MOTO PORCH

Honda Gold Wing Buyer's Kit

Years covered: GL1500 1988 to 2000, GL1800 2001 to present

The benchmark luxury tourer, with a smooth flat-six engine and a reputation for lasting a very long time. Used ones come in three very different forms: the GL1500, the GL1800 from 2001, and the all-new 2018 and later bike. Owner records matter more than the badge.

First bike? Heavy and hard to manage at walking speed. Total Motorcycle calls even the first GL1800 too heavy and unwieldy for beginners, and RevZilla lists the 2018 Tour at 833 lb.

Generations

GL1500 (1988 to 2000)
1,520cc flat-six, carbureted, with reverse gear and air-assisted rear suspension. Many trims (Aspencade, Interstate, SE) that differ mostly in equipment and paint.

First GL1800 (2001 to 2005)
All-new 1,832cc fuel-injected flat-six in an aluminum frame, with optional ABS. Lighter than the GL1500.

GL1800 with options (2006 to 2011)
Navigation and heated seats and grips became available in 2006, along with the first motorcycle airbag option.

Updated GL1800 (2012 to 2017)
Updated styling, more luggage space, better comfort and handling, and new infotainment.

Redesigned Gold Wing (2018 to present)
All-new design with a new front suspension, a six-speed manual or an optional seven-speed dual clutch automatic (DCT). Tour models have a trunk. Standard models do not.

Known problems by year

Alternator and charging system

Years: GL1500, 1988 to 2000 | Concern: medium

UK publication BikeSocial lists alternator failure as the first thing to look for on a used GL1500 and says it is more common on bikes built after 1996. It blames cheaper parts, which we could not confirm. A goldwingdocs owner thread on a 1994 SE shows the bike dying on the road with a dead charging system. Owners there name worn brushes as the usual suspect. We found no figures on how often this happens.

- [ ] Check: With the engine running, a healthy charging system should show roughly 14 volts at the battery. Ask whether the alternator has been replaced or rebuilt, and when.

Fourth gear in the early GL1500 gearbox

Years: GL1500, before 1997 | Concern: medium

BikeSocial says fourth gear on pre-1997 GL1500s may not engage smoothly or at all, and that repair is slow and expensive. It says bikes from 1997 got the more robust Valkyrie transmission. This is one publication's report. We did not find a second source or any figures on how often it happens.

- [ ] Check: On a test ride, run through every gear under load, with extra attention to fourth. Be wary of any pre-1997 bike that pops out of gear or shifts hard.

Rust at the swingarm and exhaust collectors

Years: GL1500, 1988 to 2000 | Concern: low

A second BikeSocial buying guide lists rust around the swingarm area as a common problem and says the exhaust collector boxes can be rusted. It gives no model years, and it is written for the UK, where road salt and wet weather may make this worse than in dry climates.

- [ ] Check: Look closely at the swingarm, the pivot area and the exhaust collector boxes under the bike. Check the brake pads and discs too, which are hidden behind shrouds and often ignored.

DCT behavior at low speed

Years: 2018 to present, DCT models | Concern: low

RevZilla's first-ride review found the DCT a little slushy compared with a manual, said it sometimes hunted for gears in Sport mode, and said dragging the rear brake hurt low-speed maneuvering. MotorBiscuit relays Gold Wing owner forum posts about reaching for a clutch lever that is not there and clunky stops. This is a trait, not a documented defect. Owner forum reports are anecdotal, and the same article says most replies are positive.

- [ ] Check: Ride it in a parking lot. Try slow U-turns, stops and the creep-forward button. Decide whether you can live with it. Consider a six-speed manual bike instead.

Safety recalls on record

Recalls are repaired free by a dealer. Ask the seller for proof the work was done, or have a dealer check the VIN.

- [ ] 2020 to 2022: engine and engine cooling:engine:engine control module (ecu/ecm):software (NHTSA #22V449000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2018 to 2024: fuel system, gasoline:delivery:fuel pump (NHTSA #24V113000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2018 to 2021: engine and engine cooling:engine:hard parts internal/mechanical (NHTSA #24V820000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2009 to 2016: air bags:frontal:passenger side:inflator module (NHTSA #18V045000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2006: equipment:other:owners/service/other manual (NHTSA #06V270000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2006 to 2012: air bags:frontal:passenger side:inflator module (NHTSA #17V031000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2006 to 2010: air bags (NHTSA #16V347000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2002 to 2003: fuel system, gasoline:delivery:fuel pump (NHTSA #02V340000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN

- [ ] 2002 to 2003: structure:frame and members:underbody shields (NHTSA #03V350000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2002 to 2004: service brakes, hydraulic (NHTSA #05V010000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2001: engine and engine cooling:engine (NHTSA #01V133000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2001: engine and engine cooling:engine (NHTSA #01V162000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2001 to 2012: service brakes, hydraulic:foundation components:master cylinder (NHTSA #11V567000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2001 to 2015: service brakes, hydraulic:foundation components:master cylinder (NHTSA #15V700000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2001 to 2012: equipment (NHTSA #11E054000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 2001 to 2004: structure:frame and members (NHTSA #05V027000, listed for GL1800) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 1997: exterior lighting:turn signal (NHTSA #96V213000, listed for GL1500) - confirm by VIN
- [ ] 1988 to 1990: fuel system, gasoline:delivery:hoses, lines/piping, and fittings (NHTSA #95V128000, listed for GL1500) - confirm by VIN

Gold Wing-specific checks

- [ ] Run the VIN with a Honda dealer or NHTSA and ask for proof that every open recall was completed. GL1800s have several, including brake and airbag work.
- [ ] On any GL1800, test the rear brake. After you release the pedal, the rear wheel should spin freely with no heat or drag.
- [ ] Ask for service records. BikeSocial says high-mileage GL1500s need valve checks and timing belt replacement, so confirm they were done.
- [ ] GL1500: look for coolant or oil leaks from the water pump, and test reverse and cruise control where fitted.
- [ ] GL1500: check that the fuel and temperature gauges read sensibly, and that the center display works. BikeSocial says replacements are hard to find.
- [ ] Check the wheel, swingarm and steering head bearings for play or notchiness with the bike on the centerstand.
- [ ] Test every electric accessory: heated seats and grips, audio, navigation, lights, windshield and cruise control. Wiring faults are hard to trace.
- [ ] Airbag models: confirm the airbag warning light behaves normally and ask about any airbag recall work.
- [ ] Check the final drive for oil seepage and play at the rear wheel, and ask when its oil was last changed.
- [ ] Look at the plastics and fairings for cracks and repaint. They are expensive to replace and heavy bikes get dropped.
- [ ] Do a parking lot test. These bikes are heavy, so make sure you can hold it up at a stop and turn it around.

Before you go

- [ ] Ask the seller not to start or warm up the bike before you arrive. A cold start shows problems a warm engine hides.
- [ ] Ask for the VIN by text and run a recall check at nhtsa.gov/recalls before you drive over.
- [ ] Ask for a photo of the title. Confirm it is in the seller's name and is not marked salvage, rebuilt or flood.
- [ ] Bring a flashlight, a rag, a tire pressure gauge, and cash or a payment plan you have already agreed on.
- [ ] If you are a new rider, bring someone who can ride the bike for you on the test ride.

Paperwork

- [ ] VIN on the frame (steering head) matches the VIN on the title.
- [ ] Title is in the seller's name, with no lien listed (or a lien release in hand).
- [ ] Title is not branded salvage, rebuilt, flood or junk.
- [ ] Seller's ID matches the name on the title.
- [ ] Service records, receipts or a logbook, if any.
- [ ] Both keys are present.

Walkaround

- [ ] Tires: check tread depth and the 4-digit DOT date code (week and year). Tires older than about 5 to 6 years should be replaced regardless of tread.
- [ ] Chain and sprockets (if chain drive): hooked or pointed sprocket teeth, kinked or rusty links, or a chain that pulls far off the rear sprocket mean replacement soon.
- [ ] Brakes: pad thickness, rotor grooves or lip, and brake fluid color (clear to light amber is good, dark brown is overdue).
- [ ] Fork tubes: look for oil on the tubes or below the seals, and pitting on the chrome.
- [ ] Drop damage: scuffed bar ends, levers, footpegs, mirrors, engine covers, frame sliders and the tank. Bent levers or a crooked handlebar mean it went down.
- [ ] Frame and subframe: cracks, kinks, fresh paint or welds near the steering head, footpeg mounts and swingarm pivot.
- [ ] Leaks: oil or coolant under the engine, around the cylinder head, the water pump and the drain plug.
- [ ] Fluids: oil level and color in the sight glass or dipstick. Milky oil can mean coolant mixing in.
- [ ] Steering head bearings: with the front wheel off the ground (or a friend leaning the bike back), turn the bars slowly. Notchy or a center detent means worn bearings.
- [ ] Wheel bearings: grab each wheel top and bottom and try to rock it. Any clunk means worn bearings.

- [ ] Electrics: headlight high and low, brake light from both the lever and pedal, turn signals, horn, neutral light, kill switch and side stand switch.
- [ ] Modifications: aftermarket exhaust, intake or wiring. Ask what was changed and whether the fuel system was tuned to match.

Cold start

- [ ] Feel the engine before starting. If it is already warm, ask why.
- [ ] Starter should spin the engine briskly. A slow crank points to a weak battery or charging problem.
- [ ] Watch the exhaust on startup. Blue smoke means burning oil. White smoke that does not clear after warm-up can mean coolant.
- [ ] Listen for knocking, loud ticking or rattles that do not settle as it warms up.
- [ ] With a multimeter: about 12.6V at the battery engine off, and roughly 13.5V to 14.5V with the engine at a fast idle. Outside that range, suspect the charging system.

Test ride

- [ ] Clutch: in a higher gear at low RPM, open the throttle firmly. If RPM rises but speed does not, the clutch slips.
- [ ] Shifting: every gear, up and down. Watch for false neutrals or jumping out of gear.
- [ ] Brakes: firm lever and pedal, straight stops, no pulsing.
- [ ] Handling: no wobble or pull with relaxed hands on a straight road.
- [ ] Throttle: smooth pickup, no stumbling, and the throttle snaps closed on its own.
- [ ] After the ride: look under the bike again for fresh leaks and check that the cooling fan runs when hot (liquid-cooled bikes).

Questions to ask the seller

- [ ] How long have you owned it, and why are you selling?
- [ ] Has it ever been dropped, laid down or in an accident?
- [ ] Do you have service records? When was the last oil change?
- [ ] When were the valve clearances last checked?
- [ ] How old are the tires, chain and battery?
- [ ] What modifications have been made, and do you have the original parts?
- [ ] Have all recalls been done by a dealer?
- [ ] Is the title in your name, and is there a loan on it?
- [ ] Has it been stored outside or through winters without being ridden?

Red flags: walk away if you see these

- The title is not in the seller's name, or the VIN does not match.
- The seller warmed the bike up before you arrived and will not let you see a cold start.
- The seller refuses a test ride with cash in hand or a second rider present.
- Fresh paint, new levers and new mirrors on one side only (a hidden crash).
- Milky oil, steady blue smoke, or a clutch that slips on the test ride.
- A story that changes when you ask the same question twice.

Price worksheet

List 5 to 10 comparable bikes (same model, similar year and miles) before you go.

Listing / source	Year	Miles	Asking $	Notes

Costs this bike will need soon (tires, chain, brakes, service, recall work, damage):

Listing / source	Year	Miles	Asking $	Notes

Negotiation script

- Before you go, find 5 to 10 comparable listings (same model, similar year and miles) and note their asking prices on the worksheet.
- Write down every item from your inspection that will cost money: tires, chain and sprockets, brake pads,

overdue service, recall work, damaged parts. Get a rough price for each.

- Open with the facts, not a lowball: "It needs tires and a chain soon, which is about $X. Comparable bikes are listed at $Y. I can do $Z today."
- Stay quiet after your offer. Let the seller answer.
- Decide your walk-away price before you arrive and stick to it. There is always another bike.

Important

This kit helps you ask better questions and spot common problems. It is not a mechanical inspection and cannot tell you whether a specific motorcycle is safe. If you are unsure, pay a qualified mechanic for a pre-purchase inspection or walk away. Recall data comes from NHTSA; confirm open recalls for the exact VIN with a dealer or at nhtsa.gov/recalls.