

# BARGAINS DON'T HAVE TO BE BORING

## Suzuki GS500 Vs. Kawasaki Ninja 500

by MCN Staff



**Y**OU'D BE HARD pressed to find two more reliable and user-friendly motorcycles on today's market than Suzuki's GS500F and Kawasaki's Ninja 500R (formerly known as the EX500). Both are lightweight, weighing in at about 440 lbs., both cost less than \$5000, have fairly relaxed ergonomics, and each can boast of a decade's history of reliability. Between them, they have ushered many a new rider into the sport, given many a novice racer his first taste of the track, and served as regular commuters and weekend rides for thousands more. There is nothing cutting-edge or exciting about them, so they rarely make the pages of the motorcycling press, but each has its own, almost cult-like following.

That's why we decided to take a long, hard look at these two icons, to see what has made them endure long after their contemporaries have been replaced with newer models, and to see what they share, as well as what differentiates between them. We put both through the normal, rigorous exam we usually reserve for all-new bikes, honestly expecting to find them very similar, and were quite surprised to see how different they really were from each other.

### Engine

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

As usual, we ran the bikes on the dyno testing before flogging them on the streets. We expected these two 500cc parallel twins to produce very similar charts, but we couldn't have been more wrong. As you can see from the comparison horsepower chart on the next page, the Ninja launches with a

slight edge, that it keeps until the rpm climb to about 6000 rpm, where the powerbands diverge dramatically, the Ninja multiplying its advantage and peaking almost 12 hp ahead of the Suzuki. Also very significant is the fact the redline of the Suzuki is just 9500 rpm, while the Kawasaki reaches 11,000, for a massive difference in "area under the curve."

Why such a big hp-difference? A closer look at these spec charts reveals that though both are badged as five-hundreds, the GS is actually 487cc, giving up an 11cc advantage to the Ninja's 498cc powerplant. In addition, the Suzuki uses a less-efficient two-valve head, while Kawasaki utilizes a more modern, higher-compression four-valve head. Also, the Ninja is water-cooled, while Suzuki is an air-cooled design, equipped with an oil cooler.

The advantage not only shows up on the dyno charts, but is readily apparent during performance testing and everyday riding, as well. The Ninja's top speed was a significant 10.5 mph faster (109.7 mph vs. 99.2 mph), and it ran the quarter-mile 1.6 seconds quicker, reaching 97.5 mph in just 13.09 seconds, compared to the Suzuki's 88.3 mph in 14.67 seconds. Of course, we don't expect anyone to be drag racing these bikes, but when you're entering the freeway and need to accelerate quickly to merge into the flow of high-speed traffic, that extra 12 hp can make a world of difference. And perhaps even more importantly, when you're cruising in traffic at 65 mph and need some extra oomph to pass, the GS500 motor just isn't there for you unless you downshift, and even then responds lethargically.

On the other hand, the Ninja still has a nice reserve on hand at 65 mph, without even downshifting.

### Transmission

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

Though none of the testers could really fault the Suzuki's transmission, the Ninja wins this category by virtue of two things: An adjustable clutch lever (the Suzi's isn't), and Kawasaki's famous "positive neutral finder" which makes selecting neutral at a stop an effortless business. Both are relatively minor things, but nice touches you don't usually expect to find on bikes in this price range.

### Suspension

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

Here again, the difference is very noticeable. The GS' ride feels slightly "loose" compared with the Ninja's, which despite the age of its design, is one of the better-riding middleweights on the market. Also, studying the spec sheet, you notice that the Ninja also has front forks that are 1mm larger, and therefore a bit stiffer, than the Suzuki's. But regardless of the minor differences in specification, everyone who rode it simply felt the Ninja had a much better grip on the road. And when you get into the fast twisties, despite the Suzuki's obvious advantage of being shod with radial tires, the Ninja feels more planted and secure. This is also noticeable at highway speeds on the interstate, where the Suzuki tends to follow rain grooves and other imperfections in the pavement, while the Ninja tracks a straight line. Both had well-balanced front-

to-rear spring rates, and both provide for adjustment of rear preload to accommodate the weight of passengers and/or luggage.

### Brakes

#### Advantage: Suzuki

Though both bikes use a single disc up front, the Suzuki's is slightly larger (310mm vs. 300mm), and carried in a semi-floating mounting, while braking is handled by a two-piston, single-action caliper. The Kawasaki's caliper is similarly configured, but grips a rigidly-mounted disc. In the rear, they have identical 260mm disc sizes, but the Suzuki uses a twin-piston, dual-action caliper, and the Kawasaki a single-piston, single-action unit. In our performance testing, the Suzuki managed a stop six feet shorter from 60 mph than the Ninja (124.2' vs. 130.3'). Perhaps the slightly better-quality braking components gave the Suzi the advantage, but its radial tires may have also been a factor. But in both cases, our tester felt both bikes' stops were limited in their braking prowess not by the brake system components, but by their skinny 110/70-17 front tires. In addition, although neither system was especially responsive, we agreed that the Kawasaki's brakes were the more wooden-feeling. However, thanks to the light weight of both bikes, this was less of a problem than it would otherwise have been.

### Handling

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

Again, the Ninja was the clear winner, and displayed great composure whether running straight and true on the freeway, or charging corners. Although we can't be sure, it was obvious that the Suzuki's front axle is particularly spindly, which would lessen its steering integrity, especially on bumpy ground—which is just what we found. By comparison, the Ninja's much thicker front axle would tend to give better steering precision. Also, we noted that the instruments on the GS are handlebar-mounted, adding to weight on the steering assembly and reducing sensitivity, while the Kawasaki's are fairing-mounted. All this, plus perhaps differences in chassis stiffness, make the Ninja noticeably better-handling. On first inspection, we originally thought the Suzuki's radial tires, vs. the Ninja's bias plies, would give it an edge in handling, but if they provided any advantage, it wasn't enough to overcome the Kawasaki's overall package.

### Styling

#### Advantage: Suzuki

Thanks to a recent facelift, the Suzuki GS now looks remarkably like the highly-regarded GSX-Rs. This includes a new

reflector-type stacked headlight, a full fairing and "edgy" graphics. The bright colors don't hurt, either, making the GS look like a lot more motorcycle than it really is. We only wish they hadn't used flat black paint on the engine and chassis. The lack of visual detail lets down the plot.

The Ninja, by comparison, looks nicely finished but dated. Though the lines aren't necessarily bad, they speak of a different era. However, the glossy paint job on the chassis and engine, coupled with the polished cylinder fins, make the package look more expensive than the GS. Bottom line: The Suzuki looks new but cheap, and the Kawasaki looks sharp, but 10 years old.

### Riding Impression

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

This wasn't so easy. To its credit, the Suzuki features a very comfortable, more upright seating position and shorter reach to the handlebars than the Ninja, making for a very relaxed riding position. However, even though its handlebars are narrower and farther away, the footpegs slightly too far forward, and you lean forward more on the Kawasaki, it is not really uncomfortable either. Also, the Ninja's fuel tank is even narrower than the GS, giving it a more racy feel. And, although the seats are basically the same height, the Kawasaki's is narrower at the front, allowing the rider a shorter, straighter reach to the ground. For shorter first-time riders, this could be a big advantage. Also, the Ninja comes with adjustable hand controls, and the Suzuki does not.

Aside from the GS' ergonomic advantage, the Ninja's superior suspension and handling, and much more powerful engine made it the hands-down favorite to ride for all our testers, especially on challenging roads. However, for standard surface street commuting duty, one tester favored the Suzuki, for its more relaxed riding position.

### Instruments & Controls

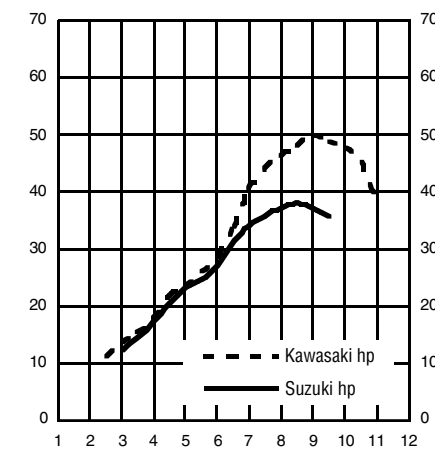
#### Advantage: Kawasaki

This category would almost be a tie, except for two things: The aforementioned adjustable hand controls on the Kawasaki, and the fact that it also sports one additional gauge over the Suzuki—engine temperature. We can understand the addition of the temp gauge, since the Ninja is water-cooled, but we would really rather have a fuel gauge or low fuel indicator, which neither of these bikes has. The timeless reserve fuel tap takes care of that item.

### Attention to Detail

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

Okay—you'd think this one would go to the Suzuki, if for no other reason than its fancy new bodywork and paint, but closer



examination tells another story. We all noted a higher-quality finish on the Ninja, including its dual mufflers (which provide more expansion volume with less restriction to hp-output), while the Suzuki makes do with just one.

However, an unexpected plus on both bikes is the fitment of centerstands—an unusual feature on a bargain-priced bike.

### Value

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

Even if all the other categories were basically even—which they obviously are not—the Kawasaki would win on value by virtue of its \$200 lower sticker price (\$4799 vs. \$4999). But perhaps even more important is the projected cost of maintenance. The Suzuki demands service every 3500 miles, including valve clearance inspection and/or adjustment. By contrast, the Kawasaki's service intervals are set at 6000 miles, with valve inspection every 12,000 miles—a big savings. And in addition, the Ninja produced a whopping 15-mpg advantage in fuel economy. Even figuring on the conservative side, the GS's ownership costs could run to almost triple those of the Ninja.

### Bottom Line

#### Advantage: Kawasaki

As you can see, in our 10-point comparison, the Kawasaki Ninja beats the Suzuki GS by a total of eight to two. And yet, we would be remiss not to mention that the Suzuki is still a good value, and fun to ride, not to mention that it looks more modern. But, if it suffers any great failing, it is simply that it so relatively underpowered. An entry-level rider would probably be very happy with either bike, but we suspect he or she would "outgrow" the Suzuki quickly. As you demand more and more of your bike in terms of acceleration and handling, the Kawasaki will be up to the challenge. Unfortunately, the Suzuki will not, and will probably end up being sold to another new rider within fairly short order. 🍌