



*Photo DRD*

# YAMAHA XT 660R 'SAFARI'

By John Nick





Photo DRD

*Transforming the Yamaha XT 660R into a head turning Safari bike proved easier than expected. With targeted modifications the bike is now equally at home on the tar seal, gravel and even moderately technical trails.*

**I first rode the Yamaha XT 660R in 2008, at the Australasian launch of the model at the Yamaha South Island Safari at Omarama.**

I must admit to not being wholeheartedly keen on taking up my allotted day on the bike. You see I'm first and foremost a trail rider. That said, for various reasons, including having edited a motorcycle magazine for ten years, I've done a heck of a lot of road riding. On the way I've been burned by many off-target dual purpose designs, bikes which despite the silver tongued words of armies of marketing people, were downright pigs off road.

Imagine my pleasure and surprise when after few hours under the blue Mackenzie country skies, I found myself liking and enjoying the Italian inspired and manufactured XT 660R. Before I perjure myself, it's not perfect, I'll get to that, it's what this story is about, but because the important elements were right, I could see the bike had potential.

Off the showroom floor the XT 660 is intended mostly for road use. The low bars, rubber covered foot pegs and road tyres, are all evidence of intent. But in the XT 660R's case any shortcomings are only skin deep. Look past these trifles and what do we see? Up front there's a 21 inch front wheel, now that's good, because anything smaller is untrustworthy off the tar seal. Note how the seat height is moderate and the seat relatively flat. That's also good, because average height people, say 5'8 to 5'10 (in the old numbers) will actually be



*There are plenty of Adventure bikes I would not take on this trail! Photo DRD.*





Photo DRD

*The suspension modifications have the effect of improving damping control and raising the bike's effective ride height.*

able to get their feet on the ground, and being flat means that you can actually sit almost anywhere on the seat, great when you get cramped up as you do after a few hours. The engine is down to earth too. It's a major re-design of the axe-trusty XT engine that has hauled Adventurers around the globe for two decades, with the addition of modern touches like liquid cooling, fuel injection and so forth. Good stuff.

### **FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

That first ride confirmed the manageable height and the inherent comfort of the flat seat. The engine also impressed. Unlike so many, this big single pulls heftily down low, it also pulls heftily through the mid range, so much so that the apparent tail off at top end is no big deal. Just change up a gear and let it launch lower down in the revs, acceleration is still brisk. Strangely, the motor doesn't feel wholly like a big

single, it's smooth and with the dual exhausts almost conspires to give an offbeat V twin sound and feel, well, sort of, but very pleasant all the same.

The XT 660R is tractable too. None of this snatchy crankshaft business, it has a marine sized flywheel, so unfashionable these days, but a good thing, as it allows

*GYTR mufflers sound superb and are a considerable weight reduction.*







*Left. The XT660 R Safari can storm up hills normally associated with enduro riding. Right. Alloy bash plate is an optional extra. We added the side wing and some padding for extra protection to the vulnerable bottom hose.*

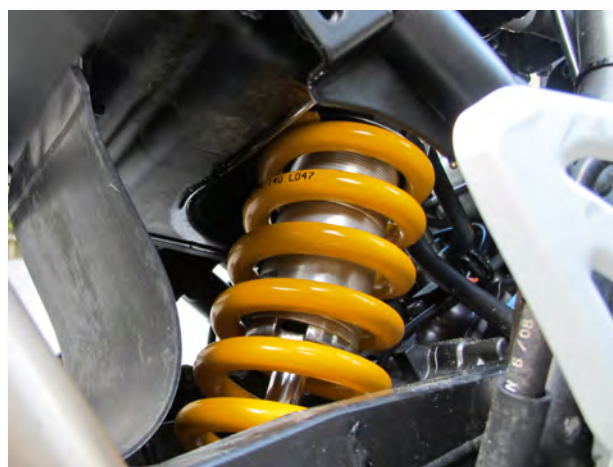
the rider to really work the engine down low where it pulls so strongly.

On the road the XT 660R makes a fun and practical road bike with assured handling, especially on twisty back roads. Around town the responsive low end and mid range give nippy acceleration and make light of traffic. On open highways it has the power to maintain a solid 120 up hill and down dale, with plenty more in hand for emergencies. With just the one front disc, compared to the XT 660X model's twin disc 19 inch wheel setup, the R model doesn't have quite the tyre screeching braking of its cousin. However it's more than enough to test the traction of the much smaller section 21 inch front tyre. On smooth gravel roads, rolling on the power from low down in third created easily controllable slides and an equally wide smile on my dial.

Off road however I was looking for more than the XT 660R could deliver, perhaps unfairly, as it was never designed or priced as a serious off roader. The bars, fine for sitting on-road, were too low for the standing posture needed on the kind of Adventure riding I enjoy. So too the basic damper rod equipped forks, adequate by road touring standards, sat lower in the stroke than I like, nor was the damping up to enthusiastic off road work. The lack of clearance was

evidenced by the tufts of grass and dirt, jammed into the under-slung exhaust pipes. No, there's no bashplate fitted standard.

Despite the niggles I enjoyed the day on the XT 660R immensely.



*Ohlins rear shock is slightly longer than stock*

Debriefing over a beer with the team from Yamaha that night soon got us to wondering (as you do) what the bike would be like with a fiddle here and there, perhaps a few subtle modifications.

#### **FAST FORWARD**

Fast forward to the 2009 Yamaha South Island Safari and our first lightly modified 'Safari' version of the XT 660R. To the base bike we added lightweight genuine Yamaha GYTR accessory mufflers, a genuine Yamaha GYTR bashplate, DOT approved knobby tyres, steel cleated enduro footpegs, higher bend Renthal alloy bars, with 30 mm accessory

bar risers, and some real suspension upgrades. Up front, in the forks, are modified springs and a set of Race Tech cartridge emulators, while tucked into the rear a very sophisticated and slightly longer Ohlins shock.

The suspension modifications have the effect of improving damping control and raising the bike's effective ride height. The stock progressively wound fork springs are a bad choice for a dual purpose bike. They allow too much sag and lost travel, even before the bike gets underway. The modified fork springs mean the forks ride much higher in the stroke. The cartridge emulators go some way towards

creating the effect of a cartridge fork, compliant on the small bumps, but far stiffer on the big hits.

At the rear the Ohlins shock has also done wonders. It's slightly longer, to match the increased fork ride height and noticeably better at taking square edged bumps and controlling corresponding rebound. The result is that the Safari XT 660R maintains better ground clearance and is far more safe and controlled at high and low speeds. Though it's needed less, thanks to the increased ride height, the addition of the GYTR bashplate adds confidence and a measure of protection. In true Kiwi style we





*Left. Check out the drive generated by the big single, getting the front up when you need to is no problem.  
Right. Severe pot holes like this one are taken easily thanks to the suspension modifications.*

also added an extra wing to give the vulnerable lower radiator hose more protection.

With the addition of the GYTR mufflers the engine is even lustier and more willing to pull, and the quiet yet assured sound made by the mufflers is spot on for my tastes.

When the going gets gnarly, as it inevitably does at some stage on a three day ride, the XT 660R Safari proved to be a remarkable climber. Thanks to a hefty flywheel, the big crankshaft is very reluctant to stall, even if you get badly cocked up on a hill. Many big Adventure bikes don't pass this test and will stall when up against low revs, rough ground and inclined earth – in other words regular NZ terrain.

Many large capacity dual purpose bikes become hard to control when the trail tightens up, in part due to that lack of flywheel, but also because the amount of top weight they carry. Here the XT 660R Safari really shines. Even with the lighter pipes, the 660 weighs on the wrong side of 160kg, so keeping that weight fairly low makes sense to me. Though the suspension travel is only moderate, the modified bike was now well sprung and damped and so very effective.



*30 mm handle bar risers were added*

#### **XT 660R SAFARI PRICES**

- Yamaha XT 660R - \$12,999.00
- Yamaha GYTR mufflers - \$1295.00
- Yamaha GYTR bashplate - \$355.00
- Ohlins shock - \$1299.90
- Race Tech Emulator Kit - \$349.90
- Ohlins fork spring kit - \$259.90
- Fitting emulators - \$225.00 (plus oil)
- Rental bars (CR 250 high bend) - \$275.00
- Artrax bar risers (35 mm) - \$59.95
- Footpegs - Yamaha YZ from \$75.00 (pattern)
- Front tyre - Michelin Baja \$125.00 (approx)
- Rear tyre - Kenda Trackmaster (130/90-17) \$117.00 (approx)



*Wide steel MX footpegs replace rubber*

The improved riding position makes standing so much less tiring and combined with the improved suspension you can really start having fun off road. It's fun that lasts all day, for the fuel injection provides 20kpl plus fuel economy and the flat and wide couch of a seat has no annoying step and offers a variety of positions to rest your bum and hip bones, shaming many more fancied (and expensive) steeds. If there was anything else sorely needed it would be a longer gear lever with a folding tip as the standard item is rather short.

Turning the practical XT 660R into a head turning Safari bike proved easier than expected. Once the initial suspension settings were sorted the whole exercise became a fun, bolt up experience. The result represents, I think, value for money as the XT 660R Safari really does foot it with way more expensive and more fancied machinery.

The 2009 XT660R Safari bike proved so popular with all who rode it that a second bike was prepared for the 2010 Marlborough Sounds Safari. My time on that ride was equally enjoyable and I'm hoping to be on XT660R Safari again next January.

