

# IS IT V4 VICTORY?

With the adventureness of a GS, sportiness of an XR and ground-breaking tech, Ducati's new Multistrada V4 looks to beat BMW at both their own games. It's not all as easy as it sounds, mind...

By Mike Armitage Photography Jason Critchell



**N**o mistaking what Ducati are up to with the all-new Multistrada V4 S. With its larger 19-inch diameter front wheel, 52mm increase in ground clearance, bridge-like swingarm and a more 'dominant' riding position for improved off-road control, the model has become more adventure-like. Actually, no, let's be accurate here – Ducati have made the Multistrada more GS-like. And who can blame them? BMW's omnipresent R1250GS is the biggest-selling bike in our gravitationally-bound system around the sun.

But wait, what's this? With the older model's V-twin engine replaced by an 1158cc V4 and the steel tube frame

ditched in favour of an aluminium monocoque, the new Multistrada is also sportier. Lighter, shorter and more powerful, this means it also has BMW's inline four S1000XR – the defining large adventure-sports bike – in its radar-equipped sights.

Yes, you read that right: the Ducati has radar, allowing adaptive cruise control and blindspot detection, and it's the highlight atop a mound of sale-stealing technology.

To find out whether Ducati's new Multistrada V4 S really is the perfect road-going adventure bike, we've lined it up with fully-equipped versions of the GS and XR in the UK's first three-way beak-to-beak comparison test.





## Buy a used Multistrada

£21k a little salty? Preloved 1200/1260 Multistradas start at just £4000...

- » Cylinder heads on very early 1200s could be porous, allowing coolant into the exhaust.
- » Fuel sensors cause niggles, the dash not registering a full tank after filling.
- » On a 1260, make sure the rear brake master cylinder has ample pressure.
- » Seals don't last long on the S model's Öhlins forks.



Above: it's tall but the V4 is trim next to the Beemers. Looks like a Multistrada 650 from here. There's an idea...

Right: waterproof tank-top cubbyhole, with USB socket to charge your £50-a-month selfish device



# Ducati Multistrada V4 S

The greatest dirt friendly Ducati so far, but also lighter, shorter and more powerful – oh, and with more gizmos than Inspector Gadget

There would appear to be a problem with the new Ducati. It isn't that the panniers for this 'Full' option version didn't arrive in time for our straight-off-the-boat test, or that in this specification (heated grips and seat, radar, Akrapovic end-can, centrestand, carbon mudguard) it costs a £21,643 on the road. The Multistrada's issue is anyone taking it for a test ride will be impressed, yes, but not blown away – especially if they own a certain German boxer. The Ducati's subtle. Where you jump on the GS and its thumping engine grabs you with instant punch, the Multistrada's calm. Where the S1000XR feels purposeful and keen, it's accommodating and relaxed. The V4 isn't inclined to bark or bite, doesn't employ gimmicks or shock tactics to impress on first contact. Instead it's slick and polished in a way that's intriguing given Ducati's fondness for loud, sporty creations. 'The Multistrada isn't what I was expecting, but in a good way', says ex-Bike road tester and current contributor, Martin Fitz-Gibbons. 'I'd read Ducati had crammed a big-bored Panigale motor into an adventure bike, so naturally I imagined it'd be one endless physical battle with a big, angry, overpowered, snarling, explosive, single-minded brute of a thing. But it's nothing of the sort. It's calm, refined, obedient and polite.' This subtlety means on my first ride I find the Ducati very good, but not the revelation I'm expecting. But after full riding days on all types of road and in all weather, I appreciate how exceptional the Multistrada is.

The 1158cc V4 is ace. Our tested 155bhp is some way shy of a claimed 168bhp but is still a huge amount, and though there's less torque than the previous 1260 V-twin Multi' it's spread more evenly across the rev range. It's also shorter geared than the needlessly tall V-twin, so is far more flexible. Fifth gear at 30mph? No bother. It's also the smoothest engine here. While not feeling as grunty as the GS it matches its acceleration, and though the revvier XR feels sportier the tractable V4 is easier to ride fast. Glorious airbox honk too. The Multi' also handles. With weight carried brilliantly, it's nimble and light at low speed yet steadfast when cracking on. Yes, like the GS. Gone too is the floaty, unpredictable feel of Ducati's earlier semi-active suspension. 'It steers easily and accurately from walking pace in the wet, right up to tramping in the dry,' says Martin. 'The suspension has some of the best ride quality I've ever felt.' The riding position is much closer to the GS than the more aggressive XR, with a sat-in feel and pulled-back 'bars. Though large the Multi' feels (and looks) the trimmest. Comfort is superb, and heated seats are roasty-toasty. The mirrors are great. Adjusting the screen is easy (grab and pull, tap to lower) and it's superb at deflecting blast with minimal

**'I imagined it'd be a battle with a brute of a thing. But it's nothing of the sort'**

noise. Gills and wings mean flap-free motorway progress, and it's nice in town too as the rear cylinders can shut down to keep you cool. Radar-controlled adaptive cruise is ruddy clever: select the distance you'd like to maintain and it smoothly rolls speed up and down. It only detects vehicles travelling more slowly in the same direction, so doesn't get muddled by filtering. It won't stop you from riding into a house, but does apply the brakes if a myopic rep swings his Audi into your path. The TFT dash is nice to look at with intuitive control from a new (back-lit) joystick on the left switchgear. Modes are easy to alter, as is tailoring set-up: I go for full power, smooth throttle (dynamic is a bit snatchy) and suspension set to 'soft', giving ride comfort with control for high-speed assaults on uneven lanes. Gripes? Although the most adventurous Multi' yet only a jibbering fruitloop would take this refined, classy, sumptuous bike off-road; it hasn't the rolled-up-sleeves-and-wellies air of the GS. It's also thirsty: 36mpg is disappointing. But then the new non-Desmo V4 pulls ground back with 36,000-mile valve service intervals. You won't find longer. 'I wish it wasn't so thirsty,' says Martin. 'But as a proper, credible all-rounder with a spicy, sexy side, I think it's absolutely incredible.'



# BMW R1250GS

Some might say BMW have done a deal with the devil, surely they must have to keep the GS this good for this long. And the thing is there seems to be no let up, even after 40 years...

Walt casually into your neighbourhood BMW dealer and they'll sell you a GS for £13,705. But you don't want that bike. No, you want the TE version with glitzy additions like dynamic traction, heated grips, semi-active bouncy bits, quickshifter, oodles of modes and a headlight that squints around corners. In for a penny, in for a pound. Or rather 3240 extra pounds.

This R1250GS TE has even more adornments. It's got the 'Edition 40 Years' option which tarts it up like an old R100GS, with a yellow screen, handguards, machined head covers and bench seat, for an un-snip-like £1990. Except this one also has a 'pillion package' that swaps the yellow screen and seat that you've paid for back to the stock bits. Add a few 'Option 419' trinkets, fog lights, bum warmers and a shapely Akrapovic pipe, and the man in the nicely-pressed branded shirt wants £21,690.

This is clearly what a financial advisor would call 'shit loads'. But the wallet-clenching figure will make no difference as to whether you wade in or not, and neither will anything that we say here. Because if you've decided you want a GS then nothing else will ever do.

BMW's proposition is unique. Here's a bike loaded with technology and of-the-moment features, such as electronic suspension and the ability to deliver turn-by-turn navigation, yet that looks and sounds like it could have rolled out of the Messerschmitt factory. The way it blends burbling character and a sense of robust old-school engineering with slick modernity can't be bought anywhere else. And it works so, so, so damn well. Who'd have thought a misfit behemoth with a classic sticky-out engine and oddball suspension would be the best-selling big bike year-after-year? We bought 2677 of the ruddy things in 2020 (GS and GS Adventure combined) – more than four times as many S1000XRs.

'Surely the entire universe can be divided into those who already know how good the R1250GS is, and those who're sick of being told how good it is,' reckons Martin. 'But it really is. The big boxer lacks the dulcet drama of the Ducati and the scorching speed of the XR, but makes it up with endless and effortless momentum.'

It feels unstoppable. With its burping 1254cc engine delivering immediate romping drive, the load-separating Telelever front end and the surreal ride quality of the single-sided rear, the GS floats over even the most dilapidated surface with fuss-free velocity. It has the plushiest ride of the three bikes, and is the one with the greatest sense of being secure, unflappable and capable of nerfing DPD vans out the way.

Ground-covering efficiency doesn't mean the Beemer lacks wow. With 15 pound-feet more wallop than the Ducati and its peak delivered with far fewer revs, the motor delivers the greatest feeling of low-rev punch and makes the XR seem ludicrously over-geared. Agility in town makes its stablemate feel top heavy and like its front tyre needs some wind in it, too. And despite being the heaviest here at 258 kilos (9kg more

## 'A shrug-it-off machine with real go-anywhere potential'



Left: all as pleasingly chunky as ever, but the spinnny wheel thing now plays more of a role in adjusting stuff



Below: CinemaScope TFT offers turn-by-turn navigation, but traditionalists can still have a big box of maps

than they claim) the 1250's balance and ease of use at low speed are bewildering. Where does its blubber disappear to?

Equally bewildering is the dash. The 'home' screen is simple, classy and clear, but all the additional screens, layers of data and sub-menus are too much for my clogged brain to deal with on the move. It all works well enough, but the more straightforward dash on the Multi' is easier to fathom and use. With backlit switches and radar gubbins the Ducati also out-gizmos the swankiest GS (even if this is like arguing an extra teaspoon of cream makes one giant trifle more luxurious than the next). The Italian is also smoother, has a better screen and is every bit as comfortable as the German.

But what neither the Multi' or XR give is the boxer's temptation to bound down a green lane.

The Ducati may be more adventurey than ever, but the rugged GS is the only one you'd think about getting dusty. It feels most like an adventure bike; a shrug-it-off machine with real go-anywhere potential.

'As a fizzing, action-packed thrillseeker the GS is the third-most exciting,' says Martin. 'But as a complete all-round bike – with the added novelty of being the one you'd possibly consider taking down a green lane – it's still the benchmark others should be measured against.' But if you do buy an Edition 40 Years model, keep the funky yellow seat.



**Buy a used R1200GS**

**The 1250 is an evolution of the bike introduced in 2004. Prices from £3500.**

» Pre-2010 bikes leak oil from the drive shaft. If it's also dribbling where the gearbox and engine meet, go and find another one.

» If the ABS lamp stays lit when you pull away then the ABS pump is shot. If it has ESA, make sure it all works.

» There have been six recalls, so check they've all been seen to.



# BMW S1000XR

An armchair strapped to an intergalactic missile, with a trendy little beak and the correct socially acceptable roundels. It must be good...

Cuffin' nora, this is fast. Easily the lightest, most powerful and revviest bike here, the S1000XR turns open rolling A-roads into knotted garden paths, smudging the almost-spring landscape into muddy greens that streak out from the vanishing point. Its 999cc four emits a sportsbike wail in its rush to 12,000rpm, forcing the BMW's electronics into overtime as it tries to rotate the bike around the rear spindle on corner exits. Its chassis does little to discourage such loutish riding, feeling better the swifter the progress.

'The S1000XR is the most focused, the most edgy, and its character feels the naughtiest,' grins Martin. 'It howls where the Ducati gurgles and the BMW thumps, and is the one doing the most authentic impression of a superbike on stilts.'

Which should be no surprise, given the XR takes its engine and frame from the UK's best-selling sportsbike, the S1000RR. Seems unlikely, but basing an 'adventure-sport' model around a clip-on-shod race replica actually makes sense. Most adventure-style bikes never leave hard surfaces, so why not combine their benefits of upright control, comfort and presence with effortless power, handling accuracy and proper tyres?

No questioning BMW's theory. The XR's ability to slice across the landscape at ridiculous pace but in upright comfort is remarkable. You can actually ride it faster than an S1000RR; the riding position means greater control, less fatigue and easier overtaking on today's dishevelled and cluttered roads. Updated last year, the current XR is also the most refined and sophisticated version so far; the pointy bits from the RR have been made smoother, its design has been made more cohesive, and it comes with electronic suspension, many modes, phone connectivity, in-built pannier lugs and a gloriously simple screen adjuster as standard for £14,290. Another couple of grand for this TE adds cruise, heated grips, quickshifter, DRL, cornering lights, keyless ignition and more.

Retuned from RR specification, the S1000XR still has a fat 165.6bhp

(that's 0.6bhp more than claimed) and delivers 10% more wallop than the superbike, spread more deeply in the midrange. There are Rain, Road, Dynamic and Dynamic Pro modes; only the latter has full torque in low gears, but you don't notice – there's so much oomph on offer even paranoia-inducing speed rarely needs more than half throttle.

Despite this, the XR feels kind of hollow next to the Multistrada and GS. It hasn't the high-gear roll-on flexibility of the Ducati or the low-rev punch of its stablemate. The inline four is also gruffest. Vibes aren't as bad as on earlier S1000XRs (there's a 'bar de-coupling system) but it still fizzles, especially through the footpegs. 'The motor is the most powerful but also the tingliest,' notes Martin. 'I still can't get on with the high-frequency vibration through 'bars and mirrors at motorway speed.'

The semi-active suspension got new valves, pistons and a pressure reduction last year for a comfier ride, with an adjustment range that allows it to be much softer. The ride's certainly supple and comfy, but the shock can be floaty and disconnected on brisk bumpy B-roads. Change the setting to something with stricter control and the ride is noticeably sportier but a little too firm; it lacks the Ducati's mix of control and ride quality. And though it feels nimble in isolation, back-to-back shows the XR isn't as agile sub-50mph as either of the others.

Both the Multi' and GS offer superior mile-eating as well. The XR has a short seat with limited front-to-rear wriggle room, giving a fixed riding position. The padding's thin with curious contours (or my bum's the wrong shape), and riding in textiles I keep gradually sliding into the tank. It also has the worst screen and mirrors. 'For covering distance the XR is my last choice of these three,' reckons Martin. 'The 2020 update has made it a step more refined and sophisticated, but it still sits right at the pointy, aggressive end of the all-rounder spectrum.'

BMW say the XR 'stands for the uncompromising combination of athleticism and long-distance performance' and 'is built for curve hunting'. They're not far wrong – if you want a tall sportsbike it's the go-to choice. It's easily the cheapest bike here on like-for-like spec as well. But the other pair are superior all-round adventurers.

**'The S1000XR turns open rolling A-roads into knotted garden paths'**



Above: redline creeps up as the engine warms, like on the exotic old HP Sport. Pleasing touch  
Below: upright sportsbike wants to be adventure bike by wearing £325 accessory fog lights



The least adventurous of the three bikes here, so if you like your adventures more tarmac based...

**Buy a used BMW S1000XR**

The XR was first introduced in 2015, meaning early ones are getting very affordable. How does £7500 sound?

- » Owners claim fit-or-miss finish; look at body, castings and cases to check it's a good 'un.
- » Vibes that affect the controls can also shake bits loose, such as pillion footpegs and mirrors.
- » Check the swingarm and wheels for chipped or flaking paint.



‘The performance, usability, easy-life extras and comfort of the BMW, but with quietly-spoken efficiency’



Verdict

The landlord at the local of *Bike*’s production overlord Nigel Grimshaw is the proud owner of a BMW S1000XR. Over very many pints of Scruttock’s Old Basher he frequently talks about how he owns a sportsbike – and despite its lofty stance and little beak that’s exactly what the XR is. It can see off miles, offers accommodation for two, has above-average wheel travel and a decent payload, but it’s a bike that exists to scorch along straights and attack the turns. It’s a high-rise sportsbike. If you want serious performance with a hefty smearing of practicality and without contorted limbs, fill your boots.

So the fight to be best road-going large adventure bike is a neck and neck race between the established BMW R1250GS TE and new Ducati Multistrada V4 S. In trinkets-and-baubles specs as tested here (which most people will go for) their prices are split by just £47. Yes, forty-seven quid. Rolling on the same size tyres, there’s just 5kg between measured wet weights and less than half an inch difference in seat height.

Yet despite both also being supremely comfortable, fabulously well equipped and staggeringly accomplished, they’re very different things.

The GS has a stronger adventure air, with a more rugged image and larger beak. Sensations are more direct, its attributes more apparent, and the way it rides is unique – no other bike mixes cutting-edge tech and civility with traditional charm and quirky features like the GS. Things are slicker, calmer and more polished on the Multistrada; it has the same performance, usability, easy-life extras, flexibility and comfort as the BMW, but with quietly-spoken efficiency, smoothness and refined modernity. It’s got epic service intervals too. And radar.

It’s bloody close and choosing a winner is extremely difficult. It comes down to what you’ll do with the bike. The R1250GS is perhaps the better genuine adventure bike thanks to its promise of dirt ability, but I can’t ever imagine taking one off-road. The Ducati is – just – the better pure road bike. Multistrada wins. *Bike*

SPECIFICATIONS	DUCATIMULTISTRADA V4S	BMW R1250GS TE 40 YEARS	BMW S1000XR TE
Contact	ducati.com	bmw-motorrad.co.uk	bmw-motorrad.co.uk
Price (on the road)	from £18,543 (as tested £21,643)	from £18,935 (as tested £21,690)	from £16,220 (as tested £17,410)
Typical finance	PCP: £5328.23 deposit, 36 months at £219, optional final payment £11,559	PCP: £3786 deposit, 35 months at £246.52, optional final payment £9333.75	PCP: £3244 deposit, 35 months at £203.89, optional final payment £8286.16
Capacity	1158cc	1254cc	999cc
Engine	16v DOHC 90° V4	8v DOHC opposed twin	16v DOHC inline four
Bore x stroke	83 x 53.5mm	102.5 x 76mm	80 x 49.7mm
Transmission	6-speed, chain	6-speed, shaft	6-speed, chain
Power (tested)	154.9bhp @ 10,500rpm	127bhp @ 7600rpm	165.6bhp @ 11,200rpm
Torque (tested)	84.3 lb.ft @ 8400rpm	99.8 lb.ft @ 6300rpm	84.2 lb.ft @ 9300rpm
Top speed	160mph (est)	133mph (tested)	155mph (tested)
Frame	aluminium monocoque	steel tube front and rear subframes	aluminium twin spar
Front suspension	50mm forks, semi-active	Telelever with monoshock, semi-active	45mm forks, semi-active
Rear suspension	monoshock, semi-active, automatic preload	monoshock, semi-active	monoshock, semi-active
Brakes (f/r)	2 x 330mm discs, 4-pot calipers/ 265mm disc, 2-pot caliper	2 x 305mm discs, 4-pot calipers/ 276mm disc, 2-pot caliper	2 x 320mm discs, 4-pot calipers/ 300mm disc, 4-pot caliper
Tyres (f/r)	120/70 ZR19 / 170/60 ZR17	120/70 R19 / 170/60 R17	120/70 ZR17 / 190/55 ZR17
Rake/trail	24.5° / 102.5mm	25.7° / 100.6mm	24.9° / 116mm
Wheelbase	1567mm	1514mm	1522mm
Weight	253kg (wet, measured)	258kg (wet, measured)	239kg (wet, measured)
Seat height	840/860mm	850/870mm	840mm
Tank size	22 litres	20 litres	20 litres
Economy	36mpg (tested), 174-mile range	44mpg (tested), 193-mile range	43mpg (tested), 189-mile range
Electronics	ABS, TC, modes, wheelie control, quickshifter, heated grips, DRL, keyless, connectivity, nav, adaptive cruise, blindspot detection, hill hold	ABS, TC, modes, quickshifter, heated grips, DRL, keyless, connectivity, nav, cruise, hill hold, tyre pressure monitoring	ABS, TC, modes, quickshifter, heated grips, DRL, keyless, connectivity, nav, cruise, hill hold
Bike rating	9/10	9/10	8/10