

# DUCATI 900SS

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Italian motorcycles are known for their superb handling, magnificent braking, very stiff suspensions, board-like seats and total impracticality — consider the Laverda 1000 or the Ducati 900 SS.

Both fit into this format so well we wonder whether those characteristics were the first five design prerequisites given the engineers.

The traits come to the fore in the Ducati 900 SS because the motorcycle is designed, first and foremost, to win production races. The fact that it can be street registered is almost incidental and absolutely no concessions were made for the street rider which would diminish in any way its racetrack capabilities.

The Duke unquestionably ties with the Z1000 Kawasaki as the fastest point to point motorcycle REVS has tested, yet the 900 in street-legal form cannot even come close to matching the Z's searing acceleration, despite its 52 kg weight advantage.

## The Visual Experience

The Ducati easily outrates the big Kawasaki in two other territories, however; those of eye-appeal and good, old-fashioned character. The Duke was far and away the most admired, looked-at, stared-at, pointed-at, and talked about motorcycle we've encountered. Taxi drivers, truck drivers, bus drivers, car drivers, policemen, and pedestrians, not to mention other bike riders, would all drink in the 900's sleek proportions and tasteful blue and silvercoloring for as long as they could. Chopper owners, outlaw club members and even a BMW R100RS rider cheerily waved during a two-day excursion into the country on the bike and everyone would stop to admire the Duke and ask questions at service stations.

Although the appearance of the 1977 900SS is almost identical to the 1976 model, the Australian Design Rule limiting motorcycle noise has taken its toll on the bike. Those beautiful, seamless, Conti-silenced megaphones we all knew and loved have been replaced by the quieter Lafracanti mufflers which first appeared on the 860 Ducati tourers, and the 40 mm accelerator-pump Dellprto carbs with ram tubes have been succeeded by similiar 32mm carburetors inhaling through an aircleaner.

Induction roar prevented the model from meeting the noise limit even with the quieter silencers filter. The 40mm carbs and Conti silencers are still supplied with each bike as a race kit and REVS will publish a supplement on the kitted 900's performance.

Notwithstanding the muting of the Duke's traditional pulsing, four-stroke exhaust, or the loss of several kilowatts of power, the 900SS is packed full of character right to the top of its attractive blue and silver bikini fairing. The hefty swing needed to get the two large pistons moving of their own volition, the immense reserves of low rpm torque, the fact that the bike demands to be ridden in a positive, firm manner and the drequent small owner-attentions required by the machine all combine: the bike does what it was designed to do so well, engendering a special relationship with its owner.

The no holds barred, cafe-racer riding stance and ridiculously limited steering lock available for maneuvering (the rider can do only three-point turns in most suburban streets!) further enhances the Ducati's character in spite of their being maddeningly annoying at times and are a continual reminder of the machine's intended purpose. The model's impracticality as a street hack is the crowning embellishment on its racing-first, street-use-second design philosophy — it is impossible to carry even a cupcake for morning tea on the Duke without resorting

to a tankbag.

Components from top-class manufacturers abound on the 900SS: Marzocchi forks and rear spring/damper units, Brembo disc brakes, high adhesion Michelin tires, Tomaselli handgrips, and Japanese Yussa batteries are all fitted as standard equipment by the factory, yet in many ways, the big Duke is something of an anachronism.

## A Powerplant Of Class!

The engine is equipped with Ducati's sophisticated desmodromic valve gear (where the valves are both opened and closed mechanically, using a second set of lobes and rockers to push the valve closed instead of the more usual coil springs) which makes valve bounce impossible, yet develops its maximum power at only 6500 rpm. Even the red-line revs, given very positively in the owner's manual as 7900 rpm (and not 8000) could be catered for with conventional (and cheaper) spring valve closure. We assume the Desmo heads on the 750SS, which has maximum power at 8000 rpms and redlines at 8800 rpms, are employed on its larger brother (which even with the 40mm carbs and Conti silencers develops its peak power at only 7000 rpms) just to add exclusiveness and retain model similarity between the two SS Ducatis.

The engine develops vast low rpm (3-4000) torque, yet the bike comes with five close-ratio gears (which may be ideal for racing) and one quickly builds a hatred for the overly tall first gear and the need to drop down not one but two gears if anything more than top gear acceleration is desired on the open road. Most around town riding is done in the three lower gears.

The engine is housed in an extremely well-made, flex-free, high-tensile steel frame, yet the rear shocks are so grossly oversprung that the rider will never find out just how well the frame can cope with the bumps and dips in the roadway (when the swing arm should move about three times as much as it does) unless he buys softer rated springs.

The bike has a particularly good 55/60 watt Quartz halogen headlight that really turns night into day, yet comes with a measly, piddling tail-light that is much too small for today's traffic conditions. (Possibly Ducati reasons that the only view other roadusers will get of the 900SS is a fast disappearing tail-light). The model is capable of ridiculously fast, effortless touring, yet the bike is so dammably single-purposed that any more than two hours in the saddle causes shoulder, back, and arm pains from the boy-racer rider crouch.

## What Are Ancillaries?

The bike has no blinker warning light, yet has a dash light to tell you your headlight is on. Only thing is, in daylight you can't see that the dash light is on, and at night you can see the headlight beam anyway.

The engine is a thumper down low (although drive train harshness discourages using less than 2500 rpm) but will rev h-ppily and smoothly to 8000 rpm without fuss (once the bike is run in).

The Ducati has particularly attractive rounded lines to the fairing, tank, seat, side covers and mudguards, yet uses the very angular engine castings first seen on the 860GT. The rounded castings of the earlier 750s would have been more in keeping with the 900's gentle lines.

Which brings us to another point — though the engine is in a considerable higher state of tune than the touring



5

If you require a cut lunch compromises are necessary!