



SUZUKI'S GUIDE TO JAPAN

PLANES, TRAINS, DIRT BIKES, AND THE GOAT

Story By Pete Peterson · Photos By Pete Peterson And Courtesy Of Suzuki

People think working at *Dirt Rider* is all new bike tests, fun events, and benchracing with the stars of the sport. It's almost never like that, but every once in a while the stars align and we get a straight week of it. That happened for me this year when Suzuki's RM/RM-Z line turned 40 and I got an invite to the party—a trip to Japan with Ricky Carmichael to ride a factory bike and get a sneak peek at the new RM-Z250. I don't know how to say "no" in Japanese, so before I knew it I was eating dinner with Carmichael in a California airport and awaiting our flight to Tokyo.

Even though Ricky spent his career on Japanese bikes, this would be his first visit, and he brought his company president and right-hand man, JH Leale. But before we boarded the plane, four other magazine/website guys crashed the party, so Suzuki sent test rider Chris Wheeler to babysit us. President of Suzuki Motor of America Takeshi "Tak" Hayasaki joined us once we landed in Japan—and our travel party was assembled.





SUZUKI'S GUIDE TO JAPAN



FRIDAY/SATURDAY

As we reached Hiroshima and spent a day as tourists, 16 hours back in time in California Ricky's race team was getting their final rest before the Hangtown national. As co-owner of the RCH Soaring Eagle race team and CEO of Ricky Carmichael Racing, Ricky made it clear he's not done working: "I quit racing, but I'm not retired."

Ricky and JH are friends, and their relationship looks a lot like the one between Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly in *Step Brothers*—more before than after the movie characters became pals. Tak held his own every time they brought him into the shenanigans. There was no awkwardness to spending the week with the sport's Greatest of all Time and the man who heads up Suzuki in the US.

SUNDAY

A bus took us to the Sera Green MX track for round three of the MFJ All Japan Nationals. The track was built on a hillside, and the obstacles all looked very forgiving, which was good because the national was also holding some amateur classes that same day. The track prep was on par with what we've seen at other foreign circuits, as the course was beat in places and dusty in others before the first 250 moto even left the line. But once the racing started in the pro motos, all was forgiven. Junya Takenaka's Factory Suzuki RM-Z250 that we'd be riding the next day led all but one lap of both 250 motos, ending with a 1-4 tally for the day after he tangled with a lapper on his final go around of the second moto.

In the pits, the factory rigs are like an 80 percent scaled-down version of the US's 18-wheelers. Their pit area footprint is about the same, but the trucks fold open and closed like a cross between a typical RV slide out and a Transformer. The Suzuki pit had an extra tent set up for Ricky's autograph area, and the fans were excited to see him. We were told attendance was up

tenfold because of his appearance. I'd estimate the total numbers of fans at 5,000 that day, so Japan's race fan turnout is not the same as the US fan base. At halftime in the racing Ricky rode a few demo laps. The crowd loved him. One of the coolest parts of the day was after the final 450 moto when the Japanese riders did a parade lap while the fans got to walk out onto the track to get a high five.

MONDAY

This was factory bike ride day. Even though rain was expected, the weather was perfect as we arrived at the track—which had not seen any significant prep since the previous day's national. It was dry hardpack with several sections that still showed the shallow grading, a few rocks, and the bumps from the day before. This was good news/bad news, since a loamy track is no way to evaluate factory suspension.

Suzuki had a couple of stock 2015 RM-Z250s for us to warm up on, and then it was time for the racebike. After a few action photo passes I got my

The racing at the Japan National was great in all four pro motos. There was no runaway win, and the race leaders never got much more breathing room than what Junya Takenaka has here over Toshiki Tomita in moto one of the 250 class.



allotted track time on the factory bike—four laps. It wasn't much, but a first impression only takes an instant. With the sag set for me at 107mm (Takenaka prefers 103mm) I got my instructions: "You are under orders not to crash." I let the clutch out slowly and took off.

While the stock bikes pointed out how chattery some of the dirt was, the factory bike's suspension was everything your subconscious teases you with in those dreams of riding a factory racer—supple and planted. You had to reinterpret what your eyes were telling your brain. The bike just flattened out the cobbly sections. I realize the Suzuki was raced on a track without any monster jumps or rollers, but it was shocking how plush this setup was at my vet novice pace. The bike retained the Suzuki handling, which means it was perfectly nimble into and through the corners and did exactly what you asked of it, right when you asked.

The motor was an interesting case. Down low it felt stronger but slower revving than the stock bike; it also has a smoother/smaller pulse to its motor vibration. Throttle response was just as good as the stock bike but with more meat and a slower rev rate through it. It was actually less fun down low compared to the stocker. But once into the midrange and up, the bike had a forceful surge, and its rev rate kept it hooked up. I'd describe the overall character like a 275cc big bore—a little slower to rev and with a little less of that sprightly 250F feel, but a lot stronger up top where it continues to push higher-horsepower numbers as it catches up to an opened throttle. One unique thing is that the engine didn't feel like it had more engine braking, but it did feel like it revved down slower—sort of the same end result but more like the engine stayed ready more than it got into a decompression sensation. I'd been warned about the front brakes of factory bikes, how they were so powerful and touchy that they were hard to modulate, but the front brake just felt like a good front brake, not grabby and not touchy. The rear brake was harder for me to get a feel for, and I locked it up more often than with the stock bikes.

An interesting note about the track: All the jumps had gradual faces and steep landings, almost like we were running the track backward. Also, our group of magazine guys had the track to ourselves with the exception of a Ricky Carmichael University riding school Ricky was giving for about 40 Japanese racers. It was pretty cool to have RC wave you through the section he was teaching. I think his voice was hoarse because I never heard the, "You couldn't possibly," before I clearly heard



This Suzuki won its class at the Isle of Man TT in 1962.



the, "Go faster!" as I rode through.

Once the factory bike time was over we were free to join or listen in on the RCU. I watched Ricky teach a right-hand-turn entry, where his tip was for the riders to stop braking with the rear early and instead to trail brake slightly with the front brake and get their inside leg out way early. The premise is that the bike does not want to lay over when you're on the rear brake, and you can't turn fast until you have the bike leaned. If you get nothing else from this story, try this tip from Ricky.

After the class we all got a short ride with Carmichael, and I asked him to follow me for one lap and give me some advice. Ricky is a class act and called me a chicken in the nicest way I've ever heard it: "Your style is plenty capable of carrying more speed." As we wrapped up our rides with Ricky, the clear day turned to mist, then to drizzle, then to rain, and our track time was officially over. The RCU students then had a Q&A with Ricky. Both he and JH commented on how focused the Japanese riders were on getting information to make them better racers, rather than asking Carmichael questions about favorite bikes or battles. Many of the racers were taking notes.

As the rain pounded I grabbed one last thing from Team Suzuki—an interview with Akira Watanabe, the only Japanese World Motocross Champion. He won the 125 class in 1978 and had a cool story about getting to Europe to compete in the World Championships. He was proud to remind me that his championship was one of 10 straight for Suzuki in the 125 class. Since this trip was all about the

RM/RM-Z's birthday, here's a good stat to mention: The RM125 came out of the gate and won the first 125cc FIM World Championship in what was also the RM125's first year (1975) and then again in the next nine straight years.

Dinner that night was back at the hotel, and JH and Chris Wheeler got steaks so tough you'd swear they were the hoof. Carmichael got more joy out of this than a race win—he could not stop laughing or telling everyone how excellent his steak was. Ricky is a fun antagonist.

TUESDAY

The next day we hit more than 180 mph on the bullet train to Hamamatsu, where our first stop was the Suzuki museum. The highlights were seeing the looms (yes, big cloth weaving machines) that were invented by Michio Suzuki and which started the company in 1909. When you see how intricate a loom is, particularly Michio's invention to automatically create cross patterns, you understand how the company would be well positioned to get into engines and motorcycles.

It was exciting to ride a lap with Ricky following. I'm glad I got the suspension so far down in the stroke. It almost looks, for an instant, like I belong on the same track as the GOAT.



SUZUKI'S GUIDE TO JAPAN

The museum had on display an early-model motorcycle, the Diamond Free DF, that rode from Bangkok to Paris; starting in 1956 the trip took two years, which saw the bike ride through 32 countries and travel more than 29,000 miles all on a 58cc two-stroke. The museum also had the actual RM62 racer that won the Isle of Man TT in 1962 in the 50cc class, as well as some RM racebikes from years past and, of course, dozens of other Suzuki cars and motorcycles.

Carmichael did an autograph signing for Suzuki employees, and it was very impressive the way he deals with his fans. He has the ability to playfully tease people in a way that everyone has fun. That night a few more Suzuki execs joined our group for dinner where drinks were ordered in what seems to be the norm in Japan: by the hour. We had 1.5 hours to drink as much beer, wine, and sake as we wanted. Our group never took full advantage of that (at least, the end of the table where I sat didn't), but it's an interesting way to serve booze. I saw Ricky with a beer in his hand, but he spent a lot more time trying to trick or goad others into drinking rather than actually putting any lean angle into his own glass.



WEDNESDAY

This was the big visit to the Research and Development facility in Ryuyo, just outside of Hamamatsu. We dropped our bags in a large meeting room and were driven past the large grouping of buildings and right onto the road track that boasts a 2.3-kilometer (1.4-mile) straightaway that is long enough to test superbikes' top speeds. The track had corner-entry marks where the MotoGP bikes had recently been tested, and inside and around the track were road simulation sections where production streetbikes are tested on every road surface, and even through a rain simulator that can deliver anything from a light mist to a downpour. Then we got to unofficially peek into a few test bays, saw the on-site motocross track, and watched some of the full-time test riders pound laps on production bikes—Suzuki does durability testing every day at the facility or at other tracks in the area (as long as weather allows).

Next was the new model reveal, the 2016 RM-Z250, back in the room

where we'd dropped our bags. But now the U-shaped arrangement of tables had two groups of engineers flanking the "magazine guy" table. The engineers took turns explaining their contribution to the new 250 four-stroke. Most spoke through a translator, but the pride in their new machine was clear. Shockingly, one of the only things not new on the bike is the plastic—maybe there's a joke in there about still looking the same at age 40, but it did seem odd that with so many changes, the look stayed the same; it's like the exact opposite of a BNG (Bold New Graphics) bike.

Then the conversation was turned around, and Tak asked us what we thought about the direction of the new bike and what changes US riders would like to see. The questions to us were a surprise, and I was really impressed that Suzuki wanted our opinions. For all the details on this new 2016 model, check out the top story in *Tear Offs* in this issue, as well as watch for first ride reports on dirtrider.com.

This is the monument at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum.



THURSDAY

We bullet-trained farther down the tracks to Tokyo and acted like tourists for the day. Then that night on the bus back from dinner—after a week of playing it cool—we asked Ricky some basic fan questions. As he told us about his factory bikes we turned backward in our seats and sat up, looking like prairie dogs peeking up from their holes.

FRIDAY

This was a time-travel day. I left Tokyo at about 5 p.m., and thanks to jet engines and the earth spinning on its axis, I arrived home shortly before 5 p.m. It was a great trip that had everything—riding, spectating, and getting to know one of the sport's greats. Ricky is a great ambassador and really seems to enjoy his current position in the sport. RCU is world-wide, so watch for Ricky to visit you at some point. And by the time you read this, the 2016 RM-Z250 will be either on your Suzuki dealer's showroom floor or on its way; be sure to stop by and wish it a happy birthday. **DR**

WANT MORE?

CHECK OUT DIRTRIDER.COM/RICKYCARMICHAEL2015-INTERVIEW FOR AN INTERVIEW WITH RICKY CARMICHAEL ON HIS ROLE AS TEAM CO-OWNER AND HIS THOUGHTS ON THE SPORT TODAY AND INTO THE FUTURE, AND GO TO DIRTRIDER.COM/AKIRAWATANABE2015INTERVIEW TO READ THE AKIRA WATANABE INTERVIEW.