A full-page photograph of a rider on a blue Yamaha thumper motorcycle splashing through a river. The rider is wearing a red and black jacket, white pants, and a helmet. The motorcycle is partially submerged in the water, creating a large splash. The background shows a wooded area with bare trees.

*Can a 12 year old thumper still make a splash alongside the latest Yamaha WR450F? More than a decade since Yamaha's WR400F pioneered the thumper revival, we go back and revisit the bike that launched the four-stroke revolution and ask... how far have we come since the 400F was the bike making waves?*

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I arrived with a splash back in 1998 and gave the rest of the enduro thumper class a proper soaking. I'm talking about Yamaha's WR400F, the first of the new wave of 'uber-powerful', high-revving enduro four-strokes. Back before the Millennium, the middleweight class in enduros was awash with them, and it went on to influence the design of enduro bikes for the following decade. These days you rarely see one of the old 400s in good, original condition, so we thought it would be fun to revisit one of those early bikes and pit it against Yamaha's latest offering in the middleweight class - the 2009/10 WR450F - both on the trail and around a timed special test. How far has the WRF come - if at all - in the intervening 12 years?

### Blue is the Colour

It was hailed as the future of enduro bikes, the bike that would revolutionise the sport and change the way we thought about our machinery. And in many ways it did just that. Without a doubt the powerful thumpers we all ride today owe their very existence to (and are indirectly descended from) those early WR400Fs, which used spiralling revs as a means of delivering their performance.

Up to that point four-strokes had been torquey, overweight, slightly lumbering beasts delivering a healthy dose of midrange but not a whole lot else. Then along came the lithe and revvy WRF and at a stroke changed all that. Suddenly we were all talking about 13,000rpm redlines, incredible power, and four-strokes with the compactness and light weight of a stroker. Even if the reality fell some way short of the promise.

Back in the early 'Nineties two-stroke technology had more-or-less peaked, and the dirt bike industry was looking for a means of reinvigorating the sales charts in a way that could be seen to be more 'eco-friendly' than the smoke-spewing stokers of the previous decade. Yamaha secretly began work on an all-new, high revving, compact four-stroke engine using their established five-valve technology which was to be the basis of the replacement for their competition two-strokes. The result was the utterly beautiful YZ-M400F factory motocrosser, which went on to achieve six GP race wins and even win a round of the US supercross series.

That bike (like all the works 'M' bikes) was utterly sublime - titanium everything, it featured a twin port head, cam-driven water-pump and a tiny (one-shot) electric-start. Though by the time production bikes arrived a couple of years later, many of the sensuous details that had made the YZ-MFs so special, had disappeared or been seriously watered down.

The WR-F finally arrived in 1998 on the back of the



YZ-F MXer. And by launching a high-revving four-banger, Yamaha at a stroke made all other dirt bikes obsolete, got a leap on the opposition, and created fresh demand for off-roaders. It's no co-incidence that KTM's new four-stroke engines came along shortly afterwards and that sales of dirtbikes in the UK and Europe peaked around the same time.

'TBM was less of a fan of the early WR400F than most other British dirt bike magazines...'

TBM was less of a fan of those early bikes than most. We could have gone along with all the hype surrounding the new machine and accepted that the WR400F was an improvement on the previous generation of four-strokes, but actually we felt customers had been a bit short-changed by the early 400Fs. What we saw was a bike that promised to be the future, but failed to deliver the goods on much of its claims.

Yes it was a leap forward in technological terms, but in many of the other key areas it fell woefully short of expectations. Talk of 13,000rpm rev-ceilings (and the potential for approaching 50-odd hp) turned out to be hugely exaggerated and when TBM stuck one on the dyno and revealed to the world that it was actually only making 35hp at the rear wheel thanks to a rev limiter

set at 11,500rpm, relations between Yamaha UK and TBM took a bit of a nose dive. Worse was to come. The 'scientific' TBM bathroom scale test revealed the bike was heavier than the machines it was replacing and rather heavier than Yamaha's bold claims suggested it might be. But worst of all..... We found it just wouldn't start.

It's not that it would never start - the bike lit up from cold fairly easily - it's just that once you got it hot and clattered in mud, if you stalled you could find yourself kicking away frustratedly at the bike for minutes on end. I should say that not every machine exhibited this problem, but enough of them did to make Yamaha sit-up and take notice.

And it wasn't just TBM that had problems, around the world there were reports of punters frustratingly returning bikes to dealers claiming they were unable to start them, and indeed TBM readers wrote to us in droves with the similar problems. This was the beginning of the end of cordial relations between this magazine and Yamaha for a good couple of years (whatever happened to the idiom: don't shoot the messenger?), and although the WR400F went on to be a worldwide sales success, had Yamaha launched the bike with an electric-start, they would almost certainly have avoided much of the negative publicity associated with this model.

So why return to a bike which TBM once claimed was: 'as much use as a chocolate teapot'? Well, it's a good question and one we pondered as we stood in a leaky greenhouse on the outskirts of Birmingham looking at a well-used and rather sad-looking 12yr old example that had last run a couple of years before. Were we really going to stump up our own cash for a bike we'd once termed 'the most overhyped dirt bike of the decade'?

Er... No, but we knew a man who was. Because TBM contributor JK was with us and enthusiastically brandishing a bunch of used tenners - 60 of them in fact. A deal was struck and the WR was loaded forlornly into the back of JK's pick-up along with a few shredded tyres, and we headed back to the Metropolis. We hadn't even heard the thing running. Chiefly because... it didn't!

Back at base we took a look at the WR-F's knackered plastics,

### Buying it

Our 1998 WR400F cost us £600 for the bike alone with no MoT, no road tax and non-running (though it was running fine when it was last used, apparently). On top of that we added a front fender (£19.30), air filter (£12.95), oil filter (£4.00), spark plug (£6.85), rad scoops (£36.50), front brake lever (£6.00), side panels (£36.50), front brake pads (£17.00), rear brake pads (£17.00), high temperature paint (£10.75), frame paint (aerosol and tin £28.88), fork seals (£23.40), clutch cable (£14.00), throttle cable (£25.50), handguards (£22.50), and flexi-number-plate (£14.00, Techmoto 0114 2581151). There was also the cost of a service, three hours of labour to find and fix the camchain/starting issue, a fork service and a bit of (paid) polishing. The grand total of which comes out to £1149.43. The bars, grips and fender bag were all found lurking in the back of UKRob's garage and thus were gratis...



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rusty exhaust, crud-caked air-filter, seized-on brakes, corroded spokes, and hand-painted frame and decided that there was only one man for the job: UKRob.

Unless you are on the TBM Forum ([trailbikemag.com/forum](http://trailbikemag.com/forum)) you probably won't have heard of UKRob, but take our word for it there's no finer bike polisher in Christendom. You know the expression 'You can't polish a t'rd'? Well Rob's probably the only bloke alive who could get one to sparkle like it was part of the crown jewels.

The WR-F was despatched to Rob's gaff with the express instructions that he was to spend as little money as possible in order to make it as presentable as he could. Having given the bike its first proper clean in years (thoroughly cleaning all of the grime out of the seat and from around the engine with a toothbrush etc),



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some paint was mixed to match the Yamaha frame (as opposed to simply purchasing some random blue colour as one previous owner had done), and was then carefully applied by masking off the surrounding areas. That was then covered in clear film.

Next it was time for the rusty old pegs, sidestand, gear-lever, exhaust and heat-shield to get the Rob treatment. The pegs, shifter and stand were sprayed back to silver, while the zorst and heat shield were rubbed down and given two coats of heat-resistant black.

Rob then set about removing some of the old and knackered plastics and replacing them with some fresh ones. On went a new pair of side-panels, front mud-guard, rad shrouds and a fresh set of graphics which improved the look no end. The old air-filter got binned as did the bent bars and mis-shapen handguards and Rob fitted a spare set of bars which had been hanging up in his garage - taken off another bike. Finally a new filter, spark plug, brake pads, front brake lever and some new grips and handguards went on, and Rob set about polishing up the rest of the machine - including the spokes.

The original plan was that Rob would get the bike running - but it proved impossible to start, so we collected it and took it over to Yamaha specialist Moto-Ward in Surrey (01403 823222). Now I know there'll be those among you who wonder why we didn't pull it

## SECOND OPINION: JK

Setting off on a trail ride on a 12 year old competition bike might not seem that daunting, but setting off on an overseas, long distance, winter trail ride on a bike I last saw over a decade ago, was something I definitely wasn't savouring. All kinds of disastrous thoughts entered my mind as we set off at an easy pace to warm it up. But with the rocketship 450F out front, the pace didn't stay too easy for too long. And even though the bike I was riding looked immaculate (some new plastics and a thorough spit and polish saw to that), I was only too aware of the twelve hard years of use it had already seen.

In fact I was concentrating so hard, listening for signs of imminent catastrophic failure that I failed to notice the big 450 storm off as the pace lifted to er... enthusiastic. Oh well it was now or never. Gunning the 400 to stay in contention as the mighty 450 stretched the elastic, the memories all came flooding back. Oh yes this thing felt good all right.

So good in fact that I forgot all about the smallish pegs, the slow steering and the slightly lumpen motor and simply reveled in the relaxed, but precise handling, the still-slick transmission and the comfy seat. Truth is this thing really didn't feel that old. Okay, you had your work cut out to keep pace with the Millen-

nium Falcon 450 as it launched into Hyperspace, but a quick pit-stop to adjust the suspension revealed an oil tight motor, and nothing remotely loose or hanging off.

What's more it started again easily! This can't be the impossible to start nightmare of ancient folklore, can it? Because ours started easily first time, every time. Well... almost every time!

I wish we'd put some decent tyres on it as everything else was just peachy. I loved the way it felt so relaxed at normal speeds and although it ran onto the rev limiter a bit too soon for my liking, for most of the time it had more than enough go to keep pace with the latest tackle ahead. Even the brakes were more modern in feel, than the retro nightmares I had anticipated.

With a starting point like this, no wonder the WR Yams went on to greatness. It's just a shame that they picked up such a bad rep for not starting, cos if the factory had gone the whole hog and fitted these early bikes with an electric-starter, who knows what might've happened?

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apart ourselves, well the answer is easy.... Time! In an ideal world we'd get stuck into a bike in the TBM workshop, but frankly we simply don't have the time these days. It's hard enough finding the required time to put the magazine together each month, let alone sort out a technical problem like the non-starting WR-F!

And I'm glad we did it that way because we'd still have been scratching our barnets right now were it not for ace spanner-man Sam Simmons at Moto-Ward. Sam set about twirling the spanners on our WR-F and it was him who finally figured out that the timing chain was out by two teeth! Strange but true.

Having sorted that out and re-tensioned the cam-chain which he said 'looked like new', he re-set the valve clearances, cleaned out the carb, fixed the leaking fork seals and serviced the bike for us - draining out four litres of oil in the process (it's only supposed to hold a litre and a bit!). We also got him to replace the clutch cable and throttle cable and when he finished he handed us a bill for a very reasonable £251.93 inc VAT. Top bloke and top service.


Add that to the money it cost us for new plastics, paint, graphics, lever, air-filter, other labour etc and we were in it to the tune of about £1200 (including the purchase cost) - which is pretty much what a used WR400F is worth in good nick. Now we could have spent money on replacing all sorts of other items: tyres, chain, sprockets, clutch, worn front disc, brake lines etc, but as anyone who has ever bought a used bike out of the classifieds will tell you, the purchase price is only half the expenditure. Besides, we really didn't want a 'new' WR400F, we just wanted one that was clean and tidy and ready to ride.

There's another little bit to this tale that's worth knowing because it adds to the final story. This particular WR-F was not unknown to us, because in fact JK had owned the bike ten years earlier, having bought it secondhand back in 1999 and raced it in enduros for a season. Then he sold it to a mate of his... and now he was buying it back again. The funny thing was JK always remembers that this bike started easily when he owned it, and we know that many others found the same thing with their WRs. The trouble was as we discovered... some started easily, whilst others didn't!

We picked the bike up from Moto-Ward and Sam said to us: 'it's running fine, but it probably wants a good blast, just to blow out the cobwebs.' Just as well, because we were planning on taking it on an epic 200 mile trail ride and pitch it up against the latest offering from Yamaha. Would it last the distance? How would it feel in this sort of company? Would we be disappointed after

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12 years of progress? Other than firing it up, we'd not had the opportunity of test riding the old girl, and had no idea whether four litres of oil swilling around its belly had done any harm. One thing was certain, it would be kill or cure for our secondhand Yam...

### Allez Les Bleus

Springtime... and having been cooped-up all winter with idle lever-fingers, a man's thoughts turns to the promise of sunshine, epic trails and the chance of lots of vin rouge without the missus finding out. That's why in spring we always find ourselves heading south to France to ride out with TBM columnist Chris Evans. Chris invited us to join him and his punters on a Tour de Normandie, so we packed our bags, loaded the TBM love-bug with a pair of WR-Fs (our 400 was joined by a shiny new 2010 450F) and hit the Rue!

Gacé is a sleepy little market town nestling in the ample rural bosom of picturesque Normandy; and marks the epicentre of Chris's Gallic trailriding empire. There among the quiet streets of onion sellers wearing berets, lies the Hotel Golden Shower [*check translation - Ed!*] which was to be our base for the next three days. Unloading our ancient Yam among the glitzy new metal comprising Huskys, KTMs, Sherocos and Beemers, we were as anxious as anyone about whether our 'six-hundred-quidder' would complete the trip.

By way of comparison we'd brought along the very latest Yamaha WR450F, replete with alloy frame, powerhouse of a motor and er... new tyres. Standing the two bikes side by side you could see the lineage that ran from one to the other, though you probably won't find a single component in common.

The intervening 12 years has seen a lot of detail changes in machinery, not least in terms of getting them started. Our biggest gripe with the 400F back in 1998 - that it could be difficult to start - has ensured that nowadays you can't buy a four-stroke *without* an electric-start, and of course the latest 450F lights up at the touch of a button.

We also complained back in '98 that the 400F's ugly 12L 'humpy' tank intruded too much on the riding position, and these days manufacturers appear to agree. The latest WR-F has a slender 8.0L tank, as Yamaha now concur that a narrow bike is much easier to ride - even if you do have to stop to refuel every couple of hours or so.

Our complaints regarding the original 400F's excessive weight and lack of quality have also been met - that machine had a mild steel exhaust, steel rads, steel side-stand and steel bars; plus of course a steel frame and no dials. The modern WRs have alloy rads, alloy bars, alloy

pipe and of course an exquisite alloy frame, plus a lovely set of digital dials to keep you abreast of all that's occurring.

But the quality of the new machine is more than just skin deep, it's inherent in the whole design of the bike. Just like KTM have done with their bikes, Yamaha have taken a rather more cohesive and global approach to the design of their machinery, ensuring that not only does it function correctly, but that it all fits together nicely and looks good too. The slim-line tank flows into the seat, the rest of the bodywork is modern and stylish, and the bike is well equipped and very well put together. This is real progress.

'The intervening 12 years has seen a helluva' lot of detail changes in the machinery...'

It's been a couple of years since I last slung a leg over a 450F, but I can't help thinking things have changed for the better in the blue camp. Yamaha appear to be positioning themselves more upmarket than ever before, and there's been a steady drive towards quality. We've seen it with Yamaha's other products - bikes like the new R1 (that focuses less on pure speed, and more on the whole riding and owning experience), the new SuperTénéré (with its high specification and ambitious pricing), and this quality approach even extends to other products in the Yamaha line-up, such as their new 350hp V8 outboard motor!

It's always struck me as slightly odd that a pioneering company like Yamaha which prides itself on class-leading innovation, should seek to occupy the middle ground in terms of price and quality. It's why 12 years ago I complained about the WR400F's cost-cutting mild-steel exhaust, steel handlebars and low quality plastics which (I felt) had no place on a bike aiming to set new standards in the enduro world. And which I believed was short-sightedness on Yamaha's part. I think it's fair to say that at the time... Yamaha vehemently disagreed with me.

Well I'm, pleased to say that over the years Yamaha's taken a good hard look in the mirror and decided to do something about its financial squint. Corrective surgery has unashamedly taken their products up a good few notches, and produced a bike, which - in quality terms

at least - is among the very best on the market. Well done to them for that. It may have taken 12 years and a certain amount of argy-bargy between us, but I think it's fair to say that TBM's original beliefs have now found a home at Yamaha HQ.

The quality oozes out of every pore on the new Yam - the plastics are miles better, the equipment list is better, the build quality is better, the standard of cycle parts is better and the whole bike is much more cohesive. Okay it's not as road-ready as a European machine, but it's much better than it was.

**'I think it's fair to say that TBM's original beliefs have now found a home at Yamaha...'**

### Blue Sky Thinking

Day one dawned clear and sunny. So clear in fact, that there was ice in all the puddles in the ruts. Would our old Yamaha start up? Course it would (second kick, too), though it did take a good bit of warming up to get it to idle smoothly. The 450F purred into life like a giant pussycat, and JK and I hit the trails - looking forward to a great day's ride.

Starting on the 450F I was amazed to discover how silky smooth the latest version of the engine is. On the short blast of tarmac to the first of the day's trails the Yamaha simply gobbled up the road in every one of its five gears, surging forwards with a powerful flood of torque every time you changed gear.

It's tradition that the season-opening Normadie trail ride is an annual mud-fest. The clay-lined lanes hold their fluid better than a TBM staffer at a lock-in, and there's usually more mud about than a wet Welsh summer. Not this year there wasn't, not a bit of it. Despite a long and drawn out winter, the trails were remarkably dry, relatively smooth and a joy to ride. Not that it wasn't muddy in places, but if I'm honest, I prefer the joys of fast single-track to the slog of wet ruts. Good thing too because experience has shown that the WR450F which is a mighty fine and fast beast in the dry, can be an almighty handful in the wet.

On the dry trails of the first day the WR450F was proving a joy to ride. Faster than a very fast thing indeed, it effortlessly outpaces ALL opposition on hard/dry routes, no matter what that opposition might be. But it

does it in such an unruffled and dignified way that the rider uses almost no effort to keep it powering forwards. The steering is perfect and well-weighted with just the ideal level of feedback, the suspension amazingly compliant and capable, the seat all-day comfortable and the bike so remarkably quiet and efficient that it makes an incredible trail bike for when conditions are dry. Note the words 'trail bike', and 'dry'.

In fact the more I rode it, the more amazed I was by the WRF's astonishing turn of speed on dusty trails. Fallen behind because you weren't paying attention to the run leader? No worries, twist the throttle and watch them magically appear in your sights in seconds. This bike is seriously, amazingly, brutally and effortlessly fast... providing the trails are dry. There's that word 'dry' again.

The engine is incredible - not just for its performance, but also for its smooth supply of serious power delivered in an amazingly unstressed way. Incredible also for its utterly faultless carburetion (yes it still uses a good old fashioned carb), and its utter refusal to stall no matter what gear you are in!

And what's more, despite the bumps and the punishment the bike is obviously taking, it simply refuses to get out of shape, to get knocked off line or to squeak or rattle in protest. It is a remarkably resilient machine and I can see why it makes such a good rally bike - and why so many people choose to ride them in the dry and dusty Dakar rally.

If it were a car this thing would be one of the AMG kitted, S-Class Mercs - fast, and powerful, subtle and refined, yet smooth and cosseting for the pilot. And just like an S-class it's incredibly fast in a straight line, but not really designed for dancing around a tight track. The 450F is no different, it runs a wider line on corners than most other bikes would take, smoothes out the bumps and then piles on the coals once the track straightens out. And while it will work its way around tight turns, or between trees without too much effort, it does so in a way that is measured and steady, rather than being nippy or fleet-of-foot.

By contrast our old 400F was a bit of a bone-shaker! Okay, maybe that description's a little unfair, but it didn't feel anywhere near as composed over the bumps. That's only to be expected - 12 year old suspension which hadn't been serviced (at least not at the rear) nor adjusted for our use, was never going to feel as plush as the latest units. Nevertheless it was remarkable how quickly the new bike covered (dry) ground, compared with the old one.

I'd forgotten just what it was like to ride the old 400F,




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how it needs a good few revs on board to get the most out of the engine, and yet how it feels quite thrashy and harsh once you dial them in. There's no doubt that part of the WR-F's evolution over the past 12 years has been in terms of improving key areas of noise, vibration and harshness!

Nevertheless our 400F was not only holding together, but loosening up nicely as the miles increased. At the fuel stops we took the opportunity of tweaking the suspension and gradually getting the 400F more to our liking. And to be fair to it, it was good fun to ride. You still noticed the bulbous tank pushing out your knees, and the performance differential between the bikes meant working the 400F a fair bit harder to keep up, but hell... it was a 600 quid bike up against a six grand one. There was bound to be a difference!

### Blue Velvet

So just how much has the new Yamaha improved from the early one? Well, in a sense it's a bit like trying to compare riders from different generations, the comparison is impossible because circumstances change. Not least you must remember we're not dealing with a brand new WR400F here, but a 12yr old bike that's had various owners, done numerous seasons of racing and trail riding and been used and maintained in a variety of different ways. It's unlikely to be in its prime.

That said, it did feel pretty good still, and everything was working fine on the bike (brakes, suspension, clutch etc), so certain conclusions can still be drawn. For instance the new bike is considerably faster (in the dry), much more powerful and linear, and far, FAR smoother than the older bike, and maintains that smoothness even as the revs increase, whereas the 400 just gets more thrashy the harder you rev it. The 450 packs a lot more punch in its midrange too - and whereas the 400F needs to be spinning hard to get the most out of the motor, the 450 works best when you shift up early and use the engine's sizeable torque to drive it forwards.

You notice the difference in braking too, the new bike's anchors are much more powerful, and that's not because the old one's weren't working efficiently. In fact they worked very well, but the new bike has the benefits of a bigger front rotor and a more powerful braking system. Just as well really as this thing is a proper beast at times. Never more so than when the going turns sloppy...

Day three dawned cold and overcast, the sunshine of the previous two days was now just a memory, and as we found out, the trails would be more of a mixture of wet and dry too. Dry was fine, but when things get

gloopy (particularly soft ruts), that gorgeous new bike turns downright ugly.

The problem stems from the 450F's phenomenal powerplant. In the dry it manages to put down its power in a way that translates into forward momentum, but in the wet it's another story. The twin-cam powerplant revs up so smoothly, so swiftly and so forcefully that it simply overwhelms the softly sprung suspension, and the tyres lose their unequal battle for grip with the substrate. And then instead of charging along headlong, you find yourself going very fast, and kinda' sideways.

'In a sense comparing these two bikes is a bit like trying to compare riders from different generations...'

I kid you not, I went into one set of squidgy ruts with the power on, and found myself still heading forwards but with the bike on full-lock! The problem is that as it has grown up, the WR-F appears to have gained a few pounds of middle aged spread, the motor's become ever more powerful and the suspension has been softened off to further improve comfort. And the combination of all these factors mitigate against finding grip in the wet. In fairness we've always said that about the 450 - both steel-framed bikes and alloy-framed ones have always been a real handful in the slop.

It's strange because it gives the bike such a Jekyll and Hyde character. On the one hand it's an absolutely fabulous trailbike for when the lanes are baked dry and there's loads of miles to be covered in the day. In such circumstances the bike is an absolute joy to ride, covering the bumpy miles with admirable ease. But then if your day turns wet and slippery, then be prepared for lots of footing, and some much slower going.

Sure you can try charging through the wet stuff, but if you back off even for a second, the stock set-up loads-up the front end so much that it tramlines the ruts and you're forced right down into it. We did try stiffening up the suspension a little and while it improves matters slightly, it only goes a small way to alleviating the heart of the problem.

Because suspension-wise, the new bike feels much plusher (softer and more responsive to smaller bumps) than the old 400F. And while some of that could easily be down to age and set-up, I'd be willing to bet that the

new 450s are dialled in to be rather softer now than the old 400s were - more in keeping with their role as rapid trail bike rather than all-out racer. And that's no bad thing, either. Handling-wise well there's nothing really bad to report with either of these bikes - wet or dry. I like the way the new 450F steers - it's typically 'Japanese' with solid, stable, and predictable handling, and never a hint of head-shake. Despite much slower steering, the 400F felt slightly easier to get turned than the modern bike (certainly in the wet), but that might have been down to its limited power as much as anything else.

But here's a thing... you DO still notice the 400F's bulbous tank - not just when standing, but when you drop down onto the seat and try to slide forwards for a tight turn. It was one of the problems we pointed out at the very beginning, and now the present bike's lovely smooth and open cockpit has vastly improved matters in that department, well hopping back onto the old bike you notice it even more.

I've talked a bit about the obvious quality improvements over the years, but there are less obvious ones too. The broader pegs are now made from alloy rather than steel, the seat is no longer covered in a cheap and shiny single-coloured smooth vinyl, but now has a non-slip, multi-textured fabric, the alloy swingarm has a lovely brushed aluminium finish to it rather than just being painted silver (I never understood why Yamaha chose to paint an alloy swingarm), and the new bike's sidestand is not only made from lightweight alloy, but now tucks up out of harm's way, where it won't interfere with a trailing leg in a corner. That was another of the things we pointed out at the time.

But what of the 400F's Achilles heel - its starting difficulties. Well... I have to report that our one started easily. Very easily in fact. Every time. And although we never dropped it, nor got it caked in mud and hot to the point of boiling, I have to say that this was one of the bikes which *did* start. So easily in fact, that once or twice it was quicker to fire up than the electric-start bike! Who says TBM never eats its words!

### Blue Blooded

So what conclusions can we draw from part one - our trail riding comparison test of old and new WR-Fs? That you can buy a cheap secondhand bike out of the classifieds for a few hundred quid, and it could do the job of a bike costing nearly ten times as much - albeit the new bike would actually feel faster, more refined and much more enjoyable to ride? Ha! You knew that much already.



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CHALLENGE!

## Sport Adventure

If like me, you're a fan of property porn as typified by the Sunday Times Homes section, then the statuesque French manor houses, stately chateaux, sturdy farm-houses and sizeable medieval barns, which seem to fill this part of Normandy are a kind of realty viagra.

They're everywhere! A millennia of occupation since Viking times (the name Normandy is said to be derived from 'Northmen') has left its indelible mark on the rural landscape, with more beautiful old buildings set among the bocage than anywhere else in France.

Sport Adventure's Normandie tour is not specifically set-up to enable you to ogle the real estate, but it might well have been. The three-day route gets you intimate with the Basse-Normandie region with its glorious patch-work of apple groves, stud farms, tiny smallholdings and larger dairy farms, and within each lies a characterful and distinctive ancient building, which - rather like a Pigalle peepshow - tempts you to take a closer look.

The trail riding's not bad either, with a pleasant mix of easy trails, fast single track, open woodland, grassy lanes and some muddy ruts thrown in, (complete with fast-moving wildlife - just to keep you on your toes). There's nothing too taxing here for the competent trail rider, but three solid 100-mile days in glorious scenery will ensure you feel you've done plenty of riding.

Navigation is by 'road-book' - a kind of continuous sheet of mini instructions which you scroll through as you advance along the lanes. Riding while navigating takes a bit of getting used to, but ends up being part of the challenge, and a good thing to tackle among a gang of mates. Riders use their own machinery which they are responsible for insuring themselves.

Typical of French regional accommodation, our hotel was clean and characterful in equal measure; the food was fresh and tasty while the décor was the opposite. But then if you want to stay at a place which accepts your muddy enduro boots, then don't expect it to be furnished like the Palace of Versailles.

Sport Adventure's business continues to thrive on a clever mix of well thought out (and constantly-evolving) routes, a clued-up set of organisers and the integration of the local community (rather than using British owned accommodation for instance). Huge amounts of repeat business are testament to the fact that the balance is right, the price is fair and the punters remain satisfied.

A three day Normandie tour such as this, costs £450 which includes three day's riding, two nights' accommodation, breakfast and evening meals, lunch on the final day, a supporting van and mechanic to help you out should things go wrong (though don't expect them to



rebuild your bike each evening for you). The price doesn't include getting down there, any fuel you use, nor the laid-on lunches on the first two days. Budget on about 10-15 euros for lunch and twice that in the evenings for drinks at the bar, though there's always plenty of vin-de-table at mealtimes.

Chris Evans, Sport Adventure's owner is not only this magazine's longest-serving columnist (who claims to look younger in real life than his column photo suggests), but is also a host famed for his generosity of spirit, genuine warmth and his enjoyment of irony.

For details of the Normandie tours and indeed all Sport Adventure holidays you can call him on 0033 662 487190 or email [chris.evans@sport-adventure.com](mailto:chris.evans@sport-adventure.com)...



Actually the conclusion I prefer to make is that 12 years down the line, all the criticisms we made about the 400F at its launch, have been vindicated, and more importantly have all been subsequently addressed by Yamaha. So that we've ended up with a bike which - while not as intrinsically 'sporting' as the original - is nevertheless far, far easier and more pleasant to ride. Well..... in the dry at least!

So is the modern bike an improvement on the old machine? Of course it is, not just in terms of refinement and speed, but in the key areas of quality and value for money. The new bike is more sophisticated, better equipped and actually much nicer to ride for 90 per cent of the time. But is it any quicker around an enduro special test? Well part two of our Scrapheap Challenge next month aims to find out, when we put them back-to-back around a timed special. Don't miss it...

**Thanks to:** Chris Evans at Sport Adventure (0033 662 487190) for a memorable few days following his Normandie route. To the guys at Moto-Ward (01403 823222) for sorting out our bag-o-nails at such short notice. To UKRob for taking on the polishing challenge; to Terry Rudd Motorcycles; to Yamaha UK and Yamaha Off-Road Experience for the loan of the WR450F,

to Paul X for a night out and a Ruby Murry whilst offloading his bike onto us. To JK for buying said machine and his help in compiling this feature. And finally to Jon Perry who rode with us on day two and put up with all our pathetic wise-cracks. Top guys, one and all...

2010

Yamaha WR450F

Price:	£6099
Engine:	Liquid-cooled, DOHC, 5-valve single, e-start
Displacement:	449cc
Comp ratio:	12.3:1
Transmission:	5-speed
Chassis:	Aluminium semi-double cradle
Wheelbase:	1500mm
Fuel cap:	8L