fully element-proof and even has a torch and camera option, meaning Steve can photograph and record coordinates. Unlike the Crossover, two replaceable AA batteries power the Triton.



SCREEN

Completely foreign to the MX boys, not needed by the enduro lads, but ask any long-distance traveller for comfort tips and a good screen will top the list. If you've still got 200 clicks between you and a beer, you'll need some form of wind protection. As there is nothing on the market, you'll have to get creative. The XR runs a Honda CB Hornet roadbike screen, simply mounted on the standard headlight unit (the bulb of which has been converted to Xenon). This keeps most of the wind out of Crombie's face and helps him relax while thinking of that cold one.



FRONT GUARD

After snapping a few front fenders on previous bikes, due to the constant vibration, the Ballard's catalogue was raided and the combination of new guard and aluminium brace was chosen to avoid the problem. This super-strong set-up also allows a fender bag to be mounted, holding its cargo of heavy-duty tubes and tools out of the way but within easy reach should the need arise. So far, with the combination of Dunlop D908F and D606R road-legal knobbies covering HD tubes, the fender bag hasn't been opened in the 12,000km life of the bike.





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PACKING THE LOT

Including the kitchen sink...

The classic mistake of the new adventurer is over-packing and weighing the bike down. After 12,000km on the XR, Crombie’s got the luggage department sorted better than Myer. If he’s just “looking around” Australia, he favours the soft luggage bags over the rigid alloy cases. “I only use the cases when I need the extra security of a lock,” he explains. “Otherwise,

the soft bags are the easiest to work with.” A typical going-away kit consists of: Tent, which at 1.4kg, is well over a quarter of the total kit weight, sleeping bag, liner, bedroll, stove, kitchen set, cutlery, dishes, water purifier (uses UV light to purify one litre in 48 seconds) and, not forgetting, a foldable plastic sink. Total weight? Four kilos! **ADB**

