

Jet Ski: Kawasaki Ultra 250X Personal Watercraft Review

Kawasaki's most powerful Jet Ski model to date also is its most refined.

by Matt Trulio, September 27, 2006
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By any measure, the evolution of personal watercraft has been amazing. What began as the first tricky-to-ride, carbureted two-stroke stand-up Jet Ski—a Kawasaki product—morphed into sit down two- and three-rider models with direct fuel-injection. Next came giant four-rider models, which were followed by a wave of four-strokes.



The author put the Ultra 250X Jet Ski through its paces on Lake Mead.

The evolution of the industry has been just as dynamic. When sales peaked in 1999 at somewhere around 200,000 units, there were five manufacturers in the game. Now, with annual unit sales at 80,000, there are four. Only the strongest—Kawasaki, Sea-Doo and Yamaha and Honda, a later-coming and much welcome addition to the party—survived.

The result, at least for the consumer, has been some pretty amazing products. With fellow members of the boating press, I tested the most recent example of this, the Kawasaki Ultra 250X, on Nevada's Lake Mead in early September. And to put it mildly, the four-stroke three-rider watercraft dazzled me.

Rated at 250-hp, the Ultra 250X Jet Ski is the most powerful personal watercraft on the market. It makes this somewhat mind-blowing amount of power on a 1,498cc inter-cooled four-stroke engine with a roots-style supercharger running a maximum 11.4 pounds of boost.

In the supercharging process, the blower (or supercharger) compresses air before it enters the engine's combustion chambers. In technical jargon, that "increases volumetric efficiency." In layman's terms, that translates to getting a "bigger bang" in each cylinder, which in turn translates to more horsepower than you'd get with a naturally aspirated (non-supercharged) engine of the same displacement.

If all of that seems like so much gear-head blather (OK, it probably is, but it's lightweight gear-head blather), don't sweat it. The key fact to take away from this is that the small engine, a remarkably compact power plant packaged in a remarkably limited amount space, makes big power. But the power, at least in the way it translates to the water, is not at all intimidating or unmanageable.

During several wide-open runs on the Lake Mead glass, I saw 70 mph on the Ultra 250X's digital speedometer. Personal watercraft speedometers, and all pitot-fed boat speedometers for that matter, are notoriously happy, so I immediately deducted 5 mph from that top speed. I strongly suspect that a radar gun or a GPS unit would confirm my estimate.

Not that 65 mph isn't fast on a PWC—it is fast, very fast and needs to be respected and approached with caution. But it's also the limit that manufacturers have set for themselves based on an agreement with the United States Coast Guard.

Now, if you're really dialed into the PWC market, you'll know that a competitor's model does an honest 65-mph on less power. Shouldn't the more-powerful Ultra 250X be faster?

Not necessarily—if the Ultra 250X is slightly under-propped, meaning it has slightly smaller impeller than it could spin at top engine-operating speed. More gear-head blather, I know, but in terms of power-delivery performance, the Ultra 250X is all about acceleration.

From the moment I pulled the throttle trigger, acceleration was strong and linear right up to the watercraft's top speed. Little blips on the throttle produced delightful bursts—think motorcycle or snowmobile—of acceleration.

None of this would be much good if the Ultra 250X weren't extremely stable. It is and, in fact, it's among the most stable personal watercraft I've ever tested. It felt substantial in the water, and even at high speeds seemed to ride fairly "wet," meaning a lot its hull remained in the water.

Though I wouldn't describe it as nimble or light on its feet, and with 250 hp that's probably a good thing, the Ultra 250X did lean into and carve through the hardest maneuvers without slipping or catching. Straight-line tracking was equally pure.

Lake Mead started out as sheet glass during our test day. Even by noon, the worst conditions consisted of 6-inch chop to which the 250X was impervious. But later in the day, I was able to find some rougher stuff in the form of 1- to 2-foot slop, and the 250X crushed it, especially at higher speeds. From attacking the conditions at bad angles to riding off center, I did everything I could to get the new model out of shape. It refused.

Among the most impressive features of the Ultra 250X was something I discovered by accident in the morning. I was putting the 250X through a series of decreasing-radius turns, and I ended up punching through my own wakes and submerging the watercraft's nose. The entire 53-gallon storage compartment went underwater. Inside the compartment was my shirt, towel, wallet and sunglasses—all of which I expected to be drenched. But thanks to an excellent gasket around the compartment opening, all contents were dry.

What didn't I like about the Ultra 250X? Well, I found the release lever for the forward/reverse handle a little cumbersome to use. But that could be more a function of my lack of familiarity with the lever than its actual functionality.

Priced at \$11,499, the Kawasaki Ultra 250X Jet Ski is not inexpensive. Yet it is an exceptional model that provides much more than superior brawn. Sure, it accelerates like a rocket and is, box-stock, as fast as anything else on the market. But it also handles beautifully, boasts superior stability and cruises softly through rough-water. The Ultra 250X combines big power and refinement in a delightful package.

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