

Arai SZ/c Helmet with J&M Clampless Headset

Ah, spring! When a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of...airing up those tires, charging the battery, and putting the bike back on the road! Of course, this affliction strikes both genders of motorcyclists whether young, old, or otherwise. Lots of us make other preparations as well. Perhaps you need a new riding suit, or maybe it's finally time to replace that old helmet. You know, the one that smells like something crawled inside it and died? After all, spring is time for renewal. If you traditionally wear an open-style helmet (and even if you don't), we have some news we think you'll like.

The Helmet

Most Wingers are familiar with Arai three-quarter style open face helmets. They're generally acknowledged as some of the most comfortable helmets available. J&M has been offering them for some time, either by themselves or equipped with J&M's open-face style headsets. When John Lazzeroni of J&M invited us down to Tucson to see a new version of this popular helmet, we jumped at the chance.

J&M's current version of the Arai open-face helmet is the Classic/c. It's available in colors to match most Wings and includes a black plastic sun visor that's held to the helmet by three snap fasteners. A system of four snap-open vents is included, and different thickness cheek pads are available for a custom fit. What's different about the Arai Classic helmets sold by J&M? Theirs has a bulge molded into the left side of the helmet's shell to accommodate internally mounted headsets. The bulge is pre-drilled and plugged, so the helmet can easily be fitted with J&M's new Clampless Headset, or not — we'll discuss that in a minute. These helmets are currently available only through J&M's Nationwide Installation Center network, but as other Arai distributors begin to stock these new helmets, availability should improve.

Yes, the Classic/c is a very nice helmet, but that's not what we were in Tucson to see. The big news was the introduction of the new Arai SZ/c three-quarter style helmet. The SZ/c is identical to Arai's Classic/c in most details; the big difference is the integral, flip-up face shield. If there was one thing that used to drive me nuts about face shields on open-face helmets, it was the incessant rattling of the shield and snap fasteners. That, plus the shields never sealed well against the helmet, so water and wind blast were unwelcome riding companions.

Because of that, most Wingers choose to wear these helmets sans shield, and that creates what I consider a dangerous situation.

The integral shield of the SZ/c is mounted to the helmet in much the same fashion as the shield on Arai's full-face helmets. It's pre-curved, very rigid, optically correct, and seals tightly to the rubber gasket at the front of the helmet. In addition, the shield incorporates the same eyebrow level vents found on full-face models that bring cooling air to the wearer's forehead. Unlike shields retained by snap fasteners, the SZ/c shield, while positively locking in the "down" position, can be easily released and flipped out of the way to facilitate donning eyeglasses, drinking, eating, etc. Though we realize many readers engage in these activities while



underway, we recommend them only while stopped — that's just for the record. We like this new design because it's convenient and quiet and should therefore encourage the use of a face shield.

The Headset

What's the big deal about the Clampless Headset? Look at the photo; there are no dangling external wires to pull loose and no clamp to break or catch the collar of your jacket when you turn your head. The thin, internally mounted microphone boom and the speaker wires are joined in a solid connection that rests in the left cheek bulge. Only a small, round plug is visible on the helmet's shell. This arrangement should vastly improve the already-excellent durability of the headset.

Lastly, J&M's eight-pin Clampless Headset easily adapts to any factory installed motorcycle audio system in existence today just by interchanging the lower section hook-up cord.

Road Trip!

On our trip down to Tucson, my wife Hilo and I were wearing Arai Signet helmets equipped with older style J&M full-face headsets. These were two of the helmets used to evaluate the Kennedy VOX system last month. During that test, we noted that the VOX had to be set to a low sensitivity level to function properly in extreme wind conditions, though function properly it did. All of that changed using the Clampless Headset. We took a trip in the countryside surrounding Tucson accompanied by John Lazzeroni and Nick Hoppner, both riding GL1800 and using the same headsets. Though conditions were very windy, our VOX system could now be set at or near its most sensitive setting, and the wind didn't trigger it. When the Co-Rider spoke, the unit turned on instantly with no wind noise noted in the background. Nor was there any noise apparent in CB transmissions received from the two 1800s. We don't know what J&M did inside these tiny microphones, but they're J&M's best offering yet. Not only do they offer excellent noise rejection, but CB and intercom speech are the clearest

we've experienced — period.

Because of previous experience with open-face helmets, I personally didn't expect much in terms of music quality. Usually, the wind noise while wearing this style helmet dilutes the music, resulting in a rather tinny sound. That's not the case while wearing the SZ/c. Due to the tight seal of the face shield and the use of J&M's enhanced fidelity DynaPort speakers, the music sounds every bit as good in this helmet as it does in the full-face Signet. The integrity and rigidity of the shield, the quiet comfort it affords, and the excellent performance of the headset installation causes me to give the Arai SZ/c and Clampless Headset combination serious consideration as an alternative to wearing a full-face helmet. While still not our choice for use on a "naked" standard bike or sport bike, the SZ/c has become our favorite on the Wing. Hilo especially appreciates the wide field of vision afforded without the wind-in-the-face blast typical of unshielded helmets worn in the Co-Rider's perch.



John L. wears a Classic/c, holds an SZ/c.

As An Aside...

While we were out testing the SZ/c, the previously mentioned Signet helmets were retrofitted with J&M's HS-EDC374-FL head sets. These units, intended primarily for flip-front helmets, incorporate J&M's DualMode™ AeroMike@ III miniature boom microphone. They were used in our Signets in place of the flush-mounted disc microphones normally used by J&M for the full face style of helmet. This microphone, mounted at the end of a thin boom, barely touches the lips. While some may have trouble adapting to this feel, this is the microphone positioning used with aviation headsets. It provides better volume and clarity than with the microphone recessed into the chin bar and spaced perhaps a half inch or more from the wearer's mouth. We found the HS-EDC374-FL headsets yielded the same clarity of speech and noise rejection in the Signets that the Clampless Headset provided in the SZ/c. It was so good, we hope J&M develops this concept, maybe in clampless form, for future installation in this and other full-face style helmets.

—Stu Oltmon