

Eye Of The Beholder

A Trike Conversion Earns A Convert

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PHOTOS BY EVANS BRASFIELD
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“Turn it down, Jonny!” she yelled from the back seat as she smacked me hard on the shoulder. “People are staring!”

“I don’t think that’s why they’re staring,” I muttered as I thumbed the toggle lever to turn down the stereo. I understood where she was coming from, because people were definitely staring. We were sitting at a stoplight on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood, so “Girls! Girls! Girls!” seemed like an appropriate tune to me. But it’s safe to assume you’d never catch one of the bad boys from Mötley Crüe on Champion’s Honda Gold Wing GL 1800 trike. A sexy beast, it ain’t. In my mind, that’s why glitterati were giving us the stink-eye; they must have assumed we were from the Valley or, worse, Orange County. Duly humbled, I hit fast-forward and made the next left.

Unfortunately, that’s been the stigma of trikes since day one. Manufacturers, customizers, and advertisers have been trying for years, but nothing seems to alter the three-wheeled stereotype. You can doll them up, tune them up, and pimp them out, but all the bells and whistles in the world aren’t going to provide the kind of sex appeal that motorcycles enjoy — and no amount of music-blasting, tire-spinning, rock star-posing attitude is going to help.

But the folks at Champion Trikes are out to change that perception. How? Champion under-

stands the long-cemented reputation of three-wheelers isn’t going to be undone overnight, so it doesn’t go crazy with the aesthetic design of its conversion kits in a shameless attempt to be edgy or distinctive. Rather, Champion relies on improved performance, superior handling, modern technology, and creature comforts that set its trike kits apart from the competition.

That’s the spiel I was given, anyway, but I was determined to test Champion’s GL conversion and its optional Comfort Ride Trike (CRT) independent rear suspension on its own merits. And by the conclusion of my test run, I’m here to say that my opinion of triking has been permanently changed — for the better.

The key was simply getting used to being on three wheels. I had but one weekend in the spacious saddle to spare and a hotel with a West Hollywood address, so to this Southern California native, the move was obvious: Mulholland Drive. What better place to put the trike through its paces than the iconic thoroughfare that straddles the hills between LA and the Valley? But the wife wanted to see the beach, so the Pacific Coast Highway beckoned first. So I cranked up the Crüe and we triked down Sunset Boulevard toward the coast. Which is about when I got smacked.

My first few minutes aboard the trike were admittedly shaky, and those initial stares on the Strip only made my passenger and me more self-conscious. But within 20 minutes or so, I was rolling along like an old pro. I mean, a young



pro (sorry, Champion). Deciphering which gadgets belonged to Honda and which were proprietary to Champion's conversion kit also veered some of my concentration away from the road, but by the time we got to the PCH, I had the hang of the trike's accoutrements (most of the cockpit controls are direct from the Gold Wing), and its merits and shortcomings became quickly apparent.

While the Honda Gold Wing motorcycle is sometimes referred to as tottering and unwieldy, no one will ever call Champion's GL1800 trike conversion heavy. It probably is, but that's not your concern. The trike is definitely large, but maneuvering it became much easier once I got used to the heft of the rear end and manipulating the reverse gear. I was surprised initially at how much upper-body strength it took to steer a trike properly; countersteering was not to be my friend this weekend.

But in the end, the lat workout I received from muscling the trike around was rewarding.

Aboard it, I felt stable and secure. You don't have to hold a trike up; in fact you

don't have to do anything. It just sits there patiently, waiting for your command, and when you twist the throttle, those 1800cc push it off the line effortlessly. Given that ease of operation, it's immediately clear why these machines are so popular with seniors and handicapped riders: anyone with decent back and arm strength can ride one (in fact, in California you don't even need a motorcycle license to do so: see Schwarzenegger, Arnold).

Those with Attention Deficit Disorder might have a problem, though, because in street traffic, I frankly got bored; there's not much to do in the saddle. Multitasking consists of adjusting the radio and trying to look interested at the same time. Thank God, I had to at least shift gears. Trike manufacturers take note: do not be tempted to equip your trikes with automatic transmissions! Trikers might just nod off. All kidding aside, even the lack of responsibility takes some getting used to. There was some fun to be had here; I just needed to find it, and that wasn't going to happen lazily cruising Malibu. It wasn't until the following day, ripping around the Hollywood Hills, that I was able to cut loose and fully appreciate how Champion has revolutionized triking.

Trikes by nature are beset by one common ailment: centrifugal force. This unavoidable law of nature wants to push the trike's mass outside the turn, causing the inside (rear) tire to "fly" off the pavement in sharp corners. The resulting sensation is unnerving at best, and dangerous at worst — catch enough air and you can end up kissing asphalt. Champion's cure for this disorder is its brand-new CRT independent rear suspension. Made with high-pressure cast components, the CRT system features two gas shock absorbers and forged upper and lower control arms that allow each wheel to react autonomously from its counterpart. This means that even while the body of the vehicle rises up, the inside rear tire remains planted. The antiroll



CHAMPION TRIKES GL1800 CONVERSION KIT	
LIST PRICE	\$7,845
OVERALL LENGTH	108" (109-1/2" with EZ-Steer)
OVERALL WIDTH	57-3/4"
WHEELBASE	71" (72-1/2" with EZ-Steer)
RAKE/TRAIL	TK?
SEAT HEIGHT	29.1"
TIRE SIZE	205/75R15
TRUNK STORAGE	6.75 cu. ft.
COLORS	Matching paint or primer

(Dimensions shown once kit is assembled to your vehicle)



bar drastically reduces the fear of flippage.

A key Champion characteristic is variable sway control (VSC). With the spin of a dial on the left side of the dash, you can adjust the trike's rear-end handling to match the road or your riding style: soft and cushy for highway travel, firm and responsive for twisties and around town. I was pleased to find that the device noticeably worked, and well. The more I spun the knob the more effect it had on the sway.

Another popular option on all Champion kits is the company's EZ-steer system, a modified triple tree that improves responsiveness. The increased rake in the tree translates to a decrease in the vehicle's trail, which results in improved handling (I know that sounds screwy, but it really works). The EZ-Steer triple tree extends the rake on the GL conversion by 4.5 degrees, and I found Champion's Gold Wing trike was as easy, if not easier, to maneuver than Honda's Gold Wing motorcycle.



Standard features on Champion's GL Comfort Ride Trike kit include independent rear suspension assembly with disc brakes, powdercoated structural components, a Gel-Coated reinforced fiberglass body for a lighter rear end, and OEM tail and signal lights, direct from Honda to preserve the traditional GL look. As for creature comforts, start with this: the trunk features 6-3/4 cubic feet of storage. Finishing off the trike kit is the color-matching paint option.

On Mulholland I rode solo, and I had a blast! Champion's trike kit and its IRS blew my mind. I'd heard the horror stories about the wheel flying up and guys seeing their lives flash before their eyes at 24 frames per second, but my tires never left the pavement. Once I got used to riding the machine, I soon got the hang of manipulating it; once I became adept at that, it was like I was born on three wheels. I turned up the stereo and twisted the throttle. I gained enough confidence to begin seriously testing the trike by charging into corners using only engine braking, hitting turns late, accelerating hard out of them — and she didn't budge. The sure-footed Champion lived up to its namesake, carving through the posh neighborhoods and making mincemeat of the lumbering luxury cars that dared get in my way. A drive that takes about an hour in a car was ripped through in less than 40 minutes. So I turned around at Interstate 405 and did it again in the opposite direction.

Just when I thought I'd given the Champ all she could I handle, I jumped on the freeway to return the three-wheeler to the Champion facility in Orange County, and voilà! Now I understood what the machine was truly built for, and why trikes are such popular touring vehicles. I softened up the sway, set the cruise control, and glided in comfort all the way to the Orange Curtain.

It was only a weekend, but I had definitely developed a new appreciation for triking. Haters should give it a shot; it's not as easy as it looks and a heckuva lot more fun that it appears to be. And as for the sex appeal? That's in the eye of the beholder. **RB**

hard data
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BEHIND THE ORANGE CURTAIN

I arrived at the Champion facilities in Garden Grove,



California, direct from the airport, and was met by affable general manager Jim Pinto, who politely offered me and my posse (my buddy John, his son Jack, and daughter Jenevieve) a complimentary warehouse tour before cutting me loose on a ready-made GL conversion. A walk-through of the plant revealed a clean, well-designed factory. In addition to the GL1800 kits, Champion also manufactures trike conversions for the GL1500, as well as Harley-Davidson FLH and Softail models, Yamaha Road Stars, and the Honda VTX (1300 and 1800). Plenty of options are available for all Champion kits, including reverse gears (for five- and six-speed Harley-Davidsons), EZ-Steer, paint-matching, trailer hitches, carpeted trunks, and accent panels and lighting. The Gel-Coating and paint matching is all done in-house.

Champion trikes are available as conversion kits only, but you can save yourself the shipping and handling costs by picking yours up direct from the factory. If there is no dealer in your area, Champion will happily put your trike together for you. Finally, if you'd like to try one out, ready-to-ride Champion trikes are available for rent from EagleRider locations all over the US. ■