



THE Quiet

Mac McDiarmid is your guide to a range of Ducatis

DUCATI

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WHEN DUCATI UNVEILED the 500 Pantah at the 1977 Milan Show, it was the first volume-production two-wheeler to feature belt-driven cams, a fact which invoked a good deal of speculation about the consequences of one snapping – not to mention the expectation that they regularly would.

Much to everyone's surprise Pantahs never did get into the habit of self-flagellating their top-ends to bits with broken Uniroyal belts, and the same system survives in today's exotic eight-valvers. In fact, problems are almost unheard of – which is more than can be said for cam chains. Elsewhere, Honda's ST1100 and the odd single use belts, but few other bikes have taken advantage of their lightness, simplicity, quietness, cheapness of manufacture and relative immunity from variations in production tolerances.

The other major changes designer Taglioni made in setting the belt-driven ball rolling were shell big-end bearings in place of the troublesome caged rollers of the bevel-drive twins. This, in turn, required a substantial increase in oil pressure (from around 20 to 70psi), and a consequent increase in efforts to stop the bloody things leaking.

Other novelties included the adoption of Nikasil bores (and a decent air filtration system to stop them and the pistons wearing out), which more-or-less eradicated the piston seizures which sometimes plagued bevel twins. Even so, that old bevel-drive bugbear, clutch slip, was still to afflict the earliest production Pantahs, but at least the factory finally ditched Ducati Elettrotecnica as alleged purveyors of sparks: Taglioni insisted on Bosch ignition and got it, thank God.

BIKE certainly loved the first Pantah: "Smooth, flexible, quiet, devoid of crude thumps in its power curve – yet undeniably quick," we wrote in August 1980.

What Taglioni couldn't do with his drawing board was instantly obliterate Ducati's reputation for dodgy paint, fibreglass and chrome, sloppy quality control, laughable electrics and all-round cussedness. That had to wait a few years – partly because old stereotypes die hard, and partly because Italy still had Friday afternoons. But forget what hairy-faced old fogeys tell you in pubs: since Cagiva took over and gradually got their act together, Dukes have got everything licked bar the price.



Main photo shows 600cc version

PANTAHs

In the beginning were the Pantahs, and verily God saith unto Bologna, "You still haven't sussed those gearbox problems, have you, mush?" The first 500SL Pantahs borrowed the gearbox internals from the bloody awful 500 twin, and they had a definite shelf life. The problem wasn't fixed until the second generation Pantah of '81, which also had revised styling, stronger crankcases, and Silentium silencers in place of Contis. (Like most of the models below, the Pantah also appeared as a 350 for the Italian and German markets. None were officially brought to Britain, but the odd private import did find its way here.)

Late '81 also saw the 600SL. This had larger discs and calipers and a more robust gear cluster, but the crankcases were a bit puny for the larger capacity. The extra poke also promoted clutch slip – only really solved, despite frequent modifications, with

the introduction of dry clutches from the 1986 F1 onwards. Pre-86 charging systems were also prone to going limp thanks to below-par regulators, and early starter motors tended to get waterlogged, despite the supposed assurance of saying Nippon Denso on the side. Expect to pay £1500 or so for a 500, £2500 for 600.

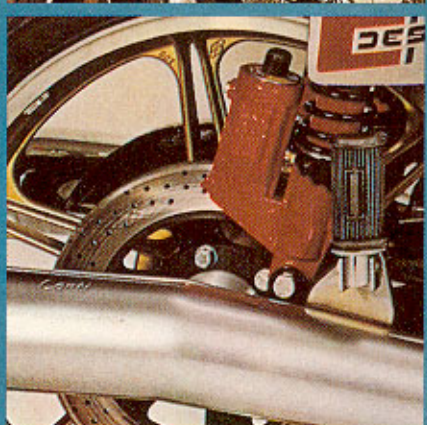
The 600TL of 1983 was basically a touring Pantah, probably the second-worst looking Duke ever, but cheap and sturdy (apart from a tendency to weave around its handlebar-mounted fairing). About 70 found their way into the UK. A select dozen or so of these formed the basis of TT F2 "Replicas" built variously by Steve Wynne, Vecchia and Dave Rayner, cashing in on Tony Rutter's world championships when the factory unaccountably failed to do so. Stock TLs are the cheapest "sorted" Dukes, fetching upwards of £1700 in decent nick with no major problems imminent.

Revolution

added reliability to their classic virtues of handling and torque



antah: details are of 500cc model



CAGIVA'S TAKEOVER

1984 saw the Cagiva takeover, and a period of uncertainty punctuated by the 650 Alazzurra ("Silver Arrow") from '84 to '86, and the Alazzurra GT in '86 only. These were slightly oddball, but '85 F1s had a lower compression engine than later versions, and suffered very occasional valve guide seizures. They were the last Dukes lumbered with the old-type regulator, the one that used to blow up. A tasty little number, even though the chassis wasn't all it was cracked up to be. About 75 were imported over three years; expect to pay £4000-plus for one.

A distinct rung up from the F1 was its racing derivative, the Montjuich of 1986. This came with a high compression motor, high lift cams, bigger carbs, floating discs, Forcelli Italia forks (in place of the usual Marzocchis), ally swing-arm and tank, Japanese ignition, slicks, and the noisiest

pipes ever to grace a Ducati. Around three made it to Blighty. Twelve months later the equally trick Laguna Seca followed, but the Santa Monica dual seat version of late '87 was a bit watered down.

1986 also saw Cagiva getting dirty in a big way, with the Elefant series. First was the 650, which was pumped up to 750cc a year later, culminating in the 900 in 1990. The latter is the rarest (three in Britain) of a pretty rare breed, but also the heaviest and clumsiest. Each provides the inestimable bonus of an Ohlins shock, and none has any particular glitches, although the 650's forks are a bit feeble.

The only significant problem with the oddball Indiana customs of 1986 (650cc) and 1987 (750cc) was their abundance of chrome – Italian chrome. Otherwise they were neat little tools, rated better to ride than the Harley 883 – but far less desirable, hence a tag of £2000 or so for good examples.

PASOS

Remember the first Paso you saw? I do. It was at the '85 show, and a stunner. The 750, of which maybe 250 were imported, stayed in production until 1990. Early versions suffered petrol tank fractures at the front seam. They fixed this, but not the twin-choke Weber's lousy carburation. The 900, with the same 6-speed bottom end as the 851, breathed better, but not a lot. Expect 750s to start at £3000, 900s a grand more.

The 750 Sport of '88 was also prone to tank-splitting, not to mention carb icing, quirky carburation and an underwhelming rear shock. Like the 900SS of a year later (see box), it can be radically improved quite simply. Certainly worth a look, with prices as low as £3500.

Later Sports and the early 900SS suffered some quality control problems, although these should have been ironed out by a previous owner under warranty. Note, too, that the Sport, SS and both versions of the Paso succumbed to clutch release bearing failure if used regularly around town. This in turn gave rise to slave cylinder seal failure, which is easily spotted. A revised bearing was a total fix.

EIGHT-VALVERS

Now we come to really radical territory. When the eight-valve, fuel-injected 851s debuted in '88, a lot of people swooned with lust, me included. About 15 Stradas (the red, white and green 'uns) arrived that year, plus a similar number of 851 'kits', some of which found their way onto the road. There's nothing wrong with the Strada kits that 17in wheels can't cure, and it did have the benefit of rapid handbuilt motors with race-spec cranks and rods. The 'kit' had 17in wheels as standard, plus a braced swing-arm and raucous pipes. It fetches £8000-plus, the Strada grand less.

For '89 all 851s lost almost an inch out of their trail, and suddenly realised they could turn quickly. Clutch revisions also cured snatchiness at low revs. The 851S (120 imported) had a racing crank; last year's 851DS (150 imported) didn't, but it did have a cure for the fuel vapourisation problems of earlier eight-valvers (a simple mod if you've got one – ask your dealer. 'S' versions fetch similar sums to Stradas, SDs perhaps a grand more. But the bees knees is the absolutely wonderful SP – if you've got 12 grand to spare.

DUCATI

"Ducati
now have
everything
licked but
price"

BUYER'S GUIDE: Belt-drive Ducatis/Cagivas

SERVICING AND SPARES

Other than the specifics referred to above, the biggest thing to bear in mind with Dukes is their desmodromic valvegear. Although valve clearances are stable for 10,000km or so, lash adjustment is a fairly time-consuming task, especially on the eight-valvers. It's not a job for the uninitiated, but cost encourages a few Malcolms to try. The result can be burned-out valves, so stick a compression tester on any potential purchase.

Since Cagiva took over, spares availability has improved dramatically. Oddly, there are four spares importers, although only two of these – Spares GB and Moto Cinelli – go in for it in a big way. Between them they must have the best part of £1 million-worth of stock. Look out in particular for pattern bodywork – the genuine stuff is mostly German-made, often injection-moulded, fits perfectly and is usually stamped with 'Cagiva', 'Ducati' or the elephant logo. It's not even ridiculously dear: an 851 fairing, for instance, painted and complete with decals, is 'only' £450. Mind you, 125 quid for a pair of clip-ons is a bit steep.

In the bad old days most Ducati spares sold were to sooth wrecked engines. It's a testament to progress that these days most of them are for general wear and tear, or to patch up crash damage.

It used to be said that if you were thinking of buying a Duke, either see a shrink or take one for a test ride – for a month. These days they're much more dependable, and it boils down to how bored you are with the same old Jap tackle (and its depreciation), and whether you prefer rumble to revs. □

THE PRICE TO PAY

Model		Guide Price £
PANTAH	500SL	1500
	600SL	2500
	600TL	1700
	650SL	see text
ALAZZURA	650	2000
	GT	2500
	F1	4000
	Laguna Seca	8000
ELEFANT	650	3500
	750	4500
	750	4500
	900	6500
INDIANA	650/750	2000
PASO	750	3000
	906	4000
SPORT	750	3500
	900SS	5000
SUPERBIKE	851	7000
KIT	851	8000
S	851	7000
DS	851	8000
SP2	851	12,000

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● Guide prices are quoted as the lowest figures you could realistically expect to pay for an example in good condition bearing in mind its age and mileage. Expect to pay more for a concours one, especially from a dealer.

SIX HOT ONES



Laguna Seca: mean machine



Cagiva Elefant: rare beast



900SS: brilliant on paper



851: check the spec

1983 650SL

The 650SL had the first of the long-stroke motors. It was a real good 'un – undoubtedly the best of the Pantahs. They're red and yellow, reverted to a cable-operated clutch, and you can't miss 'em – either of 'em: only two arrived in Britain. Apart from Paul Smart's Imola-winning racer, there isn't a rarer Duke in the country. Name your price.

1986 ALAZZURA GT

The GT had a fuller fairing than the stock Alazzurra of '84 – '86, plus a hydraulic clutch. Both proved deeply unpopular. This was initially thought to be a reaction to their 'Cagiva' badging, but even bodging 'Ducati' on the tank made not a blind bit of difference. Ironically, they were the most sorted Dukes to date, very reliable and vastly underrated.

1987 LAGUNA SECA

If the F1 series is the archetypal lean, raw Ducati, then the Seca is the meanest of the lot. A road-legal fantasy, including all the Montjuich's goodies (except slicks), as well as Marvik wheels, mirrors, indicators and choice of single or dual seat (why?), it was streets ahead of the relatively tame Santa Monica which followed. They fetch upwards of £8000.

1987 750 ELEFANT

All Elefants are rare in the UK. Although the rarest is the 900, which also boasts Paris-Dakar honours, the 750 is a lighter, better balanced package and a serious all-round tool. So discerning money – about £4500-worth – goes on the 750. Expect to pay maybe a grand less for a 650 and two grand more for a 900.

1989 900 SS

For '89 the 750 Sport grew to become the 900SS. On paper, it was brilliant, especially if you thought the eight-valvers over-complicated. They even fixed the 750's leaky tank problem, but the shock wasn't much better than before and the carburation was still full of flat spots. Konis and Dellortos transform both models; the price will be upwards of £5000.

1990 851 SP

Look, why don't I just read you the spec?: Ohlins upside-downers, Ohlins shock, 320mm floating Brembos, eight valve, fuel injection desmo motor, 109bhp, fully sorted. If looks could kill, to you, sir, 12 grand...