

CLASSIC DRIVER

Ridden: Royal Enfield Bullet 500 Classic Chrome



Short of a genuine, 60-year-old classic, nothing on two wheels comes closer to evoking the sensation of 1950s motorcycling than a Royal Enfield. You see, contemporary Enfield motorcycles aren't reincarnated retro pastiches of machines from yesteryear, but the culmination of a genuine evolution of the original Royal Enfield Bullet, a model that's been in production since 1932.

Having made motorcycles since 1901, Royal Enfield opened a satellite operation in Madras in 1949 to manufacture its 350cc Bullet for the Indian armed forces. When the UK factory closed in 1967, the Indian plant continued production under its own steam. Following Enfield India's acquisition by the Eicher Group (a significant player in the Indian automotive industry) in 1995, the company has benefited from significant investment, which in turn has allowed the development of a new 499cc fuel-injected engine to meet modern-day emissions regulations.

Introduced in 2009, this motor has the old, air-cooled single-cylinder engine's bore and stroke dimensions, so it retains the essential 'duff-duff-duff' character of the archetypal British single from which it has evolved, but it now boasts a few mod cons such as Keihin fuel injection, hydraulic pushrods and a catalytic converter concealed within its extra-long silencer.





Other concessions to modernity include a front disc brake, push-button starting (in addition to a kickstart lever), and, based on my test bike, modern levels of finish and reliability along with an absence of oil leaks.

Enfield India has a production target of 70,000 machines in 2011, and in the UK the range currently consists of about 10 different models all with the same engine, frame and running gear. Arguably the prettiest of these is this new Bullet Classic Chrome version, and with gold-pinstriping, lashings of chrome, polished engine cases and an exhaust note that sounds like amplified bubbles blown in thick custard, it's a genuine head-turner.

However, if you're accustomed to the performance of most motorcycles from the past four or five decades, you'll need to readjust before riding an Enfield. With just 28bhp, the Bullet is a bullet in name only, but that doesn't mean it isn't very handy in the city and a joy on quiet rural roads where it comfortably thumps along and copes with gradients without losing too much momentum. This is complemented by competent suspension, light steering, a sweet-handling chassis and grippy Avon tyres, which all permit reasonably enthusiastic cornering.





The front disc brake feels springy at the lever but it's adequately powerful, and for the most part the gearbox (left foot change, with down for first, up for 2nd-5th pattern) also does what's asked of it, although at higher revs it quite frequently misses both up and down shifts at first attempt.

Where the Enfield isn't in its element is on the motorway. At a 50mph cruise it's very relaxed, and it's also comfortable at 60mph, but by 70mph the engine is working quite hard, engine vibration has become noticeable and there's not much oomph in reserve. Hold the throttle wide open and after a while you should nudge 80mph on the level, but bulky clothing, a gradient or headwind will all be a hindrance at such dizzy speeds.

One important flipside of the Bullet's sedate pace is fuel economy. Officially it's 79.6mpg (under Euro III test conditions), but ridden fairly sensibly on a variety of roads I managed 65.3mpg, which equates to a safe range of around 175 miles.





An Enfield Bullet probably won't suit riders with even a mild addiction to speed, or those who wish to travel far in limited time but with Bullet prices starting at just under £4,000, an increasing number are being charmed by a bike that instils a feeling of calm and contentment that few, if any, other modern motorcycles can match.

Price in UK: £5,295 on the road. See www.royal-enfield.com.

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Gallery

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