

REVIEW: Triumph Thunderbird



Triumph has got that very sought after thing called “heritage”. Without heritage you’re nothing in the highly emotional cruiser market. Without heritage you’re left only with a good product and price competitiveness that simply isn’t enough to go to war with. The 2011 Thunderbird places itself exactly in the market where some of its rivals rule. The Triumph Thunderbird closes the gap between 800cc and 2300cc with this 1600cc parallel twin powertrain.

The 2011 Triumph Thunderbird is a stripped down cruiser that can be taken to the exact same places as the extensive H-D Softail range. Triumph has in fact already launched more than 100 accessories that enable a lot of changes from day one. The range includes everything from sport to touring accessories.

A big old tapered leather seat is my first point of contact on the 2011 Thunderbird. The seat is at a low 700mm in height and it’s instantly comfortable. The low seat height enables the forward mounted foot pegs to give a comfortable cruising position. I start my day on a slightly customized Thunderbird fitted with ABS brakes, pipes, mirrors and head-light cowl just messing around to get a feel for the bike and striking up a relationship. The front brake setup is a double 310mm disc with Nissin 4-pot calipers, and a single 310mm disc at the rear with a 2-pot Brembo caliper.

The ABS brakes work exactly like you want ABS brakes to work and the ultimate stopping power is very strong. Let’s not forget that the Thunderbird weighs 339kg ready to ride, so the stopping power is impressive. I rode only in the dry, so I didn’t find much personal use for the ABS system. On heavy cruisers with ample rubber touching the surface at all times, I find hard braking easy and safe also without ABS. The front brake set-up over the 47mm Showa fork felt very good, and the suspension at the back is a chromed double shock affair from Showa. The 2011 Thunderbird is definitely on the comfortable side, but the suspension easily handled also the sporty riding that I did. I’ve spent the last part of the day pushing the limits a little and yes, the Thunderbird handles very well.

With Triumph’s accessory pipes the 1597cc Thunderbird parallel twin engine runs at a low 865 rpm idle speed. Max power is 85bhp at 4850 rpm, and a mighty 146Nm of torque at 2750 rpm.

Twisting the throttle the big parallel twin roars to life immediately. Shifting up, you feel the torque surge straight away, which is the norm on a large bore machine such as the 2011 Thunderbird. Helical cut gears make for smooth upshifts, very smooth in fact and for those of you that know your Triumphs, I can tell you that this is a very big improvement. Sixth gear works as overdrive, but, with the torque maxing at a low 2750 rpm, you can ride in sixth at very low speeds too. The fuel injection is sublime and this is an area where Triumph has worked really hard. Triumph chose belt drive for the first time since the mid-1920s on the 2011 Triumph Thunderbird.

The aftermarket silencers that release a little more thunder are an essential upgrade giving that all important extra bonding between man and machine.

Cruising in sixth on the freeway also proved a delight, as all you need to do to overtake is to wake up the big motor with the throttle and pass. The engine works in a very smooth and calm way in overdrive whilst the beast is only a twist on the throttle away. For more sporty riding in twisty sections the Thunderbird impressed me and only the lack of ground clearance stops you being faster. The foot-pegs scraped in pretty much every corner but the solid chassis and suspension allows for full confidence.

Tim Prentice, the designer has been responsible for cruisers such as Triumph’s own Rocket III Touring, Honda’s VTX and Rune. He states: “Aside from the engine, the form is straightforward cruiser. For styling inspiration, I looked towards the 1960s muscle car, we wanted the bike to be comfortably recognizable to the cruiser market. The forms themselves are simple and honest, and are meant to work well with the mechanical nature of the bike.”

All in all Triumph has done a brilliant job creating its first proper cruiser. I love the big 1600cc parallel twin and despite this being a different engine, it doesn’t feel very different. The Thunderbird is the basic new Triumph cruiser and rather than going for a flashy finish Triumph has opted for conservative paint options. All that’s left now is for customers to start customizing themselves and for that purpose the Thunderbird is perfect. Triumph has enough heritage, the way I see it, to stare the rivals straight in the face and showcase its true potential.

Priced at R169 500.00 - Incl. 14% VAT

EAST COAST MOTORCYCLES

Tel: (031) 566 3024

10 Meridian Drive, Umhlanga Ridge