

TESTED

APACHE RLX 450 AX SPORT

The latest sports quad from Apache promises to be the company's funkiest-ever product. With a well proven frame, performance suspension components and a feisty & fast engine, allied to an extremely keen price, this could prove to be one of the most significant new quads of the year...

Words Alan Kidd Pictures Steve Taylor

SOMETIMES, YOU JUST NEED TO LOOK

at a vehicle to know what it's going to be like. Be it the crushing self-confidence of a Discovery, the mimsy cuteness of a Smart or the braying arrogance of a Lambo, the best examples of automotive styling are those which grab your attention and hold on – and, while they've got it, tell you all you need to know about what you're looking at.

It can work both ways, of course; to look at a Mahindra was to find it hilarious, and to drive one was to discover what it's like to be laughed at. And there's no shortage of machines in the ATV world which, to put it kindly, look a lot cooler than they actually are.

Apache's new RLX 450 sports quad, first deliveries of which are happening pretty much as you read this, is not among them. And that's not because it doesn't look cool. It looks very cool indeed... and from the moment you clap eyes on it, there's not even a flicker of doubt in your mind that it's going to be more fun than a whole box of monkeys.

The 450 is based on the same frame as the massively successful RLX 320, which since its launch just over a year ago has completely taken over as the company's top-seller. It has the same body, too – but gains a set of accessories which transform its image, making it a seriously aggressive looking bike whose appearance gives it more than a little to live up to.

The basic body shape is funky enough, with front and rear elements creating two sharply raked design lines which follow the form of the wings. Between them, the seat tapers backward with a black covering which



either contrasts with or blends in to the bike's paintwork; you can have any colour you want, so long as it's Glacier White or Diamond Black.

This alone gives the naked design a poised, crouching appearance that makes it look like it's going fast even when it's standing still. Okay, apologies for the cliché... at the very least, though, it does look as if when it does take off, it'll do so like a rocket from a bottle.

Adding to this on the 450 is a wide front nudge bar with a gleaming polished alloy finish which immediately grabs your eye. And having been taken by that, you'll soon be gazing on a set of remote-reservoir DNM gas coil-overs with groovy looking yellow springs – not really a styling element, of course, but with their sexy bypass design on show for all to see thanks to the bike's open-fronted design they might as well be.

Moving back from here, there's a flamboyant pair of nerf bars in stainless steel and a set of standard-fit alloy rims, and at the back another functional item which adds much to the bike's overall image is a wide-bore sports exhaust can. The effect is at once compelling and completely convincing: the 450 looks for all the world like a competition bike, even though all this kit is simply standard equipment on this range-topping model.

But there's one other thing that adds to the bike's busy, action-packed stance compared to the 320. Whereas that vehicle has a 300cc one-pot with CVT, the 450 plays its trump card – a 450cc DOHC engine mated to a five-speed manual gearbox.

If that sounds like the makings of a recipe for fun, we're with you. The RLX 450 is a sexy looking quad alright – and its technical specification lives right up to its appearance.

Let's start with that engine. A four-valve unit with liquid cooling and, of course, that big sports exhaust to help it breathe more easily, this puts out a claimed 49hp. Apache doesn't quote a kerb weight for the vehicle, but as you can imagine the power-to-weight ratio is pretty impressive, even by quad standards.

The five-speed box drives the rear wheels only via a chain and a solid axle riding on a single coil-over, once again featuring a remote reservoir gas shock. Axle location is via an alloy swing arm, while at the front the five-way adjustable coil-overs, whose pre-load can be tuned to optimise their characteristics for both damping and rebound, act on extended unequal-length double wishbones.

Bushing is rubber all round, though Apache told us that polyurethane items are available as an upgrade. They also said that although they've sold a few spare bushes for the 320 in its first year of production, the numbers haven't amounted to much; obviously, the 450's enhanced suspension will allow it to take much bigger loads, and its engine will make it that much more capable of inflicting them, but the company is confident that the standard set-up will cope. If you're buying one for really serious use, you'll probably not bother changing them to start with – though depending on how long it is before you've worn the

rubbers out, it might be worth upgrading to the tougher material when that finally does happen.

Brakes follow the same pattern as the suspension, with a hydraulic disc at each side on the front and a single inboard item at the back. Braided hoses are standard all-round, as they are on the 320, and there's a simple mechanical handbrake which is far easier in operation than a good many of its breed. Finishing off the axles is a set of Kenda Klaw XCTs, AT21x7-10 at the front and AT20x11-9 at the rear.

This is definitely a bike that gets you more excited the more you look at it, but it has all the sensible stuff on it, too. There's a 12-volt socket on the left of the body for powering your phone charger, sat-nav or whatever, and an available rear carry rack will take up to 35 kilos of cargo – more than enough for any practical application we can think of a sports quad being put to. A simple, easy to read digital display sits in its own mini fairing in the centre of the bars – this is identical to the 320, as is the range of equipment supplied as standard for making the bike road-legal.

On the prototype we tested, the aperture for the CVT shifter was blanked off on the front right of the body. In addition, the frame was in the same silver-coloured brushed alloy finish. That's because this was basically a set of 450 mechanicals built into a 320; on production models, the body will be finished correctly without the shifter hole stamped out, and the frame will have what promises to be a particularly arresting finish in red powder-coat.

**YOUR CONFIDENCE BUILDS
ALMOST AS FAST AS THE
BIKE COVERS GROUND, AND
BEFORE LONG YOU'RE WELL
ON THE WAY TO HERO STATUS**

TESTED Apache RLX 450 AX Sport

Will this go better with the white or black body colour? Time will tell. But that's one of very few choices Apache offers, simply because in its view, the 450 is so well specified already.

With its bypass shocks, big-bore exhaust and lairy bump and nerf bars, it's hard not to agree with that. A twist grip and sprocket conversion (shorter rear and longer front) will be available from the word go, but the company is content to leave further performance upgrades like engine tuning mods and a wider rear axle to the aftermarket. We're quietly sure that said aftermarket is busy working on such items at this very moment.

Anyway, unless you plan to use your RLX 450 for proper competition (and many owners will), it has more than enough power and handling to put a grin on your face so enormous you'll have to count your teeth afterwards. It's not an instant, plug-and-play grin of the sort a CVT bike delivers the moment you get on board, however, but after a little initial sizing up, your confidence builds almost as quickly as the bike covers ground, and before long you're well on your way to self-proclaimed hero status.

That's if you have the flattest left foot in the world, though, because the clutch pedal on the prototype we rode was set way too low for our liking. This tester happened to be breaking in a new set of MX boots on the day, so movement was limited and pain was abundant, but even taking my constricted state into consideration I could still barely fit the toe under the pedal at all. A simple mod, of course, but for these purposes I had to fall back on a set of well worn hiking boots lying around in the back of my car – and after that, there was no stopping me.

Actually, that's only partly true, because the field available to ride in wasn't big

enough to get the bike beyond third gear, and even then only on a moderate throttle. So there was quite a lot of stopping me (since I've brought the subject up, the brakes didn't seem to have a huge amount of feel, but they certainly did the job). But during the manic squirts from edge to edge of my circuit, again without using all the power available it was abundantly clear that this is a seriously fast quad. It's instant on the throttle without being unmanageably aggressive, and is followed by a deep, linear supply of torque that allows exceptional in-gear acceleration.

I used the H-word a moment ago, and it should be understood that you're not currently reading the words of any sort of self-professed quad bike hero. However, on the RLX 450 it's very, very easy to start becoming one. Not in a dangerous way, unless you're simply a dangerous person – I'm talking about the ease with which you learn your way into the bike and start appreciating how it responds to your inputs and those of the terrain beneath its wheels.

We drove it back-to-back with the 320, and the difference is simply extraordinary. Itself a tidy bike, and no slouch, it's eclipsed by the 450's power and immediacy, obviously, but more than that by its hugely compliant, resilient suspension. Those gas bypass coil-overs transform the bike – hacking it over a series of nasty washboards, it simply followed the ground with no pitching at all. Likewise, attacking the sort of dip that makes you brace yourself for the crash as the suspension bottoms out is rewarded by that feeling of wonderment and satisfaction you get in a really well sorted motor when you realise you've come out the other side and the heavy impact you were waiting for has never happened. There wasn't anywhere on the

test track to yump the bike, but we're in no doubt whatsoever that it would land gracefully – and, given the immaculate balance it showed on the ground, that it would fly every bit as well, too.

With handling like that, and so much power on tap, you won't be surprised to learn that it steers beautifully, too. Just point it where you want it, lean your back end towards the apex of the corner and squirt the throttle, and you'll be hooting with laughter inside your helmet as the back end leaps effortlessly into a powerslide. Once again, hero status is but a few minutes' practice away.

In sensible terms, this means the 450 is hilariously easy to turn on a sixpence, something that actually has a touch of practicality to it. Not that you buy a bike like this to do a job of work, of course, even though it won't shirk its duties if you do – you buy it to have fun on, and if this thing don't turn you on you ain't got no switches.

Best of all is the fact that at £3495 plus a hundred quid or so to put it on the road, the RLX 450 gives you more fun per pound than just about anything else on four wheels. It's not trying to compete with the premium brands at this kind of money, but what it is trying to do is deliver a combination of startling looks and performance at the sort of price that makes it very easy to say yes.

Given that Apache had already sold the best part of three container loads before they even arrived in the UK, people are quite clearly doing exactly that. We don't think they'll regret it, even for a moment. The RLX 450 is a brilliant bit of kit; it might not be an off-road workhorse, but it's a plaything and fair-weather on-road commuter toy that turns everyone who sits on it into (here it comes...) a hero.





IN DETAIL



DIGITAL DISPLAY is clear and easy to read. As the turn signals show, the bike is road-legal as standard



QUICK FACTS

Apache RLX 450 AX Sport

Engine 450cc, 4-valve DOHC
Power 49hp
Transmission 5-speed manual
Four-wheel drive -
Suspension
Front Extended A-arms
Rear Alloy swing arm
Remote-reservoir gas coil-overs all-round
Brakes Dual front, single rear hydraulic disc
Tyres 21x7-10 front, 20x11-9 rear
Max load 180 kg
Dimensions 1825 x 1230 x 1140 mm



CHAIN-DRIVEN rear axle puts down all the power from a hard-revving 450cc DOHC engine



SUSPENSION uses remote-reservoir DNM coil-overs all round. The effect is apparent first time you hit a bump



COMPETITION EXHAUST upgrade is fitted as standard, helping liberate a claimed 49hp from the engine