

Two days trail riding in the heart of French enduro country with two of the latest 450s...

Deven in the southwestern quarter of France there's a region known as the Lozère. Like many of France's upland areas it's sparsely populated, achingly beautiful in look and criss-crossed by stony tracks which meander their way through thousands of acres of forest and National Park. At the heart of the region lies the medium sized (but fairly unimpeachably) town of Mende which dates back to late medieval times (though there's been a settlement in this area since Roman times).

Despite its relative obscurity and isolated position, Mende nevertheless has an attraction to dirt bikers which far outweighs its domestic importance. Because Mende is slap-bang in the heart of

one of France's biggest enduro areas and since a year plays host to the famous three-day Trefic Lozère Enduro. And we were here as guests of the Moto Club de Lozère (who organise the event) to ride some of the tracks and trails which make up just a small part of that great enduro.

To give you some idea of the scale of the place, every year in June the 'Trefic' attracts more than 500 dirt riders. Keep to tackle its 630km course (three days of more than 200km - and you never ride the same track twice), which along with its 15 beautifully taped-out special tests make up the event. And that doesn't even come close to describing the atmosphere of the place once the dirt bike circus mills into town.

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GAS GAS EC450 V KTM 450EXC





But this year we hadn't come to ride the Trefle Enduro (collectively, we've done it several times between us) this year we came to sample the guided trail riding which is available to just two approved operators - one of whom is British - our own indomitable, irascible, irrational columnist Chris Evans (what were they thinking of?)

And we hadn't come empty-handed either. A brand new 2004 Gas Gas EC450 and a 2004 KTM 450EXC graced the TBM Winabagel as we headed down the French Autoroute on our way to two of the best day's trail riding we've had this year.

Our guide for the two days was 'Duke' - a pint-sized ex-paratrooper and former WEC outrider, and no slouch on his 300cc two-stroke Gasser. Duke is your typical French expert enduro rider: hard, compact, wiry - and that's just his moustache. He's also fit and incredibly skilful. He dismisses obstacles in his path with little more than a Gallic shrug of his shoulders and knows every kilometre of track like the back of his hand. He also likes to press on a bit as we found out, as we ended up working the 450s pretty hard to stay with him.

With 300 miles of riding planned there was never any doubt that this was going to be a spectacular ride - fast and challenging at times, but rewarding and enjoyable nonetheless. And with plenty of opportunity to evaluate both bikes as well as help select some killer hills for Chris's punters to struggle on later this year, it was too good an opportunity to miss.

On Y Va!

Next morning riding out from Mende up into the surrounding mountains along a tortuous ribbon of tarmac, the first of the day's trails began with an easy eight kilometre sandy track which was smooth and open - just the ticket for loosening us up before the real riding began. The real beauty of the tracks surrounding Mende lies not just in their scenic qualities, but also in their variety. One minute you can be on wide sandy pistes, the next you're firing along some cracking single track - sashaying the bike from side to side as you dodge between gorse bushes. Along the way there are stony riverbeds to cross, escarpments to climb (and descend), and numerous little technical trails which defy description. There's even some boggy upland, and a mile long trail of typical British ruts to ride. But the underlying theme is dictated by the geology of the area which is predominantly limestone. Everywhere you look there are craggy outcrops, exposed bedrock and loose rocks - quite unlike the majority of the trails we get back home in the UK.

The tracks themselves are littered with rocks - sometimes loose and moveable, at other times the whole trail has been carved into the bedrock - with evidence of many hundreds of years of usage. One track we rode which descended



Gasser looks nice... Feels heavy



Motor feels very linear. Red box is the fuel-injection...

Just one of a dozen or more stream crossings we rode during our two day trip...



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steeply down through a wooded glade to a crystal-clear stream crossing, revealed ruts left in the rock by the passage of ancient carriage wheels. And on these sorts of tracks - particularly the loose-surfaced climbs - the four-stroke is king.

Va Va Voom

On a trip like this, 450cc is an ideal capacity to have. It allows you to press on where necessary, or simply meander quietly through pretty little villages without the need for too much throttle. There's plenty of power in reserve for the occasional stretches of blacktop and the torque afforded by a modern 450 allows you to pull a tallish gear (like third, say) on pretty much all but the steepest of ascents - helping maintain momentum and limit wheelspin. Two 450s then, but both very different in their overall design and packaging. Here's how they stacked up...

General Stuff

KTM and Gas Gas have approached the lucrative 450 enduro market from opposite directions. And while both relish the acquisition of world titles, both factories are pragmatic enough to realise that the majority of 450 enduro bikes are bought by trail riders who occasionally race rather than the other way round. To that end both bikes are built fairly strong and neither of them is what you might call featherweight. The KTM tips the scales at 124kg fully fuelled (in standard trim - ours was fitted with one or two extras), the Gasser is around nine kilos heavier - and it feels it. But once on the move both offer enough grunt to feel fairly sprightly on the trail.

There couldn't be more difference between the look and feel of the bikes either. The Gasser feels long and slightly broader in the beam, the KTM, shorter and narrower. The Gasser's riding position feels neutral and traditional with a bit of a stretch to the lowish bars, pretty much anyone can get on with it. By contrast the KTM's riding position is quite unique with its high set bars and pegs. Not everyone likes it, but once you get used to it, it feels marginally better. Both have very firm seats.

In terms of specification, build quality and more especially design integrity, the KTM wins hands down - and this despite the fact that some readers report that KTM's legendary reliability is not quite as unshakeable as it once was.

Everything from the KTM's sidestand to its digital instruments and quick-release air-filter are better thought out and better constructed than the Gas Gas equivalent, and you really don't want to go looking too closely at the Gasser's frame, wiring and overall construction. A mixture of bolts, exposed block connectors and shabby finishing make the Spanish bike stand out for all the wrong reasons alongside the Teutonic KTM.

It may seem like a minor point, but to our way



Both bikes were fitted with road-book readers for the purposes of this test. Plastic sumpguard is a KTM accessory...



2004 EXC models have adopted the one-piece sidepanel and rear fender design...



450 motor is a legend. There's power available everywhere...

A BIG THANKS TO: Kiki Boulet, Duke and the rest of the Moto Club de Lozere for a superb couple of days riding...



of thinking this sort of stuff matters with an enduro bike. It can make the difference between the maintenance regime being a pleasure, or a pain. Little details like the KTM's tall threaded rim-lock nuts can save minutes at a time when it comes to tyre changing. And if you're constantly having to swap tools because (for instance) the Gasser has a variety of bolt sizes on the handlebar perches alone, then you're just going to be wasting hours in the workshop.

Engine and Power

Despite their similar capacities, it's only when you ride these bikes back to back that you find out just how completely different their powerplants really are. The Gas Gas' liquid-cooled, fuel-injected, DOHC, four-valve electric-start motor looks for all the world like a Suzuki DR-Z engine - in other words it's pretty damn chunky in size. By comparison the KTM's liquid-cooled, carb-fed SOHC, four-valve electric-start lump appears much more anorexic alongside it. And we reckon this alone probably accounts for at least four kilos difference in weight between the two bikes. What's more they deliver their payloads in completely different ways.

The Gasser motor is linear and progressive, there's a reasonable spread of torque, a decent midrange and a healthy top-end. In fact it's only once you get the motor really howling that this powerplant truly comes alive in a way that'll

thrill you. Up to that point you simply get driven along by it in an efficient, but slightly soul-less way. It makes respectable power and the EFI provides decent fuelling, and just like the KTM there are six ratios to choose from. But you quickly get used to stirring the Gasser's gearbox if you want to make decent progress - or at least you do if you're trying to live with the KTM.

Because alongside the KTM, the Gasser simply falls a bit flat. Its power delivery feels anaemic and strained at times. And this despite it being the noisier of the two machines. More surprising is the fact that it feels quite a bit more vibey than the KTM - or in any case harsher - and it uses a touch more fuel to get the same job done.

That the Gasser fails to match up to the KTM's powerplant is hardly surprising, given the abilities of the current EXC450 lump. Because this engine is quite simply pure genius. This is a powerplant which is head and shoulders above anything else available right now. Searingly powerful, relatively smooth, acceptably quiet and far more torquey than any other 450 we've tested. It's got everything: a booming bottom end, a real rush in the midrange and top-end power far and away in excess of what we need or can exploit. Roll it on in the corners and the KTM breaks traction and powerslides its way out of every turn. Blip the throttle and you'll lift the front over any obstacle. And get aggressive with it and you'll be amazed at its eye-watering turn of speed.

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But this surfeit of power can have its drawbacks. For example the KTM's power delivery is significantly more aggressive right off the bottom than the Gasser's, and this can make finessing technical rocky climbs (and slippery mud) that bit harder than on the EC450. Never was this more obvious than on one particularly long and rock-strewn ascent on day one.

While Chris on the KTM initially got the jump on me at the bottom of the hill with a burst of acceleration which left me wondering which way he went; as the hill became steeper with sizeable rock-steps and plenty of loose boulders to clamber over, it was obvious that he was struggling a lot more. By comparison the EC's flatter torque curve ensured that rolling on and off the throttle produced much less in the way of wheelspin. I quickly caught up with Chris - the KTM scrabbling for grip as each burst of throttle sent the tyre spinning off sideways - and the Gasser and I nipped swiftly past.

Le Pic-Nic

To be honest, this was one of the few times during the first day that the Gas Gas rider enjoyed any sort of advantage. With the majority of the trails being fast, twisty and relatively smooth I'd spent the morning dodging a shower of roost fired up from the rear tyre of Chris's KTM, and grabbing huge handfuls of throttle to even keep him in sight. By the time we reached our lunch

RIDING THE LOZERE

When Chris raced the Trefle Lozerien Enduro several years ago he fell in love with the area and the fantastic riding it had to offer and started looking at ways of running one of his Sport Adventure road-book tours down there. 'It had exactly what I was looking for in the way of terrain, even if it was a long way south, I knew that many of my punters would be willing to travel that far for the chance to ride such trails'.

There was however just one hitch - like many of the best areas of France, the Lozere is highly protected, with hard won rights of access jealously guarded by the club that organises the Trefle. 'The more I looked at it, the more I realised that most of the Trefle was run through National Park for which you needed special permission to ride. In addition I had a lot of respect for what the club had achieved and didn't want to mess it up for them. It is so easy to go into the wrong area at the wrong time and put everything in jeopardy.' The final factor Chris had to take into consideration was that the Lozere is a mountainous and deserted area with extreme climatic variations - the sort of area where a little local knowledge can go a long way...

All of which forced Chris into concluding that the only way he could realistically ride in the area was by persuading the locals to help him out. 'It wasn't an easy task and I trod very carefully in the knowledge that they had nothing much to gain and plenty to lose. Fortunately for me, I had worked with a number of the people that were involved in the organisation of their event and managed to get them to vouch for me. Little by little we arrived at an exclusive agreement that reassured us all.'

Chris is obviously delighted to have been able to have got this far but is only too aware that keeping everybody on side will be vitally important for the future. 'It has been hard work winning everybody's trust, but has been worth the effort. 'Putting together the Lozere this way has meant that I have gained access to some incredible places and had the chance to meet and work with some really great people. My hope is that the relationships I have built up will continue to blossom and that the locals won't ever regret putting their trust in me and ultimately in my clients.' For more information about Chris' forthcoming trips call him on 07900 826719 or check out sport-adventure.com.



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accurate pin-point placing of the front wheel, and it carves turns with a delicacy which the Gasser can't even get near to approaching. But riding the KTM, standing up on the pegs with your head and shoulders well forward, you can never really be sure whether each gentle twitch of the bars is going to turn into a complete front-end wash-out. For certain, on the slower switchback trails with plenty of turns (and steep drop-offs) and where the choice of line was key, it felt so much more secure than the Gasser because you knew it was always going to turn in time. It changed direction on the throttle (which the EC more or less refused to do), and when you spotted a hazard (such as a projecting rock) you could either take avoiding action or simply blip the throttle and jump over it. But on the fast rock-strewn climbs (and particularly the descents) it felt like a liability.

Thankfully a succession of easy open trails led the way back down into Mende at the close of day one, and here the KTM was back in its element - cornering swiftly and confidently, and powering out of every turn trailing a sizeable roost. Then it was back onto supermoto-friendly tarmac for the quick blast back into town and once again the KTM felt easily the nicer of the two machines - quicker, more secure and easier to handle. That night over a delicious steak and chips, the conversation inevitably turned to which bike we would buy. We were unanimous in our praise. Up till then, we'd both have chosen the KTM.

Bon Journee

The next day all that was set to change as the morning's route quickly departed from the fast 'n' easy trails of the previous afternoon into serious technical going. The opening downhill was typical. What seemed at times to be little more than a goat track, clung perilously to the side of a ridiculously steep ravine littered with tennis-ball

Easy does it...

sized rocks. It was hard enough just keeping your wheels in line whilst picking a good clean route without the hazards of big downhill steps, a couple of large washouts and some off-camber bedrock trying to knock them out from underneath you. All the time there was the constant chatter of moving stones so that it felt like we were riding down the edge of a scree-slope.

I've got to say I was very glad to be aboard the Gas Gas which simply refused to be deflected off

line no matter what you collected with the front wheel. It's at times like these that the sure-footedness of the EC's chassis really comes into its own, and its soft, well damped suspension (a marked improvement over the settings on last year's bike) all help. It was exactly the same story once we reached the bottom and began the awesome loose-rock climb back up the other side of the valley. Despite giving away power to the KTM and having to be worked harder, the Gas Gas simply forged its way to the top of the hill, the rider more or less only having to concentrate on giving it great gobs of throttle.

The same couldn't be said of the KTM however. By the time we got to the top, Chris was already out of breath from fighting so hard with the KTM's wayward front end. And this was pretty much the routine for the rest of the day. Whenever the trail was either fast and smooth,

or twisty and loose, the KTM was the more enjoyable bike to ride. But once the rocks became of a certain size and there was an element of climbing or descending to be done (particularly if the track didn't snake around too much), then the Gasser was the better machine.

Mid-morning we arrived at a huge outcrop of rocks down through which the track descended. With two giant rock steps to negotiate it was a matter of all hands on deck, passing the bikes down between us. We got to the bottom hot but exhilarated, thankful to find that 50m further on there was a stony riverbed to cross - flowing with plenty of ice-cold water.

From there we climbed again to the top of another huge plateau where the tracks were fast and flowing which allowed both bikes to slot into top gear. Once again it was the KTM which made all the running, its firmer damped suspension

SECOND OPINION

If only I had declined Mr Melber's offer of another go on the Gas Gas 450, this second opinion would have been so much easier to write. On the first day we were riding relatively easy tracks at high speeds, and I was feeling relatively fresh. In those conditions the KTM was king. Its creamy motor allowed me to slide out of corners in a beautifully controlled manner, while its ready to race suspension saw me bopping from bump to jump with exuberance. When we stopped to take photos or admire the view I could hardly tear away my eyes from the Katosh's handsome lines and bored everyone to death pointing out the bike's remarkable fit and finish. In comparison the Gas Gas 450 felt stodgy and looked a bit of a mess.

Its super soft suspension meant that you rode into things, rather than over them, and the engine felt strangely strangled. Whenever you stopped to look at it your eyes were invariably drawn to the paint peeling off the clutch cover and the oil weeping out of the engine casing just next to it.

On the second day everything changed. Instead of following a roadbook I found myself struggling to follow the 'Mad Midget from Mende', as our guide took us up and over some pretty extreme rocky climbs - at pace. Suddenly the EXC's suspension and quick steering had me struggling to keep the KTM pointing in the right direction, while its huge reserves of power were proving something of a liability. As soon as I climbed aboard the Gasser everything became so much easier. The bike's imperial stability and smooth suspension meant I could hit just about everything without fear of being bounced off the edge of whatever

precipice we were riding. And I could do this as happily sitting down as standing up - something my exhausted leg muscles were hugely appreciative of!

This isn't the first time I have ridden a KTM and a Gas Gas back to back and ended up wishing that KTM could just tone their bikes down a tad - just make them a little bit easier for mere mortals to ride. I have a French journalist friend called Museau (which incidentally means pig snout) who has a strange but highly plausible explanation for the two companies' different philosophies when it comes to making dirt bikes handle. Apparently the bloke who owns Gas Gas is a keen amateur off-road rider and when he comes back from sampling his R&D boys' latest handiwork, he invariably says something along the lines of: 'yes very good chaps, just kick out the front forks a couple of degrees and back off the suspension and it will be perfect'. Over at Mattighoffen it's a different scenario. The geezers knocking out the new models lean out of their office door and shout, 'Heinz, Kurt, we've got something for you to whiz around the test track'. And Kini and Nicoll (dirt biking demi-gods both), take the bikes out for

a play and then say: 'yeah, pretty good boys, just sharpen up the steering a tad and stiffen up the suspension and it'll be spot on'.

What is so frustrating is that if you could combine the best aspects of both bikes you would have an absolutely unbeatable package. As it is, if I had lots of time to spend in the garage and didn't give a damn about reliability or resale value I'd buy the Gasser. Back in the real world the KTM wins out for me. The 2004 model is definitely more forgiving than previous ones and with a little time and money spent on revalving suspension and fitting a steering damper the bike has it all. I just wish those boys over in Austria would let Signor Gas Gas have a quick spin on their bikes before they decided on the final spec... CHRIS EVANS





feeling perfectly at home on the high-speed going, though in fairness the Gasser felt pretty good too, sliding through fifth and sixth gear turns with lots of throttle dialled in.

The descent down the sheer rock face into the Col du Tarn is one I remember from the Trefle Enduro and takes some beating. Switchback turns so tight that sometimes you can't even get around them on full lock, so you end up having to brakeslide the rear end round, whilst staring down the face of a 300ft drop. Seriously scary. But the effort is all worthwhile, once you've descend into the picture-perfect village of St Enimie where lunch was taken on the banks of a shallow river in one of the riverside cafes.



The climb up the other side was as difficult as it was perilous, but back aboard the Gasser 1 stormed up it, even overtaking our guide at one point as he stalled on a particularly tricky turn. Chris on the KTM meanwhile, was struggling with an excess of wheelspin and a shortage of inside leg. And when we swapped bikes part way up, it was noticeable how much more difficult the KTM made the climbs.

The Final Analysis
And this was our overriding conclusion from the second day's ride. Whenever the trail got technical (which is to say most of the time), the Gasser was the machine which demanded the least from

its rider. It was stable, well suspended and frankly much easier to ride, to the point of being much less of a drain on your reserves of energy.

With the sun setting on a great couple of days riding it was back into the van for the long trip north and a chance to reflect on the two bikes - their relative merits and downsides, and ultimately try and decide when we would place our money. Ideally a combination of the EXC's lusty engine with the Gasser's sure-footed chassis would be best, with the steering geometry set somewhere between the two. But obviously that's not an option, so falling that we eventually came to the following conclusions:

You'd buy the Gas Gas EC450... if you are more of a trail rider than a racer. If your level of riding is 'clubman' or below. If you don't mind spending time fiddling in the workshop. If you can afford to take more of a hit on the depreciation. If you like great suspension. If you don't like headshake. If you like a nice easy to ride blue bike...

You'd buy the KTM EXC450... if you are more of a racer than a trail rider. If your level of riding is 'clubman' or above. If you appreciate aesthetics and build quality. If you want a decent choice of aftermarket parts. If you ride more on the road. If you're not at all scared of speed. If you can put up with headshake or afford a steering damper. If you like a truly great (but challenging) orange bike...

Whichever one you buy, you'll end up compromising somewhere along the line. No question in either of our minds on that count. Both of them are good, but neither is faultless. So perhaps the broader question is: are either of them better than perhaps a 300 two-stroke or even a good 250 four-stroke these days? And that's gotta' be a question for another day and another test. But then again... it's a perfect excuse for a return trip to the Lozere!

What the Heck is GELANOTS?



How It Works

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