

COMPETITION AT A GLANCE

	Hp	Weight	1/4-Mile	Seat Height	Price
<b>Yamaha FZ6</b>	85.8	460	11.32	32.0"	\$6499
<b>Honda 599</b>	80.4	446	11.57	30.5"	\$7099
<b>Triumph Speed Four</b>	79.6	452.5	11.29	31.9"	\$6499*
<b>Suzuki SV650</b>	68.6	428	11.89	32.4"	\$5899
<b>Suzuki SV650S</b>	69.0	433	11.63	32.25"	\$6299
<b>Ducati M620ie Dark</b>	54.3	424	12.52	29.9"	\$6495
<b>BMW F650CS</b>	44.2	432	13.07	30.5"	\$8690

\* Note: Priced reduced from \$7499 in 2003

a balanced grip front to back. This is stuff that makes you savor a challenging set of curves. Yet it's a quality that's rare to find, even with all the choices that abound. For one, it requires a relatively light bike, and these two are light, just 446 lbs. for the 599 and 460 lbs. for the FZ6, both soaking wet with a full tank of gas.

And although our whining hasn't been able to pry loose fully adjustable suspension from any manufacturer but Triumph in this category, we'll keep trying. However, considering what they do provide, we'll have to admit both are pretty good. After being aboard the Yamaha, the Honda feels a bit floaty, which we attribute to being a little short on damping in both directions at both ends, but isn't truly bad by any stretch of the imagination. The Yamaha, on the other hand, is pretty darn near perfect, and a definite cut above the Honda. The FZ6 feels sure-footed in the canyons and noticeably smoother on the freeways as well—making it hard for us to snivel.

**Brakes: Tie**

Because both bikes are relatively light, the relatively inexpensive braking components fitted to both machines work quite well. The front brakes are both dual discs—298mm diameter on the Yamaha, 296mm on the Honda—with simple pin-slide twin-piston, single-action calipers. The rears are single disc, 245mm on the FZ6 vs. 220mm on the Honda, giving the Yamaha more rear stopping power when loaded with a passenger, but making the rear brake somewhat harder to control during our maximum braking tests with just the rider aboard. Our best stopping distances were a perfect tie, exactly 116.5' for both, although the 599 did exhibit some hop-chatter from the forks at the limit, which the Yamaha did not.

**Handling: Tie**

Both have been made to appeal to American audiences with wider 17"-rims and fatter rear tires, to look less like inexpensive commuters.

The stock tires on both are obviously

intended to provide long life. However, the 599's Michelin tires don't warm as much in use as the FZ6's Bridgestone BT020 rubber and didn't display any tread-surface graining after a long ride, either—an indication of adhesion. They also don't seem to offer quite the same level of grip. We liked the feel of the FZ6's Bridgestone's better, but both bikes can be ridden quite exuberantly without exceeding their limits, and both are extraordinary in this regard—two of the most fun bikes to ride we've sampled. Of course, on winding roads, rider skill pays bigger dividends than more hp at this performance level. If you're a good rider, you won't be eating anyone's dust on either of these machines.

Of course, because the new, wider 17"-rims (3.50" front and 5.50" rear on both) accept a plethora of excellent rubber choices, you'll have the option of even more aggressive riding fun when you replace the stock rubber.

**Styling: Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd**

Styling-wise, both machines go for the trendy high-mount exhaust design. The Yamaha's exhaust features polished stainless steel headers that collect into a single pipe that rises in front of the swingarm, where it turns back to a single box-like muffler under the tail, equipped with two outlets and stylized covers that make it look like two mufflers, *a la* the Ducati 916/998.

The 599 looks almost exactly like its big brother the 919, except that the larger model's left muffler has been eliminated. While the Honda's position isn't truly under the seat, it does offer improved ground clearance. However, it may prove to be in a hotter location for the passenger than the Yamaha's design.

Visually, the Yamaha is a very attractive package, with a sparkling metallic paint on the chassis and bodywork made from color-impregnated plastic to eliminate the discoloring caused by scratches. Incidentally, the FZ6 features a titanium alloy fuel tank to minimize weight up high and the tank's shape is very nice, narrow between the legs,

and with superior capacity to the Honda, 5.1 gals. to 4.5 on the 599.

The Honda is an attractive bike, but is perhaps a bit less dazzling to the eyes. And, unlike the 919 last year, you get a choice of bright yellow paint if you don't favor the "asphalt" matte black look. Personally, we're not too impressed with paint that can't be waxed without spoiling its finish (the matte black).

**Riding Impression: Tie**

The 599 has a much more compact control layout than the FZ6. Although it's still comfortable enough for six-footers, smaller riders will find the Honda more to their liking. The FZ6, on the other hand, feels full-sized to larger riders, with a comfortable stretch from the seat to the pegs and higher handlebars. Naturally, the excellent wind protection afforded by the front fairing and windshield add a lot to the comfort. Also, because the fairing is placed fairly far away, it makes the cockpit layout seem even more spacious.

Comfortwise, if you're riding more than a hundred miles between stops, the seats on these machines will start to get your attention—negative attention. Neither is especially good, but the Honda's is definitely better than the Yamaha's. The FZ6 seat feels way too hard and is not well shaped for the anatomy (the perch on Yamaha's own FZ1 is much better, for instance). The Honda's is softer and slightly better shaped, but on either one, we suspect those riders regularly seeking distant destinations will be looking to the aftermarket for add-on pads or new upholstery to improve the situation. This is too bad, as both are welcome platforms for longer riding otherwise, but at least such improvements are not terribly expensive. However, both provide a very tactile and confidence-inspiring feel of the road, encouraging the rider to really enjoy the ride.

**Instruments & Controls: Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd**

Although the Honda has what looks like fairly simple instruments, a large round analog tach and speedo side-by-side, the displays include such details as coolant temperature, twin tripmeters and a digital clock, so they are actually pretty complete. But, we would have liked an actual fuel level gauge, rather than just a low fuel warning light.

By comparison, the Yamaha has a more high-tech look, with a wraparound LCD tachometer surrounding the speedo. In addition to the Honda's features, the FZ6's instruments include a fuel gauge. Also, even though we found the tachometer's bar graph harder to read than the Honda's simple ana-

log tach, the Yamaha also allows a numerical display of engine rpm to be toggled into view. This made it very easy to determine the engine's exact rpm at an indicated road speed, something we found intriguing to observe. Also, the display's units of measure can be changed from Metric to Miles, if you were to cross the border, for instance.

The 599's headlight is exceptional. Although outwardly a conventional 7" round shape, it uses new technology: A polycarbonate lens with a cast aluminum reflector divided into two parts, the high and low beams both using H7 bulbs rather than the more common, dual filament H4. It received rave reviews from our testers for the spread and quantity of light it produced, and Honda says the technology will be used on future models. Also, the 599's headlight has some aerodynamic qualities you might not expect. Its lens shape is so blunt that it actually works to create some wind protection the faster you go. And, in still weather, several testers noticed that rider wind pro-

tection was actually better at an indicated 90 mph than it was at 80, as a strong swirl of air turbulence forms in front of the rider's chest and reduces the forward pressure, but without causing any bothersome turbulence at the helmet.

**Attention To Detail: Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd**

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**Value: Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd**

Not only does the FZ6 carry more comprehensive instrumentation, but it also offers a very useful fairing and a centerstand, making this one an easy call.



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However, the FZ6 has dramatically better wind protection, as you'd expect from a proper head fairing and windshield. Also, despite the fact that the windshield is fairly far from the rider, it does a remarkably good job, and is superior to the bigger FZ1 in this department. Also, the Yamaha's mirrors are noticeably wider than the 599's for an excellent rear view—better than the Honda's, which aren't bad. Plus, they are rock solid at speed, too, for very clear images.

And although the FZ6's lighting arrangement looks superior, and we were told at its introduction that it would use paired high/low beams, we found only the left side is the low beam and the right, the high, so

newer sibling, the SV650S, offers a fairing for \$6299, however, the S-model's revised riding position is really too racey for sport touring, in our opinion, and it doesn't offer the long-range comfort of the FZ6.

Not to be overlooked, the Ducati Monster 620 is actually competitively priced at \$6995 (or just \$6595 for the "Dark" model). But while the M620 is beautifully detailed, great fun to ride and makes a fine choice for a shorter rider, it is significantly underpowered in this group.

BMW's F650CS is another fun machine, without a doubt, but doesn't come close to offering the performance or value of the others in this group. Although it is the only one to offer ABS, a significant feature.

However, the Triumph Speed Four, new to the US last year, brings you fully adjustable suspension front and back (a significant benefit we wish the others offered, but don't), an even better quarter-mile time than

the FZ6, and with its premium four-piston brakes, posts a better 60-to-zero braking distance as well. And although its abbreviated wind deflector isn't as good as the FZ6's for long range comfort, it's better than it looks. Best of all, Triumph has recently seen fit to drop its price a full \$1000, taking it from the 2nd most expensive in the class to exactly the same as the Yamaha FZ6.

To settle this category, a study of the "Competition At A Glance" sidebar will show that although the new 599 and FZ6 are very strong contenders in terms of performance, the Honda 599 has unfortunately been priced out-of-line with its features; a stiff \$600 more than the FZ6. Had the 599's price been even \$200 less than the Yamaha, we'd have to say this comparison was a very tough call, but not now. The FZ6 simply overwhelms the competition with its blend of full features, comfort and performance. And except for its seat (and you won't find any really great ones in this category), it has no major faults.

**Bottom Line**

For two machines that are so close in so many ways and dimensions, these two could hardly feel more different. The Yamaha feels more refined and significantly larger. Its fairing, the centerstand, the taller seat and the extra responsiveness and top end power of its engine make it feel like a bigger displacement machine, closer to Honda VFR800 than the 599. On the other hand, the Honda's lighter and more compact package makes it a thrilling machine at canyon speeds and very agile picking its way through traffic. Its lower seat height, (30.5" to the FZ6's 32.0") and more compact control layout makes it an especially attractive mount for shorter riders. But, for those with the requisite inseam length, the FZ6 offers an unprecedented combination of class-leading power, additional features, long term comfort and value that wins this comparison. 🍀