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American theme for a deeply British bike

## Ridden: Norton Commando 961 California

Written by Alan Cathcart , Date 6:14 PM



**N**orton's new Commando California leads a trio of limited-edition models celebrating 50 years since the original Commando appeared in 1968. Special edition Commando 961 Sport and Cafe Racer versions complete the line. Norton is making 50 of each to mark the anniversary.

While the Sport and Cafe Racer models are familiar, the California takes a new turn, bringing a dose of West Coast style that befits its name.



The Commando California comes in a choice of ten different cleverly chosen '70s-style colour schemes. They range from a truly retro metalflake red to a gaudy white-and-blue combo that entirely lives up to the California tag. It evokes echoes of cruising the Pacific Coast Highway from Malibu to the Sunset Strip in the so-cool Seventies.

The new Norton is further distinguished from its sister models by a high-rise handlebar. Its pulled-back grips taken straight from the famed Norton Girl ads that made Britain's sportiest motorcycle brand such a firm favourite with American customers in the 1970s.

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is a direct evolution of the existing Commando 961 platform, the new model's official mouthful. It's the Norton Commando 961 Mk.II Limited 50th Edition California. Inside the company's classy Donington Hall factory it's just called the Cali.

"We're building 50 numbered editions of each Commando model to mark its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary," says Norton owner Stuart Garner.

"The Café Racer, Sport and California will each be pimped-out with a full range of our polished billet aluminium and carbon fibre special parts, then we're discounting them back to the price of the standard model without all that, as a bit of a thank you to our customers for all the support the Commando has had over the years that's enabled it to enjoy a 50th anniversary at all. So we're selling the bikes for the old 2017 flat price, which means you get about GBP 6,000 worth of options included for free. Spread out over 150 bikes, that's more than a million bonus US dollars of extras, so we're calling it the 'million dollar thank-you'. They're available now on a first-come first served basis, and each limited edition bike will also have its unique build number from 1 to 50 etched onto the instrument dash."



The California's £16,495 price in the UK includes a carbon fibre front mudguard, rear hugger and numberplate hanger. Norton has polished the fully-adjustable 43mm Öhlins fork, twin piggyback Öhlins gas shocks, lightweight sprocket and assorted chassis parts. There's also a brushed aluminium oil cooler and a chrome chain guard and headlamp bowl/bezel. The engine features the

classic combo of a silver cylinder head and polished rocker covers sitting on a black cylinder barrel. The price includes a bike cover and paddock stand.

"You can also have a black anodised finish if you prefer," adds Garner. "We're acknowledging that the Commando model has had fabulous support to keep it alive for half a century, with a little hiccup in the middle for a few years until we got it going again from 2010 onwards. We see this as an opportunity to say thank you to our customers, while forfeiting a bit of profit to do so."

Once Norton has sold the 50 limited edition bikes the California will continue without all the options included as standard.

But it's the Cali's high-rise handlebar that really makes it stand out. It's what used to be termed a Western Bar back in the '70s; far more rational than the ape-hanger featured on Choppers.

"We wanted to mark the Commando's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year with something appropriate," says Garner, 49. "Many riders like yours truly are getting a little older these days, and suddenly all our joints are a little stiffer than



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been asked for that seemed a sensible move, and the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday gave us a trigger point to introduce a more easy riding Commando with nearly everything else the same as the Sport. So it's a handlebar option only, giving quite a different riding position as opposed to any extra levels in performance. But we've made sure that the footpegs aren't any further forward, and there's no plug-in iPod or suchlike – it's still a sportbike!"

So it sounds like this is the nearest that Norton may ever get to building a cruiser?

"You're right, it's about as close as we can get to a factory Custom Norton," says Garner. "When it was first launched at the Milan Show in November we originally got some stick for the riding position on social media, but then when those same people come to try it out, they go, "Oh – actually, it's really comfortable!" OK, so it's a good bit away from what you'd think of as a normal Norton riding position would be today, but actually it makes lots of sense when you ride the bike. Riders have become less hell-bent on speed in recent years, and more lifestyle focused, and this meets that desire head-on – as well as looking suitably retro."



As the first rider outside the factory to ride one – number 1 of 50 – I discovered a road tester's cliché; the grips just literally fall to hand. It has a much more relaxed stance than the regular Commando 961 Sport. And it's way more comfortable than the Café Racer with its clip-ons. The high bar does slow the steering slightly, and changes not only the look but also the

feel of the bike beneath you. The gentlemanly neo-classic streetfighter becomes a relaxed high-speed sports-cruiser. You can still chuck it around in turns, and get the best from the Dunlop Sportmax Qualifier tyres. But it's just a bit slower in transitioning from side to side than the Sport.

The 2018 Commando family all incorporate the improvements to the ohv motor. Delivering 72 bhp at 7,500 rpm, with peak torque of 67Nm a thousand revs lower, the changes appeared with Mark II version introduced in 2016. Norton design boss Simon Skinner explains:

"It was a pretty significant evolution of the original 961 engine, because the motor was retooled almost in its entirety. We have new crankcases, new cylinders, a new cylinder head, new pistons, new crankshaft, and a new gearbox, all in order to reduce NVH [Noise Vibration and Harshness], and to improve overall quality as a means of refining the product. We've been able to go to suppliers that we couldn't go to before because our volumes didn't support it – but now they do, and so we've got a different manufacturing process for those parts.



"They're all die-cast components now instead of sand-cast, although the sad thing is that we now have to go overseas for a few parts that are simply not available in the UK. But not only has the price for these parts come down for Norton, which increases sustainability of the business, the quality of them has shot through the roof as well. So not only have we refined the bike

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It's also now Euro 4 compliant with Bosch ABS on the Brembo brake package; fully-floating 320mm steel discs gripped by four-piston radial calipers, with a 240mm rear disc and two-piston caliper.

The California retains the stock Commando's chrome-moly tubular

steel duplex cradle frame. A fabricated backbone doubles as the oil tank for the dry-sump ohv pushrod motor. The frame retains the same steering geometry as the Sport; the highly-polished Öhlins 43mm fork set at a 24.5° rake with 99mm of trail. The wheelbase is a little shorter than before, at 1400mm.

Crank the powerful starter motor, and the undeniably butch-looking motor rumbles immediately into life. It settles to a throbbing 1,300rpm idle. This Euro 4 version has the same great torque as always, but the revised mapping gives a more linear power delivery up to the 8,000 rpm limiter. The Norton just keeps on pulling almost to the redline.



Despite the gear-driven counterbalancer there's a little vibration, especially above 5,000rpm. It's not enough to be annoying, and there's still the same great punch in the gears. Low down fuelling is good when you're just crawling along in a line of traffic. Spot a gap and gas it up hard, and the Cali catapults you forward in a totally addictive way. Meaty torque means it'll take almost any gear you throw at it. It pulls hard from barely off idle, then strongly from 2,000 rpm upwards.



This is a very friendly and usable motor, with 4,000 revs the gateway to more serious urge. From there to 6,500rpm, is the happy zone. There's no point in revving it anywhere near the rev-limiter; just surf that power curve and ride the waves of torque. The five-speed transmission doesn't need a sixth ratio. The engine has such a spread of torque you change gear when you feel like it, not because you must.

The handling has always been a strong point of the Commando 961. The Cali steers faultlessly; tipping easily and controllably into a turn on the brakes, without falling into the apex when you let them off.

It feels light and agile, yet stable and forgiving. A confidence-inspiring motorcycle that you can trust completely over a variety of surfaces. Hitting a bump cranked hard over in a 60 mph downhill fourth-gear sweeper didn't unsettle it at all. Indeed, the Öhlins suspension just shrugs off bumps, and the Norton holds its line well over them.

The Brembo twin-disc brake package provides controllable, effective stopping power. There's just the right



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of the 961's civility from the radically-re-engineered California. You can also use a surprising amount of the considerable engine braking on offer without getting the rear wheel hopping.



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Retro is cool right now, but only when done right. Fortunately, the Norton Commando 961 California is a properly re-engineered interpretation of a classic-era design icon. It's both functionally pleasing and fashionably stylish, while also being completely authentic. It's a satisfying blend of old and new, a mixture of period chilled-out attitude combined with modern civility; brakes that work brilliantly, tyres that warm up fast and grip well on a cool winter day. Suspension that's taut with a degree of compliance that makes this a very confidence inspiring bike to ride hard.



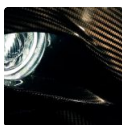
It's getting on for a decade since Stuart Garner acquired the rights to Norton in October 2008. Hard graft, a bit of risk taking and several changes in strategy have put Norton back on the map. Norton has built nearly 5,000 motorcycles so far and delivered them to owners around the world. It exported 77.6% of the 1,000 bikes

made in its last financial year.

Garner has got Norton flying high via an ever-expanding range. Two 1200cc V4 hypersports models due to begin production this spring. A 650cc parallel twin will reach production a year from now in both Scrambler and high-performance Supertwin guise. A supercharged version will join it soon after. And in the meantime the Commando California is the latest, and arguably most practical addition.

Photos: Kel Edge

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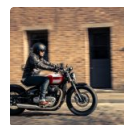
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