

*It's been about a year since the ZX-14 first hit the streets. Kawasaki's new flagship bike has changed the landscape of the industry, dethroning Suzuki's Hayabusa in the process. Over the last two years Bikeland has followed the 14 from rumor, to production, from the press launch to the showroom floor. In the year that the bike's been on the road we've put thousands of miles in the saddles of several ZX-14's trying to figure out what works, and what doesn't work. Since last fall we've taken the time to speak with 14 owners about their impressions of the bike, the problems we've had, they've had and haven't had. We've also spoken at length with Kawasaki and technicians at Kawasaki about our findings.*

*So here it goes...*

## ***The 2006 (and 2007) ZX-14... Bikeland's Long Term Test...***

*There are two things that still hold true for me in life; if you really want to put something through the wringer, there's nothing like a good old fashioned American Road Trip. Second is that you honestly can't script this stuff. Life is truly stranger than fiction, and if it didn't actually happen to you, you might never believe the story if you read it.*

*Last summer few ZX-14's were to be had at the dealer level, but with some prodding KMC stepped up to offer us*



the use of two pre-production units to put through the paces. Sure, they might not be 100% the "real thing", but hey... beggars can't be choosers and honestly, how different can a pre production bike be? We were about to find out first hand.

Numbers 47 and 55 had seen a hard 1900 miles before we got our hands on them, but they'd been nurtured and hand prepped by a good friend of ours and we knew that we could trust them (and his work) implicitly.

I'd made the mistake - being somewhat geographically inept - of suggesting to PK that we should visit Mount Rushmore for a photo op. Every journey should begin with a quest, and when I suggested this, I failed to realize the vast distance required to get to Mount Rushmore, and to back to the MotoGP at Laguna Seca. With only 7 days to get to Rushmore, and then from Rushmore to Laguna we knew the schedule would be tight, perhaps impossible?



We fitted the bikes with a few extra bits, but nothing over the top. The goal of this test was to put the 14's through the paces as sport touring machines, not the straight-line Drag Bikes the PR people want you to think they are. The Blue 14 was bone stock spare the new Garmin 2820 GPS, a Techmount holding said GPS, a harness for a heated vest and a charging cord for a Chatterbox.

Similarly equipped, the Black 14 carried the winner of our radar shootout, the Bel RX65, a heated vest adapter, a cigarette lighter socket to power an inverter for our laptop, and a pair of Muzzys stainless slippers. Both bikes had about 65 pounds of luggage on the back of them shoved neatly into two Wolfman Alfa Packs. Additionally we carried two separate tire patch kits; the first by Stop & Go, and the second made by Slime. To try out along the way we also had a communication system made by Tork. Laden down with tools, camping, camera and computer gear, we were ready for the journey.

We took off heading east at about 9 am on Thursday morning. It was 80' on the coast, and the LA traffic was thick as we lane split our way towards our afternoon waypoint, Las Vegas, Nevada. Riding along the Interstate, the temperature began to rise. The approaching desert heat began to take its toll on us. By the time we hit Baker it was 119' and only

getting hotter - a LOT hotter. We pulled over at a service station and shoved ice down our leathers, in our boots and then poured water all over our heads. This worked for about 20 miles at which point our bodies and leathers were again bone dry.

A quick glance at the dashboard revealed... nothing! Mysteriously, the heat had wiped out the LCD dashboard display on both bikes. Half an hour later, for no apparent reason, both displays flickered back to life. Was this a sign of things to come?

Both of us have ridden in the heat. We've put thousands of road trip miles on various bikes in similar conditions and icing ourselves was our standard way of combating it. We pulled over and repeated the process. By the time we hit Vegas, it was at least 125' in the shade, and then the traffic came to a standstill.

With my head pounding from the heat and unable to lane split due to Nevada State Law, we took the first exit off the freeway and looked for a place to pull over. Then it began to happen. The temperature gauge on my 14 climbed and climbed. Interesting as traveling on the highway at 40 mph and higher in the same roasting ambient, we had no real issues with the temperature gauge and its readings, but now it was

starting to read 1 bar under hot. Then PK radioed me... her bike began to flash "high temp"... Then so did mine... With a new sense of urgency I began to look for a place to pull over.

Slow cooking myself in the 125'+ heat was not only effecting the bike, but it was taking its toll on me as well. I started to get dizzy and could barely ride another block. Somewhere north of the Stratosphere I spotted a 7-11 and pulled in. Clearing a path through the "locals" loitering in the parking lot, I rolled to an abrupt stop. Kickstand down, burning inside my leathers I almost (and I'm not exaggerating when I say this) fell off the bike. I ripped my helmet off my head only to turn and see my poor 14 spew its coolant onto the pavement. PK pulled in right behind me. As she got off her bike, it did the exact same thing. When she took her helmet off, her face and skin was the most unusual shade of beet red. Realizing we were near hospitalizing ourselves from heatstroke, we holed ourselves up in the air conditioned 7-11 for a good three hours, waiting for both the bikes and our bodies to cool down.

"What are you doing riding at this time of day? No one rides around here in this heat" is what the voice from my cell phone told me. Vegasdude made me feel even worse, but he was right. As we sat in the ghetto 7-11 watching traffic go by, I didn't count a single motorcycle. Apparently (spare the two drifter types we spotted riding what appeared to be freshly stolen scooters) we were the only people foolish enough to ride in the heat.

It was now painfully obvious to us that our bodies, used to the cool ocean air of the Pacific, were definitely not trained to deal with the extreme desert heat, and that we had to find a place to stay for the night where we could cool down and reevaluate our plans.

The ride to the hotel was particularly unpleasant. Neither of us wanted to put our gear on. It was still stinking hot out, but we had little choice in the matter. Setting up camp in the parking lot of the 7-11 wasn't going to work that well for us. After about a dozen blocks of riding, with the 14's now low on coolant









and again teetering on the hairy edge of a high-temp reading, we rolled into the Comfort Inn's parking lot.

Diving into the hotel room's blessed air-conditioning we peeled off our gear and lay down on the bed, exhausted. PK was looking worse for wear as each minute ticked by. On the edge of a vicious case of heat stroke, I loaded her into an ice cold shower and began the cooling down process. About an hour later, with her skin color returning to normal, I set my attention back to the 14's, now sitting abandoned in the parking lot. When I opened the hotel room door the heat of the night desert air hit me... like a brick wall. It was still well over 100' out and it was now close to midnight!

Looking over the 14's I realized that they had lost a substantial amount of coolant, so I went to work replenishing them so we could leave town. With a makeshift funnel and the coffee maker from the Comfort Inn I topped up both bikes and got them back in running order. Heading back inside, I caught the headline on the TV.... "HEATWAVE". The heat was coming, and we were about to get hit with it. Apparently today's heat was just the beginning and it would only get hotter from here on in. Realizing that we would never make it to Rushmore and back alive in this heat (and apparently, neither would the 14's) we changed our plans and aimed for the only part of California showing temps in



the 80's... The Sierra Nevadas.

We turned the Air on to Max-Cool, and went to bed for a shortened, and very uncomfortable night's sleep. We only had one chance to get out of the impending scorching heat and that was just before sun-up. With renewed urgency we woke up at 5:00 am, loaded the bikes, stopped for an espresso and were on the road, heading northwest and away from the Inferno that would later become the great heat wave of the summer of 2006.

Not even 24 hours into our test and we were already unsure of the ZX-14's. They didn't seem to handle the extreme

heat all that well, but neither did our bodies – 125'? Who could blame them? We contacted the folk at KMC to let them know the bikes were running hot (to say the least). They suggested that it might be a calibration issue with the non-temperature specific temperature gauge. Our Spidey-senses (and the pool of coolant we'd had at our feet) told us otherwise. Maybe it was only an issue with the pre-production bikes? More on that later.

Off the Super Slab and away from civilization we snaked into the mountains with the rising sun beating down on our backs. As desert dust and Death Valley gave way to the pines of the Sierras we could finally relax and enjoy the bikes.

The 14's had eaten up the previous day's straight pavement with ease and launching the big bikes into the corners became today's newest pleasure. Slithering our way through the mountains, we ended up at the Mammoth Lakes where we set up camp and headed for a swim. Sitting in the cooling glacial waters, we cleared out minds and focused on the days to come.

With the temperature in the 80's, the high Sierras were ideal for riding, but how long could we stay here? How long would these temperatures last? If it's 80 up here at 8,500' and the heat wave hasn't hit yet, how hot would it







be in two days, and more importantly – how hot would it be between here and Laguna Seca with the burning valley floor separating us?

We knew that we needed to head to a hotel, and planned to do so the next day, but first we took a detour across Ebbetts Pass and Highway 4 – easily one of the twistiest roads in the country.

Scrunching itself to one lane – for both directions – Ebbetts Pass rewards you with breathtaking vistas, sheer cliff edges and corners that you could drag your knee on, if only they weren't so damn tight! and that cliff... right... that cliff... Navigating our way through the pass we make a quick stop in Bear Valley where we check our email and pay a visit to everyone at Bikeland, then it's back to the open road as we head down to Jamestown.

"Honest Officer, I would never pass on a double yellow!"

Now, if I was pulling this maneuver, I'd probably get the book thrown at me, but chicks, well... I guess you get cut some slack if you're a woman riding a ZX-14 in the twisties. Different rules seem to apply! You can fill in the blanks for yourself.

From Jamestown we headed west for San Francisco, and the coast. With 1220 miles on the clock and counting we cut straight across California, through San Francisco and then north, ending up in the one road town of Tomales, California.

Tomales is a cool little retreat with only a few buildings, a corner store, a café and a Pub that only serves food on certain days (we found out the hard way). Plan yourself a night to stay at The Continental Inn. It's been there since the 1850's and the rooms are fantastic.

Well fed, well rested and poised to hit some of the best motorcycling roads in the world, we spent the next several days traversing Highway 1, the Northern California Coast and the roads that work their way inland.

The bikes were handling flawlessly and





spare PK losing her footing with her fully loaded bike on some gravel exiting a parking lot of a Mexican restaurant, the 14's hauled us and our gear effortlessly through the twisties without so much as a complaint. Pulling the trigger on one of these machines is truly a pleasure. With bottomless power on tap delivered ridiculously smoothly, we ate up the miles and the never-ending corners.

With several more days of riding under our belts and the MotoGP approaching, we turned and headed south towards the Bay area.

Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, I heard a voice behind me...

"Pull over now. DO NOT TRY TO RUN. Pull over at the end of the bridge".

Apparently the allure of two brand new ZX-14's without plates on the Golden Gate Bridge was too much for this motorcycle enthusiast Officer to turn up. After a brief chat with him about the fact that these bikes didn't have plates because they were preproduction units, he talked to us at length about motorcycle riding, his Harley and how nice the Muzzys slippers were. He then he asked us if he could get a picture taken with the 14's, and sent us on our way!

With a few more nights' camping and over 2000 miles under our belts, we pulled into Salinas Motorcycle Center for a much needed tire change courtesy the folk at Dunlop. We'd burned through the hard and slightly sketchy feeling OEM Bridgestones, and were interested in seeing how a set of Qualifiers would affect the handling of the big bikes.

Salinas Motorcycle Center is a relatively large dealership, and they were kind enough to accommodate our tire change on both bikes, even with MotoGP and race weekend upon them.

With new shoes fitted, and the old ones disposed of we made our way to Monterey for several days of race watching. At our house in Monterey we took some time to go over the bikes, adjusted the chains, checked the oil levels of both and also emptied the







oil overflow blow-by bottles from both machines. Curiously, both overflows were full, but this didn't concern us – I remember having to empty the catch bottle on my 2000 ZX-12R several times per lengthy road trip. With the bikes adjusted, tweaked, oil spot on where it should be in the site glass, catch bottles emptied and the GP over, we headed out for more riding, this time with freek in tow on his 2000 ZX-12R.





Heading back north up California's Highway 1, I had the opportunity to trade the 14 for freek's ZX-12R. As a previous 12R owner, I know how zealous all of us can be about our bikes. In all honesty the 12R feels dated when ridden side by side with the 14. Granted freek's ZX-12R is not the best example of the machine, but it does give you a pretty good idea of what the 12R rides like - coupled with the fact that I'd already put thousands of miles on my own 12R.

This particular trade off left a lasting impression for me.



We carved our way all the way back up the coast to Leggett, where the ZX-14's indicated "high temp" yet again. It was finally time to turn around and head back for home and for Hollywood. With the bikes in top form, all systems go and the stickier Dunlops nicely broken in and providing added confidence we sped our way back towards the LA basin. Stopping for some deep fried artichokes at a tourist trap restaurant, we hear that the heat wave has been on for 11 days now - without the temperature dropping below 100°. 57 people have died from the extreme heat. We were thankful about our decision to remain on the coastal roads, where the temperatures had stayed in the high 90's and lucky that we got out of the path of the heat wave when we did.







On the 14<sup>th</sup> day of our journey, we made it back to Los Angeles and visited with some friends. I was curious about how the 14 compared to the Hayabusa, so I arranged a ride with Ducmanic, the owner of Labusas.org. Labusas is easily one of the largest Hayabusa

websites in the world. The next day we took the bikes out for a spin to the The Rock Store and around the Hollywood Hills.

We traded off and I rode his Hayabusa. It's amazing how similar these bikes

are in performance and handling. The 14 definitely out brakes the Busa, and although the power is similar the 14 feels considerably more refined. The other thing that surprised me was how dissimilar both the Busa and the 14 were compared to the 12R. The 12R didn't even seem to fit into the same class. After all the years of debating online and offline, having the opportunity to ride all three bikes back to back had really summed it up for me.

The refinements of the ZX-14 were obvious, and when ridden side by side with its competition the choice of which bike rode "better" was easy – it was the 14 – but not by a lot. The Busa is so similar, albeit slower, that brand loyal people may or may not switch, and choose to wait for Suzuki's answer.

It was time to return the bikes, but not without a final ride. Hooking up with a couple more Bikeland members, we decided to take the 14's out for a final flog on the Ortega Highway, only a few miles from their home at KMC. On the







gas with almost 3500 miles under us, stickier tires and over two weeks of adventure past, we made our way up Ortega and into the first real turns... Then I got the call on the radio... It was PK...

"Uh (thack thack thack thack) this doesn't sound right... there's something wrong with the bike (thack thack thack thack)! I have to pull over!"

Oie vey! That "thack thack thack thack" noise is so distinct, anyone who's smoked an engine knows it when they hear it. I ride back to find the 14 dead on the side of the road... I thumb the starter and she fires up.... "thack thack thack thack". Oh God, this can't be good! A call to our friend with the rescue pickup truck and the poor 14 heads home to KMC, much worse for wear than expected!

Apparently PK has earned a new nickname ... "Phourteen Killa"!

Back at KMC we unload the bikes only to discover that neither have much oil remaining! This is truly bizarre as we'd checked them about 800 miles previous and they had oil in the middle of the sight glass. With no idiot lights warning of impending doom, the engine simply toasted itself. It was done.

In fact, even with the engine mortally wounded, connecting rods rattling around inside its cases and little oil to speak of in its depths, the bike would start, idle and rev up with no oil warning indicator illuminated. Checking the other ZX-14 revealed an equally low level of oil, but no warning light to indicate

impending doom.

We find out later that according to Kawasaki the preproduction engines



were fitted with pre-production non-spec parts. In this day and age of bulletproof engine reliability we never thought about checking the oil more than every 800 miles or so.

What really caught us off guard was that no idiot light came on.

"Hey idiot... you're about to ride Ortega with no oil!"

The lack of oil, or excessive oil use we don't have an issue with. To Kawasaki's credit, the engines in these machines were not production spec. Apparently they don't build these early run units to last forever.

Where did the oil go? This is yet another mystery. You'd think the thing would be blowing blue like an old Pinto with oil usage high enough to commit hari-kari, but this didn't happen. We've had lots of discussion about this, but no answers. Euro 3 emissions ate up the smoke perhaps? We don't have an answer, and if Kawasaki knows, they're not telling.

If you own this bike or any bike for that matter, check the oil frequently. Though we believe Kawasaki in their claim that production engines won't suffer from the same oil use issues, we simply can NOT recommend you trust the oil warning light on this bike, pre-production or not. Not that it's going to use oil or grenade itself spontaneously,

but it did surprise us that even in this day and age, you can't trust the warning lights – even with a 32 bit computer in control.

After we reported our issues to KMC they provided us with another 14 to try – this time it was a production unit. We put an additional 1200 miles on this bike with no oil use issues whatsoever, however we did experience the same "High Temperature" readings that we did with the pre-pro units as well as some

fit and finish problems. We were able to reliably and consistently recreate the high temperature warning condition on the dashboard of the production bike just like we'd experienced with the pre production units.

With regards to the issue that many





have complained about dealing with heat on the rider's legs, the 14 has a foam gasket installed between the fairing and the engine which prevents hot air from escaping onto your legs.

The pre-pro units had no issue with this, however our test production unit did. It took us a while to track the foam gasket down as being the culprit – we were having a hard time understanding why the two other 14's we had ridden didn't displace any hot air onto our legs, yet this production version was searing my left ankle. We installed a temperature probe to demonstrate the temperature variances caused by this and measured a 29° variance between the sides of the bike with the foam installed incorrectly.

This problem seems to be nothing more than a case of sloppy assembly. Install this little bit of foam correctly and you shouldn't have any heat issues (comfort wise) with this bike.



# **The 2006 / 2007 ZX-14**

## ***What we liked:***

- Never ending Power
- Comfort
- Handling
- Suspension
- Braking
- Dunlop Qualifiers
- Never ending Power
- Never ending Power
- Never ending Power

## ***What we didn't like:***

- Cooling fan doesn't stay on when bike is turned off (contributes to potential overheating)
- Hot air blown onto legs if fairing gaskets not assembled correctly (inconsistent build quality)
- Engine tip-over sensor did not shut the bike off when PK had her slow speed tip over
- Pre-production LCD display/dashboard didn't work in extremely high ambient temps
- Oil warning light (idiot light) didn't work - Can't be trusted

## ***Can you tour on this bike?***

Heck yes! That's why we wrote this review. The 14 confirmed all of our suspicions - it's a fantastic sport tourer and an absolute joy to ride. The ZX-14 has ample wind and weather protection, comfortable seating and out of this world power and performance. Correctly equipping a ZX-14 with hard or soft luggage, this bike becomes the sport touring alternative that might make you question the purchase of the new Concours14. Armed with all the information and a few minor tweaks, the 14 is more than anything you'll need for years and years of riding enjoyment.

Is this bike Teflon? No, but what is? It's pretty close to perfect, except for its issues in dealing with extreme heat and a questionable oil warning idiot light.

## ***The 14 and Heat – its ability to deal with heat.***

The 14 will read "high temp" only under very specific conditions, and from the best of our deductions it appears to be due to the fact that the fan does not push enough air through the rad at lower speeds when ridden in higher ambient temperatures. The lowest ambient we recreated this failure in was 91.9°. Contributing to the problem is the fact that the bike experiences a heat "spike" when the engine is shut off due to the fact that the cooling fan does not continue running.

Why is it significant that the gauge reads "high temp"? What follows after a "high temp" indication, we have proven, is boil over. You have a few blocks of riding cushion, but if you end up in the "high temp" zone and do what you're supposed to do (which is turn the engine off) you set yourself up for the heat spike and the potential of a puddle of coolant on the ground beneath your feet. A damned if you do, damned if you don't situation.

This problem won't effect 90% of ZX-14 owners, although we have heard reports in our forums from the 10% who have complained of this condition. If you own this bike and live in a hot climate, consider changing to a synthetic coolant that handles heat better. Switching to a Muzzys fan could help. If I took the 14 on a road trip, I wouldn't even consider going on that trip (knowing what I know now) without changing to a higher pressure radiator cap and wiring in a switch to keep the cooling fan on when I turned the ignition off.

I don't like running the risk of being stopped dead by extreme heat/hot weather – not that I seek it out, but just that I'd never want to be caught in it like I was this time.

## ***Why did we wait?***

We've waited a few months to publish this article for several reasons. First and foremost, we wanted to be 110% sure that we were reporting the facts to you, our readers. We wanted confirmation from Kawasaki that the issues we had experienced



with regards to overheating were valid, and we also wanted to give them a chance to try and solve the problem. To date, and to our knowledge, Kawasaki hasn't made any changes to the ZX-14 to address the issue of overheating, though they told us that they were able to duplicate our findings in their recent testing.

How come you haven't heard about these problems in the mainstream media? We guess that's a question you'll have to ask yourself the next time you think about buying a magazine, isn't it?

2008 is just around the corner. We hope that Kawasaki will solve these problems in the next incarnation of this bike.

### ***Special thanks to...***

*Kawasaki Motors Corp (USA)  
Dunlop  
Muzzys Performance Products  
Slime  
Stop & Go  
Tork  
Bel Radar Detectors  
Salinas Motorcycle Center  
Wolfman Luggage  
Techmount  
Garmin  
Labusas.org*

