

900 SS Cont'd

brake system required on all bikes for sale in the U.S. The gearshift conversion is very neat and works well and although the gearshift lever moves further than most Japanese gearlevers, it is quite positive in operation. The bike appeared to have a habit early in the test of selecting a false neutral on the 3rd to 4th upward change but this all but disappeared as the gearbox freed up.

As mentioned earlier the ratios are quite close and chosen with racetrack use in mind. Fortunately the tractable engine copes with the tall first gear without much difficulty, although if the bike was able to carry a pillion passenger, hillstarts would certainly necessitate clutch slipping.

The clutch required a heavier pull at the lever than most machines from the Land of the Rising Sun, but the only time this became annoying was in heavy city traffic. The clutch itself had a wide zone of take-up and performed excellently throughout the test.

Landling & Braking

The Duke's handling, although slow and heavy at low speeds was absolutely above reproach at high speeds. This is the sort of motorcycle that gets riders out of bed at 5 am on Sunday mornings, just so they can explore a twisting ribbon of tarmac without being troubled by other traffic.

Pussyfoot riders are not tolerated happily by the Duke, which works best when a line is picked and adhered to. This is not to say that changes of line are impossible merely that the model prefers a deliberate, premeditated approach to cornering. Considerably more effort is required to affect a line change on the Ducati than on the much heavier Z1000, for example. Given a smooth twisting road with good visibility however, and the bike's cornering capabilities seem to border on the magical. Bends simply flow together and can often be taken at twice the posted speed with absolute surety. The Duke's excellent ground clearance helps heaps when pushing, but a bump partway through a turn can make the centerstand drop enough to hit the roadway — its return spring is rather weak.

The Marzocchi forks worked extremely well, being perhaps very slightly oversprung — but beautifully damped both ways and prompting stability during severe braking on a corrugated hotmix surface.

The rear springs/damper units by the same manufacturer however were much much oversprung.

There's so little movement it was almost impossible to appraise the unit's damping capabilities. This also meant that the frame's stiffness could not be checked under sizable rear suspension movement. We're sure the frame will be up to it, but owners will have to buy lower-rate springs to find out.

This type of rear suspension suits racetrack work where surfaces are generally smooth, but it has serious drawbacks for street use. Firstly, it gives the rider's posterior and lower back a hard time and secondly, it allows the rear wheel to jump about excessively when a sharp bump is hit. If you really want to give yourself a scare, push the bike into a bend where heavy breaking by trucks has rippled the pavement. Just remember you've only got about ten degrees of steering lock to play with if you fancy yourself a budding Ivan Mauger.

Three drilled, cast-iron Brembo disc brakes are the stoppers on the SS Ducati. They offered good feel combined with extreme power when needed — a security immediately noticed in the stopping distances recorded at Castle-reagh.

It's significant that the braking performance when wet was nearly as good as its dry performance.

A clear reservoir is fitted to the very neat Brembo twin disc master cylinder, but the rear brakes's master cylinder reservoir is not transparent, although the unit gives the impression of being extremely well thought out for its location and functions. Hydraulic pressure switches in both circuits operate the taillight.

Significant Detail

Prior to the introduction of the 750s, the name Ducati used to be synonymous with terrible electrics. We can now go on record and say unequivocally that they've

come a long way baby! The Duke was out in two heavy rain storms and was pressure car washed twice and not only did it not stop in the rain, it started first kick after the two washes.

The new handlebar switches by Aprilia are at last approaching Japanese standards, and included an easily workable headlight flasher. The headlight was excellent, the horn fair (How 'bout some Italian airhorns Ducati?), the blinkers acceptable (could be a little bigger and flash a bit faster) and the stop/tail light miserable. A Japanese tail light would remove the only serious blemish in the Duke's electrics.

No side stand is fitted since the rider must use the centerstand each time the bike is started, but the bike is reasonably easy to place on the main stand. The low seat makes parking easy by "padding" the bike and allows even short riders to plant their feet firmly on the ground at traffic lights. The same seat however prevents any more than about 25mm of posterior movement on trips and combines with the high footpegs to force an uncomfortably tight bend at the knees. A rear vision mirror should be fitted to the left hand clip-on as well as the right. In a rare concession for street use the factory has fitted a good quality steering lock.

Conclusion

The Ducati 900SS is one of the half-dozen or so bikes each year that we don't want to return to the distributor at the end of the test. The machine has so much charisma, style, charm, and class it's somehow lacking in words.

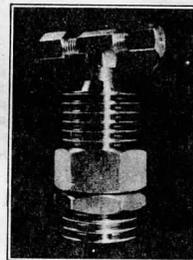
Of course it doesn't come cheap at \$3795 plus registration (in New South Wales) and around \$513 per year for insurance (10% less if a burglar alarm is fitted). But consider what you get for your investment — a motorcycle which is absolutely guaranteed to become a classic, a motorcycle which displays all that fabulous Italian artistry with style, a motorcycle which must be the most unabashed eyeball-grabber ever created and a motorcycle you could have a ball production racing with — on any Sunday.

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