Aaron Starnes

Cheap Thrills on the Suzuki VZ800 Marauder

Check your local classified ads and you’ll see at least a half dozen or so entry level motorcycles for sale. They all have a couple things in common; they are overpriced and underpowered. Someone learning to ride went to the dealership and dropped a chunk to ride off into the sunset with their shiny new 250cc buzzing between their knees. Fast forward one year and they’re trying to unload it for top dollar in a market flooded with bigger better bikes for the same money. These little guys are great for bopping around a parking lot during your driver course or if your commute is nice and short with limited interstate driving. But live with one and you’ll soon find that 250cc just isn’t enough. Not heavy enough for highway comfort and not powerful enough to pass. So what’s a rider to do? Well I recently explored the middle option, bikes that have larger displacement without stepping into the big bike money realm. Motorcycle manufacturers have long known that their smaller displacement bikes are impractical for the US market and have adjusted their lines accordingly. There is a plethora of mid-sized cruiser options to choose from that are in the 600 to 900cc range.

I know what you’re thinking Shadow 750 and Sportster 883 right? How about the Suzuki Marauder? This is a bike with a liquid cooled 805cc 45 degree v-twin plant, overhead cams and dual carbs. On paper it’ll hang with the 883s ¼ mile time, between the stop lights too, and when they were new the Marauder would cost you about 3k less. Never heard of them? Well neither has anyone else. That’s why picking one up used can save you a bundle. I bought a 2000 model with 16k on the clock off a college kid who laid it down once and then bravely picked it up and parked it in his back yard to rot and fade. I made him a low ball offer because it “didn’t run” and for $1600 plus a battery and some elbow grease and I had a runner!  
  
And what a runner! This thing was equipped somewhere along the line with some aftermarket drag pipes that just scream. At low Rpms the engine is smooth with a resonate, bassy rasp that you feel in your chest. Wrap it up to 6500rpm though and all fifty of the horsepower make a noise that’ll loosen your teeth. Hearing a big twin wind up like this one does is sensational and the overhead cam technology that lets you keep a twist in the throttle while the Harley boys are fiddling with their clutches and clunky transmissions. Interstate on ramps are a blast and the sprint up to ninety mph is like riding a stabbed rabbit.

The looks are somewhat traditional, it’s bobtail rear fender is reminiscent of Harley but overall the bike looks a bit more contemporary. To call it beautiful may be pushing it but it does have a sort of brutish, hard knock charm with its big, chunky bobber front tire, a set of drag bars and a low slung seat. The headlight is massive, as is the tank. In fact the bike is big overall, but it’s big in proportion it doesn’t look embellished or cartoony at all.   
Before you go off and invest though consider the following. I was able to pick this bike up for a song because it is not what you would call in demand. In other words, I wouldn’t finance one. You’re better off finding a clean used one. Another drawback is that while the overall construction is very acceptable don’t expect the moon. The bike looks and rides great, but look closer and you’ll see the short cuts taken by Suzuki to keep costs down. The fenders, for example, are made from plastic which may or may not bother you depending on how you look at it. If you’re the glass half full type this does save weight and they won’t ever dent or rust. The chrome is not the quality you expect from Harley or Honda, and there is no rear disc brake like you get on the Sportster. And then there’s the ride. It’s smooth and planted enough to inspire confidence on the highways and is in no way wanting for power, but ride it for more than about 40 minutes or so and your hind parts will be made tenderer for it. Also the ride at around 25 mph is pretty jerky so cruising in residential or slow traffic situations is not hard but less comfortable than other bikes I’ve ridden. Then there’s the seating position it doesn’t really know what it is. Too far back for forward controls as defined by Americans and too far forward to be consider anything close to a standard bike. What you’re left with is a sort of bent knee affair that is fine for the commute, but after some time in the saddle left me wishing for some highway pegs.   
   
Overall the bike is a pleasure to ride. And it’s affordable to run considering it gets 45 miles to the gallon and you’re not paying a sport bike insurance premium. It has good looks that you won’t get bored of and enough power to keep you excited. So, depending on the riding you do, how much scratch is in your bike fund and what you consider important in a bike you may want to skip the big heavys and consider this midsized option from Suzuki.