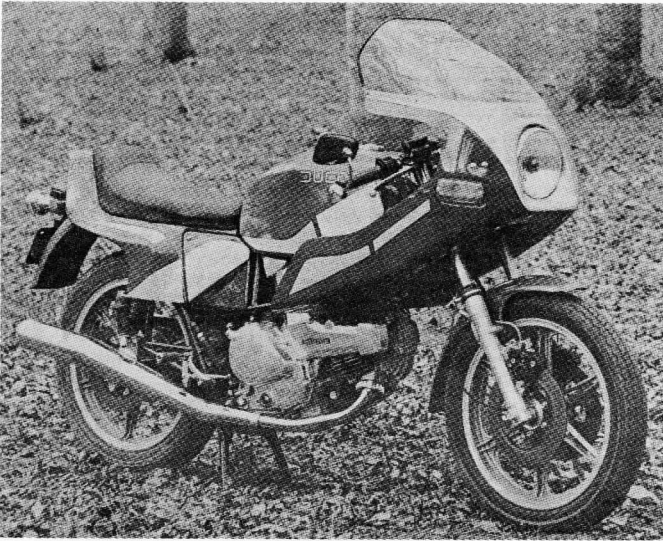


features



DUCATI 500 PANTAH

THE SHORT, RICH MAN'S STREET RACER

Borrowed from REVS MOTORCYCLE NEWS, published in Australia in their October 12-25, 1979 Issue. Publication sent in by Ian Faloon.

IN 1972, Italian motorcycle manufacturer Ducati Meccanica SpA followed up a long line of single cylinder sports models with its by now famous 750cc 90 degree V-twin. Many though the machine ugly, but its good high-speed handling characteristics ensured rave reviews.

Over the ensuing years, Ducati has brought out a number of variations on the big V-twin theme, all based on the same basic motor, and now markets four different versions.

But while the big V-twins endeared themselves to the hearts of many Ducati fans, the 500 cc parallel twin the company bought out a few years later was greeted almost with scorn. Why not a V-twin Ducati owners asked one another.

Their prayers were answered a few years later when the Bologna-based factory let it slip that chief design engineer Dr. Taglioni, had been instructed to design an all new 500, and that it was to be a desmo V-twin. Since that news, little was heard of the project until last year when Ducati showed off a prototype at the Cologne Show.

A year later, Ducati has finally finished a limited run of pre-production versions that were sent to the distributors all over the world for evaluation purposes.

Two arrived in Sydney recently along with a shipment of 860 GTs for Norm Fraser, and created quite a stir in the windows of the company's Homebush outlet, Jack Davies, manager of the Homebush shop, received a never ending stream of enquiries almost immediately.

"How much will they cost?" was the first question, followed by enquiries as to whether the machine on display is for sale. It isn't. It is here primarily for evaluation purposes and as part of that evaluation REVS was offered the machine for a brief ride impression which eventually stretched for three days.

After collecting the machine one Tuesday morning, it was off up to Wisemans Ferry for a photo session, and once that was completed, the bike was taken to Gosford and down the Pacific Highway back to Sydney.

Initially, the riding position felt a little cramped but once out of the outer suburbs, leg cramps eased and the bike was gently put through its paces.

A very firm pull is required on the clutch, and this, combined with very tall gearing and a slight flat spot in the carburation off-idle meant clearing Sydney was a bit of hassle. The clutch engagement point is much narrower than has come to be expected from Ducatis, and pulling away from the lights on a grade meant the clutch had to be slipped to avoid stalling the machine.

The machine only had 44km on it, so a lot of care was taken in making sure no damage was done to the engine. This was later proved not to be quite so necessary as first imagined.

First impression of the suspension was that of a firm but more compliant set of Marzocchi forks and rear shock absorbers than has come to be expected on Ducatis and this was particularly noticeable when switching back and forth with the Darmah that had been leant to us for comparison.

However, pushing it hard over bumpy surfaces in the next two days showed that the rear units could be bottomed out a pillion passenger on board, and on one or two occasions, this proved quite painful for the passenger. The pillion seating position is also very cramped. (Who cares! Joel)

Once out of the city the smallest Ducati V-twin was a delight to ride, aside from stiffness induced in the rider's wrist from pulling in the rather heavy clutch. By the time Wisemans Ferry was reached working the clutch had become quite a chore and detracted from the overall enjoyment of riding the bike.

The Pantah fires up with the first touch of the electric starter - there is no kick starter fitted - and settles down into a very quiet idle. The machine exhibits none of the larger V-twins off beat idling sound and runs very sweetly.

Engine noise is kept to a minimum by the use of rubber toothed belts to drive the single overhead camshafts on each cylinder head and use of a plain bearing one-piece crankshaft also helps reduce noise. In addition, the cooling fins on the cylinders have small rubber blocks between them and this also helps keep the noise at a low level as it reduces fin 'ring' - the resonance which produces quite a lot of noise from aircooled engines.

Once under way, the only sound which can easily be heard from the engine is the gulping going on under the large 18 litre fuel tank from the giant (by 500 standards) 36mm Dell'Orto carburetors. Intake noise is about the only engine noise that intrudes into the rider's consciousness, but even so, it isn't particularly annoying and certainly didn't leave our tester with ringing ears - even after 200 km ride.

Dropping down to Wisemans Ferry the brakes were given their first serious test and came through with flying colours. Instead of the lightswitch like operation of many dual front disc set-ups, the Pantah's 260 mm Brembo units were extremely progressive. The lever has quite a long travel and can easily be operated with one finger. Feel is very good and even under very hard braking, the front wheel was never locked up. Likewise, the rear disc brake is not easily locked either so that the brakes can be applied deep in a corner without fear of lock-up.

As the kilometers clicked up the riding position began to feel better, although the seat is definitely much too firm. However, it is understood that this is one item Ducati has already redesigned, so hopefully, the production versions will be much more comfortable.

The photo session finished, it was on to Gosford and advertising manager Bernie Summers, a B-grade road-racer, put the Pantah through its paces. He felt the suspension bottomed too easily, but try as he might, he only managed to scrape the right-hand exhaust once - after hitting a bump going through a corner.

Using only 6000 rpm - the machine makes its maximum power at 9050 rpm - the 500 was flying along at an indicated 120kmh and seemed to be itching to be revved out. But that came later.

Heading down the Pacific Highway, the Pantah really came into a class of its own. The Michelin tires fitted - an