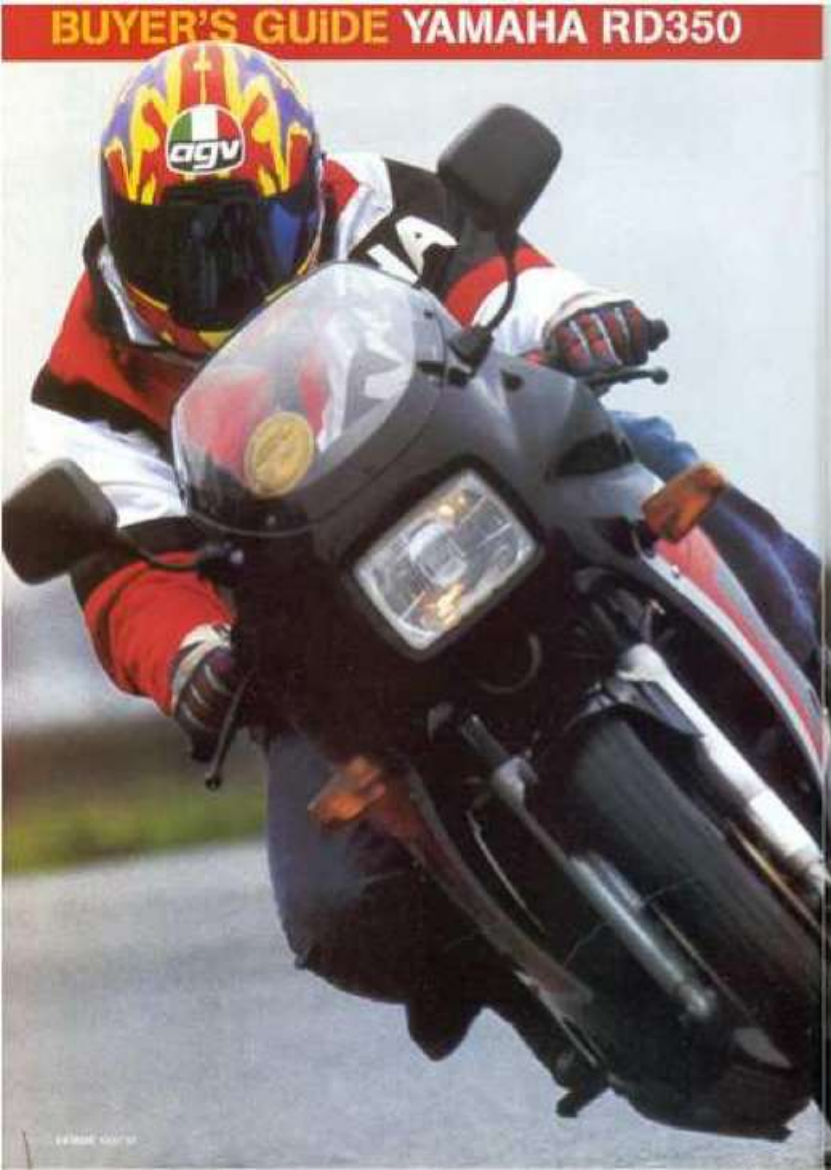


Forever Fun

Yamaha's RD350 cult hooligan has matured into an affordable sports hack. We show you how to relive your youth for as little as £2000

BUYER'S GUIDE YAMAHA RD350

THE liquid-cooled RD350 has been buzzing up and down UK roads for 17 years now – and bikes don't stay that long on the model line-up without being exceedingly good. And reliable. The last few new ones have just been sold so it's second-hand only from now on.

When the original RD350 – the LC – appeared in 1980, its two-stroke twin-cylinder engine was a technological revelation. In stock trim the LC would leave the air-cooled 750s of the day for dead.

In 1984, Yamaha upped the stakes and added the innovative power-valve mechanism which varies the exhaust port height to give a howling top-end *and* good midrange tractability. They called it the Yamaha Power Valve System (YPVS).

A good RD350 YPVS will hit 120mph and handle well enough to be enjoyable. We're talking top laughs for as little as £1200.

A question mark has always hovered over the 350LC's reliability. In reality, the LC (YPVS, or otherwise) is a pretty reliable bike – for a two-stroke – so long as it hasn't been subjected to any home tuning. Huge amounts of power can be squeezed from the engine, but for each extra bhp comes the increased threat of a blow-up.

With a good, low-mileage bike running top grade oil, a 3000-mile tour isn't out of the question. Find yourself the owner of a poorly rebuilt bike and your life could soon dissolve in tears of frustration. Many RD350s spend half their lives being lashed together and the other half being thrashed back into the workshop: avoid at all costs.

There are five basic types of Yamaha RD350: the original 350LC (no power-valve, basic monoshock, curved spoke wheels); the first YPVS (bikini fairing, rising-rate rear suspension and slight wobble at speed); the F1 (tapered black pipes, new frame, more power); the F2 (alloy end cans on the silencers, a tad more power) and the RD350R (made in Brazil, twin-headlamps, early ones were restricted but most will have been unplugged by now). In addition unfaired versions were sold of the F1 and F2 (F for faired), called the N and N2 (N for naked).

It's taken ages, but RD350s are now old hat: narrow tyres, 15mph slower than an Aprilia RS250, slightly wobbly handling, brakes that lack feel. But an RD350 will still make you grin, which is what it's all about.

The old RD beats the modern stuff with a proper dual seat, riding position that won't cripple you, a four-gallon tank, and an engine that's easier to work on. A good used one can be had for under two grand, whereas a two grand RGV is a blow-up waiting to happen.

So who buys them these days? Either the semi-skint, or older people who appreciate the fun inherent in a good RD350. Lee of Birmingham's Speedaway Motorcycles says: "The last two I've had went to middle-aged people."

Tony Greenslade, membership secretary of the LC Owners Club, agrees: "Lots of people in their 30s and 40s, who wanted them when they were younger, are buying them."

The smell of two-stroke oil smoke hanging around you; the feeling as the revs rise past 6000; the front end going light; hooligan rides down fast A-roads. All this is part and parcel of the RD350 experience. You can buy a Kawasaki ZX-6R and ride it sedately. You can buy a Honda Blackbird and never exceed the ton. You can buy a 916 and use it for city commuting. But you can't, you just can't, buy an RD350 and resist the temptation to screw it to the limit. Bliss ...



It may be a bit long in the tooth, but as a used buy the RD350 is a bike for the next thrillenium

I bought one!

Dave Woolley
29, rat-catcher (!), owns a 1991 F2 model, which he bought used. It now has 4000 miles up

"THIS is my third F2. I've had a blue one and a red-and-white one. I love it to bits.

"I proddy raced an F2 for four years and sold it for more than I paid for it. Just cane the nuts off it and always use top quality two-stroke oil."

Stuart Gunn
21, engineer, owned an 350LC bought used

"IT never blew up, but the gearbox did seize up on it. The biggest problem with them is you have to keep an eye on everything to make sure it's OK. The best thing is that it was cheap to run."

Duncan Powell
22, injection moulder, owned a 1994 RD350R bought new. He sold it with 15,500 miles up



"YOU have to watch what you buy because there are some dodgy ones. Mine leaked exhaust seals all the time. At one point it was costing me a fortune. When I sold it it was rattling: I think the crank was on the way out."

Matt Beaumont
27, sells bike clothing for Carnell, and used to own a 1993 RD350R. He sold it on with 33,000 miles showing

"I HAD no trouble with it at all. I was quite surprised because you hear loads of stories about them having lousy reliability.

"A mate had one and it seized up on a motorway run. But I enjoyed mine immensely. The only thing that would have possibly improved the bike would have been an electric start."

Gavin Adams
21, student, owns a 1990 F2 model



"IT was the first big bike I've had. The previous owner was a vicar and it was mint – I looked at a lot before I bought it because there are some awful ones around. It wasn't the fastest thing on the road, but the way the power came in was incredible. It was written-off with 10,000 miles up: £3500 worth of damage to a bike that was only worth two grand."

Steve Jones
30, joiner, has a 1989 F2 bought used for £1900. He's done 50,000 miles



"THE engine's having its first rebuild at the moment. Crank and pistons are all knackered. I've just spent £700 on parts. I love it. Never had so much fun in my life. This is the first two-stroke since my Honda moped. I can use it for going to and from work and at weekends use it for track days."

Tim Humphries
26, accountant, owns a 1989 F2 model bought used for £1050

"IT had an £800 rebuild just before I bought it. It's the first two-stroke I've ever owned.

"As long as you aren't doing many miles and don't live in town they're great."

Steven Barrett
19, motorcycle mechanic, has a 1995 RD350R bought new

"THEY'RE very good bikes if you're not used to riding high performance stuff. The handling's reasonable and they're cheap to run."

John Lawrie
38, fireman, has a Y-reg 350LC with YPVS engine (a common hybrid)

"I'VE had a couple and I've also had the 250, so I know a bit about them.

"You've got to beware of anything crash damaged, and with a YPVS you've got to be sure the power-valve isn't sticking. Mine blew up at 90mph on a motorway: the piston crown melted..."

So did we!

Tim Thompson
33, RiDE editor



"I HAD my first 350LC when I was at college. It dribbled oil from the exhaust seals and had a big midrange flat spot. But it made me a sixth-form legend. When it got stolen, I was so upset I nearly gave up bikes altogether. In 1986 I bought a new N-model. It did 16,000 miles without a proper service. Brilliant all-rounder and no problems."

Kar Lee
28, RiDE art editor



"I HAD two. The first was the early YPVS (£900) with the bikini fairing, and the second an F-model, which cost me £1100. I did about 10,000 miles on each and sold them when they hit 20,000 miles. Both loved exhaust seals, vibrating, and taking on 750s."

Model changes

RD350LC



80 White, blue, or black with contrasting stickers. Few changes during life – carbs revised, tie-bars added under engine to restrict movement on rubber mounts which was cracking exhaust pipes. Last models will have Y- or A-plates.



RD350 YPVS▲

84 First power-valve model. Bikini fairing, rising-rate rear shock, all-new frame and forks, slotted discs.



RD350F▲
RD350N unfaired version▲

85 Full fairing, new clocks, improved brakes and suspension, more power. Red/white/blue.



RD350F2▲
RD350N2 unfaired version

86 Alloy end cans on silencers, restyled fuel tank with aircraft-style filler, more power, new carbs. White/red.

88 New colours: black/grey/red, white/red or blue/yellow.

RD350R

95 Made in Brazil, twin-headlight fairing, mechanically same as F2. Red/white or black/purple. Discontinued January 1996.



Things to look for ...



EXCESSIVE SMOKE
They all smoke, Sir, but overly-smokey silencer indicates a leaking crankshaft seal, especially if it's reluctant to start. Left-hand side usually guilty because it carries the generator load. Walk away

CRASH DAMAGE
Check wheel alignment and look at the headstock for stress marks and flaky paint

ENGINE
Any rumbling or rattling from the engine will mean large bills – avoid at all costs

NAFF PAINT
Fag packet colours are OK, but most custom paint jobs only appeal to the tasteless people who commissioned them in the first place

RACED VERSIONS
Check sump plug and brake caliper mounting bolts – have they been drilled for lockwiring? If so, it's been raced

TUNING
Few RD350 "tuners" know what they're doing. Better to buy standard if you can. Giveaways are K&N filters and expansion chambers

POWER VALVE
Smoke from power-valve mechanism at front of barrels means the seals are gone. They'll probably need re-bushing as well. That's expensive.
Listen to the "whee-whee" noise of power-valve mechanism cycling. If it stutters or sounds hesitant, it's seizing up. Could be old cables; more likely to be carbon build-up on the valves themselves. Can be fixed but seriously sticking valves mean a strip, which means removing the barrels as well. No whee-whee noise at all means the power-valve motor's burned out

GEARBOX
Check gearbox oil for milkiness. It indicates coolant getting into the system somewhere. Make your excuses and leave

CENTRESTANDS
People take them off in the belief they'll get an extra 2 degrees of lean and a bit more acceleration due to the reduced weight. Either that or they buy crap exhausts which foul them. You want a centrestand, you do

"I had no trouble at all. I was surprised, because you hear nasty stories" owner Matt Beaumont



Check for mileage. Rebores usually needed over 20,000 miles. Inspect for "scratched" digits



Frame numbers: make sure it has them. Wonky engine numbers mean it's been re-stamped. Avoid



Power-valve cable pulley: check you get the whirring noise when you switch on ignition

ENGINE/FRAME NUMBERS
MANY RD350s are nicked. Numbers should not only match the log book, but should also read the same as each other. If they aren't identical, but match the log book, it's had an engine change and you should ask to see a receipt. It may be kosher, but then again ... If numbers don't match the log-book, it's definitely hooky: walk away and grass the git to the police

Still want one?

What goes wrong?

HEAD races, swinging-arm bearings, chains, sprockets all wear fast if neglected. Bores usually last about 20,000 miles between rebores; rings 10-15,000 miles. Clutches and crankshafts similarly short-lived – rumbling from bottom end indicates main bearing demise. Power-valves catch road crap and seize or blow seals – rebushing can cost £200 with labour. Brake calipers seize.

Servicing

EASY. Carbs have windows so you can synchronise slides. Change gearbox oil every 6000 miles. Use 10w/40 oil. Plug change every 2000 miles. Air filter is washable. Check adjustment of power-valve by twiddling cable adjusters to line up the setting marks, and then watch the mechanism while revving engine to see it opens properly. Check coolant levels, and replace annually. Dealer service should cost no more than £75 plus parts.

Consumables

METZELER tyres are favourite fit, especially Comp Ks for extra grip. Narrow rims mean few modern tyres fit. Always use an O-ring chain. With proper care they can last over 20,000 miles.

Tuning

STAN Stephens or Bob Farnham tunes involve cleaning and matching ports and a slight skim on the head to raise compression – £75 or so. The engine is noticeably crisper afterwards. F1 ignition system gives another 500rpm of useful power when fitted to an F2. F1 carbs work well on F2s. Loads of aftermarket air filters, reed blocks and pipes.Tuned LCs can top 125mph. Expect new rings every 5000 miles.

Well-wrought specials are beautiful, but are rare and only worth more than a stocker to a very small number of people. Home-tuned bikes are slower and less reliable than stock. You have been warned.

On a budget?

PRE-YPVS, the original LCs, are now appreciating. Mark One YPVSs wobble like hell so RD350N probably best bet.

Best buys

1990 F2, especially if retro-fitted with F1 ignition and carbs.

Money no object?

NEW F2 and R models are still available from John Groombridge Motorcycles (01435 862466) at £3150.

Avoid

ANYTHING owned by someone who appears educationally subnormal, anything with a Halfords aerosol paint-job, anything missing indicators, centrestands and anything running on pre-mix. That rules out 75 per cent of used RD350s.

Top tips

- Always use synthetic oil.
- Mudflap keeps crap off power-valve.
- Use original equipment gaskets, pistons, rings.
- Clean brakes regularly.
- Steering damper is a useful mod.
- Front forks a bit soft: heavier oil and stiffer springs a good idea.

Prices

350LCs entirely dependent on condition and degree of originality. £1500-plus for an original minter (which is rare); £600 for a woof-woof (which isn't).

Mark one YPVS	£800-£1200		
RD350F1s			£900-£1300
RD350F2: 1987D	£1495	**1987E**	£1550
1988E	£1595	**1988F**	£1725
1989F	£1795	**1989G**	£1895
1990G	£1950	**1990H**	£2050
1991H	£2095	**1991J**	£2150.
RD350R: 1992J	£2275	**1992K**	£2395
1993K	£2450	**1993L**	£2495
1994L	£2550	**1994M**	£2675
1995M	£2750	**1995N**	£2875

THESE are dealer prices – private prices for F2s and Rs will be about £200-£250 cheaper. Modified bikes, even well-done ones, generally worth no more than standard and often worth less.



Fancy taking part in a future RiDE Buyer's Guide? Ring Cathy Dennis and ask her nicely and she'll put your name on our database. The number to ring is 01733 465692. Next up: Suzuki GSX600

USEFUL NUMBERS: LC Owners Club (01424 422641), John Groombridge Motorcycles for new RD350s (01435 862466)