

Cagiva Navigator

By Dave Abrahams

Cagiva's love affair with big Suzuki V-twin motors continues. Not satisfied with building the Grand Canyon - the most nimble big trailie around - (see IOL's road review) it has dropped the kick-ass TL1000 engine into an updated version of the Canyon frame to create the seriously muscular Navigator.

Even detuned to 73kW, at the time of its introduction it was the most powerful dual-purpose machine on the market and capable of well over 200km/h while the shortened "off-road" gearing produces impressive acceleration and effortless wheelies.

Hamamatsu's 996cc 90-degree twin needs little introduction but in this application it retains the 98x62.6mm bore and stroke, twin overhead cams, eight valves and twin-swirl combustion chambers of the original. However, but the cam profiles have been reconfigured for maximum torque - and it works.

Although neither Cagiva nor Suzuki will quote torque figures for the detuned edition, it will cruise as low as 2400rpm without juddering and pulls like a steam train from 3200rpm. Above six there's real big-bike power, through until 8000rpm, when the motor becomes harsh and vibratious as it runs out of steam.

The Navigator was reluctant to reach the 10 000rpm red line in any gear at the 1500m altitude where I rode it so I didn't force the issue, just kept it in the meaty part of the torque curve between four and seven, revelling in the effortless grunt and smooth power delivery.

There's very little spritzer snatch on this version of the fuel-injected Suzuki mill and the clutch is smooth and predictable hot or cold. The gearshift on the test bike was slicker than most of the cog sets Suzuki sells to other marques and I was soon able to make respectable upchanges without recourse to the left lever - although matching the revs pretty closely is required due to pronounced driveline lash.

It's all mounted in a trellis frame of square-section steel tubing with two big triangular plates to stiffen the headstock. The motor was designed to be a fully stressed chassis member and is used as such in this application, with a mounting point on the top of the crankcase in the vee of the cylinders and another on the front cylinder head.

There are no downtubes or cradle below the sump but two neat silver plastic covers fill the space between the seat and the fabricated steel engine plates so that at first glance it looks like a fashionable beam frame. Neat, but blocky, alloy castings extend from below the engine mounts to provide mounting points for the rider's footpegs while the pillion pegs are mounted on classic triangular hangars.

The swing-arm is made from aluminium extrusions (did you know that the first all-alloy perimeter frame, on the Bimota YB4 which won the 1987 World F1 championship, was in fact made from components originally intended for doorframes?). The rear suspension uses a rising-rate linkage and a single Boge shock-absorber adjustable for rebound and spring preload while the 18-inch front wheel rides in 45mm conventional Marzocchi forks devoid of adjustment.

Japanese specialists Nissin provide braking and at first glance it's uninspiring, with twin-piston floating callipers on 296mm discs, but looks in this case are deceiving. Lever effort is a little high and there's not much feel for what's going on between rubber and road but, with a little practice, the Cagiva can be made to stop in distances that'll raise eyebrows among riders of big dual-purpose machinery, despite unnerving amounts of front-end dive.

The rear brake also works better than I expected, given another low-tech floating calliper, but needs to be used with discretion as it will lock up easily.

The distinctive body panels have the signature of South African designer Pierre Terblanche all over them. There are no sharp edges or straight lines. Everything is organically curved and smoothly flowing; the fairing is neatly waisted along the line of the top of the fuel tanks to separate the centre of the bike from the top hamper.

Nothing sticks out - the indicators are mounted in neat circular cut-outs at the widest point of the centre module and the built-in rear carrier mirrors the line of the tail-piece, making it the only example I've ever seen that looks designed in rather than added on. Its leading edges are also thickened and rounded to double as a very practical and comfortable pillion grab handle.

The big airbox above the fuel injection throttle bodies would have made a conventional saddle tank unattractively humped and raised the centre of gravity when full so Terblanche fitted a 10-litre plastic tank either side of the frame with identical aircraft-style filler caps side by side in a separate panel. The tanks are siamesed by a balance pipe across the frame under the tanks so that fuel is evenly drawn from both sides, but it's much easier to fill them individually - and so cool!

The only drawback is that the front of the saddle is a little wide and I found that it caught me on the inside of the thighs, which took a little getting used to. That aside, the seating position is superb, the saddle wide and deeply padded, with just the slightest step up to pillion country, and plenty of room for both pilot and navigator (sorry!) to move around on long rides.

The wide handlebars have very little rise but the steering head and upper triple clamp are relatively high so hand position is just above elbow height, about right for a big trailie if a little upright for the high speeds this one can reach.

The controls are chunky and positive, the fascia neatly laid out with speedo, tacho and the usual idiot lights, but in a plain, very unimaginative black plastic panel. It's a cop-out. Nevertheless, the flight deck earns top marks for neatness, fit and finish.

With its upright seating position and a saddle height of 850mm - high for a street bike if reasonable for a trailie - and the wide bars giving plenty of manoeuvrability, the Cagiva easily handles commuting. The motor pulls usefully from just over 2400rpm, the bike is stable almost to walking pace and you can see over most of the tin-tops to spot trouble two and three cars ahead.

On the open road the little screen protects well and the bike is rock-steady, right up to its top speed of just over 208km/h (at altitude - expect considerably more at sea level). The suspension soaks up the bumps like a luxury bus and the gentle vee-twin throbbing makes the bike a very relaxing companion. My only quibble is that the seat is a little too sit-up-and-beg for all-day comfort, unless you're into touring at relatively modest velocities.

It's on the narrow, bumpy back roads that this motorcycle comes into its own. The Navigator lets you relax and enjoy the scenery - which is why you chose the road less travelled in the first place, isn't it?

On the tarred twisties it can be thrown around with gay abandon, flicked around like a much lighter bike because of the leverage afforded by the wide bars. The motor's midrange punch shoots it out of corners like only a big V-twin can go and the trailie styling endows the Cagiva with practically limitless ground clearance.

The forks are a little underdamped, which shows up as a slightly choppy ride in town and as a distinct tendency to "pogo-stick" when pushed hard on bumpy corners. It never got out of hand and the bike held its line fine, but the front wheel could be made to feel unsettled. It must be said that the bike's superb open road comfort is in no small degree due to its supple suspension, so I felt that this was an acceptable compromise.

Cagiva's Navigator is more of a street bike than its styling would suggest, although it's as sure-footed on gravel as any other 210kg light tourer and better than some purpose-built mud-pluggers, within the limits of its street tyres. Nevertheless, on the blacktop it's superbly competent; it'll commute, it'll tour, it takes two in comfort and it'll give you the kind of Sunday morning rides that make motorcycling worthwhile.

Build quality, fit and finish will stand comparison with the best in the world and the design work shows real insight into what a motorcycle actually does; it's cohesive, smooth and very practical.

Thanks to Marco Liberatore of Italmoto in Germiston, Gauteng for the test bike. The Navigator sells for R71 000.

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SPECIFICATIONS

Motor: Liquid-cooled 90-degree four-stroke V-twin.

Capacity: 996cc.

Bore x stroke: 98 x 62.6mm.

Valvegear: DOHC with four overhead valves per cylinder and Twin Swirl Combustion Chambers.

Power: 73kW.

Induction: Electronic Fuel Injection.

Ignition: Transistorised Electronic.

Starting: Electric.

Clutch: Cable-operated multi-plate wet clutch.

Transmission: Six-speed constant-mesh gearbox with final drive by chain.

Suspension: 45mm Marzocchi conventional cartridge forks at front, Boge monoshock adjustable for preload at rear.

Brakes: twin 296mm disks with twin-piston Nissin floating callipers at front, 240mm disk with twin-piston Nissin floating calliper at rear.

Tyres: Front: 110/80-18 tube type. Rear: 150/70-17 tube type.

Wheelbase: 1530mm.

Seat height: 850mm.

Dry weight: 210kg.

Fuel capacity: 20 litres.

Price: R71 000.

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