

CHEAP & FAST

You've always got what you paid for with Chinese bikes, but now CFMoto is selling Japanese-quality bang for not much buck

TEST ALAN CATHCART PHOTOGRAPHY STEPHEN PIPER

On a clear autumn day at the Broadford track in Victoria, I came face to face with the future of global motorcycling – the CFMoto 650NK. It's a first step on the climb up the engine-displacement ladder that's certain to fuel an increasingly irresistible attack on Western markets by Chinese manufacturers. Powered by a DOHC parallel-twin with a gear-driven counterbalancer to smooth out the vibes, there's no denying that this is a pretty direct copy of Kawasaki's ER-6n, even down to the overall styling. But it's the first motorcycle to come out of China with an engine larger than 250cc and after riding it I'm convinced it's a game-changer.

This is history repeating itself. Back in the early 1960s, Japanese bikes were scorned as being cheap and undesirable small-capacity 50-175cc runabouts, but Soichiro Honda changed all that. Firstly with his drive to raise quality standards and reliability, which his Japanese rivals had to match. Then by ramping up the cubic capacity of his company's offerings to export customers so that in 1965, the first middleweight sportsbike from Honda in Japan hit the showrooms – the CB450 Black Bomber parallel-twin. That was followed four years later by what's generally recognised as the most significant motorcycle ever produced by any manufacturer – the four-cylinder overhead-cam disc-braked Honda CB750. And the bike world would never be the same again.

I'm not claiming that the 650NK is as much of a landmark as the Honda four, but it's definitely the modern Chinese equivalent of the Black Bomber – the first product from a Japanese manufacturer to demonstrate convincingly to Western customers that a J-bike could be fun as well as functional, and sporty in addition to affordable. And the price is indeed the punchline, as the 650NK I subjected to 45 increasingly hard laps at the Broadford circuit

costs just a bit under \$6000. That stacks up pretty well against the \$10,000 price tag of the comparable Kawasaki ER-6n – admittedly with ABS as standard unlike on the Chinese bike – though that's a reduced price only achieved via a \$1000 cash rebate.

Any way you look at it, though, the CFMoto is one hell of a deal. But is the extra reassurance you get from buying a bike made in Japan worth almost twice the price? That would depend a lot on how well it's made, and especially what it's like to ride.

I freely admit I approached CFMoto's latest and greatest armed with every possible prejudice against Chinese-made motorcycles. To be fair to myself, these were born of hands-on experience riding various 250cc single-cylinder examples of the breed which were often downright poorly made. I was used to rough-finished frame welds and fragile, cheap-looking switchgear which lived down to expectations; crude-looking electrical systems with cables and wiring running everywhere; thin and poorly-finished paint jobs with dated graphics; brakes which barely lived up to the name; tyres for which the word grip was a relative term and engines that revved noisily and didn't make as much power as it seemed they ought to, even with their humble pretensions of capacity. In short, basic transportation at a price to match and living proof of the axiom that you get what you pay for.

So from the first moment I saw the CFMoto 650NK, I'll admit that I was ticking mental boxes. The styling wasn't bad; in fact, pretty sharp with its stubby R6-type exhaust, bright red frame and all-black bodywork plus pseudo-carbon add-ons. There's also a red/white/black option and, while the 650NK is inevitably reminiscent of the Kawasaki ER-6n, it's still a cool-looking entry-level alternative. The paint depth and overall finish was quite good, too. It's probably the equal of a budget-priced bike made in Italy, though the plastic still seems a little



1. Stubby little R6-inspired exhaust
2. A name you'll probably be seeing a lot more of, for all the right reasons
3. A gear position indicator is the only thing missing here

low-rent and the metal castings' bright-work finish isn't very bright. But the whole bike has an air of substance, and it's pretty solid.

After taking it all in, I thumbed the starter and listened to the engine and I must say, it sounds pretty meaty at its 1300rpm idle speed. There's minimal undue vibration thanks to the effective gear-driven counterbalancer running off the crank, which means that it's not tiring to ride and no vibes reach the well-placed mirrors, which give a clear view of what's behind you, not just your shoulders.

I climbed aboard the well-padded 795mm-high seat, which should be comfortable for longer runs as well as city squirts, and was greeted with a totally rational riding stance. There are five-way-adjustable brake and clutch levers, an ideal seat-peg-handlebar relationship and footrests which are low enough to give room for a taller rider without leading to ground clearance problems.

The six-speed gearbox had a Japanese-level shift action in terms of precision and I was amazed that I didn't miss a single shift in all my laps. That parallel-twin engine is torquey, free-revving and smooth, thanks to the single

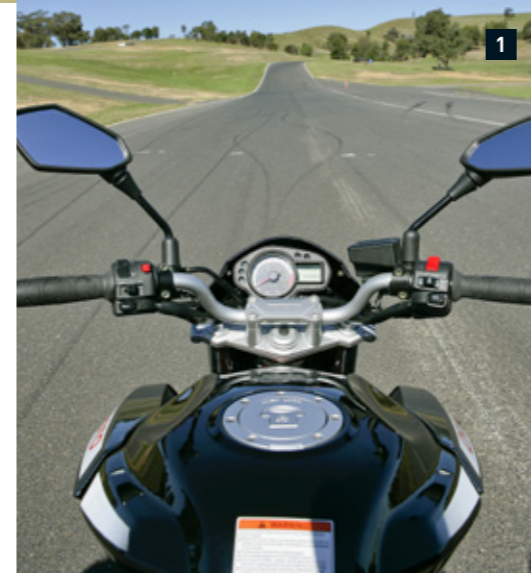
balance shaft ironing out the vibes perfectly. The motor pulls pretty strongly from 3000rpm upwards, with the butterflies of the twin Italian-made throttle bodies wide open and the Chinese EFI's single injector per cylinder squirting away hard to deliver 52kW (70hp).

There's a completely linear build-up of power all the way to the rev-limiter at 10,800rpm, but it revs a little faster from 8000 upwards. This is in no way a step in the powerband – instead, the 650NK is a model of rideability. Yet at the same time, this humble middleweight is also honestly exciting to ride and one reason for this is the fabulous sound you get from the air intakes – deep, throaty and muscular. There's an undeniable sense of satisfaction when you wind the throttle hard open exiting the off-camber left-hander onto Broadford's pit straight, and the evocative engine note makes you think you're riding a twin-cylinder supersport. The 650NK definitely gets an A-plus for sales appeal in terms of the sound of music.

The acceleration is determined rather than assertive, but it's sufficiently strong enough to be satisfying and the 62Nm of torque peaking at 7000rpm is spread widely enough throughout

the powerband that there's no point in revving it anywhere near the limiter. I was shifting gears at 9000 revs and found myself back in the fat part of the torque curve every time. This would make a pretty good engine for a one-make race series as it's seemingly strong and unburstable, but it'll also be a good everyday ride thanks to the forgiving power delivery, crisp gear changes and a clutch action which, while relatively strong, is nowhere near as stiff as on a dry-clutch Ducati. Your left hand won't cramp up riding the Chinese bike in traffic.

It ticks all the mechanical boxes but how about the handling? With Kayaba's Chinese affiliate providing the 41mm telescopic forks and centrally-mounted cantilever monoshock operated directly by a swingarm made from steel extrusions with tubular upper bracing, the 650NK's suspension compliance was frankly much better than I expected from such a budget-priced package. The ride quality and the ability to absorb bumps and ripples in the road surface without affecting the steering was good, and the way the bike steers is indeed excellent. The not excessively short 1415mm wheelbase and pretty neutral steering geometry delivered



1



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MOJO MOTORCYCLES: CHINESE DELIVERY

Mojo Motorcycles imports these bikes into Australia and boss Michael Poynton, 28, first came to do business with CFMoto during the course of visiting China an amazing 48 times in the past seven years, as he nurtured an alliance that's grown significantly in that period.

Poynton and his partner, Josh Carter, were high-school chums who ended up going to university together: Michael to study engineering, Josh a commerce degree. "But two years into uni, we decided to defer our studies in favour of starting up a business we saw as an opportunity to do well in," says Michael. "We chose real-world job experience over theory, and it looks like it paid off."

In creating Motovert in 2004 – a self-brewed cocktail of Daytona crate engines from Japan, Italian Marzocchi suspension, and practically everything else sourced from China – the partners surfed the global wave of pitbike popularity, selling 6000 Motovert Australian-built performance off-road minibikes a year to importers in North America, Europe and South Africa, plus 1500 more bikes in Australia alone. This not only put paid to any ideas of resuming

their studies, but also provided a platform for Mojo's expansion to import Daelim motorcycles from Korea, Sachs minibikes from Germany, TGB scooters from Taiwan and, since 2011, ATVs from CFMoto, who also send them scooters and now bikes. Thanks to deals to supply Pizza Hut and Domino's with delivery transport, Mojo has 22-percent of the flourishing Australian scooter market, second only to Piaggio's importers with 25-percent

"I've visited all the major manufacturers in China at one time or another," says Poynton, "and CFMoto is nearly unique in being its own brand – it doesn't build bikes to sell to other people for rebadging. It's also more export-focused than most of the larger companies there – for the past three years it's been the biggest exporter of ATVs from China in both units and dollar volume, and they only build larger capacity models, 500cc and up. They're well priced, but extremely well made – Australian farmers are

demanding customers, but it's a mark of how good CFMoto's reliability is that we've now overtaken Kawasaki and Can-Am in terms of numbers as word spreads how good they are. They have an 800cc V-twin engine in one model that would make a great basis for a cruiser motorcycle – but instead they decided to develop their own purpose-built 650cc parallel-twin motor entirely in-house as a platform for a whole range of middleweight bikes of different types, of which the 650NK naked roadster is the first. But there's lots more to come, and this is just the tip of the iceberg because CFMoto gets the whole quality issue in a way that most other Chinese manufacturers, which are primarily price-oriented, still don't yet."

CFMoto began development of the 650NK in 2009 and it's a mark of how quickly the company's R&D engineers work that it was launched on the home market early in 2011, with over 20,000km of testing under its wheels, and zero major bought-in components – it's a CFMoto product through and through. Since then, any remaining durability issues have been resolved closer to home, and pending EPA/EU/

ADR homologation means the inaugural shipments of China's first middleweight motorcycle to reach export markets will shortly be arriving in the USA, Europe and Australasia. "We'll be bringing in both the full-power 52kW version you've been riding and the 42kW novice rider model," says Poynton. "Upgrading to the more powerful version after you get your licence involves simply changing the ECU, and we have exchange units on order to let customers do that. It'll be a learner-friendly motorcycle and all our dealers will have demo bikes available. Riding it is the key to understanding what a good bike this is – beyond the affordable price."

CFMoto gets the whole quality issue

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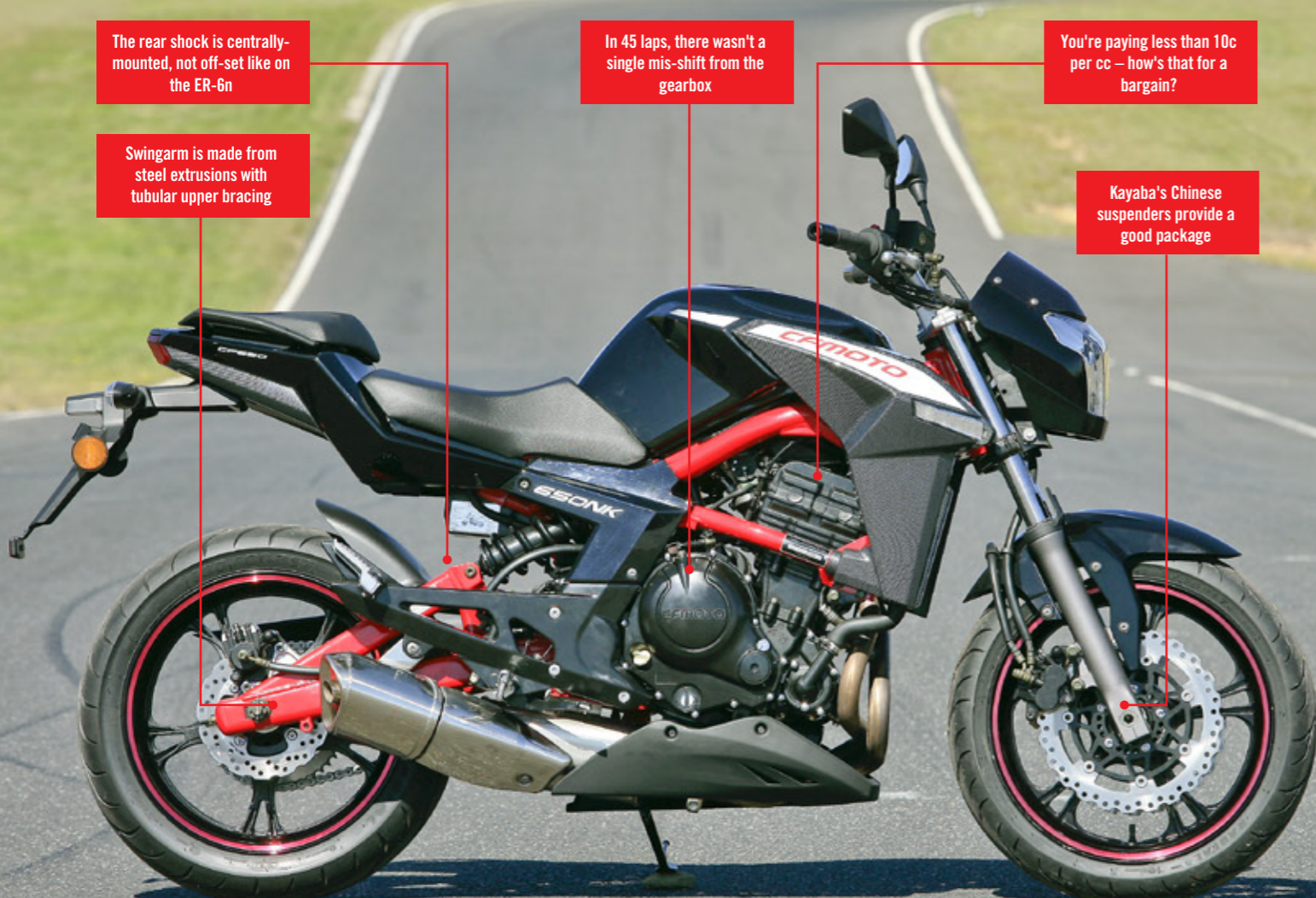
The rear shock is centrally-mounted, not off-set like on the ER-6n

In 45 laps, there wasn't a single mis-shift from the gearbox

You're paying less than 10c per cc – how's that for a bargain?

Swingarm is made from steel extrusions with tubular upper bracing

Kayaba's Chinese suspenders provide a good package



1. Non-crappy Chinese manufacturing: the view from the rider's seat
 2. Front brakes were initially sketchy, but they were new and came good after a bit
 3. How will the donk handle some big kilometers? We're getting a long-termer to find out



poise as well as stability which allowed me to pick a line avoiding sundry oil patches left by the previous weekend's Honda Broadford Bike Bonanza meeting with absolute assurance.

The nicely shaped handlebars help give the necessary leverage to pick a precise line, but the fact that the Chinese engineers know how to design a chassis was proved each lap as I crested the ridge in the Broadford upper straight with the front wheel lifting off the ground, only to have it touch down without inflicting the slightest wobble or weave on the bike. There's no steering damper on the 650NK and none is needed; this is a well-behaved bike at any speed and it'll make an ideal mount for beginners and experienced riders alike.

I was bedding in the brakes perhaps a little more madly than Chinese testers do

I thought the CFMoto had failed to tick one of the most crucial boxes in the beginning, though. The two 300mm front brakes gripped by twin-piston calipers simply didn't work very well when I first applied them, which made me use a lot of engine braking to slow the bike hard. But then I stopped after a dozen laps or so to let the photographer change position and the smell of the fumes coming off the brakes made me realise one of two things was happening. Most likely I'd overtaxed them and they'd just got too hot. The other option was that I was burning off the outer coating of the brand new brake pads on a bike that had only arrived in Melbourne two days earlier and I was bedding them in perhaps a little more madly than Chinese testers do.

Back out again, I asked the same questions of the brakes and this time they worked 100-percent. Lap after lap, the 650NK stopped

After 45 punishing laps around Broadford, not a single screw was loose or a bolt out of place



A full-fairing tourer for not much cash: coming soon



CHINA WATCH: THE FUTURE

The 650NK represents a window on the future of real-world motorcycling. At last, a Chinese manufacturer more interested in quality rather than price or volume has developed a functionally excellent product providing exceptional value for money – crisp styling, dynamically delivered at an affordable cost.

But this is just the first of several models which CFMoto is planning to introduce on the same 650cc parallel-twin platform. Later this year follows the CFMoto 650TR, a full-fairing tourer with luggage (left) followed soon after by a dual-purpose street enduro. All this is part of CFMoto's far-sighted strategy which we can expect more Chinese brands to follow sooner rather than later; to increase the quality of their products in the same way as Indian manufacturers are presently doing in an attempt to recover their declining market share of global exports.

In the first two months of this year, the Chinese

industry exported a total of 1,482,000 motorcycles, a drop of 7.8-percent from a year ago and although their average unit price was still a cheap \$492.40, that's 15.4-percent up year-on-year. But February, 2012, saw China export 603,000 powered two-wheelers – the lowest monthly sales since March, 2011, down 6-percent year-on-year and a fall of 31.3-percent month-on-month.

In one key market, neighbouring Vietnam, the world's fourth largest, China's market share has been slashed to 20 percent; while in the third largest, Indonesia, it's shrunk even lower to less than 3-percent. This has mainly been brought about by two key factors: the strategic investment in developing markets of Japanese manufacturers (in some cases, at the expense of developing new models for more mature Western markets) and the increasing quality of Indian-made motorcycles, both of these affecting China's overseas market share by offering superior value for money.

1. Cheng Shin tyres were surprisingly grippy, even to the point of grinding toe sliders
2. This is the first such badge on a bike over 250cc from China



I started scraping the quite-long hero tabs on the footrest

a little better as the brakes bedded in so that by the time I parked the bike up, they were working as well as any comparable budget brakes made in Europe or Japan. The lever pressure remained constant, I didn't need to squeeze it excessively hard to get them to work and there was zero fade, so I could use the same braking points lap after lap.

One final box remained unticked – rubber. Frankly, I didn't hold out much hope of the Chinese-made Cheng Shin tyres being very good. I remembered the first time I'd ridden a Hyosung 650 V-twin on similar-sized Korean rubber, when I realised early on that these had to be treated with caution which was the same as the barely grippy thinner-section tyres on the Chinese 250s I'd ridden since. I gradually upped the pace with heaps of suspicion, taking a little more lean angle and a bit more turn speed in corners until I started scraping the quite-long hero tabs on the footrests. A few more laps and I was glad I had toe-scrapers on my boots, yet I still hadn't had a single slide from the rear radial – not even winding the gas wide open earlier and harder when exiting the left-hander leading onto the Broadford pit straight.

The same thing happened driving hard out of the uphill right leading on to the top straight; no slides, just good drive heading for the 170km/h top speed I saw at 9000rpm on the speedo. It's also got trip, engine temp and fuel gauge readings set within the analogue tacho, but I'd have liked a gear indicator to allow beginners to keep track of what gear they're in on such a smooth, torquey bike which I figure you'd see 200km/h on.

There's one question I couldn't answer from my one-day Broadford bash and it's one that will be a key issue for CFMoto's potential customers around the world: just how well will the 650NK wear the passage of time and the kilometres beneath its wheels? The jury's out on that but I must say that if it's as well manufactured as it has been engineered, this is a Chinese-made bike that'll have the same impact on the marketplace as the Honda CB450 did 47 years ago.

If CFMoto has in fact created a bike that will stand up to the rigours of normal riding better than its other Chinese competitors, then I think it's a game-changer for sure – especially at this price. 🏍️

ENGINE

Configuration Parallel-twin
Cylinder head DOHC, four valves per cylinder
Capacity 649.30cc
Bore/stroke 83 x 60mm
Compression ratio 11.3:1
Cooling Liquid
Fueling EFI, 2 x 38mm ITT throttle bodies
Power 52kW @ 8500rpm (claimed)
Torque 62Nm @ 7000rpm (claimed)

TRANSMISSION

Type Six-speed
Clutch Wet, multiplate
Final drive Chain

CHASSIS

Frame material Tubular steel
Frame layout Diamond

SUSPENSION

Kayaba
Front: 41mm fork, non-adjustable, 120mm travel
Rear: Monoshock, adjustable preload, 45mm travel

WHEELS/TYRES

Wheels Five-spoke cast aluminium
Front: 17 x 3.5 Rear: 17 x 4.5
Tyres CST Radial
Front: 120/70ZR17 (58H)
Rear: 160/60ZR17 (68H)

BRAKES

Front: Twin 300mm discs, twin-piston calipers
Rear: 225mm disc, single-piston caliper

DIMENSIONS

Weight 193kg (dry, claimed)
Seat height 795mm
Wheelbase 1415mm
Fuel capacity 17L

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 200km/h (est)

CONTACT & SALE INFO

Testbike Zhejiang CFMoto Power Co. Ltd., Hangzhou, China
Contact www.cfmoto.com.au
 (03) 8363 1600
Colour options Black and White
Warranty 24 months parts and labour
Price \$5990+ORC
Aus availability June, 2012

