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- August 10, 2010
- Gabe Ets-Hokin
- Brian J. Nelson
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2011 Victory Motorcycles: MD First Ride



The Big 106/6 for Everyone

We all have impossible dreams. I'd love a vintage cafe racer that has modern power, brakes and suspension that I can ride all day without needing prescription back pills. Editor-in-Chief Edge would like a self-running website. And Polaris motorcycles would like to sell as many on-road motorcycles as it sells off-road vehicles.

Polaris started as a farm-machinery company during World War II and started building snowmobiles during the '50s, but its story doesn't really start until the 1980s. That's when president Hall Wendel, Jr. and a group of investors bought Polaris from its larger parent company (sound familiar?). Wendel had a vision of diversifying Polaris' product lineup beyond farm equipment and snowmobiles to ATVs, personal watercraft, and—the reason I'm writing this—a new line of American designed and built motorcycles. Dubbed “the new American motorcycle,” at 1507cc (92 cubic inches) the 1998 V92C was the biggest V-Twin on the market, came equipped with all the top equipment names—Fox, Brembo, Marzocchi—and had fit, finish and build quality equal to anything else in the industry. Victory's original focus was to sell to Polaris customers (30 percent of whom rode motorcycles in 1998), not to take market share from the giants of the industry. 12 years along, how many Victory cruisers and tourers are on the road?



Kingpin 8-Ball

“Around 60 or 70 thousand,” V.P. of Victory Motorcycles Mark Blackwell told me. Considering this is more than a decade of sales, Victory might be disappointed. Harley sells more than 3 times this number each year. Yet Victory is committed to the idea of providing a second American motorcycle brand, spending millions on research and development, developing sophisticated marketing strategies, and fully supporting its customers and dealers.

What is Victory doing wrong? Not much, it turns out. I spent three days in beautiful southwestern Colorado riding the full 2011 lineup through some amazing scenery, and it doesn't look like there's anything amiss with the bikes themselves or how they are marketed and sold. It doesn't surprise me at all that Victory consistently scores high marks when it comes to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

If you follow Victory, you'll know there are two basic model lines, with the Touring models at one end and the Hammer,

Kingpin and Vegas cruisers on the other. Each model gets a stripped-down, blacked-out version called the “8-Ball” as well, and there’s also the premium Vegas Jackpot, a tricked-out version of the regular Vegas.

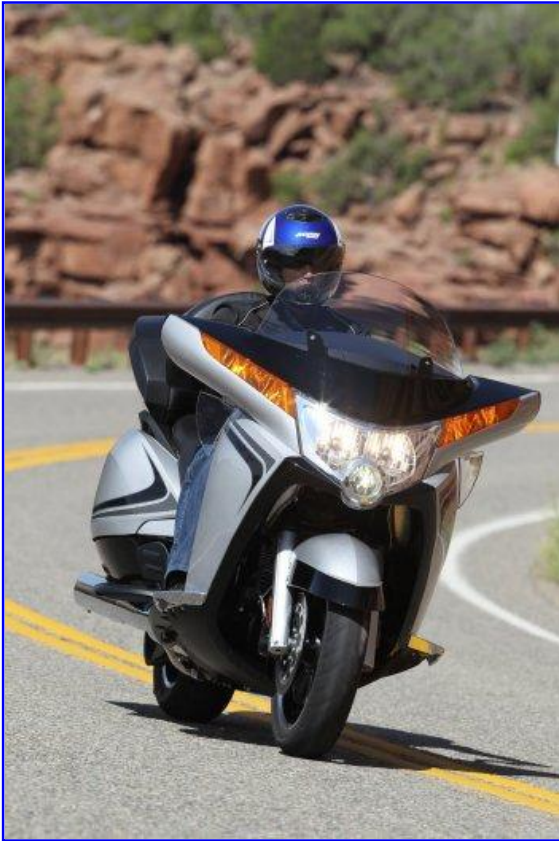
There are no new models for 2011, but there are some significant changes, as well as a few new Arlen Ness limited-editions. All the bikes now get the 106/6 motor, the 106 cubic-inch (1731cc), six-speed unit found in the 2010 Touring models. The transmission received a total redesign for less gear noise and smoother shifting action, and in turn the reduced engine noise allows a slightly louder exhaust for more of that requisite cruiser rumble. The smoother-running transmission is easier on the oil, allowing for 5000 miles between oil changes. There are also brighter headlamps and easier-to-read gauges in the cruiser lineup.



Accessorized Cross Country

But the most significant feature of the Victory line may be the competitive pricing. Even with the addition of the 106/6 motor, the Vegas and Kingpin keep their 2010 MSRPs (\$14,499 and \$14,999 respectively). Also, the the Cross Roads is now sold through the Core Custom Program. Priced at \$14,999, it’s delivered without bags, windscreen or crash protection, but at delivery the customer can get it equipped as he or she wants in one of 48 possible configurations in minutes, choosing between two colors, two different luggage options and three different tip-over bars. This allows dealers to stock less inventory—important when sales are down and credit is tough—and the customers get exactly as much bike as they want.

Also on the accessory front is a new trunk for the Cross Roads and Cross Country. It’s designed to retrofit to the 2010 models—installation is as simple as snapping it in place and locking it, and the older bikes are even pre-wired for the speakers and internal lighting—and it can hold two full-face helmets or 17.65 gallons of liquid helmets. It even includes built-in LED taillights and a 12v outlet; a lot of thought has gone into this accessory, as touring riders place a lot of importance on their trunks. It’s pricey at \$1745, but it adds a tremendous amount of functionality, giving the Cross Country (or a hard bag-equipped Cross Roads) more storage than the luxury-oriented Vision.



The Big Vision

The winding roads of western Colorado were our testing grounds, and the Victory folks made sure we got enough riding in. Instead of the 100-odd miles I expect to ride at a press event like this, I rode almost 400 miles over three days. The weather was (almost; I spent an afternoon drenched by thunderstorms) great and the pavement way better than what the state of California calls “roads.” It would have been ideal testing grounds for these very rider-oriented machines, except the high altitude seemed to sap some power from the 106 motor.

Still, the addition of that motor to the cruisers made them much more entertaining to ride. But the extra power highlighted how much better the touring chassis is than the cruiser’s. In high speed sweepers, the cruisers can feel a bit rubbery, and the lack of cornering clearance is easily and noisily apparent. Still, the high-quality brakes and suspension, along with a dry weight less than competing brands made the Vegas, Kingpin and Hammer plenty of fun.

I finally got a chance to spend some time on the [Vision](#), and it kept its promise of being a fast, comfortable, good-handling and stylish luxury tourer. The seat is very comfortable, with good support for the ass and lower back, and the ergonomics are humane. Wind protection is excellent, with great coverage (I’m five-six, so your results may vary) and little buffeting with the screen in the highest position. Storage in the big trunk (optional on the \$17,999 Vision 8-Ball) is good, although many of us at the event were scratching our heads looking at the toaster-oven-sized side compartments. Handling is also very nice and neutral, the anti-lock brakes (standard on the \$23,199 Vision Tour) work seamlessly, and the air-adjustable suspension lets the rider quickly set up the bike for load and riding conditions. Finally, fuel economy and range are very acceptable—with a six-gallon tank, 200 miles in the saddle is easily achieved.

But the star of the show is the Cross Country. For \$17,999, you get a bike with almost as much wind protection as a Vision, with more storage (if you spring for the trunk), a very good sound system, cruise control and over 500 pounds of load capacity (and only .2 of a gallon less fuel capacity). It also handles better than the Vision, as it’s 100 pounds lighter and feels less top-heavy. All the bikes have gear indicators now, and it’s a useful feature, as the Cross Roads runs so smoothly (somehow smoother than the Vision) that the big “5” on the indicator is a handy reminder that it’s time to shift. There is also an mpg readout along with range to empty.



Jackpot

If you want an extra dose of style, there are three generations of Nesses to help you out. Arlen, along with son Cory and grandson Zack, have created three limited-edition rides this year. The \$27,999 Arlen Ness Vision gets lavish pin-striping, custom grips and pegs, a cut-down windscreen and other unique touches. The \$24,999 Cory Ness Cross Country looks good with suede seat, custom mirrors and lavish two-tone paint. Zack's \$18,999 Vegas has a stitched leather seat, special chrome exhausts and blacked-out frame and paint. All three bikes receive billet wheels, diamond-cut cooling fins and loads of other Arlen Ness billet parts. Yes, billet grips are as uncomfortable as they sound. Photos of all three Ness models can be found in our [preview article](#).

I also got to experience the new transmission. The cruisers benefit from having the sixth-speed overdrive, gear noise is indeed reduced, and there's a neutral-finding feature that makes finding neutral under five mph very easy. But the shift quality is still not quite up to modern standards—it's still clunky and requires a lot of effort—and there's no heel-toe shifter, although an accessory part is easily fitted to all the models.



Cross Roads

Okay, I think I've made a case for Victory making a very good motorcycle, with performance, pricing and features that can give any brand—foreign or domestic—the sweats. So why are there only a few thousand happy new Victory customers a year? Victory's been a premium-priced American product, with a small dealer network (and most are single-line or in Polaris dealerships). That means the most likely customer for a Victory probably doesn't know about it—or doesn't want to know about it, in the case of savagely brand-loyal Harley-Davidson customers. "When I ride a Harley, it just feels right," a Harley-Davidson-owning motojournalist told me. For such rabid fans, a Victory, no matter how good or value-priced, just isn't an option. Dreams of capturing a significant share of the Harley market—if they ever existed—have probably faded from any Polaris executive's head.

But with the new pricing and a satisfying product mix, your average metric cruiser buyer may start to sniff around the Victory showrooms. These buyers, who tend to be very price and value conscious, would be well-served by the solid build, engineering and performance these bikes offer. They just need to find out about Victory, and to that end Victory has expanded heavily into overseas markets, doubled the number of demo-ride rigs, tripled the number of demo rides, focused its marketing more on motorcycle enthusiasts, and is reaching out to military veterans (many of whom may have used Polaris products during their service).



Cross Country


Will it be enough to grow the brand in a murky economy and shrinking heavyweight cruiser market? With typical American enthusiasm and resolve, it doesn't seem to matter to Polaris; the company has committed to selling American motorcycles. Thanks to Wendel's idea of diversification, that commitment is supported by lucrative defense contracts and booming sales of other products, so we're likely to see Victorys on the roads—in whatever numbers—for many years to come.



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45 Comments

1.  *Skipper* says:
[August 14, 2010 at 10:07 am](#)

Victory makes a great motorcycle and I feel they are far superior to the Harley's but why do they have to make only cruisers? Why don't these companies get serious and build an adventure bike or a sport touring bike. Harley had a good thing going with the Buell line up and just when they dumped the stupid boat anchor Harley motor for a decent Rotax motor they dump the line up. Harley could have sold the Buell line to Eric Buell or another company but out of pure stupidity they chose not too. Maybe we should all e-mail Victory and at least ask them to consider another type of bike to there line-up. I am sick of the Harley morons riding around town without a muffler on there bikes just showing off.

[Reply](#)

2.  *scorpio* says:
[August 13, 2010 at 1:39 pm](#)

Styling is subjective; I think Ness is the best thing to happen to Victory, because the V92C was "aesthetically