

# Will the Off-road Pan America lead Harley-Davidson back on the Road to Success?

By Wolfgang Philipp

*Harley-Davidson's latest model divides the fans: Is the Pan America the most exciting off-road motorcycle of 2021 or is it simply off-brand? In this article, we are going to look at the DNA of Harley-Davidson, its off-road potential, and the Pan America's brand compatibility: Are there winning ways ahead or merely bumpy roads?*

Harley-Davidson is probably the most iconic motorcycle brand in the world. The epitome of cruisers with roaring V2 engines and tough guys on them both attracts and deters other riders in equal measure. Harley-Davidson dominates its niche like no other brand. Many have tried to enter its segment and failed remarkably. Now Harley-Davidson's Pan America wants to conquer new territory.

## **TROUBLE IN THE LAND OF THE FREE**

The wind in Harley-Davidson's face has become stronger: the main markets are stagnating, the clients growing older, and Europe has applied a 31% import tariff on American motorcycles – while some of its core markets are threatening driving restrictions on motorbikes above a certain loudness level.

All this amidst the unparalleled transition in technology to emission-free mobility. The search for Harley-Davidson's future is the search for freedom in an ever more normative society. Where does the road lead the Easy Rider in 2021?

## **NEW PERSPECTIVES OF FREEDOM**

Harley-Davidson approaches the motorcycle with a new perspective. The already available,

electric LiveWire demonstrates that all options seem to be open for the future.

Now the Pan America is taking on the booming segment of adventure bikes. And it's not only in the foreign segment, but also the way Harley-Davidson is doing it: cutting-edge technology at a very competitive price is not a characteristic a Harley-Davidson rider has bothered about in the past. The V2-engine layout is the only parallel to the classic product range, albeit it is a water-cooled, perfected, and silent machine.

The Pan America shows the full potential of Harley-Davidson's engineering. It is not a raw, wild horse that has to be tamed – it aims to outperform the category's forgiving leaders at their own game – and even lowers its back for the rider when standing. On a Pan America, it takes no daredevil to keep up with the BMW GS riders in their domain of mountain passes.

While these features are certainly impressive for the latter clientele thinking about a new addition to their garage, it's hard to imagine a Fat Boy rider on a Pan America.

## **FREEDOM FOR A NEW TARGET GROUP, NOT NECESSARILY A NEW GENERATION**

Until now, Harley-Davidson did not come to the riders, the riders came to Harley-Davidson. The Pan America will certainly bring new riders to the brand, but a completely different kind and not necessarily younger ones.

Harley-Davidson will become relevant for riders who never thought about the brand, who probably even were afraid of it. And that's the thing: suddenly this thrill is safely accessible for the mainstream – sliced and fitted to their needs. The intriguing aura of Harley-Davidson becomes an innocuous rebel element in the feature-driven segment of adventure bikes.

## **HARLEY-DAVIDSON IS NOT A LIFESTYLE, IT'S A CULTURE**

The reason why Harley-Davidson is probably the most iconic motorcycle brand in the world is its strong culture. All Japanese attempts to build the perfect Harley-Davidson have failed, because it's not about perfection in the first place. It's about riding the real thing: a timeless mindset, not a contemporary feature. Most models barely change for decades, apart from required technological adjustments to meet the latest emission standards.

The perfection of Harley-Davidson lies in its imperfection. The feeling of controlling a wild, POTATO POTATO neighing stallion, rather than a tame circus horse that does the tricks all by itself. Features like rigid mounting, which directly couples the engine to the frame, are key to "the Harley feel that riders know and love<sup>1</sup>," also known as "good vibrations<sup>2</sup>." A Harley-Davidson feels alive.

The core of Harley-Davidson's culture is nonconformism. A brotherhood united in their quest for freedom and their loathing of being fenced in. Society and its rules play the counterpart: riding a Harley-Davidson is an opposition to the norm. The culture is protected by a line the masses cannot cross, which makes it all the more attractive.

It provides a home to many lifestyles in different strengths and flavors – from barking rebels to proud outsiders to furious outlaws: the dentist breaking free from the monotony of life, the veteran world tourer, the local bar brawler, and many more. The motorcycle is merely the platform – and a very attractive one. Brand loyalty is exceptionally high – sometimes even eternal with a tattoo of the brand logo. The value retention of a Harley-Davidson is unmatched in the market, similar only to Porsche in cars.

### **WHERE ARE THE YOUNG RIDERS ASPIRING TO JOIN THE CLUB?**

Actually, the problem is not new. There is no "real" entry model that also provides credibility among thoroughbred Harley-Davidson riders.

The Sportster, temporarily discontinued in Europe, was always looked down on, let alone the completely ignored and also discontinued Street 750. At above 15,000 euros, the new Sportster S will come with twice as much power and will no longer be the base model of the brand.

A lightweight, happy-go-lucky beginner's model seems to counteract the culture, the aspiration to ride the real thing. Just like being part of something special requires being able to handle it, it also has to be earned: The new entry model, the Softail Standard with a 1.75-liter engine and 297 kg weight in running order starts at just above 14,000 euros – far above the typical, easy-handling beginner bike well below 200 kg and 10,000 euros. Harley-Davidson's icons such as the Fat Boy or the Road King are priced at well above 20,000 euros. The Pan America, at 17,000 euros, offers very competitive value at 245 kg with 152 hp – but in a completely different segment.

### **HARLEY-DAVIDSON'S GREATEST FUTURE POTENTIAL: ITS OWN FOLLOWERS**

Substantial merchandise sales indicate that the typical first Harley-Davidson is probably a T-shirt. With its own niche and unique culture, Harley-Davidson has one of the strongest bases when it comes to launching into the long-term future.

It has to win over its own, populous brotherhood again and again – and give them a real reason to buy another, someday potentially electric, Harley-Davidson. In this regard, the new Sportster S already looks very promising.

### **DON'T COMMERCIALIZE A CULTURE – UNLESS YOU WANT TO CHANGE IT**

A powerful brand like Harley-Davidson can thrive in many different segments without losing its roots, as long as the connection to its nonconformist culture remains.

While the electric LiveWire is an alien in the brand's portfolio, it is a true pioneer that demonstrates Harley-Davidson's ambition to stay for another 100 years – and at the time of writing, it seems it is to be given a separate

<sup>1</sup> "Rigid mounting and internal counterbalancing allows for a smooth ride without giving up the Harley feel that riders know and love," Harley-Davidson describing the 2021 Sport Glide at [harley-davidson.com](https://www.harley-davidson.com), June 2021

<sup>2</sup> The German version specifically mentions the „good vibrations“: „Der starr verschraubte Motor mit Ausgleichswellen trägt mit seinen „good vibrations“ entscheidend zum typischen Harley-Davidson Fahrerlebnis bei,“ [harley-davidson.com](https://www.harley-davidson.com), June 2021

branding using the same name but outside of Harley-Davidson<sup>3</sup>.

The upcoming Sportster S has reinvented itself for the future by cultivating its legendary roots and nurturing them with the future-proof V2 engine already introduced in the Pan America.

The Pan America is adopting a different approach: it is taking on a booming segment by emulating the top dogs. For the first time, a Harley-Davidson is pitting itself against others by playing their game. While its great, distinctive design makes the Pan America stand out from the competition, there are few connecting values to its classic siblings apart from the unique badge.

So yes, the new Pan America is the most exciting adventure bike of 2021. It is a great option for riders who are looking for an alternative to the almighty BMW GS 1250 – but certainly not to any Harley-Davidson with “the Harley feel that riders know and love.” The Pan America might lead on a new road to success, but it is heading away from Harley-Davidson’s own unique culture.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://investor.harley-davidson.com/news-releases/news-release-details/harley-davidson-launches-livewire-electric-motorcycle-brand>, June 2021