



Kawasaki invited so many motorcycle journalists and Internet motorcycle forum representatives to Houston that they had to divide us into three shifts for the week. I, in the middle shift with fellow Internet forum reps, got to spend quite a bit of time with the new Vulcan 1700 Vaquero. We started out under the awning, looking and touching. Kawasaki's Croft Long – Product Manager, along with Greg Lasiewski – Public Relations, Paul Golde, Sean Alexander, Brian Gibson, Jan Plessner, Tom Matsuda, and quite a few other Kawasaki staffers, were there to answer questions and offer explanations.

Appearance, Comfort, Fit & Finish

According to Croft, Kawasaki's market research shows there's a market niche for a solo cruiser that blends parts of a traditional cruiser, a full tourer and a bagger. The design targets were to develop a bike that's aggressive and sporty, combining cruiser





appeal with bagger and tourer features – all in a bike that sits low and has flowing design lines. So, using the Vulcan 1700 platform introduced in 2009, Kawasaki modified and tweaked it to develop the Vaquero. Did Kawasaki meet the design targets? I think they did. Look at the pictures and make your own decision.



Visually, the Vaquero projects a “tough” image. The blacked-out engine, forks, tank nacelle, brake/clutch reservoir covers, and wheels reinforce the visual cues. This is especially true for the glossy black-painted Vaquero. Don’t like black? There’s a fire-engine red Vaquero, too. A stylish chin fairing completes the aggressive look.

Those of you familiar with the previous-generation Kawasaki 1500/1600 Nomad will instantly recognize the familiar shape of the Nomad side-opening saddlebags, which are perhaps the most

distinctive and identifiable bags ever made. While the Vaquero’s bags pay homage to the older Nomad, they aren’t exact copies. The grooves and chrome strips are gone. The resulting smoothness and visual continuity add to the all-of-a-piece look of the Vaquero. Moreover, the bags aren’t square to the bike frame. They toe in at the rear, streamlining the view from behind. Same-color bag filler plates complete the smooth and sleek look.

A frame-mounted fairing first used on the Vulcan 1700 Voyager adorns the front end. Like the Nomad-style bags that aren’t exact copies, the fairing came over with a change. Gone are the auxiliary driving lights. In their place, louvered grills add visual interest and mono-color appeal.





Want more light up front? You can replace the louvered grills with optional driving lights. With a Voyager-like fairing up front, Kawasaki chose to give the Vaquero the Voyager's hefty 45mm fork tubes to match – blacked out, of course. On the red Vaquero, the headlight trim housing and dash panel are color-matched. They're chrome and black, respectively, on the black Vaquero. The fairing holds the same excellent audio system and full instrumentation as are found on the Voyager. For the Vaquero, the

tach and speedo get red dial face rings and amber lighting for all instruments.

I've always said that motorcycle seats are like mattresses because each rider has a very personal preference. I found the Vaquero's stock seat to be the best stock seat on which I've ever had the pleasure of parking my butt. After an all-day test ride, I felt no seat fatigue or discomfort whatsoever. The seat is probably only partially responsible for the comfort because the Vaquero's ergonomics are very similar to the Vulcan 1700 Classic: seat back a bit and floorboards forward a bit as compared to some other Vulcan 1700 models. The pillion portion of the stock seat is best suited to short rides, though. If you expect to do much two-up riding, you can change the passenger accommodations to something more comfortable for longer trips (more later).



The stock windshield/deflector looks good. It does let the wind blast hit you right in the chest, though. Kawasaki has two opaque deflectors and four windshields available in various heights so you can adjust the wind flow to your liking. If I had a Vaquero, I'd probably pick the 14" windshield for myself because it's short enough to look over, but tall enough to steer the wind over my head.

Overall fit and finish and attention to detail are very good. The paint is thick and glossy. Blacked-out parts have a nice matte finish. Chassis wiring is well-hidden and hoses and tubes are barely visible. One area that could use a bit of improvement is handlebar wiring and tubing, which looks a little messy, but not terribly so.

Engine, Transmission, Driveline

For 2011, there have been some changes and improvements to the engine, transmission and driveline over previous 1700 models.

Kawasaki's 1700 V-twin engine powers the Vaquero. Kawasaki has added a second piston ring, unique to the Vaquero, for improved durability. While there was no problem with the existing ring design, Kawasaki engineers determined that adding a second ring would allow ring-to-cylinder pressure to be reduced. With the sporty character of the Vaquero making it more likely to be ridden aggressively, this change should give better long-term durability.



A redesigned intake manifold is on all 2011 1700 models. The manifold has been reshaped for increased volume and more linear throttle response. Idle smoothness and off-idle throttle response benefit, too. In the primary drive, the lower primary chain guide has been removed for weight reduction. The Vaquero gets a non-damper clutch, which is intended to give the rider more feel from the engine. During my test ride, I noted a slight amount of power pulse feel coming through upon acceleration. During steady cruising, I couldn't tell any difference from other Vulcan 1700 models. By the way, the non-

damper clutch has no effect on the workings of the "slipper" clutch function.

The 6-speed transmission has a Vaquero-only revised 1st gear ratio. It's now 40/13 (3.077) instead of 44/15 (2.933). The change is slight, but noticeable when compared to other Vulcan 1700 models. In my opinion, 1st gear was a little too low on the other models, so this is a welcome change. Along with the 1st gear ratio revision, 3rd and 4th gears now use a taller tooth profile to increase the number of teeth in contact. These changes have greatly reduced the "clunky" shifting sound from the transmission and reduce gear whine in 3rd and 4th gears, too.

The final drive is a new 26mm belt, down from 28mm. The carbon fiber belt has proven to be strong enough to allow the extra 2mm to go away. A Kawasaki engineer explained that proper belt tension is extremely important for keeping belt noise to a minimum. Improper belt tension changes the tooth-to-tooth gullet distance, which causes noise and belt wear.

Also new for 2011 is a tapered exhaust muffler. This muffler is quieter (almost inaudible) at cruise than the previous muffler. There's still a bit of sound available at low speeds, though. Kawasaki believes that those who like a quiet bike will like the new mufflers and those who want more sound can install an aftermarket muffler, which is almost always louder than stock, anyway. Header pipes remain unchanged, so any aftermarket exhaust that fits 2009/2010 1700 Nomad/Voyager models should fit the Vaquero.

Brakes, Suspension, Handling

I asked Croft Long why there is no ABS option for the Vaquero. He said Kawasaki is trying to meet a price point and ABS was simply too costly to meet the point. I guess I understand that, but I'd still like to see an ABS option for the Vaquero. I know from personal experience that ABS is a must-have feature for many riders. Those who don't trust ABS simply, in my opinion, have not had a chance to experience the benefits. Okay, I'll get off my ABS soapbox. My test ride showed the non-ABS brakes on the Vaquero work very well, with good feel and stopping power and little front-end dive. 'Nuff said.



The suspension is robust, with 45mm forks up front and air-adjustable shocks out back. My test bike came to me with rebound set to 2 (out of 4) and 15 psi in the air shocks. Given the 836-pound weight of the bike, combined with my 215 pounds, this proved to be a good setup. The ride was smooth and controlled. I didn't experience any suspension bottoming or vagueness over



some pretty good bumps. Bumpy corners were no problem, either. The filler valves for the air shocks have been moved to a convenient spot under the seat. Because the seat pops off in seconds using the bike key, it's easy to check and fill the shocks.

The Vaquero is surprisingly nimble for a bike of this size. With its low center of gravity, it's easy to handle at parking lot speed. During the photo shoots, we made many low-speed U-turns. The turns were easy and there was no unsteadiness or drama. At higher speeds, turn-in was quick and sure and there was no wobble in fast sweepers or slower sharp curves. I was pleasantly surprised at the ease of taking

the Vaquero to its floorboard-scraping limits. Speaking of floorboard scraping, lean angle is more than adequate for a cruiser-type bike. Those pesky magazine writers are the only people who complain about cruiser lean angles, anyway. An interesting aside: Kawasaki does not allow floorboard scraping by staff members riding with press representatives. Sean Alexander, our ride leader, was hanging off in the turns, just so he wouldn't be guilty of scraping a floorboard. Sean's a very good rider, so I suspect he was enjoying treating his Vaquero like a sport bike.



Accessories, Value, Bottom Line

Kawasaki has heard us. There are a host of accessories available for the Vaquero now, and more are in the pipeline. There's a slot in the seat, hidden under the passenger grab strap, for a rider backrest that will be out this spring. For those who expect to do some two-up touring, Kawasaki has a gel-padded touring seat available. It's made for the Vaquero by Saddlemen and it's a steal at \$299 list. There are passenger floorboards available to replace the stock pegs. There's a very nice KQR (Kawasaki Quick Release) passenger backrest and

luggage rack, too. The KQR is key-lockable to prevent a parking lot thief from walking away with your seat and luggage rack. With the ease of changing the seat and with KQR, you can go from solo bad boy to two-up gentleman in about a minute. Very nice. There are also various chrome and blacked-out farkles, bag liners (now made to fit Vaquero or Nomad/Voyager), and a host of goodies on the way. There's a slick GPS mount that attaches in place of the handlebar top clamp, too.

At \$16,499 list, with a 36-month warranty, I think the Vaquero is a good deal. It's the ticket for those who want a solo bagger that



can easily go two-up when you're ready. If you're riding a 1500/1600 Nomad that's getting on in years and miles, the Vaquero should be on your short list of candidate bikes. If you've been considering adding an aftermarket fairing to your bike, the Vaquero already has one.

Bottom line: This is a great bike! It does a lot of things well and it looks sharp. I think it deserves a serious look from anybody thinking about a first or replacement bagger.