

Bigger, Better... and Cheaper?

This year's Progressive International Motorcycle Show recently finished in NYC, and the expansive assortment of bikes, gear, and riders was the perfect vaccine for the winter biker blues. This year, my second, instead of wandering around aimlessly I headed straight for the cluster of green and black signage when I arrived. I had to see the new Ninja 400 at its East Coast debut.

At 399cc it is the smallest Ninja engine size currently in production, up from the Ninja 300's 296cc. The appeal of a Ninja 250 or 300 was short-lived for many riders as they "outgrew" its meager engine capacity, and the 400 provides Kawasaki the opportunity to appeal to people outside of the beginner bike market, or those looking for a longer-term investment than previous iterations seemed to offer.

But besides engine size, how is the 400 different from a 300 model? The Kawi rep I asked said it was "all-new from the ground up."

Okay. What did that entail?

He elaborated that no 300 parts would fit the 400.

That explained nothing, and after asking other questions and receiving similar canned answers—"redesigned," "all-new," "different parts"—I wasn't convinced the 400 would be any better of a bike. In fact, I found myself less willing to part with my 300 for this upgrade—a level of reluctance I hadn't thought possible!

Kawasaki wants me to believe that the 2018 Ninja 400 is not just a beefed-up Ninja 300. It's a completely rebuilt bike. With a 35% bigger engine. Four years newer than my Ninja 300. And it's somehow the same base price. *How?*

I fetched a shovel and dug for spec sheets, for answers. What I found made me run from the thought of investing in a Ninja 400.

One of the points the Kawasaki representatives had mentioned was the 400's new frame style. Using a trellis instead of the previous cradle, the 400 boasts more rigidity and less weight now that the engine functions as part of the framework. The downside is the trellis style's increased cost. Kawasaki is making its new bike bigger, lighter, and cheaper than its predecessors despite a larger engine and more expensive frame design?

Again, *How?* Even if we don't account for inflation this should be impossible without either destroying the profit margin, or sacrificing quality.

I hate to hate on one of my favorite makes. My Ninjas have been good to me, through three years and more than 20,000 miles. I've been able to trust my 300 (his name is Dante) in situations where I should have had to lay him down hard, if not worse. But based on its price, and the quality I have to suspect was sacrificed to reach that number, I can't quite trust a 2018 Ninja 400.

MSRP: 2018 Ninja 400 vs. Ninja 300SE in 2014

2018 MSRP NON-ABS: \$4,999

2014 300 +200\$ for SE, base price \$4,999