

FREE... OF A KIND

Part trials bike, part extreme play bike, part economical trailie, KTM's new 250R Freeride is hard to pigeonhole. But it's not hard to like, as Si Melber discovered when he travelled to Italy for the world's first test

IT'S DIFFICULT TO PUT A LABEL on the new 250R Freeride. Is it a bike built for extreme enduros, or simply a play bike that's good at tackling extreme going? Aren't these two things more or less the same anyway? Even KTM don't seem quite sure. Their marketing blurb studiously resists the temptation to talk about any kind of competition angle, simply stating that the 250R Freeride is *'significantly sportier than its 350cc sister model, and even easier to ride in extremely tough terrain'*. But then at the press conference they talked about it being the ideal bike for *'the Romaniacs'*, so you decide.

Tellingly... when we revealed a picture of the new bike on our Facebook page just a day before the press launch, the immediate response from TBM readers was *'Romaniacs here I come'*, and *'the perfect bike for the Roof of Africa'*. Both of which are classified as extreme enduros. Clearly then their customers have their own ideas. Or maybe this is some kind of super-viral marketing campaign on the part of KTM. Don't plug it for competition at all, simply let your product do the talking for you...

Scene Setting

When the original four-stroke 350 Freeride was first launched back in March 2012, no-one quite new what to make of it. As a pure trailbike it was pretty amazing if you were a beginner, or short in the leg, or if the trail included some trialsey-type going. But for today's average rider brought up on a diet of high-performance enduro bikes, it was probably a bit too specialist, a bit too spindly and let's be honest here, a bit too tame for its own good. Sure... every 40-year old trail rider loves a torquey bike, but with only 24hp to play with, there simply wasn't the wow factor for the average green-laner... Especially if you'd just stepped off a ballsy 450EXC.

Story: Si Melber, Photos: Marco Campelli



KTM quickly realised this and up-specced the motor (via fuelling and ignition timing) to a claimed and rather more respectable 28hp and the bike was considerably better for it, but you still couldn't help feeling that it somehow missed the mark with that de-tuned 350 lump. What it really needed was an engine that gave it instant 'Braaaaap', and the sort of excitement that people craved. What it needed... was a two-stroke motor!

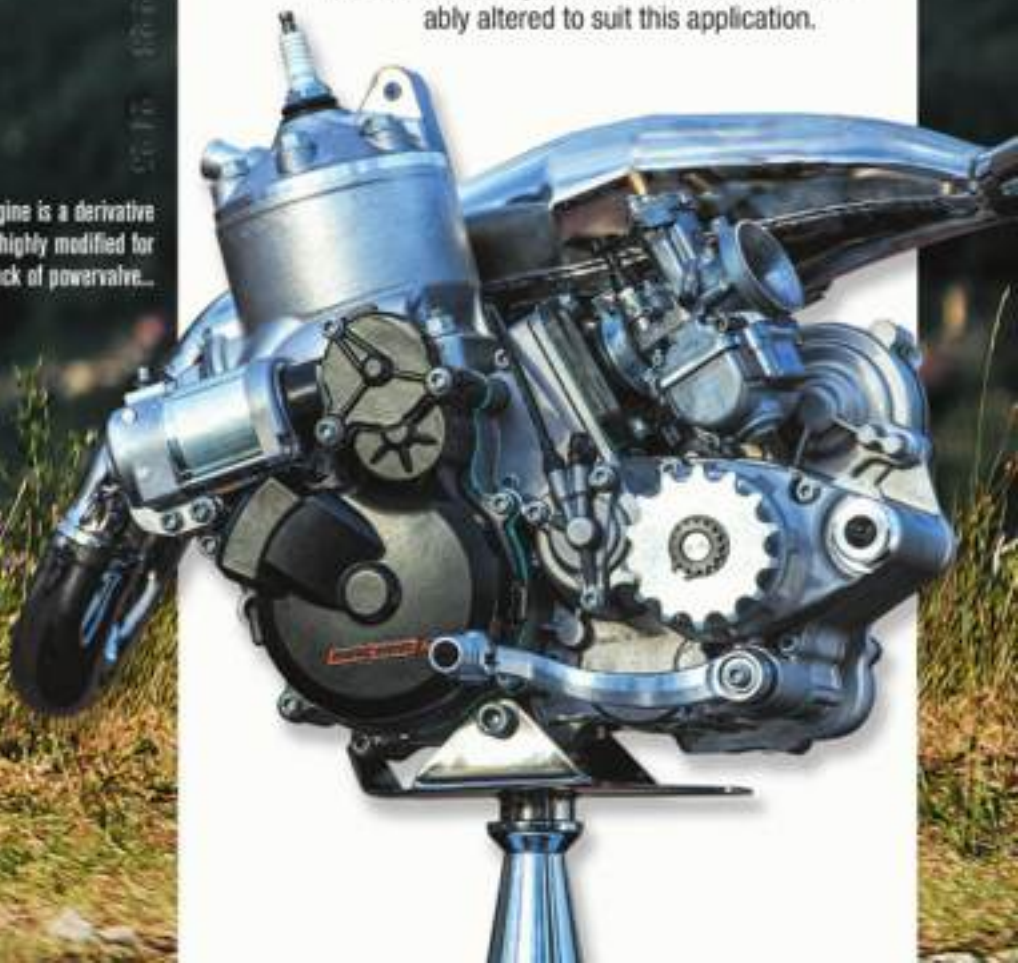
Because, if you get your kicks far from the beaten track, or like to test your mettle on the most ridiculous terrain imaginable, then a two-stroke is still king of the mountain. Last year we asked KTM about the likelihood of there being a 2T version of the Freeride and they suggested that the four-stroke had far wider appeal. *'Maybe if the concept takes off we'll see a two-stroke version'* is all they would concede. Well guess what... it did because here it is.

R is (not) for Racing

Named the Freeride 250R, its target market is - apparently - not the racer, nor the 'occasional' trail rider, but riders who want something for launching at obscure rocksteps, up vicious ascents and over mammoth fallen boughs, but without the restrictions and limitations of a trials bike. An 'extreme' bike, then? Maybe...

Of course, no-one was expecting the Austrians to simply lift the motor from their enduro bike, change the gearing and whack it into the existing Freeride package, that's not how Austria operates. And although the engine grew out of the existing 250EXC, it's been considerably altered to suit this application.

The 250R's engine is a derivative of the EXC lump but highly modified for this application. Note lack of powervalve...



Based on the well proven enduro lump, it's shed both its kickstart and more crucially its power-valve. Losing the kicker, and therefore the associated shafts and gears, cuts a healthy bit of weight and although there are doubtless times when a kickstart is desirable (having drowned the motor in a river, for instance), KTM reckon it's one part of the engine you can do without.

The lack of powervalve is altogether more curious, until you remember that trials bikes don't have 'em, and the grunt they manage to produce allows them to tackle by far the most extreme terrain of any motorcycle. With a new barrel (complete with different porting), altered timing, plus a revised-to-suit cylinder head, the motor has been tuned for torque, so unlike an enduro bike it doesn't require a powervalve to help smooth-out the bottom-end in an otherwise relatively top-endy delivery. It simply produces low-down, torquey drive at the expense of 'on-the-pipe' wailing power. With an 8500rpm rev ceiling and a claimed maximum output of 25hp it's more like a trials bike than the typical enduro engine that pumps out high-30s at the rear wheel. KTM admits it took a close look at the porting on modern day trials bikes and built their engine accordingly.

The less aggressive porting is also much kinder on the new piston and rings (power-valves constantly eat away at piston rings) and that means the service intervals of the 250R are greatly increased. We like that. And with new cases and a reworked lightweight waterpump, the 250R's engine weighs two kilos less than that of the EXC. That's a decent amount to carve out of a simple 2T lump. We like that too.

The Keihin flatslide carb is significantly smaller than the EXC's as well, by some eight millimetres in fact (28mm rather than 36mm), and this has quite a profound effect on power, torque and fuel consumption. *'Markedly below that of the EXC'* is how KTM describe the way the bike slurps its premix, and with a recommended fuel/oil mix of 80:1(!) you'll be shelling out far less on 2T oil too, plus these bikes are almost smoke-free in use.

The exhaust pipe is curious... it looks like a pet python that's swallowed the neighbour's cat. Exiting the cylinder with the traditional enduro curve, it starts off slim - like a four-stroke header or an old-fashioned trials bike pipe - before bulging into a more-or-less straight expansion chamber as it tucks itself out of harm's way behind the right-hand frame tube... eventually thinning and curving around the rear shock, and exiting on the left-hand-side with a single silencer. It's not as quiet as the 350's twin piped system, but it's not loud either thanks to the relatively low frequencies it produces.

On the 2014 Freerides KTM have ditched their DDS 'damped' clutch (as found on the EXCs) and reverted to a more familiar multi-spring device here, claiming that the seven plates, steel basket, and soft springs have been





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specifically developed for the bike. That's good, and likewise so is the re-configured six-speed gearbox that has been adapted for the more technical riding the Austrians envisaged for (both) the Freerides, with first through to fifth being lower than usual, and sixth effectively becoming an 'overdrive' gear. Sounds very 'trialsy', doesn't it?

Chassis dynamics

Although the alloy/steel composite chassis looks almost identical to that of the 350, the two-stroke motor and side-mounted exhaust (as opposed to the 4T's under-slung pipe) have allowed the designers to effectively lift the lower frame rails up by 60mm. A handy 55mm increase in ground clearance is the result (with the seat height remaining the same at a low 915mm) giving an astonishing 380mm of fresh air under the bike - or put another way, almost an inch more ground clearance than an EXC. Don't tell me that won't come in handy when log-hopping.

Despite offering better gas mileage than its enduro sibling, KTM have wisely enhanced the Freeride 250's fuel tank to hold a lot more juice than the 4T 350. The smaller dimensions of the two-stroke lump and the fact that the carb sits a lot lower than the 350's throttle body meant there was more space available above (and behind) the engine, so they filled it with an extra 1.5L of fuel, giving seven litres in total. Hopefully that'll be enough to address one of the criticisms of the 350 - its limited tank range.

Something else that's grown bigger on the 2T is the air filter. The design remains similar - a cylindrical sponge in a clear plastic (pull-out) canister located under the seat - only this one's got a much taller canister giving a larger filter surface area (almost 50 percent bigger), and looks much less likely to clog than the diddy one on the 350. Owners will like that.

But perhaps the biggest change for the 2014 Freerides concerns the suspension. Both machines utilise the same 43mm USD WP fork legs as before, but the internals have come in for some sensible modification designed to address the shortcomings of the original model.

Originally the bike was conceived as a softly suspended trailie, but owners using the bike at trail speeds quickly found the limits of the suspension. For 2014 KTM have aimed to keep the comfort levels, but get more progression out of the suspension. A new set of heavier and progressively wound fork springs (and heavier shock spring) along with new bump rubbers has eliminated the Freeride's tendency to bottom out when the going gets rough. And given that the externals haven't changed, owners of the old model should be able to upgrade their suspension and fit the latest springs.

In keeping with its more serious intentions, the 250R gets slightly firmer settings over the 350 and although travel remains unchanged at 250mm on the forks and 260mm on the shock, both bikes now feel so much better suspended than before.