

A RIGHT **LITTLE** WEAPON

If people bought the machine they need, half the world would be riding a Polaris Sportsman 400 HO.

WHAT IS IT?

The Polaris Sportsman 400 HO (\$9795) sits in the very competitive middleweight category and has plenty of determined opposition. This class is home to several variations on the basic theme. There are autos and manuals; diff locks and no diff locks; air-cooled and liquid-cooled, and some that well and truly punch through the \$10,000 barrier. Most of all, this is not a dance club for quads that can't boogie. You have to be good here or buyers with this much choice won't give you the time of day.

In terms of pricing, here's how the ATVs closest to the 400 stack up (NB: prices may vary due to dealer and statutory charges). As you can see, the Kymco is the least expensive, by quite a margin, and the Can-Am the dearest. The Polaris is midpack.

- Can-Am Outlander 400: \$11,490
- Yamaha Grizzly 400: \$11,099
- Honda TRX420TM: \$10,490
- Suzuki KingQuad 400: \$9990
- Polaris Sportsman 400 HO: \$9795
- Kawasaki Workhorse 360: \$9490
- Kymco MXU400: \$8999

If you're a weight saver and fret over every gram you carry around, the Sportsman again lobs in the middle of the pack at 271kg. At 237kg the Honda is the lightest and at 292kg the Suzuki is the heaviest. Yellow paint must be heavy.

WHAT DO YOU GET?

The Sportsman has a well-thought-out design and is difficult to use for target practice, although its build quality is what we expected. A little more attention to detail wouldn't go astray, where the seat joins the

tank, for example, or in the plastic fit. But for what looks like a harmless little gadget, this quad is surprisingly capable. A couple of times it had us downright gobsmacked.

But let's start at the bottom. Power is churned out by a tough and reliable little 455cc liquid-cooled single, and fuel is pumped into the system through a good ol' Mikuni carb, not fuel injection.

The driving force is delivered through an auto tranny, with an idiot-proof F/N/R gate pattern, and shaft drive. There's no low range. Like every Polaris cross-country ATV, this one has simple push-button 4WD engagement – one feature that makes it so easy to operate. Sure enough, on-board gadgetry decides when you need all wheels driving once you push that AWD button, but in our experience the Polaris 4x4 system is pretty good.

The little Sportsman has MacPherson Strut suspension up front and supple IRS down the back. This manufacturer has switched to double A-arm front suspension on larger machines, because you get better rough terrain performance with that set-up, but on this particular machine the MacP front-end seems to work pretty well. We had no complaints about clearance, turning circle or ride quality.

ERGOS AND CONTROLS

The braking system is single lever. In other words, a single 'bar-mounted

Underbody protection is minimal. The A-arms could do with a bashplate and the front CV boots are a bit vulnerable.



Rough terrain ability is exceptional. Even without low range this little red jigger will go almost anywhere a more powerful 4x4 will go.

"THIS ATV IS SURPRISINGLY CAPABLE. A COUPLE OF TIMES IT HAD US DOWNRIGHT GOBSMACKED."



ABOVE: Its instruments are basic by today's standards. It's not often you see a choke anymore, but that's because this HO engine has a carb, not EFI.



LEFT & ABOVE: Polaris always gives us somewhere to put stuff. The flat storage box up front is standard, plus you get a bunch of Lock 'N' Ride accessories to choose from. No-one does that better than Polaris.



lever operates the front and rear brakes while a pedal near your right foot operates the rear brake independently.

Like single-lever braking, push-button all-wheel drive was introduced to make quads easier for the inexperienced to ride. And it's been a huge success. Auto 4x4 has made the cross-country ATV accessible to those who would otherwise have been nervous about riding a large and heavy machine, and power steering is well on the way to doing the same thing. The only riders nowadays who want independent braking are racers (but they're not normal, so their opinions don't matter).

The only bitch we have with the single-lever thing is that for safety's sake the lever should always be on the same side of the 'bars.

Polaris puts it on the left-hand side, Can-Am on the right. That can be a problem if you switch from one brand to the other. But we can't whinge about the brakes themselves. They're powerful alright, in fact the HO will pull stoppies!

There's a park brake too – many riders feel cheated without one – and it's a simple clip-lock on the brake lever.

Fuel capacity is 17 litres. Front rack capacity is 32kg and rear rack capacity 45kg. The trailer tow rating for this machine is 810kg, which seems like a lot of work for 455cc.

We have no idea if the manufacturers actually have a specific formula for calculating tow ratings, or if they just pluck a figure out of the air and see what happens.

RIDING IT

You feel you're sitting high on the Polaris because it gives the impression of being tall and skinny, but it isn't. So it's just that; an impression. Being a middleweight machine, though, it's best suited to 'average'-size riders and teenagers. Really tall people will feel cramped on it and fat dudes will need an extra seat.

The ergos give you plenty of room to move around

and keep your weight centred. Full-coverage guards keep you clean and dry. There's nothing annoying about the control layout. The only beef we had was with the noisy starter motor. The bike always fired-up okay, but that starter sounded like a chaff-cutter with a rock in it.

However, we like the thought Polaris has put into storage space. Many 4x4s have bugged-all built-in dry or semi-dry space, but Polaris gives you somewhere to stash your stuff. In this case (no pun intended) it's a flat box up front with a lid held down by rubber hooks. And of course this manufacturer has a large range of OEM 'Lock 'N' Ride' accessories to choose from.

The 400 HO has the same 'barbecue fork' shift lever common to all Sportsmans. It's not a problem as such, and probably engages a little quicker than the lever on larger Polaris machines, but compared with, say, a Kymco's shift action, it does feel notchy.

The 455cc motor is surprisingly strong off the bottom but power is spread nicely across the rev range. Throttle response was better than we expected and we had no trouble pushing her into a slide.

The engine runs out of puff early in the top-end, though. That's because its transmission gearing is biased towards off-road performance. This bike is a lot faster than the Yamaha 350 Grizzly, but don't try to run down an Outlander 800...

HOW IS IT OFF-ROAD?

The suspension is very good and ride quality isn't compromised in any way. There's little body roll, no bump-steer to complain about and the steering is actually quite light, even with both diffs locked.

If all the wheels are hooked up and you're really nailing it, you'll feel the characteristic 4x4 understeer, but it's not as noticeable as the same thing on a more powerful machine.

Women and kids should have no trouble controlling this quad, and that widens its appeal – the young fella who owns this one is happy to jump it, and with

his lighter weight it never looks like bottoming out.

The machine turns nicely and despite the tall skinny feeling it's very stable. Off-road is where it shines though, and with 10,000 watts! For a machine with no low range it's rough-terrain performance is drop-dead amazing.


What makes the little red bike work so well is its comparatively light weight, and approach and departure angles that are better than we've seen on any 4x4. The 24in front tyres (on 12in rims) extend beyond the bodywork, so you can approach an obstacle at 45-degrees and not have to head-butt it before climbing over it.

This unusual design tends to compensate for a lack of low range and huge amounts of power (which is no advantage in rough terrain anyway). The drivetrain on this little jigger is so good we could point the Polaris at a retaining wall and watch it climb until it was vertical. It also climbed the huge log we use for drivetrain testing on larger quads with low range and it whizzed over that, no trouble at all. Damn this thing's good!

And it was just as capable in deep water, something that can't be said for many supposedly heavy-duty 4x4s. The CVT breathers are similar to those on larger Sportsmans, placed high in other words, so they worked fine when we dunked her big time. With a light rider this 400 will actually float and keep driving.

THE BOTTOM LINE

It's probably obvious by now that the Sportsman 400 HO really impressed us. We liked the smart combo of light weight, nice power and manoeuvrability. This is an easy bike to manhandle if you have to. And its off-road performance is exceptional.

We also like the idea that Polaris has built a 4x4 for people with no real rough terrain experience. They can have fun on it and improve their skill as saddle time grows. It's a good young rider's bike, a good farm bike, and a great machine for tackling difficult obstacles, if that's what blows your frock up. 



“WOMEN AND KIDS SHOULD HAVE NO TROUBLE CONTROLLING THIS MACHINE, AND THAT WIDENS ITS APPEAL.”

Hey kid, wait for us! If you're looking for a capable but kid-size 4x4, this is it!