ROAD TEST:

Cagiva Alazzurra 650 SS

Everyman's exotic.

BY MARC COOK

Exotic motorcycles are a strange breed. And that's not solely because of their elevated status as rare, expensive moto-art, either. Instead, exotics are different from the rest because of what they can make otherwise rational people do—namely, shell out exorbitant amounts of money for quirky, insolent motorcycles. For the connoisseur, then, the exotic's real attraction is emotional. How fast it can make his heart race is more important than how fast the bike will shoot down a quarter-mile. But even the most hard-core exotic lover will admit that day-to-day living with a high-strung thoroughbred can be a match made in hell, not heaven.

Cagiva understands both sides of the exotic equation, and thinks owning a specimen of Italian exotica shouldn't require the commitment of a Victorian marriage. And living proof of that understanding is Cagiva's Alazzurra 650 SS, because under the Alazzurra's fiberglass bodywork beats the palpitating heart of a recognized exotic: the Ducati Pantah. Though the agreement between the two companies revolves around Ducati supplying engines for the larger company, Cagiva chose to update one of Ducati's existing models as its first U.S.-spec streetbike. More important, though, is that Cagiva's refinement didn't distill the Pantah's spirit right out of the Alazzurra. Instead, the company saw fit merely to smooth some of the Duck's rough edges to adapt it to the American market.

That approach works especially well for the Alazzurra, because its fit and finish are well up to current standards, but the bike is distinctive enough to set it apart from other middleweights. At the same time, Cagiva made sure that neither the Duck's back-breaking riding position nor its ultra-tall, *autostrada*-style gearing remain to torture American riders. The resulting combination is nothing short of delightful: The Alazzurra virtually exudes exotica, yet it offers a measure of versatility that's uncommon for many motorcycles, much less an Italian exotic.

There's little question that the heart of the 650's amicable character is its engine. For starters, the air-cooled, 649.6cc vee-twin displays

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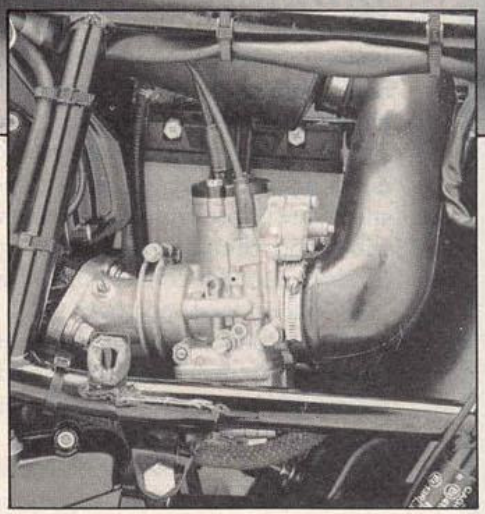
impeccable manners together with an unusually broad, usable powerband. As low as 2000 rpm, the SS pours out a torque-laden stream of power that feels almost constant until 6500 rpm, when the motor hikes up its skirt and rushes toward redline. Although it's not necessary to wring the motor to its 9000-rpm redline to extract its best power, it will pull willingly up to—and slightly past—that point.

Considering the source of that power is essentially a slightly modified 600 Pantah motor, the Alazzurra's broad powerband is surprising. Cagiva wanted a smooth, usable spread of power for its first American-export streetbike, and so commissioned Ducati to break the Pantah's cammy, high-rpm habits and pump up the engine's torque throughout the rev range. To that end, the two-valve-per-cylinder motor received a 1mm larger bore and a 3.5mm longer stroke compared to the 600, boosting displacement from 583cc to 650cc. Plus, the Alazzurra's desmodromic valvetrain got slightly milder cam timing, though valve sizes (37.5mm intake, 33.5mm exhaust) remain faithful to the Pantah dimensions.

At the same time, Ducati performed some hocus-pocus on the drivetrain to adapt the package for the American market. The most significant changes include slightly shortened (raised numerically) final-drive and fifth-gear ratios, alterations intended to complement the new engine's gutsy midrange. Those changes also make life easier for the bike's clutch, because the old Pantah's super-tall first gear necessitated two-stroke-like clutch slipping to get under way. But the Cagiva's hydraulic clutch actuation—a change made solely to counteract the stiff clutch springs—won't make life any easier for you: Lever effort is unusually high, and the blade's sharp edges only bring that home even more.



Dell'Orto carbs remain a Ducati trademark

Mixing it up for the boys from Varese.

Likewise, the Alazzurra's throttle and front brake require uncomfortably high effort. As with many Brembo brakes, the SS's front brake provides subpar feedback, making wheel lockup difficult to predict during hard sport riding. What's more, the feel and level of effort change substantially as the binders get hot, which makes braking action inconsistent from corner to corner. Yet in typical Brembo fashion, the fixed calipers and cast-iron discs—virtually the same as on the '80 Pantah—provide plenty of power, more than enough to stop the 432-pound SS.

As with the brakes, much of the Alazzurra's chassis pieces are a direct carryover from the Pantah. Cagiva elected to use the Ducati components to help speed the Alazzurra into production—although subsequent big-bore streetbikes from the firm will use all-new frame and suspension pieces wrapped around Ducati engines. That doesn't mean today's Alazzurra frame was neglected, though: Cagiva reduced the steering head angle 0.5 degree (to 30.0 degrees) in an effort to quicken the SS's steering response. Otherwise, the frame follows the original Ducati ladder design, with a series of mild-steel tubes forming a bird-cage "box" between the steering head and the top shock mounts. The engine bolts to this frame via six solid

ACTION PHOTOGRAPHY © 1986 DAVID DEWHURST

mounts, forming a stressed member with the swingarm pivoting on bushings in the rear of the crankcase.

Compared to the frame, the Cagiva's suspension components seem utterly conventional. Up front, there's a Marzocchi fork with 35mm-diameter stanchion tubes that provides neither air-pressure nor damping adjustments. In a similarly Italian fashion, the rear suspension consists of a pair of Marzocchi shocks offering spring-preload adjustment only. And although Cagiva has fitted softer springs to both ends compared to the earlier Ducati's, the ride is decidely firm, especially at the rear. Moreover, the fork possesses a fair amount of seal friction, making it feel noticeably stiff, when in fact its spring rate is much softer than at the rear.

And it's the suspension's shortcomings that prove to be the Alazzurra's Achilles' heel on a twisty backroad. The suspension responds poorly to pavement irregularities, making it difficult for the tires to maintain traction through bumpy corners. Moreover, larger bumps find their way through the shocks with enough force to threaten to throw you off the saddle. The suspension's inadequacies are unfortunate, too, because they undermine what are otherwise excellent steering characteristics. Initiating a turn requires only light pressure on the narrow bar, and the SS responds in the linear fashion that Italian sportbikes are renowned for. Still, the bike's light steering feel doesn't necessarily mean the bike *steers* quickly: The Alazzurra won't flick over into a turn or change lines as rapidly as most middleweights, thereby requiring a more aggressive riding style than is necessary on the Japanese competition.

Uncluttered instruments include clock

Breaking a timeless tradition.

In terms of engine performance, though, the Alazzurra proves easy to ride hard. Granted, the Cagiva can't keep pace with Japan's middleweights in terms of sheer horsepower, but the bike's powerband eases the chore by virtue of its breadth: There's enough power as low as 4500 rpm to mount a serious charge out of a corner. And when it comes time to stir the SS's gearbox, you'll find that the five ratios are well spaced and the transmission's shifting action is superb—the Bullworker-class clutch pull is the only significant hitch in the bike's driveline.

Moreover, the Cagiva's motor suits it well for touring duty, as well. With the 650's fairly short gearing, the engine turns about 4500 rpm at 60 mph—right in the heart of its torque curve. What's more, vibration at that engine speed is negligible: You'll have to spin the motor above 7000 rpm before any noticeable vibration creeps through the pegs and bar. Not only is the Cagiva smooth, it's also fairly comfortable. Surprisingly, the bike's stiff rear suspension doesn't hurt it as much on the highway as it does on the twisty road, because the soft Pirelli Supertouring tires absorb most of the smaller jolts, making the bike feel more taut than harsh.

The SS's moderate riding position and broad, flat saddle help on long-distance travel, too: The Alazzurra's ergonomics allow you to spread your weight almost equally between the seat, bar and pegs. And as icing on the cake, the bike's fair-

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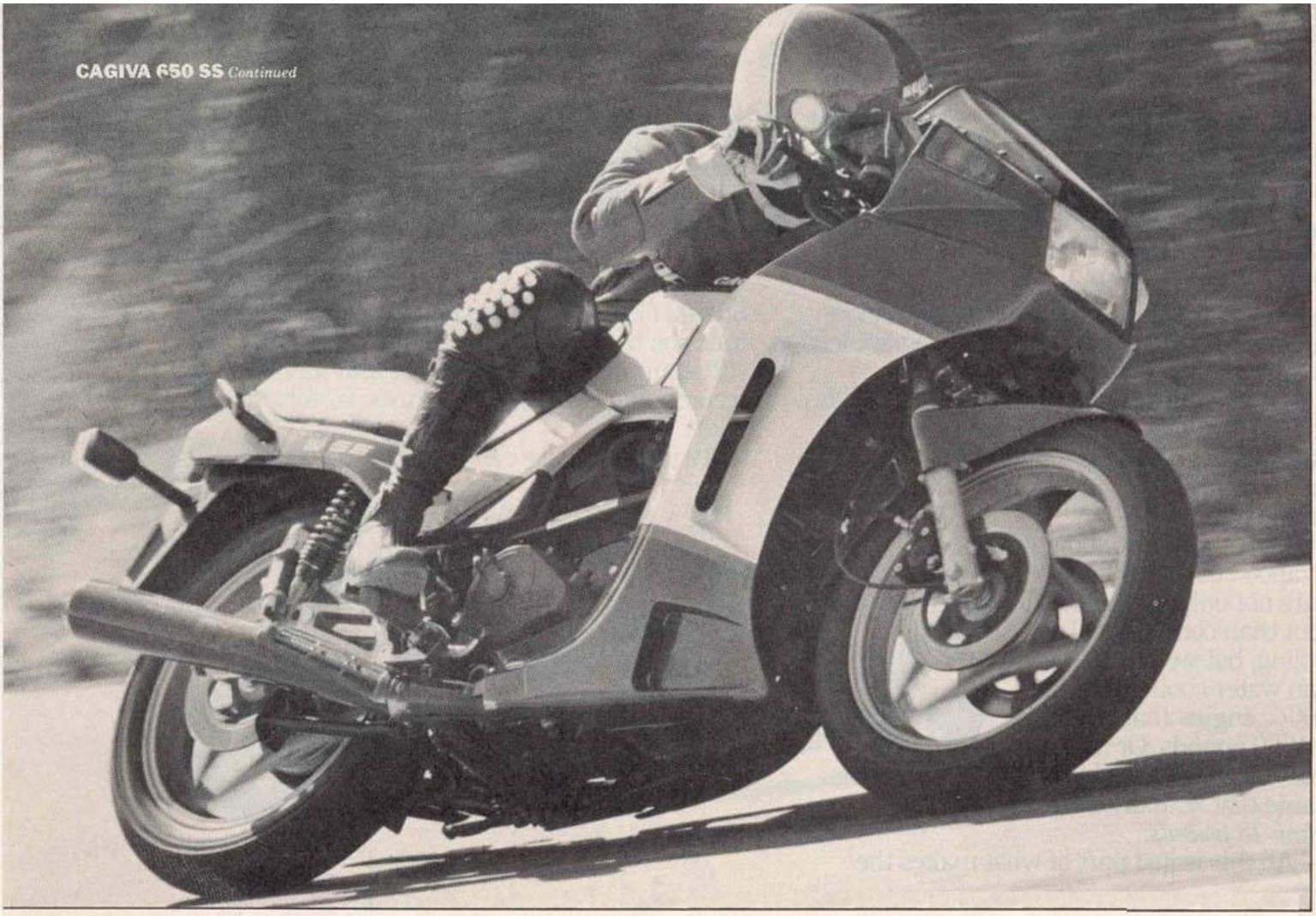


ing affords the rider good upper-body and hand protection, with very little helmet buffeting. All told, the Alazzurra proves to be unusually comfortable for a sporting bike, and exceptionally so for an Italian sporting bike.

When you're faced with around-town riding the Cagiva's shine dims, however. Thanks mostly to the bike's high control efforts, stop-and-go traffic or slow speeds quickly become a test of forearm strength. In addition, the bike's low-speed throttle response gets progressively more abrupt as the engine heats up, amplifying the bike's driveline lash. Finally, our early production test bike possessed an erratic idle that kept dropping as the motor got hotter.

Still, the bike's deficiencies pale when you consider how far Cagiva has brought the Alazzurra with comparatively minor changes to its Ducati predecessor. Every area Cagiva considered important to the American market—tractable powerband, middle-of-the-road riding position and high-quality fit and finish—has been vastly improved. In fact, when compared to Japan's sporting middleweights, the Alazzurra seems delightfully broad-band, proving you don't have to endure repliracer contortions or a cramped cockpit to have an agile middleweight.

There's another angle on the vee-twin, too, albeit a considerably subjective one. Because Cagiva elected to let some of the bike's Ducati heritage show through its new clothes, there's an intangible element of exotica present. Consider, too, that the Alazzurra embodies some of the most alluring elements of a true exotic—limited numbers and a colorful history—but without many of the warts that usually accompany an exotic. In that context, the Alazzurra 650 SS comes out a winner on two fronts: It's a fine motorcycle in its own right, and it's an exotic you can live with. •

Nits:

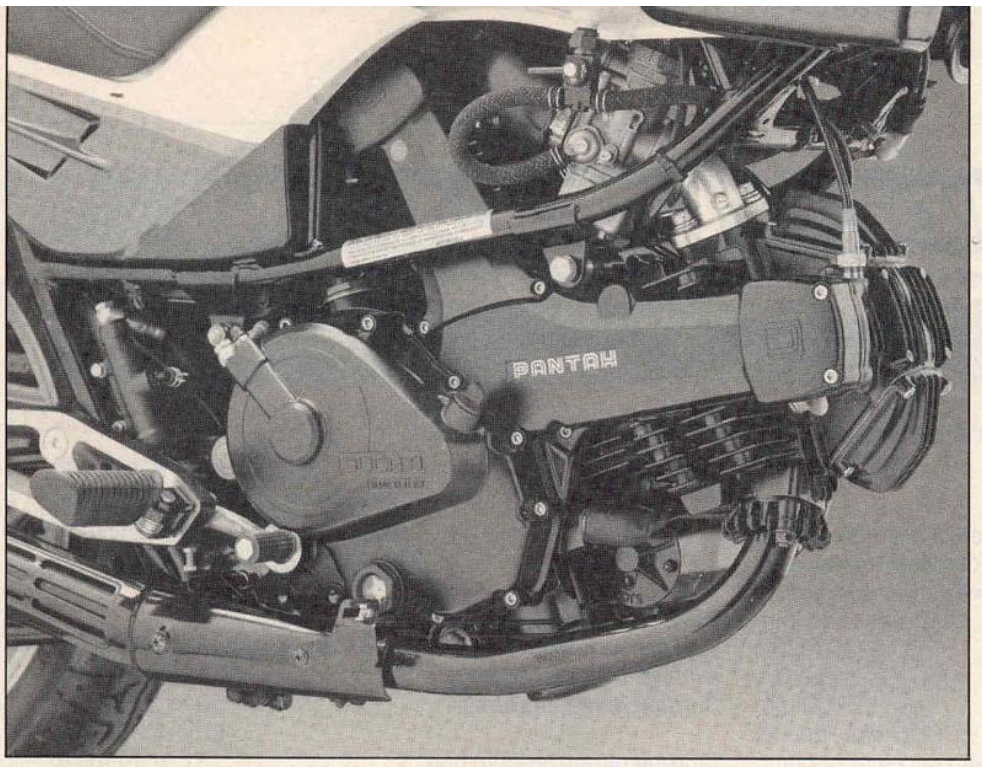
- Frame-mount choke lever is difficult to reach and has no intermediate settings.
- Low-fuel warning light is inconsistent.
- Mirrors offer insufficient view of area directly behind motorcycle.

Picks:

- Tubular handlebar allows easy replacement.
- Fairing-mounted clock is convenient.

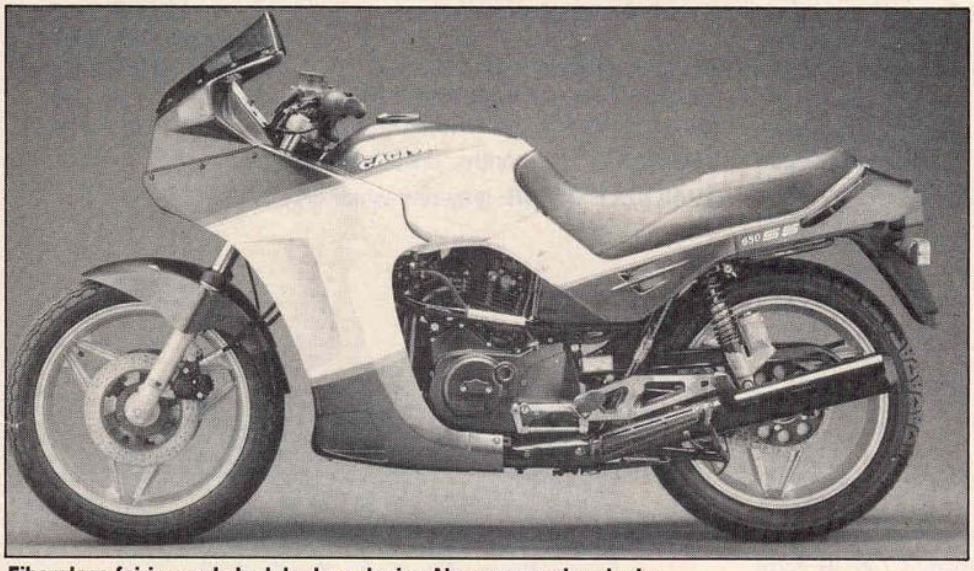
COMPARATIVE TEST DATA:

Make and Model	Quarter-Mile, sec/mph	Top Speed, mph	Weight, lbs.	Stopping Distance From 60 mph, ft.
Cagiva Alazzurra 650 SS-'86	12.982/99.18	113	432	135
BMW R80-'85	13.357/98.36	114	439	148
Honda VF500F Interceptor-'84	12.484/106.00	126	419	123
Kawasaki Ninja 600R-'85	12.124/109.09	135	448	135
Suzuki GS550ES-'85	12.551/106.50	119	447	133
Yamaha FJ600-'84	12.468/105.63	126	435	129



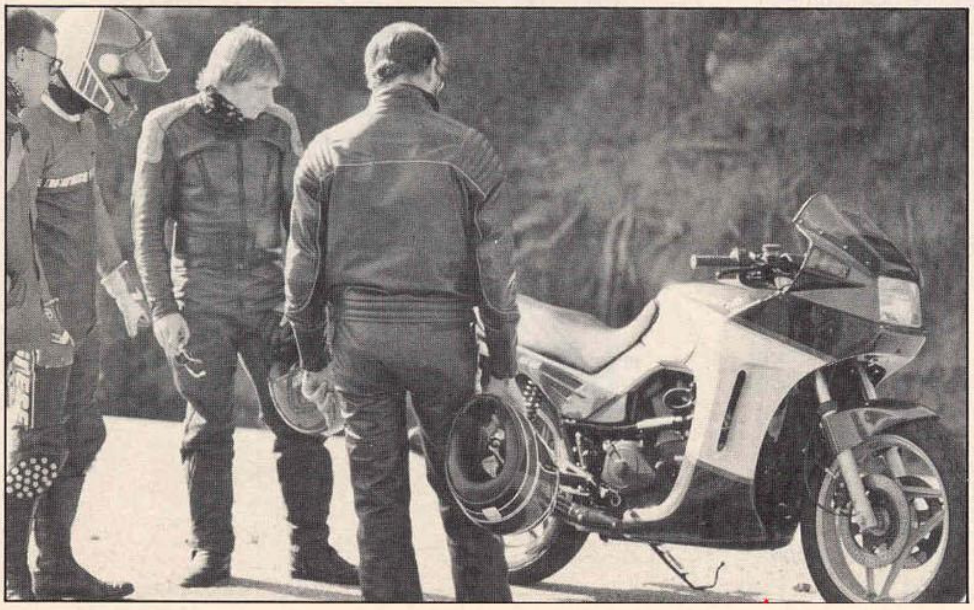
Alazzurra's motor displays classic Ducati 90 degree vee-twin configuration

But 650cc displacement gives the Pantah motor a new dimension of tractability.



Fiberglass fairing and sleek bodywork give Alazzurra modern looks

The body of a Japanese middleweight and the soul of an Italian exotic.



Ride Review

• After riding the Alazzurra SS, I've decided I *must* have one—as a training device. Never before have I put so much effort into making a bike go . . . uh . . . fast.

Yes, the way I figure it, I'll spend five days a week riding the Cagiva, and by Sunday I'll be ready for *anything.* The clutch and front brake will prepare all ten fingers with protective callouses and plenty of strength. After a week of wrestling with the Cagiva's steering, I'll be ready to get back into motocross. And finally, the hard seat will leave me qualified for a transcontinental run.

But don't get me wrong, the Cagiva does have a strong point of its own. In fact, the motor ranks as one of my favorites in the middleweight class. The broad powerband makes it a great tight-roads motor, but the rest of the bike will make those roads a workout.

—Mike Gillies

• I really didn't know what to expect the first time I threw a leg over Cagiva's Alazzurra. After all, though I've never been much of a Ducatiphile, I'm well aware of the bike's Ducati heritage. As a result, I expected the bike to ooze enough tradition to stain my pant legs, and possess enough quirks to make Howard Hughes seem well-adjusted.

What I didn't expect, though, was a motor that far outshines its chassis. Because while the Ducati motor puts out the kind of power most twins aspire to, the Alazzurra's high-effort controls and bone-shaking suspension response could put a hardtail Harley to shame. So at least now I can understand the attraction some riders feel toward Ducati, but until Cagiva comes up with a fix for the *rest* of the bike, I'll be happy to admire the Alazzurra from afar. *—Jim Miller*

• There's another Ducati in my past—a powder-blue Darmah SS—so I was especially anxious to ride the Cagiva Alazzurra. You see, I was hoping it would bring back memories of my old Duck and our times on the infamous Marin County Sunday Morning Ride, when together we pierced the early-morning, fog-shrouded peace of Highway One with the sound of huge Dell'Ortos and open Conti mufflers.

Well, the Alazzurra brings back the memories, all right—but not all of them good, such as high-effort controls, slow steering response, a stiff fork and underdamped shocks. The willing 650cc engine almost, but not quite, makes up for all these shortcomings. But I still hope Alazzurras sell by the boatload, because maybe then Cagiva can afford to build a 1000cc version. Then I'll be off to Marin again—this time on a liter-Duck.

—Jerry Smith

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CYCLE GUIDE SPECIFICATIONS

Cagiva Alazzurra 650 SS

street

IMPORTER: Cagiva North America Inc., 20030 S. Normandie Ave., Torrance, California 90502

SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE: $3893

ENGINE

Type . . . . . four-stroke 90-degree vee-twin
Valve arrangement . . . . . .single overhead camshafts, two valves per cylinder
Bore and stroke . . . . . 82.0mm x 61.5mm
Displacement 649.6cc
Compression ratio 10.0:1
Engine redline . . . . . 9000 rpm
Carburetion . . . . . two 36mm Dell'Orto slide/needle with accelerator pump
Air filter . . . . . .disposable paper element
Lubrication . . . . . wet sump
Starting system . . . . . .electric only
Ignition . . . . . transistorized breakerless
Charging system . . . . . 12-volt; 300-watt alternator, voltage regulator/rectifier, 14-ampere-hour battery

DRIVETRAIN

Primary drive . . . . . helical gears; 2.226:1 ratio
Clutch . . . . . wet, multi-plate
Final drive . . #530 O-ring chain (5/8-in. pitch, 3/8-in. width); 2.733:1 (41/15) ratio

Gear	Internal gear ratio	Overall gear ratio	MPH per 1000 RPM
I	2.500	15.210	4.95
II	1.714	10.428	7.22
III	1.333	8.110	9.29
IV	1.074	6.534	11.53
V	0.931	5.664	13.30

SUSPENSION/WHEEL TRAVEL

Front . . . . . Marzocchi, 35mm stanchion tube diameter/ 5.9 in. (150mm)
Rear . . . . . .dual Marzocchi shocks, 5-position adjustable spring preload/3.7 in. (95mm)

BRAKES

Front . . . . . dual double-action hydraulic calipers, 10.2-in. (258mm) effective disc diameter
Rear . . . . . double-action hydraulic caliper, 10.1-in. (256mm) effective disc diameter

TIRES

Front . . . . . .100/90H18 Pirelli MT59 Phantom tubeless
Rear . . . . . .120/80H18 Pirelli MT58 Phantom tubeless

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

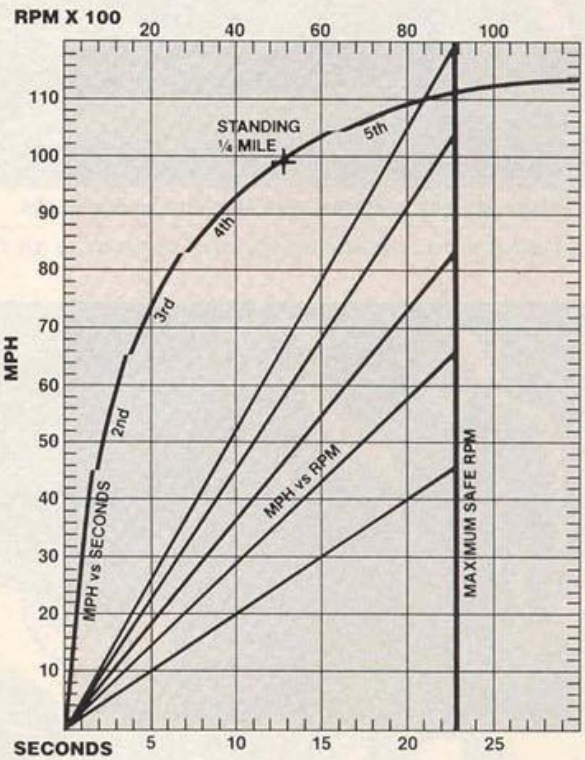
Weight . . . . . .432 lbs. (196.0kg)
Weight distribution . . . . . .44.8% front, 55.2% rear
Gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) . . . . . 796 lbs. (361.1)
Load capacity (with full fuel tank) . . . . . 335 lbs. (152.0)
Wheelbase . . . . . .56.5 to 57.8 in. (1434 to 1467mm)
Seat height . . . . . 27.8 in. (706mm)
Handlebar width . . . . . 27.0 in. (685mm)
Footpeg height . . . . . 14.0 in. (356mm)
Ground clearance . . . . . 6.5 in. (165mm), at exhaust pipe crossover
Steering head angle . . . . . 30.0 degrees from vertical
Front wheel trail . . . . . 4.92 in. (125mm)
Frame . . . . . tubular mild-steel, no front downtubes
Oil capacity . . . . . 3.5 qt. (3.3/)
Fuel tank . . . . . steel, 4.6 gal. (17.5/), including 0.9 gal. (3.5/) reserve
Instrumentation . . . . . .speedometer, odometer, tripmeter resettable to zero, tachometer, clock

PERFORMANCE

Fuel consumption range . . . . . 34 to 49 mpg (14 to 21 km/l)
Average fuel consumption . . . . . 41 mpg (18 km/l)
Cruising range, maximum . . . . . .156 to 225 miles (251 to 362km)
Cruising range, reserve only . . . . . .31 to 44 miles (50 to 71km)
Speedometer error, 30 mph indicated . . . . . .30 mph actual
Speedometer error, 55 mph indicated . . . . . .55 mph actual
Best 1/4-mile acceleration . . . . . .12.982 sec., 99.18 mph (160 kph)
Top speed (observed) . . . . . 113 mph (182 kph)
Stopping distance from 30 mph . . . . . 33 ft. (10.1m)
Stopping distance from 60 mph . . . . . 135 ft. (41.1m)

WARRANTY: 12 months, unlimited mileage

AVAILABLE COLOR: gray-and-white only



All weight and measurements are taken with machine unladen and fuel tank empty.