

Before I came to Italy pretty much every Freeride owner I know rang me and asked whether they'd done anything about the Freeride's woeful brakes? The short answer is yes... though not a lot.

The small master-cylinder remains but internally there are some changes to the ratio of the operating piston, that gives the new Freerides better feel at the lever, and supposedly greater stopping power for less lever effort. This in turn means you don't have to use the brakes as hard as before and that ensures that less of the heat gets transferred back up through the fluid.

The twin piston, four-pot radially-mounted Formula front brake caliper remains as before though it's been cosmetically altered with a sandblasted finish on both caliper and reservoir which not only stops ugly chipping but also helps dissipate heat. Meanwhile the hydraulic clutch has been similarly refined to match cosmetically and with new internals to improve the feel.

Ground Control

Another obvious change is a switch away from trials tyres to a whole new breed of tyre developed specifically for this bike. Maxxis have worked closely with KTM to come up with what can best be described as a hybrid trials/enduro hoop, that uses a slightly more open (and taller) block design than traditional trials rubber, but is still visually quite similar to a trials tyre. And best of all it's made from that ultra-sticky trials compound that feels like bubble-gum.

These tyres feel nothing short of amazing, clinging onto the slipperiest surface with a vice-like grip. If you ride extreme events, ride long distance trials or just fancy testing out the first off-road tyre innovation in 20 years, I urge you to get hold of a set and try them for yourselves (at least the rear hoop anyway). The amount of purchase they have on wet rocks, roots and damp tarmac will just astound you. Be warned though, the front tyre does lack a bit sidewall grip in terms of pointiness for muddy going, but everywhere else they just feel brilliant.

Moving On

For its second year of production, the Freeride 350 has been lightly fettled, with both the engine and chassis receiving modifications - most of which are aimed at increasing strength and reliability.

Inside the motor, the big-end now runs a plain metal bearing instead of a roller part. The SX-F saw the same mod last year, so it's proved its worth, and the factory are claiming that it extends the service intervals. In the top-end, the exhaust cam and auto decompressor have been given a gentle reworking to provide better starting, and the valve spring retainers have been reinforced. The starter itself has also been beefed-up and the clutch has been changed to the more familiar multi-spring set-up,



For its second year of production the 350 has been fettled with both engine and chassis coming in for scrutiny

FREE... OF A KIND

rather than last year's diaphragm-spring design. Lastly, a redesigned waterpump cover and associated gasket will help keep the coolant flowing where it should.

Chassis-wise, the suspension is updated in-line with the 250's units and the wheels are the same Giant rims and machined hubs as found on the quarter-litre bike. Both bikes share the same slimline digital Trail Tech instruments too, which now look much classier than before. It may seem a minor point but it helps add to the feel of quality. Cosmetically, the front fender and headlight surround have been gently reworked, and the bars are now black.

At 915mm the seat height has gained a few mm since last year thanks to the firmer springing, but the Freeride still feels manageable even for riders of limited height, thanks to its low weight and extremely narrow dimensions. However if that sounds too lofty for you because you are - as the Austrians brilliantly put it - 'of lower tallness' - then there's now a Power Parts option of a 25mm lower seat and even a low suspension kit to drop the bike right down again.

Delving further into the accessories catalogue, amongst the guards, the exhausts, the power mode switch and the



Hard Parts options include Akrapovic pipes, metal bashplate, free-flowing air-filter, brake guards and modified graphics...

graphics, are some very interesting items, including a power-up kit which thanks to a less restrictive pipe and an opened up air-filter adds approximately 5+hp to the 350. To further enhance the 350's BMX-like feel, you can slip-in an auto-clutch and run the rear brake lever on the bars too. Sounds like fun...

Ride Free

But it's the 250 we were all here in Tuscany in Italy to test out, and using the location for the Hell's Gate extreme race, we were in for some amazing riding.

Fire up the 250R on the electric starter and it sounds nothing like a modern day two-stroke enduro engine. It's got that deep bassy note of a two-stroke trialler with the old-fashioned crackle of pre-powervalve Seventies machine as you open it up. Mmmmm glorious.

The other thing you realise within yards of pulling away is that there's just no point in revving this engine hard at all. I mean you can try but by the time it climbs towards its rev ceiling the torque has all but disappeared and you're left wondering what happened to the power. Besides with no powervalve, and not much in the way of peak power its rev range is so short, that there's just no reward in hanging onto the last few rpm.

In fact the ticket to making progress is to short shift through the gearbox at peak torque (kinda 4500-5000rpm) and then keep on selecting gears - up and down. Like a trials bike it's got a very positive shift between gears (not clunky though), but the gear-lever has been extended a good way forwards, so you have to either use your heel or at least shift your foot forwards on the peg to grab the next gear. Oh and finding neutral is like trying to find free parking in central London. It just doesn't happen.

I must admit that at first I was riding the 250R all wrong - using lots of revs and working the throttle like you would on a small capacity enduro bike. But eventually I worked out that gear selection is crucial, and low rpm is where this engine does its best work. Once you figure that out (and you do have to re-calibrate your brain to do that), then suddenly the 250R comes alive.

It's not about power it's about massive torque and incredible grip and translating that into drive. The combination of that grunty motor and those self-clearing super-sticky tyres is truly intoxicating. I did find myself dancing up and down the gearbox a lot in order to keep the bike in the fat part of its torque curve - not that that's difficult - but the pay-off is lots of fun and lots of 'Wow' moments, on any slope and pretty much every surface.

The test in Italy began in steep woods, before extending out to take in an 80 mile loop of the surrounding trails high up in the Apennine Mountains. The climbs are steep and rocky, littered with boulders and craggy

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outcrops and then coated in a lovely soft loam. It sounds glorious, and indeed it was, but this going offers the most incredible test of this machine. Climbs that you would really struggle to get up on your EXC purely because of the steepness of the terrain and a lack of grip, the Freeride just romped up them - or in most cases grunted up them. And almost like the feeling you get when riding a trials bike, you start to look differently at gnarly rock slabs and believe that anything is possible.

All the while you're accompanied by this eery sort of 'Bwooooooor' sound, the kind of sound you get when your two-stroke enduro bike is off the pipe and labouring hard in a tall gear. But it's the sound the 250R makes all the time whether it's being laboured or revved out. If you remember the pre-powervalve days of the PEs and ITs of this world, then like me you'll probably find it all rather nostalgic.

Although the 250R's engine is the centrepiece of this bike, the masterstroke KTM have pulled off is to recalibrate the suspension to allow you to go a lot faster than you could on the old Freeride. This is the real story I reckon, because this is where the lines blur between EXC and Freeride.

Sure for racing you're still much better off with an enduro bike, but for those riders that like to shoot the trail and keep up a decent pace, the new Freerides now permit you to do that. Instead of worrying about clanging the suspension into the bump stops and what it might do to your spine when it bottomed out, the new bikes are easily able to maintain a good pace no matter how bumpy the track gets. Expert riders will easily outpace you on an enduro bike, but as KTM's spokesman Jochi Sauer explains *'this bike gives you the feeling of being ten years younger.'* And he's right...

And that's a massive change of direction for the Freerides. All of a sudden these bikes offer a real alternative to the EXCs and EXCFs for the trail, because they are easier to ride, more economical, quieter, lighter and less aggressive.

Okay they don't offer the same level of stability as an enduro bike - when you have this much manoeuvrability and this much steering lock, plus a shorter wheelbase, you can't have maximum stability as well - but once you allow for that, and you ride the Freeride accordingly it only catches you out occasionally. Especially if you keep your weight centred or slightly further back than normal.

Because like a trials bike you tend to use more body positioning to boss it around and make it work for you, and because the wheelbase is shorter you need to hang back a lot more over the rear fender on steep descents, but actually that's all part of the fun of Freeriding!

And perhaps the place where this was best demonstrated was on the long rocky downhill with big steps, where on the old bike you would have been forced to

EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES



AS IS SO OFTEN THE CASE, it takes the involvement of a major manufacturer to really 'launch' a new class of motorcycle. Until then, innovative bikes are often regarded as niche market machines and the trail/trials crossover concept is a case in point. Because the Freeride certainly isn't the first of this style of dirtbike, not by a long way...

Really that accolade should go to Gas Gas, with their Pampera. It's now 18 years since the first Pamp left the Spanish factory with a two-stroke trials engine snugly ensconced within a lightweight trail bike chassis.

In the model's ten-year history (the last was built in 2005), the bike underwent a complete transformation - the mkI being very trialsy especially in its gear ratios, and the mkII much more civilised on the lanes but much cheaper built - culminating in the most trail-friendly of all, the mkIII.

Although the last generation Pampera was built down to a budget (soft rims, cheap chain etc), it did combine an amazingly nimble and lightweight yet trailable chassis with the go-anywhere power delivery of a trialler.

Subsequently, a number of trials manufacturers have offered bigger tanks and padded seats to bolt onto their trials bikes in order to endow them with some semblance of long-range rideability, and in 2008 Beta reversed the