

Does Harley still have

► We cruise to Brighton on new Victory, Triumph and Harley for beach party ► Custom-building legend and racer Roland Sands delivers his verdict ► Which cruiser is the real king of cool?

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What makes Harley-Davidson so appealing? With competition getting ever stiffer from the new Victory Vegas 8-Ball and big bore, 1700cc Triumph Thunderbird, is the classic Harley cruiser still doing enough?

To find out, we got together those two new rivals and pitted them against the classic Harley cruiser – the Dyna Wide Glide which was updated last year. To get into 'full cruiser mode' we then went on a road trip to Brighton to attend dealer Shaw Harley-Davidson's Beach Party, where we hoped to find legendary US bike builder and Harley fanatic Roland Sands. Along the way

we also hooked up with Harley buff and Hollyoaks star Stuart Manning to find out if he could be swayed.

One of my most enjoyable rides last year was on a Victory Vision. It was the middle of summer, I was wearing an open-face helmet and I rode all the way from East Yorkshire to Newquay, Cornwall, for a long weekend.

The Victory was perfect and relaxing. It was my first long road trip on a cruiser wearing an open-face lid and, I have to be honest, it turned me.

Riding the new Vegas 8-Ball brought those memories flooding back. Leading up to the Brighton trip I spent a week, travelling to work and back, almost 200 miles a day, aboard the Victory. And despite the distance and lack of

open-face lid, I was still enjoying the Vegas. The riding position doesn't look comfortable but oddly it is. In terms of comfort, I preferred the Victory over the Triumph and certainly over the painful Harley.

The Victory has its weak points, of course. Anything over 80mph is a pain over real distance as the wind blast pulls your legs apart and there's too much blast on your upper body. Performance-wise, the Vegas is capable of cruising at 90mph, no problem – but it's painful after a few hours. But if you want a brisk tourer, you're missing the point.

The Harley disappointed, too. I thought it would be the clear winner in terms of

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The Wide Glide is designed to be fairly extreme but should the comfort be really this poor?”

MCN'S ADAM CHILD

comfort but the opposite is true – it's easily the worst of the bunch. Admittedly, I'm on the short side at 5'6", but all our riders complained of the stretch to the Harley's 'highway' pegs, so much

so that I really struggled to operate the rear brake pedal.

It's a big stretch to the Harley's bars, too. Yes, you may say the Wide Glide is designed to be fairly extreme with its classic custom recipe of splayed forks, skinny front tyre, ape-hangers and laid-back riding position, but should the comfort really be this poor? The seat is hard and the suspension bottoms out too quickly over large bumps, sending a jolt up your spine.

It's even worse two-up. The little seat isn't too bad for a pillion but the absence of pliable suspension is torture down a bumpy B-road. Add to that vibrations so bad that, at worst, they actually affect your vision. After my first ride on the

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Victory Vegas 8-Ball £8995
Well built, cool entry into Victory ownership with lots of style for the money

The testers

Adam Child, MCN Senior Road Tester, 34

Self-confessed surfer and Roland Sands fan, 'Chad' loves cruisers as much as sports bikes. These two passions came together recently when he raced a Harley XR1200 in the current one-make racing series, supporting BSB.



Michael Neeves, MCN Senior Road Tester, 40

Has a secret love for cruisers and spends hours watching American Chopper on Sundays... with a hangover. Once rode a Harley Street Glide from Sydney to Surfer's Paradise.



Bruce Dunn, MCN Road Tester, 44

MCN's resident performance tester. Like the Stig, Bruce never lifts his visor and has only one speed: flat-out. He fell in love with the Victory and hasn't been seen since the Roland Sands Brighton beach party.



Triumph Thunderbird 1700 £11,799
Aimed squarely at Harley and well equipped to do that in terms of spec, quality and performance





its star quality?



Thunderbird with plush suspension and 22-litre tank can handle a long touring trip



The 8-Ball is more comfortable than it looks



Harley-Davidson Dyna Wide Glide £11,590
Dates back to the '70s with old school looks but improved frame and suspension provide

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Soul, character, looks, branding and history are what counts when it comes to cruisers

MCN'S ADAM CHILD

News Cruiser group test



The performance pipes on the Victory (left) give it a huge bark. Hollyoaks star Stuart Manning brought along his Cross Bones

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Glide, in isolation, I thought it wasn't that bad. But compared to the competition it's like chalk and cheese.

In this company, the Triumph is the most conventional and least cruiser-like machine of the bunch. Co-testers Bruce and Michael both preferred it in terms of comfort. The Thunderbird's suspension is plush and its parallel-twin engine has few vibes at the very top of the rev range.

But in no way is the Triumph a compromise in terms of comfort over style. Its clocks look good but at the same time are informative – the T-Bird is the only bike with a rev counter. It has the largest tank range by far, carrying 22 litres compared to 17 on both American bikes – you could take on a big touring trip no problem.

Engine-wise, the parallel twin Brit arguably lacks the character and visual appeal of Yankee V-twins, however Stratstone Triumph (who kindly loaned our test bike) had fitted road legal performance pipes to add a little snarl which sounded really nice: just loud enough to be different but not too much to annoy the neighbours.

The Victory, meanwhile, had its own version of performance pipes fitted and compared to the Triumph's snarl, gave the Vegas a huge bark.

Everyone loved the sound of the Victory so much that it arguably gave the Vegas an immediate advantage. Bruce, for one, fell in love with it. It's perhaps unfair because the Harley was fitted with standard pipes. But you can't argue with the differences in handling and performance, where the Harley was pushed into third position again.

Every set of traffic lights was treated as a mini drag race which always ended up with the Harley last. The Wide Glide may be quick off the line but even so it was always a few bike lengths behind the almost equal Victory and Triumph. The Harley's midrange may have matched



Harley: the heritage wins through

the others but its gear change was painfully slow.

In terms of handling, again, the Harley drops to the back. Yes, we know they're not sports bikes, but the Harley's suspension along back roads is truly shocking. Its brakes are by far the worst of the bunch, too. And if all that wasn't enough, the Wide Glide's ground clearance is the worst of the group, too – you have to be careful on roundabouts not to deck out the expensive exhaust.

Despite the Victory having the same size – 21inch – front wheel as the Hog (which obviously slows down the steering), the Vegas handles far better than its styling suggests. The single shock (compared to two on the Harley) does a half-decent job of translating what is happening and ground clearance isn't bad.

But the more conventional Triumph stands head and shoulders above it in terms of handling. The T-bird may carry some bulk but it hides it well on the move. Our test bike was fitted with ABS – which worked well. Steering is far

SECOND OPINION

Michael Neeves,
Senior Road Tester



These bikes are all about style. I'd hazard a guess that if you're after a cool cruiser, you're not interested in which bike handles best, is the most practical, comfy or has the best engine. Your heart will rule your head and you'll go for the Harley.

The Dyna Wide Glide looks the part, has all the history Roland Sands talks about (see right) and sounds the best, once you replace the whisper-quiet exhausts with something with a bit more oomph.

From a riding point of view, the Victory is the nicer bike. It's lighter, sounds great and has far superior engine and performance. If the Harley went like the Victory, I'm telling you now, I'd buy one.

The Triumph is the best if you want to ride more than pose. The ride quality is superb, the engine smooth and powerful and it's by far the most comfortable, with concessions to practicality like a huge fuel tank and a multi-functional dash display. I think it looks cooler than the Victory too.

sharper than the other two and the ride is plush and smooth. Yes, if you push the Triumph hard it will get flustered – but then you're missing the point: these bikes aren't about performance and handling. But what's so good about the Triumph is that you know it's not going to get into a mess if a corner suddenly tightens or if you need to make an emergency stop. The same simply can't be said of the Harley.



Used cruisers for sale
www.motorcyclenews.com

Roland Sands says...

Harleys are always a great platform to start with if you want to build a custom bike. There are so many parts available for them and it's such a good base line. It's just that little more pure from the start. There are no big plastics, so you don't have to strip as much off them.

The resale value is super-good too. You do something cool and unique with it and you'll actually increase the value, which is unique for any motorcycle, car or anything. If I put money into a Harley I know I can get it out again, you can't do that with other V-twins from other brands, which are all rip-offs of Harleys anyway.

That said, the performance is still lacklustre. The Victory is pretty bitching, it's a great bike. It's beautifully-built, quicker than the Harley and I think they handle really well,

too. If the motor looked a bit more interesting, rather than looking like an air-compressor, it would give Harley more of a run for its money.

The way the engine looks is so important. Put the Harley motor in the Victory and you'd have something aesthetically spectacular. When I want to buy a naked bike, the first thing I look at is the silhouette, the way it sits and then the motor. If it looks like an air-compressor or a cheap Japanese knock-off, you can see it right away.

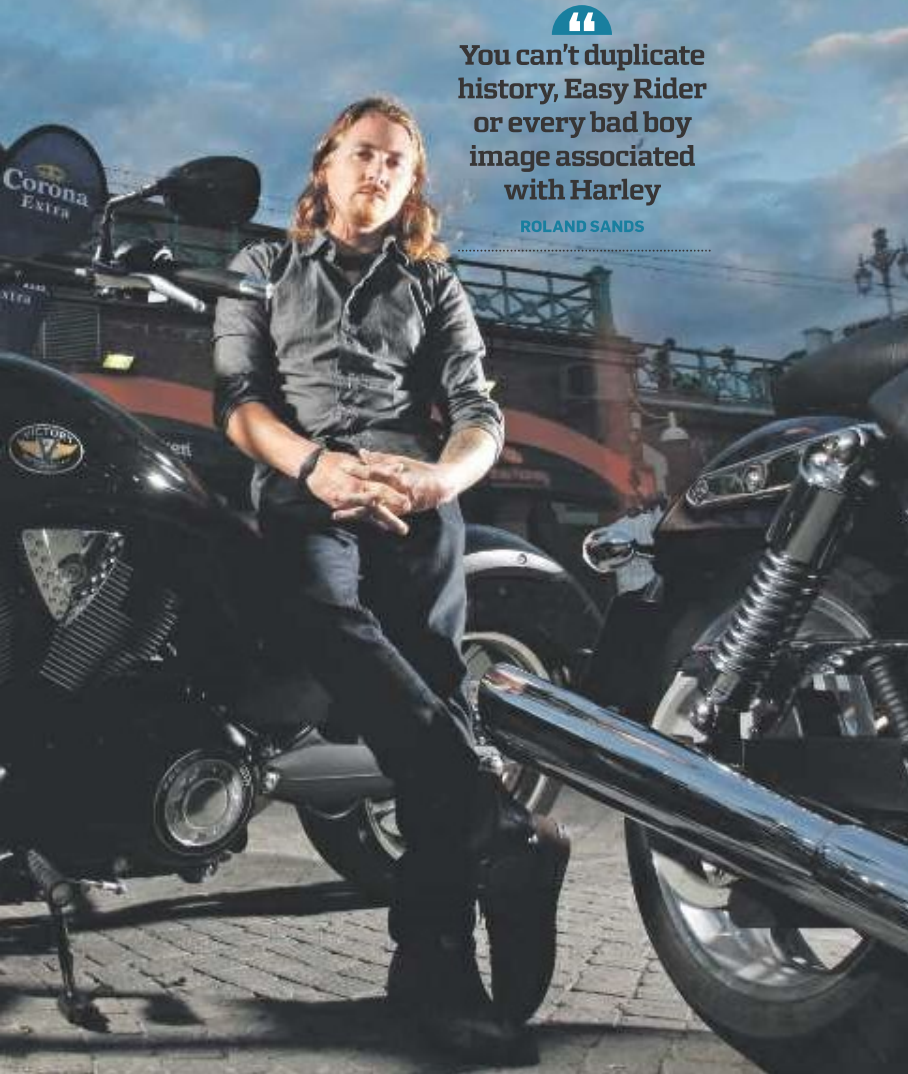
You can't duplicate Harley's history, Easy Rider or every bad-boy image that's ever been associated with Harley. You can't take that to another brand. It's the same with Triumph and Steve McQueen jumping that fence. You can't recreate that, you can't buy that."



Sands praised the Victory – but not the look of its 'air-compressor' engine

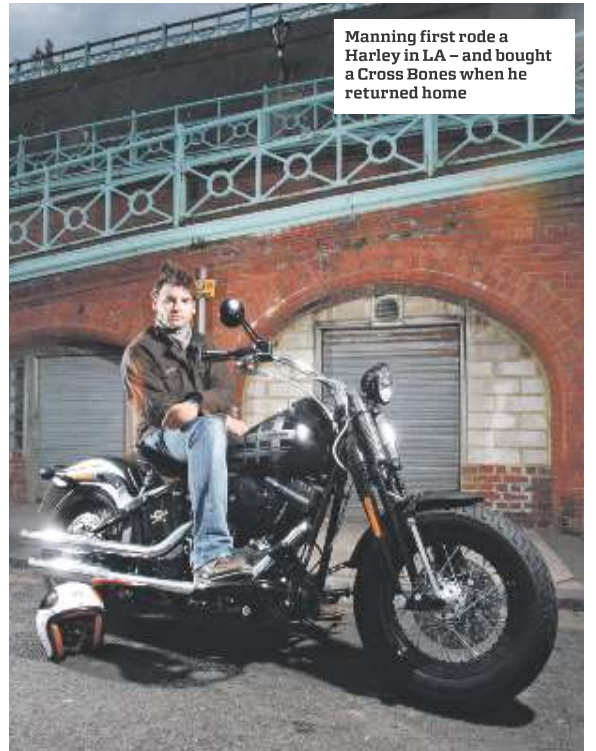


Roland Sands, far right, gives his verdict on the three cruisers to our testers on the seafront in Brighton



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You can't duplicate history, Easy Rider or every bad boy image associated with Harley

ROLAND SANDS



Manning first rode a Harley in LA – and bought a Cross Bones when he returned home

TV star Manning says...

Hollyoaks actor and I'm a Celebrity star Stuart Manning has been riding and racing bikes for years. Here's his verdict on the three cruisers:

I was in LA recently and rode a Harley for the first time and loved it. It was a Street Glide, the big tourer with a radio and panniers. Just cruising on the Pacific Highway wearing an open-face helmet was brilliant fun. You ride with a constant smile on your face.

I've got a Harley in the UK now: a Cross Bones. Brighton Harley-Davidson has customised it for me, so it has wide bars, a different seat, front wheel and loads of other cool bits and bobs.

I'm not that keen on the Triumph, it's a bit soft. The Victory is a little bit more edgy, I like it, but it's got to be a Harley-Davidson if you want a cruiser. It's got to be loud, too. Unfortunately, this Harley is too quiet with its road-legal pipes.

Riding a Harley makes you feel a lot more relaxed and chilled-out compared to a sports bike. It's much more comfortable too. Then there's that appeal that you look and feel cool on a Harley and they make you ride slowly. You don't need to worry about your licence, but you can still have a laugh, scraping the pegs.

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You don't need to worry about your licence on Harleys but you can still have a laugh on them

ACTOR STUART MANNING

Verdict

The Harley ends up last in almost every category. There are better bikes out there – we've proved that. But that misses something. When it comes to the cruiser, intangibles – soul, character, branding, appeal and history which are perhaps everything you want from a cruiser – make the Harley a winner.

Yes, the Victory and Triumph may be more comfortable, cheaper, quicker, and handle better. But they don't have 'Harley-Davidson' down their flanks. As Roland Sands correctly points out, you can't buy history. It's all about the brand. And for that reason, it's why the Harley has to win this test. It's unique.

No other brand has a following like Harley. And when you buy a Harley you join a very unique, cool club. The Victory and Triumph simply don't have that, nor – probably – ever will. They are simply, to be blunt, copies. And why would you have a copy when you could have the real thing?

THANKS TO

- Shaw Harley-Davidson
- Honey Pot club, Brighton
- Stratstone Triumph
- Roland Sands