

bike

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The Bike With A
Seven-Second Guarantee

Confessions Of A
Confirmed Street Racer!

Vitissimo!
Italy's High-Performing
500s: Benelli Sports,
Ducati V-twin Pantah,
Laverda Montjuic
And Morini Maestro
Bellissimo!

Dick Whittbread

High Performing Italian 500s

Ducati Pantah

EXHIBITING PRE-PRODUCTION PROTO-types at motorcycle shows is a chancy business. If the bike is a show stealer, as Ducati's Pantah was when it first flashed a thigh at Cologne in 1978, it arouses a frenzied discussion whenever motorcyclists meet in pub, club, or at those kerbside Saturday socials outside the local dealer. The photos in the bike mags become torn and oil-stained as they circulate round the gang like the last bottle of wine at a party. Riders of other brands trash the factory's promises on horsepower and performance; the already-converted accept these claims just as surely as they know the sun will rise tomorrow. What the new bike now has to do is deliver when it hits the streets.

It's when a fanfared machine turns out to be a limp-wristed flop that the risk element in pre-launches becomes gruesomely evident to a factory. The critics chant 'Toldyaso', while the former disciples furtively cancel plans to trade in for the new model. Total disillusionment sets in. I wonder how many proponents of the Wankel engine actually laid out money for Suzuki's short-lived RE-5 once the grapevine told of its excessive fuel consumption and chain wear, the engine's weird back-firing effect and its gross complexity?

But the Ducati Pantah makes no mistake. This middleweight V-twin from Fabio Taglioni represents the best of everything that has come to be associated with Italian motor-

cycling, only more so. Italy's motorcycling renaissance has been in full swing for a decade now, and its factories have used that experience to become competent at producing rounded-out bikes. In the early seventies their efforts were typified by delightful engines and chassis marred by tacked-on and often malfunctioning detail accessories. The Pantah is a polished, fully-fitted road traveller as well as a finely honed sports 500.

Yet virility hasn't been sacrificed in the transition to maturity. As with earlier Ducatis, a red-blooded engine is the focal point of this bike. And, also in the Ducati tradition, the unit is a 90-degree in-line Vee relying on a chain for final drive. Ducati's familiar desmodromic system opens and closes the valves, but the use of rubber belts in place of shafts and bevels to turn the single overhead camshafts is a new departure. The belts are cheap to make and silent in operation.

The 74 x 58mm engine breathes through a pair of massive — by 500cc standards — 36mm carburetors, and is claimed to produce 46bhp at 9,050rpm at the back wheel. It really is a beautiful motor. It's smooth, flexible, quiet, devoid of crude humps in its power curve — yet undeniably quick.

It shouts up to the 9,000rpm redline — OK, 9,050 for the fastidious — even at a rash 10,000rpm there is no hint of valve bounce or impending mechanical implosion. Precise control of the valves at very high speeds is one of the benefits of desmodromic operation, which substitutes cam-directed rockers for springs for the closing function.

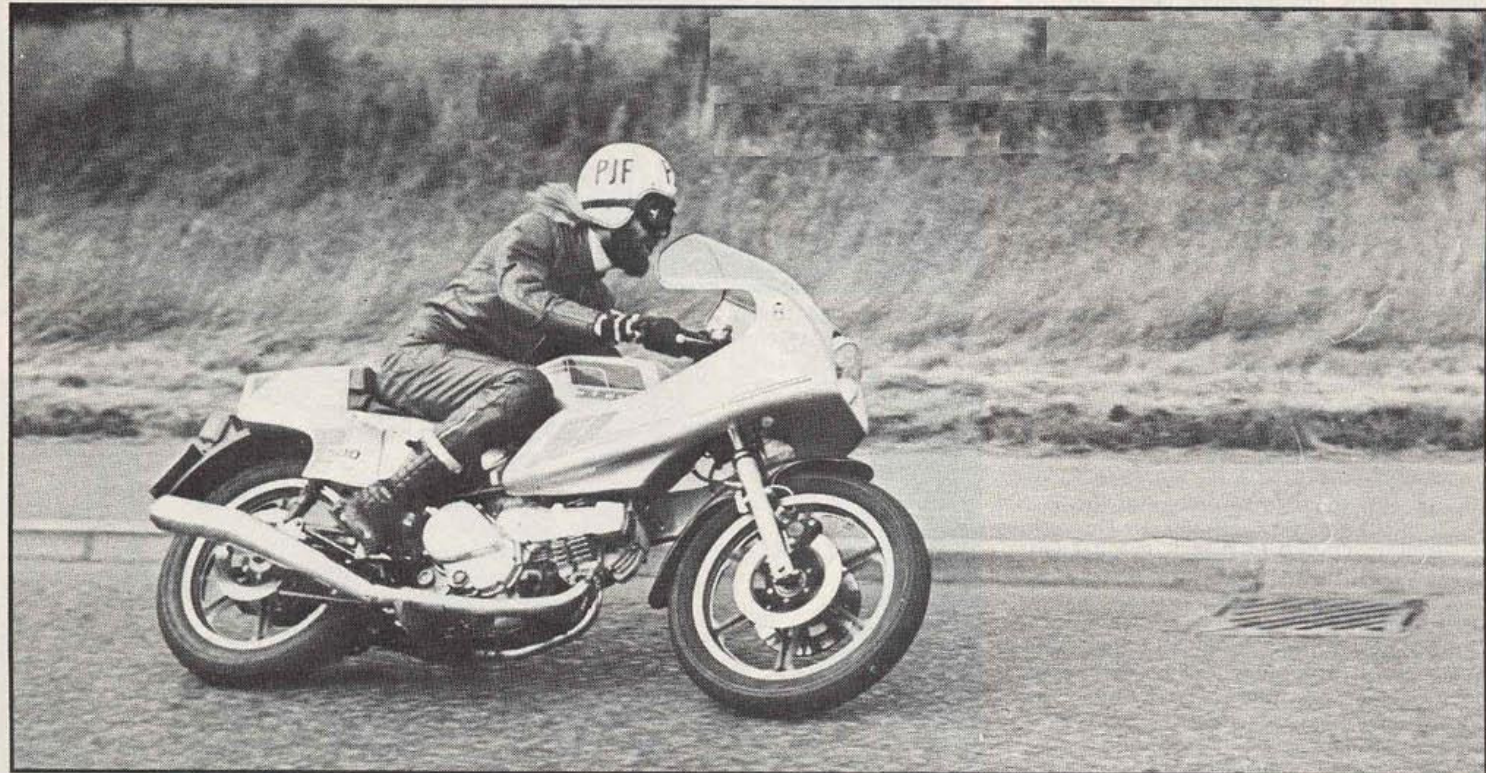
In top gear at 7,000rpm the Pantah is cruis-

ing — the word is deliberately chosen — at an indicated 100mph. The crudely optimistic speedo means that the true road speed at those revs is around 90mph, but that remains an impressive steady-rolling rate for a 500. In everything it does the Pantah's engine leaves an unmistakable message: it's Unburstable (though only time will tell).

This untiring performance is assisted by unusually tall gearing in an era when quick quarter-mile times are accepted as crucial sales propaganda. Getting a Pantah away from rest requires a little more clutch slip than is normal with a 500. And on long climbs or in the face of a strong wind the bike will sometimes prefer a drop to fourth when most half-litre machines would pull through in top.

But riders with a taste for long distance motorcycling — and most Ducati owners seem to fall into that category — will gladly trade the chance to go traffic light drag racing for the Pantah's remarkably long-legged feel on the open road. In top gear it bowls along as effortlessly as many a four-cylinder bike of half as much capacity again. But then, a well-designed two-cylinder engine of the right layout — and that implies an opposed or a V-twin — will always feel less frantic than a four. Unlike most of the Japanese parallel twins, the Pantah has no balancer shafts and doesn't need them; its basic concept means that it is smooth enough without them. And, despite that highish gearing, it's not exactly a slouch when pointed up the drag strip.

Perhaps as impressive as the Pantah's performance is the lack of noise it makes. The contribution of the camshaft-drive belts has



Civil servant Peter Fisher (29) took his Pantah over to the TT as a spectator and was 'persuaded' to lend his bike to the Sports Motorcycles racing team who'd problems with theirs. Unfortunately, though the bike handled well and went well, rider Eddie Roberts had to retire with a slipping clutch. Peter has raced his in club events with the following mods: bell mouths instead of air filters on the carbs, strategic placed holes in the exhaust though all the baffles are still there, a 41t (standard 38t) rear sprocket to help it pull top gear, Girling Gas Shocks — changed because Girling had spare springs available at the TT and Marzocchi didn't, mirrors and indicators removed and a Dunlop KR124 racing tyre up front. It was slightly faster through our speed trap at 120.8mph but was still accelerating. An rpm check showed it to be doing 125.6mph at 10,200rpm.

already been noted, while the liberal use of rubber bungs between the cylinder fins plays a part in the sound-deadening process. But the Pantah is also inoffensive at its rear end, despite the Conti brand-name carried ominously on the silencers.

Some of the bigger Ducatis are equipped with Contis, and are generally credited with giving Europe more sleepless nights than almost anything. Maybe the silencer makers are feeling some remorse at this reputation, but whatever, they've arrived at components that allow the rider to slink home at night without leaving behind a trail of rattling window panes.

Yet here again sophistication has been gained with no loss in machismo. The flanks of the Pantah's fairing bounce the battle cry of the desmo Vee up to the rider's all-too-willing ears, and if you fling the tacho needle towards the red sector you are rewarded with an aural phenomenon not unlike a supercharged V8 drag engine howling towards 200mph from beyond an adjacent hill. Making the motor pull hard in a high gear at 4,000 to 6,000rpm results in a noise like one of the great old single-cylinder engines — G50 Matchless or Manx Norton — assaulting the Mountain Mile on the Isle of Man. The Pantah is a most entertaining bike to listen to, yet the stereo effects can be shut off on demand.

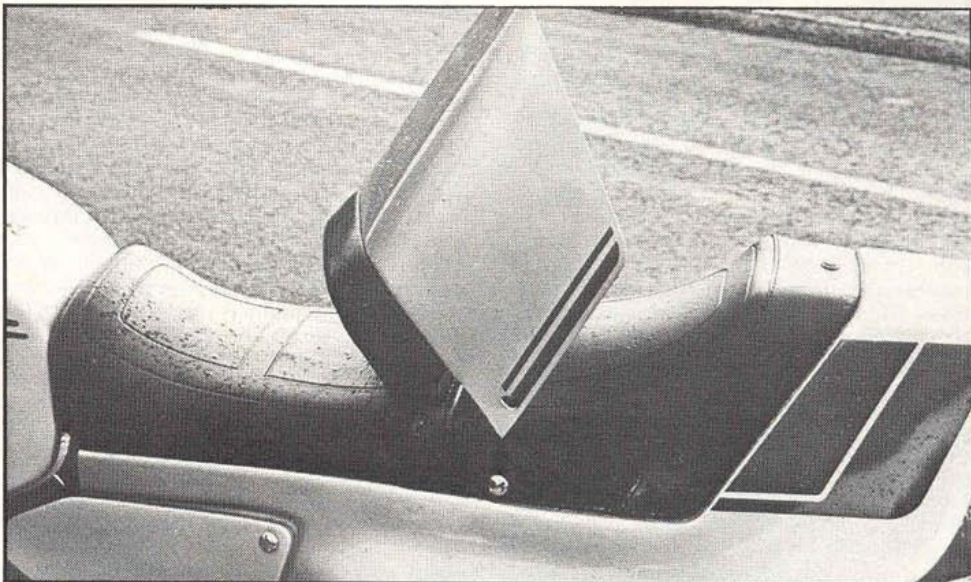
Those natty rubber belts, incidentally, need replacing every 20,000 kilometres (12,500 miles) — or so the handbook insists. And at £23.60 a pair plus VAT they suddenly don't seem such a cost-effective proposition after all. Yet belts performing similar jobs in car engines enjoy much longer lives, and one can't help wondering if Ducati haven't erred on the side of caution until they discover over a prolonged period of production just how durable these items can be. Checking for tension every 5,000 miles is accomplished by removing the seven screws attaching the two handsome cover plates to the right side of the engine.

The Pantah's vibrant engine is matched by superlative qualities of handling, steering and braking. The frame is based on the layout used on the bigger Dukes, conventional bottom rails being rejected in favour of a banana-shaped trelliswork. The lowest main frame tubes curve around each side of the upright cylinder, while further back extensions support the footrest, and the swinging arm pivots on the rear of the engine casing.

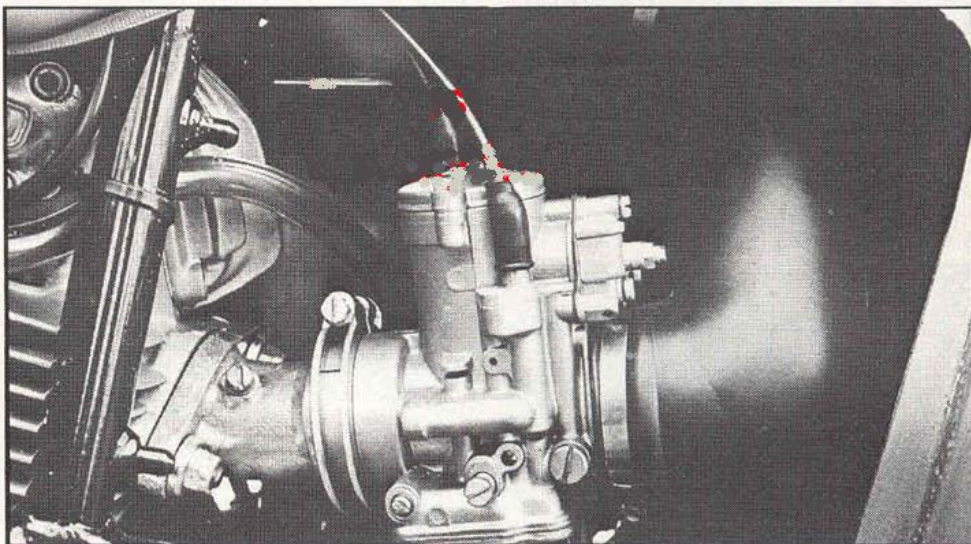
Suspension is Marzocchi all round, with an excellent set of front forks matched by gas shocks with separate reservoirs at the rear. Those rear legs contribute immensely to the satisfaction of riding the Pantah. Popular myth says that Italian bikes are plank-hard at the back end, but it's a stigma that newer Latin street racers like the Pantah are shaking off. The five-position Marzochis ride the bumps well without ever degenerating into soggy. On the softer settings the frame still has enough rigidity to hold the bike on line, while even on the next-to-hardest position there is almost none of the whack-on-the-backside punishment meted out so liberally by the old 450 Ducati singles.

Pantah handling is so fine that it's quite difficult for the average rider to approach its limits, especially on unfamiliar roads. There is

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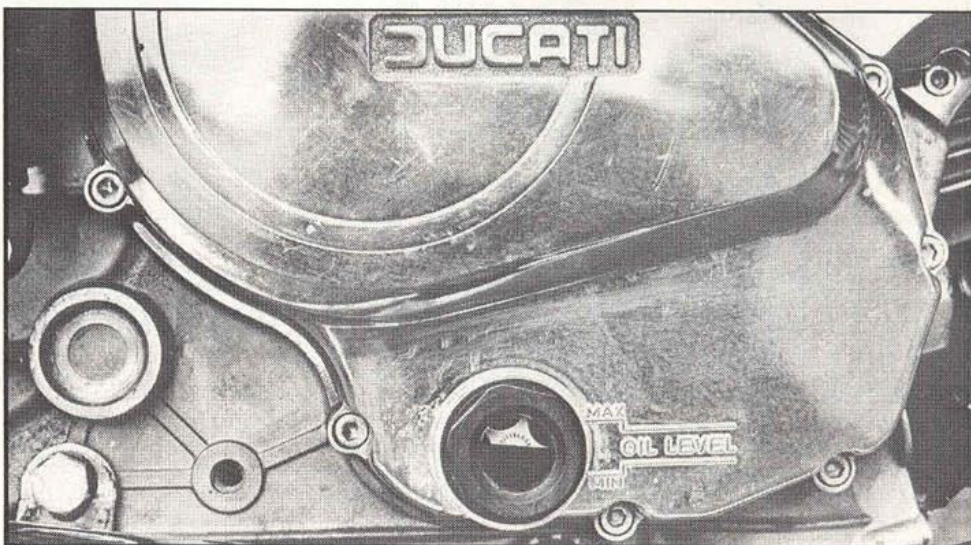


Above: The Pantah has a similar solo/dual humped seat as the Hailwood Replica. Three screws attach the seat — the toolkit is in the hump (for which you need the screwdriver to reach).



Above: The two 36mm Dell 'Orto carbs are fitted with remote choke and no ticklers.

Below: Shades of Jap convenience — an oil level window. Ducati making things easy?



High Performing Italian 500s

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no flex, wobble or weave with this bike. In fact the Pantah is so good that on initial experience it can even irritate. Lesser machines can be made to squirm quite easily, making the rider feel he's performing well by approaching the limits. When the Pantah is pushed, it simply responds. The chassis remains rigid, and the narrow engine makes for so much side clearance that you virtually have to be falling off before anything grounds.

I had a vivid illustration of Ducati handling qualities when fast-cruising the bike at 80 to 95mph along a sinuous road. Understand that I was distinctly *not* attempting to street-race, a fact that may explain my rather stupid inattention to the rear-view mirror. When I did snap a glance at it, I slowed at the sight of a white box in the far background. Too late: the 2500 Triumph hove to alongside with blue lights flashing and a black-sleeved arm inviting me to take a breather by the verge.

The driver stepped out to inform me that in that motor he was able to catch most things, but he hadn't been able to keep pace with the racy looking bike I was riding. And I stress, I hadn't been belting the Pantah that hard! Anyway, this friendly cop was certainly impressed by the Pantah's lines — so much so that he didn't even ticket me. In view of my gross violation of the two-lane 60mph limit his magnanimous act made me feel horribly ashamed of every snide comment I've ever spoken or written about the law . . .

All the Pantahs that had arrived in Britain at the time of writing had been shod with Michelins, but as an experiment the importers had fitted Pirelli Phantoms to the test machine. These covers are perfect for flipping the bike from side to side along a snaking back road, while their broad grip allows the rider to explore the Pantah's ground clearance to the full. They declined to wiggle even when poked into cat's eyes at 80mph on a streaming wet motorway.

Braking is handled by triple Brembo discs that work so well there is little to say about them. You squeeze the levers, they slow the bike; the more you squeeze, the faster they shed speed. But as well as being strong they are sensitive, so that the locking-up point can be approached without being crossed.

During the test mileage I spent two four-hour stints in the Pantah's saddle, periods that would be jail sentences on most clip-on equipped bikes. But Ducati know about riding positions; they know that you can't make clip-ons acceptable without a low seat height and properly located footrests to spread the rider's weight around all the body's contact points with the bike. At 32 inches the Pantah's seat height is not exceptionally low, yet it's still a comfortable machine. Thus 250-mile rides are no problem, while that spartan-looking seat offers quite generous support.

Top right: Fairing on the Pantah is effective and makes high speed cruising a cinch. Inside is a bit naff however.

Top left: It could only be a Ducati . . .

Right: Trellis frame and ancillaries suspended from it except air filter on top — that black rounded tube. Electrics are all packed in tight and access to the desmo valvegear is limited.

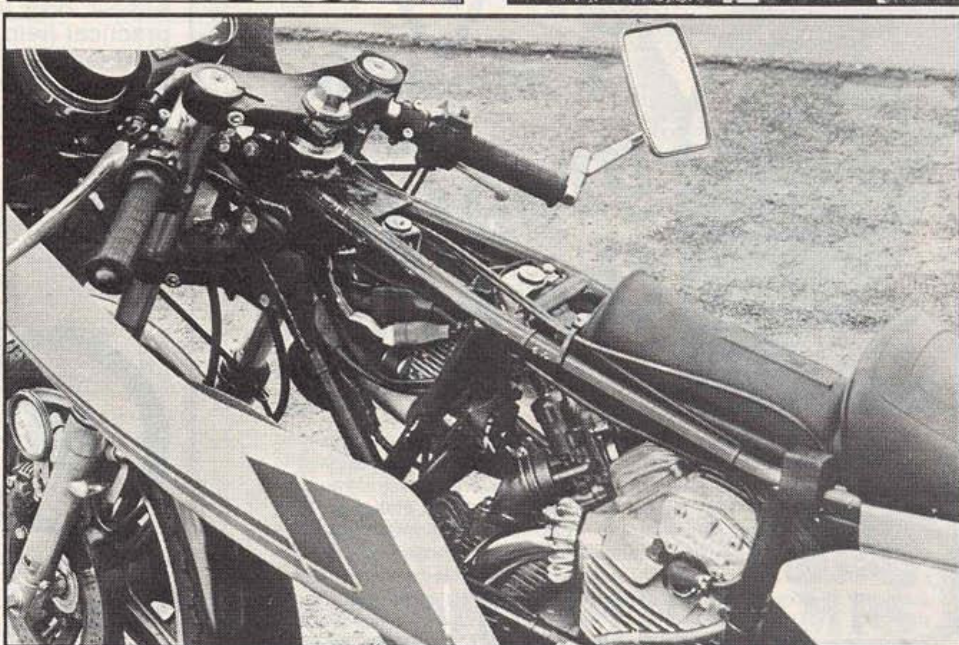
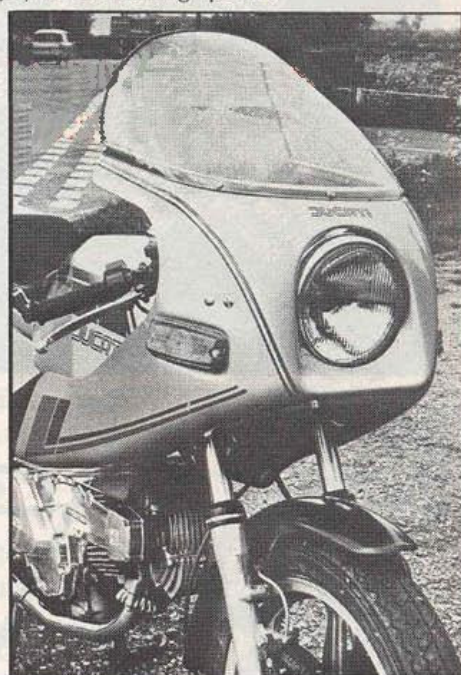
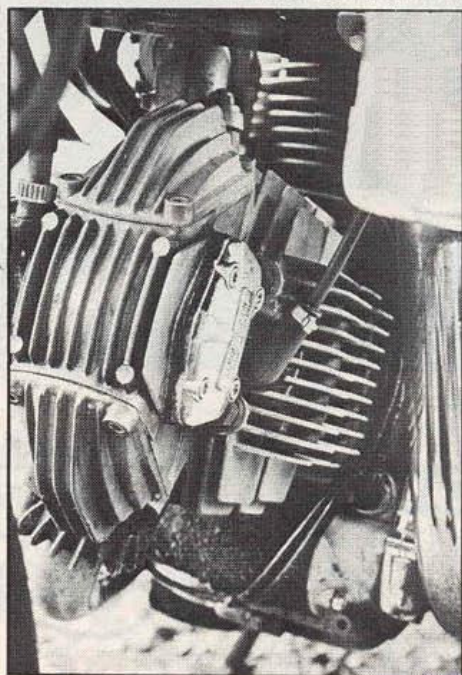
Rider stamina is assisted by the fairing, which at first seems a couple of sizes too large for a 500. But the screen tosses the wind neatly over the head, while a cruising range of about 170 miles minimises the hassle factor in long journeys.

For riders of average height the Pantah's detachable seat squab has no practical value, as no production 500 has sufficient kick-in-the-pants to make a backrest essential. But it's a good styling gimmick, and is easily removed by applying a coin to three screws. Then the three ragged-edged screw holes are visible along the edge of the main seat base — a set of grommets would be useful to plug these. Passengers have to take their chances on a skeletal pillion seat — and there's no grab rail, although, admittedly such a fitting would detract from the bike's looks.

Just a little of the old Italian abandon in the

provision of ancillary equipment still lurks about the Pantah. Efficient switchgear and big instruments are by Nippon Denso — but the rev counter is as fitted to a 900 Duke and hence incorrectly red-lined at 8,000rpm. Steering and tank locks are supplied — but the seat squab, seat and tools carried in the tailpiece are not vandal-proof. Electronic ignition and sight windows in the engine cases for checking the oil level and using a strobe light will ease maintenance chores — but the brake fluid reservoirs have basic and unprotected screw caps.

Generally, however, the Pantah is a fine motorcycle that can only add to the Italian industry's mounting prestige. It's horrendously expensive for a 500 — just £100 more will buy you a v. des. GSX1100 Suzuki — but a minority of bikers will always be prepared to pay for something special.



CHECKOUT



BENELLI 504 SPORTS

sohc 4 cyl
56 x 50.6mm
498cc
10.2:1
4 x 22mm Dell'Orto
52 @ 8900
31.5ft/lb @ 7400
Chain
Multiplate, wet
5-speed
12v 15ah battery,
280w alternator
c/b ignition
40/45w

55in
31in
28½in
6in
392lb
3.4gal

Yes
Yes
Yes
Yes
No
Yes
Cockpit fairing
linked brakes

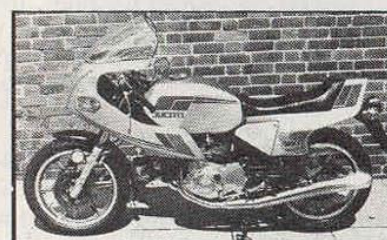
3.00 x 18in Michelin
3.50 x 18in Michelin

2 x 10in discs
(integral braking)
10in disc

106.7mph
95.5mph
14.59secs/89.6mph

31.3mph
54.9mph

45mpg
37.7mpg
£1999
6 months/unlimited
mileage
Benelli Concessionaires
361-365 Chiswick High Rd
London W4 4HS



DUCATI PANTAH

ohc V-twin
74 x 58mm
499cc
9.5:1
2 x 36mm Dell'Orto
46 @ 8500
n/a
Gear
Multiplate, wet
5-speed
12v 15ah battery
200w alternator
electronic ignition
55/60w/H4

58in
32in
26½in
6½in
418lb
4.2gal

Yes
Yes
Yes
Yes
No
Yes
Half-fairing,
single/dual seat

4.10 x 18in Pirelli
4.10 x 18in Pirelli

2 x 10in discs
10in disc

119.09mph
111.29mph
13.51secs/99.25mph

26.84mph
55.08mph

55mpg
48mpg
£2299
12 months/unlimited
mileage
Coburn & Hughes,
51-61 Park St,
Luton, Beds.

Engine
Bore x stroke.....
Capacity.....
Compression ratio
Carburation
Bhp @ rpm
Max torque @ rpm.....
Primary drive
Clutch
Gearbox.....
Electrical system

Headlamp
DIMENSIONS
Wheelbase
Seat height
Overall width.....
Ground clearance.....
Weight (with 1gal fuel).....
Fuel capacity.....
EQUIPMENT
Indicators.....
Electric start.....
Trip odometer.....
Steering lock.....
Helmet lock.....
Headlamp flasher
Others.....

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres
front.....
rear.....
Brakes
front.....
rear.....

PERFORMANCE

Top speed
prone
sitting up.....
Standing ¼-mile
Speedometer error
at indicated 30mph.....
at indicated 60mph.....
Fuel consumption
overall
ridden hard
PRICE.....
Guarantee

Supplied by