

REVIEW: Aprilia RSV4



Back in 1999 Aprilia astonished the motorcycle world when it released its first big-capacity motorcycle, the RSV Mille: the bike was right up there with the very best, often managing the unthinkable and beating its direct rival Ducati in comparison tests. Now, a decade later, Aprilia has done it again.

The new RSV4 is not only the company's first four-cylinder machine, it also boasts the first engine designed entirely in-house at Aprilia, on top of which the bike is pitched into the most fiercely competitive and unforgiving territory of all, the superbike class.

That means it's up against Honda's Fireblade, the Yamaha R1, the Kawasaki ZX-10R Ninja, the Suzuki GSX-R1000 and Ducati's 1198 S.

There's no lack of ambition; millions have been poured into the development of the RSV4 with the aim of creating the No. 1 superbike. There were no preconceptions or traditions hampering the design team either, it showed that a four-cylinder bike would be quicker than a twin or a triple and that's what they made. The target figure was 177bhp; numbers achieved using a fly-by-wire throttle system, variable-length intake ducts and two fuel injectors per cylinder.

The chassis engineers demanded as short an engine as possible to fit the longest possible swing-arm within a very short wheelbase, while the focus throughout was on minimising weight, resulting in a dry weight of 180kg.

The first version of the RSV4 to become available was the Factory, the high-spec option with Öhlins suspension, Brembo Monobloc brakes and forged aluminium wheels. A lower-cost standard version is also available such as the one I tested.

The whole machine is neatly styled by Miguel Galluzzi, head of design at Aprilia and known for the Ducati Monster and Cagiva Raptor. The look is unmistakably Aprilia with a triple headlamp arrangement that has the outer lights floating above the air intakes. But what really matters is how the bike rides, sounds and feels.

Despite the RSV4's compact dimensions it accepts riders as tall as my 6ft without having to fold my legs around my ears, although you do feel perched on top. Fire it up and the motor responds rapidly with a deep, almost V-twin-like note, surprisingly loud and angry. It sends tingles up your spine before you've even pulled in the clutch lever.

Corners might be a feast of high concentration but upright on the straight this is more missile than motorcycle. It is very quick even by superbike standards and – notwithstanding the difficulty of comparing one bike with another – I'll stick my neck out and say the RSV4 will comfortably beat a GSX-R1000 in a straight line. Yet it also features levels of low- and mid-range thrust that give it a large capacity V-twin feel, which means, if anything, it's even quicker than it feels.

The engine is nice and smooth, with just enough vibration to let you know it's busy. It feels great, like a rev-happy V-twin with a Jurassic soundtrack. The engine map-switch offers track, road, or wet-weather settings, the latter cutting power by 25 per cent. The gentle option, even in wet conditions, wasn't necessary as throttle control is good enough in the normal setting. The track option is very aggressive and maybe too much for some of us.

This is an astonishingly accomplished motorcycle and as a first attempt it is going to cause serious upset. Judging any bike is difficult but the RSV4 felt so good in so many ways, I feel it could be a contender for top superbike honours.

In my opinion, if you've got the means and your ultimate goal is to feel like a World Superbike stud as you ride down your favourite road, the Aprilia RSV4 should fit the bill quite nicely even if the world doesn't need another superbike.

Price: R185 995.00 (Standard) or R225 995 (Factory) - Incl. 14% VAT

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Tel: (031) 566 3024

10 Meridian Drive

Umhlanga Ridge