

ANNOUNCING THE BIKE OF THE YEAR!

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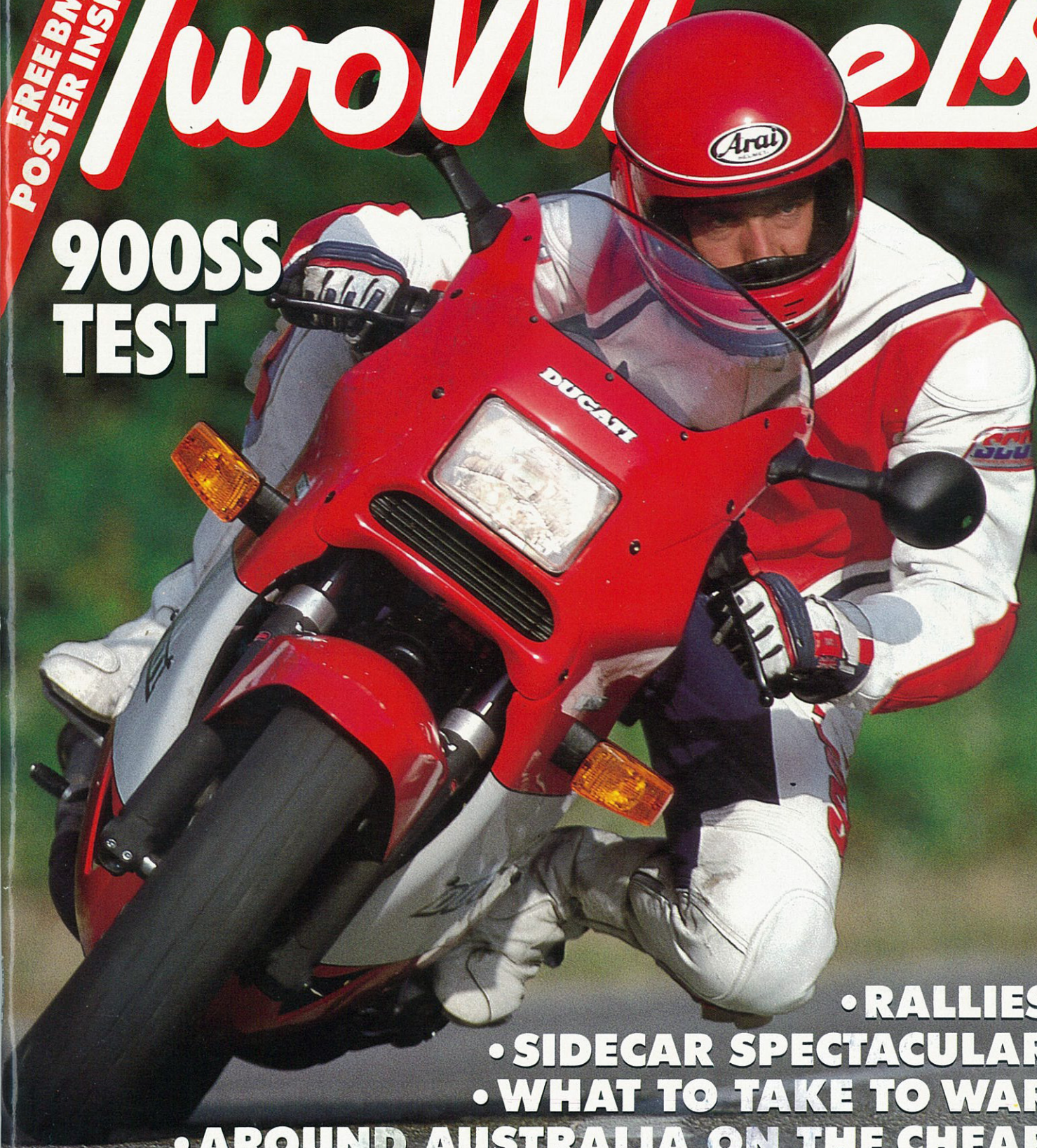
MARCH 1990

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Two Wheels

**900SS
TEST**



- RALLIES
- SIDECAR SPECTACULAR
- WHAT TO TAKE TO WAR
- AROUND AUSTRALIA ON THE CHEAP
- SUPERBIKE RACING • A TERRIBLE TRIUMPH

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Red HOT

Some people get turned on by Kylie Minogue. Others, like **STUART KENNEDY**, find their blood stirred more by exotic Italian motorcycles. Here's Stiffy's impression of Ducati's new 900 Supersport, the bike that put the S back into sex . . . ▶





Red HOT

THE first girl who let me feel her tits was a teenage beauty queen. She was so pretty I couldn't believe it. We would go out and I would just ogle her sweet, fifteen year old form. All my dumbstruck eyeballing did little for communication though and the relationship ended with a whimper.

Sixteen years later and I haven't learnt much, just got a whole lot kinkier because now it's a red, red motorcycle that's given me a permanent hard on. To my eye the Ducati 900 Supersport is one gorgeous, stunning, delectable machine. I loved just looking at it, wandering my eyes along its delicate red and white curves, across the white Oscan mags, in and around the red lattice frame and on to the half hidden, shiny black V-twin. Oooooongha, oooooongha. Bella bella. In a world of brutal blasters styled like Arnold Schwarzenegger's armpit, the 900 brings back feminine subtlety to motorcycle form.

But it was not until the end of the test that we started meaningful communication. Tooling around town and suburb the glitchy Weber carb annoyed me. I got irritable with the silly spring loaded sidestand and sub-standard mirrors on a \$13,000, late 'Eighties motorcycle. The steering felt agricultural after the likes of Suzuki's GSX-R750 and Kawasaki's ZXR. The unadjustable Marzocchi forks looked low tech and cheap. Was she just an exquisite, expensive tart?

I had to know her soul so we went to an uncrowded, unpoliced 50 km stretch of blacktop paradise and sat behind a road racing mate who knew the road and wielded his SFC Laverda in such a way that the speedo never dropped below 150 km/h.

It was one of the best rides of my life. Suddenly the 900SS felt as good as she looked. Riding a hot Japanese four in anger is a staccato experience with tyres



The 900SS looks raw and purposeful — and its looks aren't deceiving. (Leon Faivre photo)

shredding and slipping as corners suck in under the influence of big jabs of horsepower. Then you need the hair trigger brakes and knife edge steering.

Afterglow

The Duke is all feel, flow and forgiveness. Got the wrong gear? No problem, the V-twin motor is there for you with safe, predictable juice available from 3000 to 9000 rpm. Need more brakes? Just hook more pressure onto the four pot Brembos which offer lots of power and feedback. Hit a big bump

mid corner? It's alright, the SS will slap the 'bars once and only once without moving off line.

The 900SS was built to entice a stubborn generation of riders away from their ageing bevel drive wives. It seems the Pasos have not made much of an impression on those Ducatisti who would rather keep rebuilding and riding their Dramas, Mike Hailwood Replicas, S2s and SSs. And who could blame them? The Paso is a wonderful, comfortable, all-round motorbike but lacks the raw mystique of the 'real' Dukes.

Make no mistake, Ducati built the red and white lady for the boys and girls who can still remember the old 900SS which ruled the curves back in the days before the Japanese discovered handling.

Weber equipped Ducatis do not carburete well around town. I don't care what any salesman or Ducati apologist says, the two barrel 44 mm DCNF Weber carb has got low rev brain damage. It allows the engine to stutter and hunt through moderate throttle openings, gum up with phlegm waiting at traffic lights, hesitate through large throttle transitions and backfire on the overrun. The first 750 Pasos were diabolical in the carb department around town and while the 906 Paso and 900SS are better, the problem has not been solved. I'm no gas flow engineer but it seems to me that the boys from Bologna stuffed it with the decision to go to Webers and have been too up themselves with Italian arrogance to admit it — just like the Moto Guzzi boys with their murderous 16 inch front wheels on the Mk IV Le Mans.

Squirt time

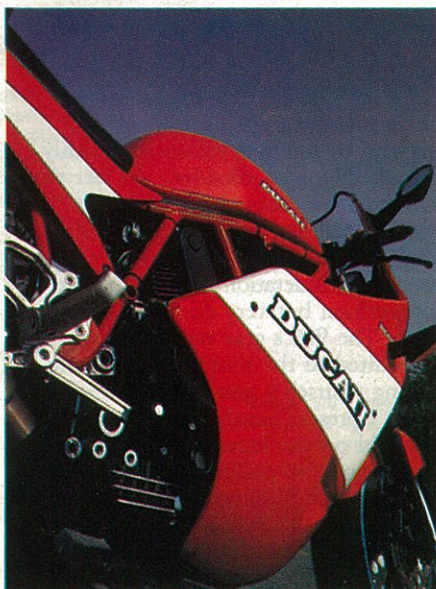
It's not good enough. The sooner Ducati fuel injects their entire V-twin line the better. Meanwhile, a partial cure for those who go trailriding is to fit a set of 40 mm Dellorto pumpers.

The Weber will not worry country riders or Sunday morning only scratchers. With the engine spinning consistently above 4500 rpm the Weber does its stuff and the fuel-air mix meets the spark at the right time and place. But I challenge anyone to ride a 900SS around in city traffic, hold hand on heart (as one foreign road tester did) and declare the motor is free of carb glitches.

The 904 cc V-twin has the same 92 x 68 mm bore and stroke as the Paso motor and shares that engine's cams, 43 mm inlet and 38 mm exhaust valves, Weber carb, 9.2:1 compression and Marelli Digiplex electronic ignition. However the SS has hotter valve timing, different exhausts and oil cooling lifted from the Cagiva Paris-Dakar race bikes rather than the Paso's water jackets.

On the road the lighter (180 kg versus 205 kg for the Paso) and slightly warmer SS will take the Paso out in roll-ons once the revs get past the 6500 rpm mark.

Carb hiccups aside, the 900's power band is flat and sumptuous. It gets cooking between 3000 and 3500 rpm and just keeps doling out power and torque through to a maximum 61 kW at 8400 rpm. While redline is at 9000 rpm and all the ponies have bolted 600 revs before that, the 900 loves to spin. I remember getting it on in fourth gear



Top: The sidestand is tricky and could cause a silly fall. Centre: Front forks are cheap but work pretty well. Four-piston brakes are excellent — bounds ahead of the Paso's twin-pots. 17 inch wheels also make for a drastic improvement. Bottom: Yum! (Roland Brown photos)

and taking a glance at the tach just before shifting. To my horror the needle was drifting happily through 10,000 rpm — this on a bike with less than 2000 km on the dial!

Feel first

The 900 is around 20 kW shy of Japanese 750 repli-racers but is more forgiving, tractable and spiritual. To my mind the V-twin is the perfect motorcycle motivator. Under 220 km/h and especially through the tight stuff a 900SS rider will either be with or in front of his 750-four mounted mates. In the cold light of the timing traps I guesstimate the SS would reel in a quarter mile in the low 12s. The bike sprints to an indicated 210 km/h in top, trundles to 220 km/h and then starts crawling. A well run-in motor may have the answer to the 230 km/h question but I didn't have the bike long enough to find out.

Low frequency vibration is always there and gets slightly uncomfortable during a fistful of revs, but my hands and feet stayed awake through a long drone down the Hume Highway. The vibes are a little sharper through the SS frame compared to the Paso but still not a problem.

Clutch and grab

The bottom end is the same as fitted to the 851 and 906 Paso. I liked the ratios on the six speed gearbox with its tallish first, close ratios through to fifth and an overdrive top but disliked the notchy action. It is impossible to find neutral without a tap dance. The test bike had a mere 700 km on it when picked up and Ducati gearboxes definitely improve with age, but I can't see the neutral problem mellowing out.

The hydraulic dry clutch is firm but easy to use with a smooth take-up. However it gets grabby when hot and starts to make strange howling noises during swift takeoffs which become necessary with a combination of phlegmed-up motor and tall first gear.

Five years ago the 900SS's trellis space frame would have looked radical — these days it looks traditional. The red painted chrome moly frame is virtually identical to that on the discontinued 750 Sport bar a bit more beef around the steering head.

The suspension works better than it has a right to, especially the rear which is a straight cantilever monoshock devoid of any rising rate trickery. This set-up was first seen on the F1 750. Going real hard over bumps the Marzocchi sprung rear end bounced a bit but there was no wallow or weave, just the odd twitch. ▶

Red HOT

Rear end comfort was surprising with compliance and ride freeways ahead of the genitalia busting antics of those old twin shock bevel drive Dukes.

Hidden fiddle

Rebound damping adjustment on the rear shock is virtually infinite with close to sixty settings from zilch to harder than a banker's heart. Getting at the damping adjustment is fairly simple while fiddling with the ring and collar preload adjuster requires unbolting the tank.

Up front the braced 40 mm Marzocchi forks worked well for my ten and a half stone frame which was a good thing because unlike the Paso's M1R front end the SS gets cheaper, non-adjustable forks. The forks give a firm ride with far

less stiction than earlier Marzocchi forks but are not in the same class as say the miracle front end fitted to Kawasaki's ZXR750. Like the rear end, the front forks had a tendency to bounce off bumps at speed.

Steering is on the slow side with 27 degrees of rake and 122 mm of trail cranked at the end of a longish 1450 mm wheelbase. It likes to be told where to go but its svelte 180 kg mean the commands do not have to be backed up with loads of muscle. Compared to an old 900SS the Supersport is a sharp and easy steerer.

While the suspension and frame on the 900 is very similar to the 750 Sport, wheels and brakes are not. The 750 carried 16 inch wheels and the ancient twin pot Brembos still fitted to the Pasos. The 900 rolls on 17 inch mags wrapped in 130/60 front and 170/60 rear Pirelli radial rubber. Brakes are 300 mm discs at the front carrying the latest four pot Brembos and stabilised by a twin pot 245 mm disc at the rear.

Tracking, directional stability and roadholding in the rough are superb with the 17 inch hoops. From hairpins to sweepers the 900SS runs on rails like a Duke should although you can shift the rails if the situation calls for it. With a motor that digs in and torques rather than shredding rubber, roadholding from the giant Pirelli tyres is fabulous. Unlike the old 900 this one is a scalping weapon in the tight stuff. Beware the lady in red through anything posted under 65 km/h — I don't care how many horsepower you have on tap.



ROLAND BROWN PHOTOS

Top: Exhausts give a muted bark. Above: Cornering clearance is superb.

Second Opinion

OOOOH yeah! Talk about a bike to stir the blood. And no, not just because it's Italian. The 900SS is a sportster through and through.

Totally neutral steering, good firm suspension, endless cornering clearance, brilliant sporting ergonomics, top brakes, feather-like weight — you can really make this thing dance. It'll do *exactly* what you want, when you want. The ease with which the Duke flashes through the twisties and blasts round the sweepers is nothing short of motorcycling bliss.

It's a bit small and light to have the incredible stability of the Kwaka ZXR750 nor has it got the top-end punch of Suzuki's GSX-R750 but it makes both machines seem like quirky-handling muthas by comparison. I'd challenge anyone to get into trouble on an unfamiliar road on the SS.

Matched to its wonderful handling is that rorty V-twin engine which responds

to throttle openings (in the top-end anyway) by lurching forward smoothly and steadily — so effortlessly in fact that I found I was doing 150-180 km/h without realising I'd passed the 130 mark at times. Not like the frenetic gear-swapping acceleration of the Japanese competition but very deceptive all the same. The 900's gear ratios are high but well-suited to the torquey motor, and finding yourself a gear too high or low doesn't present nearly the adverse effect it would on the Japanese bikes. And it comes closer to pulling redline in top gear than the Japanese.

Falling for the 900SS Ducati came in two stages for me. The first was during a photo session, following another bike through the same 45 km/h corner again and again. 'Close and hard' were the photographer's instructions. I could position myself just where I wanted with no effort. Meanwhile I could see the other bike wallowing through the same

line each time, only a few feet away.

And the second stage was at 210 km/h (flat out in top) heeled over in a sweeper, the front end only mildly touchy on the bumps, a flash of horror on the on-coming driver's face as we went by at a passing speed of about 280 km/h, and all sorts of philosophical, contented and elated thoughts running amuck in my mind. One of those moments when the world is rosy and everything's as it should be.

It's one very impressive machine. As a weapon up any mountain road it'll keep nearly everything honest. In terms of completely neutral, responsive handling, I haven't ridden a bike that comes within cooee. And nothing's yet given me such a high. Now excuse me while I go and harass the boss-man with another excuse for getting hold of the 900SS again . . .

— Mick Matheson

The riding position is sporting without being ridiculous and the skinny fairing deflects some air away from the rider. A slightly higher, wider screen would be welcome.

Fast fun

Good stuff on this latest generation Ducati includes a steering lock which works from the dash mounted ignition switch, good switchgear, a fair toolkit, easy to read white faced Veglia instruments and a jump in build quality and paintwork. The seat is comfortable compared to the sadistic planks on Japanese sportsters while the rear cowling pops off to reveal just enough dual seat for a very understanding passenger.

Dumb Italian detail errors include the disaster prone spring loaded sidestand (there is no centrestand), joke 45W headlight, bolts vibrating loose, shaky, narrow-view mirrors and idiot lights which are invisible in sunlight. Steering travel is identical to the old 900SS — the QEII can pull more radical U-turns. Road gravel blasted off most of the paint on the bellypan.

The twin exhausts sounded like magic to my ADR39(a) infected ears. They grumble at low revs and give out a mellow bellow up high.

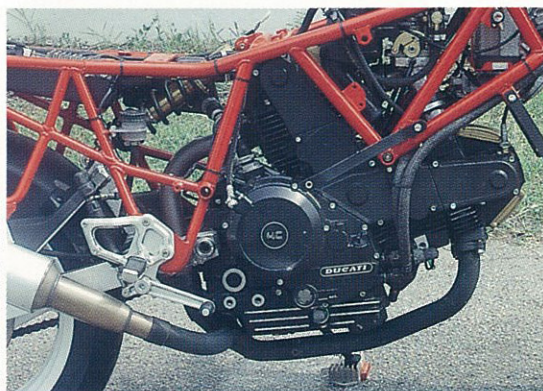
I want one but I know ownership would be a love/hate saga. During the week I would grumble at her town manners and ogle her lithe form while getting more and more frantic for clean roads. On the weekends we would go away and have fast, dirty fun. Maybe we would never come back.

LEON FAIVRE PHOTO



Below: Air cooled cylinders mount to 851 bottom end. Note frame and cantilever shock.

ROLAND BROWN PHOTO



ENGINE

Air/oil cooled, 90 degree V-twin four stroke mounted in-line with frame. Belt driven double overhead camshafts. Two valves per cylinder, desmodromic operation. One-piece crankshaft with roller main bearings, plain big-end bearings. Wet sump lubrication.

Claimed max. power 61 kW at 8400 rpm. Claimed max. torque Not available Bore and stroke 92 x 68 mm Displacement 904 cc Compression ratio 9.2:1 Maximum engine speed 9000 rpm Carburation Twin-throat 44 DCNF Weber Air filtration Paper element Starter system Electric only Ignition Electronic

Fuel Consumption

Touring 16.1 km/l City 15.5 km/l Hard riding 14.3 km/l Average on test 15.4 km/l

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight 180 kg Seat height 620 mm Wheelbase 1450 mm Fuel capacity (incl. res.) 18 litres Fuel reserve Yeah, well ...

FRAME AND BRAKES

Tubular section chrome moly steel trestle frame. Telescopic 40 mm front forks, no adjustments. Single rear spring/damper unit with continuous preload adjustment and rebound damping adjustment. Rectangular section swingarm mounted to engine. Twin disc front brakes with four-piston calipers, single disc rear brake with twin-piston caliper.

Claimed front suspension travel Not available

Claimed rear suspension travel Not available

Front brake diameter 300 mm Rear brake diameter 245 mm

Front tyre 130/60 x 17 Pirelli radial

Rear tyre 170/60 x 17 Pirelli radial

TRANSMISSION

Gear primary drive through dry multiplate clutch to six speed constant mesh gearbox. Final drive by O-ring chain. Hydraulic clutch actuation.

TEST MACHINE

Manufacturer ... Ducati Mechanica SpA, Bologna, Italy

Test machine Fraser's Motorcycles, Homebush, NSW

Price \$12,995

Warranty Six months/10,000 km (Warranty may soon be extended)

Best Points: Gorgeous looks and sound, spiritual engine. Fine roadholding, braking and handling. Real Italian sport bike.

Worst Points: Cheap suspension, stupid side stand, dodgy mirrors, no reserve tap, joke headlight.

SPARES PRICES

These are the Australian distributor's suggested retail prices. They may vary from dealer to dealer.

Oil filter \$18.00 Clutch lever \$47.00 Brake lever \$47.00 Master cylinder (front) \$204.74 Front brake pads (two sets) \$75.90 Rear brake pads \$24.95 Instrument assembly \$658.50 Mufflers (each) \$733.36 Tank (painted) \$890.20 Front indicator \$33.53 Rear indicator \$33.53 Handlebars (pair) \$128.70 Sprockets (pair) \$158.06 Mirrors (each) \$47.60 Fairing (complete) Not available

SUMMARY

RATINGS	Poor	Below Average	Satisfactory	Good	Outstanding
ENGINE					
Top gear responsiveness from 100 km/h					
Vibration					
Bottom end power					
Mid range power					
Top end power					
Fuel economy					
Starting					
Ease of Maintenance					
Engine braking					
TRANSMISSION					
Clutch operation					
Gearbox operation					
Ratio suitability					
Drivetrain freelay					
HANDLING					
Steering effort					
Steering precision					
Cornering clearance					
High speed cornering					
Tight corners					
Cornering stability					
Straight line stability					
Stability on rough roads					
Bumpy bends					
Changing line					
Braking in corners					
City traffic					
SUSPENSION					
Front					
Rear					
Adjustment accessibility					
Range of adjustment					
BRAKES					
Resistance to fading					
Stopping power					
Braking stability					
Feel at controls					
CONTROLS					
Overall layout					
Switches					
Instruments					
TWO-UP SUITABILITY					
Passenger comfort					
Two-up handling					
Grab rail					
GENERAL					
Quality of finish					
Gear carrying					
Fairing effectiveness					
Seat comfort					
Riding position					
Touring range					
Headlight					
Other lights					
Stands					
Rearview mirrors					
Horn					
Toolkit					
Value for money					