

Road Test

The gearchange is rear-set, and was at first a little too high for comfort. There's adjustment on the linkage, so it's soon sorted out. The change itself is slick and smooth and quick and crisp. Just as well, because you use the five close-ratio gears a lot to keep the vee on the boil. Production bikes may well have a wider-ratio box. Which will be a pity out on the sort of magnificent roads where I spent the first 100 miles on the Pantah, and also on motorways, where fourth and fifth combine to keep you cruising close to the ton; but a boon in town, where the high first gear of the test bike imposed rather more slipping on the clutch than it seemed to enjoy. Indeed, that component was showing signs of distress on our hard-used prototype, and started slipping at high revs in the upper gears towards the end of the test. I boiled the plates in detergent, for there were no spares and it was cured.

Oddly, the super-slim 90-degree desmo vee seems less liquid-smooth than the bigger bangers from the same stable. Not that such an advanced and intricate engine would do anything crude as vibrate. But at high revs, there's a slight but discernible tingle and the (non-standard) mirror was blurred. It's very smooth through the rest of the rev range though.

Power? A German magazine quotes 48bhp at 9000 rpm for the Pantah; my own estimate had been slightly lower at the same revs. It's possible, even likely, that the tortuous air-filter may be revised before the bike goes into production. Cam profiles might even be changed. Best way to describe the test bike's power is that there was plenty there, but it would have been nice if there'd been even more.

As it is, the power is snappish and full of zest when the revs are up, yet still fairly well-spread through the rev range. As one might expect the 500cc engine has little of the uncanny low-down torque of the big Dukes, and in turn revs much more freely. But it'll pull happily from 2000 rpm.

It starts to sharpen up distinctly at 6000, though there's no actual power step. The surge from 7000 to the red line at 9000 is full of bliss. Working the gears, you can keep the rev counter between 8000 and 9000 and you have one hell of a sporting 500. It's crisp and dramatic in the two gears, and a little more earnest as you work your way up from third towards 100 mph.

It's just past that figure that the Pantah starts panting, at least in the form tested. Carburetion ills were blamed for the unpalatable fact that it was generally quicker in fourth than in fifth, and that it would not take full throttle in top until 8000 rpm had been attained which only happened when going downhill.

I want to be sure you understand that this sort of minor tuning deficiency - for I am convinced it is just that - is exactly why people don't like the press to get hold of prototypes and road test them, for they're not necessarily perfect and one is bound to tell the truth.

Why then, am I so convinced it's just a minor tuning deficiency? Listen, I snooped around Sports Motorcycles in Manchester, and got some info I shouldn't have. During their testing of the bike, they revised the intake and the carburation. Like those nasal spray ads, the junior Duke sighed with relief uttering the immortal words: "I can breathe again". It started pulling properly in fifth gear, and recorded a top speed of 125mph. I expect that was in pretty good conditions, for it's very quick for a 500. But I believe it.

Sorry to dwell so long on that, for it is after all only noticeable when you break the law on a motorway or other wide open road. Certainly, there was no misfire on the less lavish A and B roads where the Pantah showed its magnificent best.

Yes, it's very quick point to point. Not just for a 500, for any bike. It's not just power that makes a good road bike, though the monster Japs and their legion of fans might have you believe otherwise. It's a number of ingredients - and the junior Duke has them all, in well balanced proportions.

Throttle response, for instance, is as important as sheer poke, when the road gets twisty. Keep the Pantah humming above 6000 and it launches with dedication. The big Dukes don't feel fast - they are so relaxed at speed it takes a glance at the speedo to confirm it. The Junior Duke is different; it revs hard, and you change gear a lot when you're going quick. Even so it retains a hint of the vee-twin characteristic. There's little drama as it gathers high speed, and it too can give surprises with its speedo.

Good braking is a vital element. And light weight is as important to that as having the right hydraulic hardware. The Pantah has the lot. Triple Brembo discs each have twin-piston calipers and bite on cast iron discs. Both hand and foot controls have delicate feel and plenty of power. You have to be very clumsy indeed to lock up either wheel; and the Pantah is light enough to co-operate when the tires tell it to stop. Who could ask for anything more?

Handling is the final ingredient. Glad to report, then, that the 500 Ducati has the feel the finesse and the firmness of the legendary big Dukes. A happy balance has been struck with the steering. As with the 900SS, it's on the slow side (the newer Darmah is different), and as steady as you can imagine. I found it impossible to induce any steering weave in the Pantah, under any circumstances. It was on TT100s, still my favorite tires. I never found the bike's limits on the road - I am grown far too wary to go that fast on the Queen's highway, populated as it is by murderous fools. I went as fast as I felt safe, and you have my word that on the Pantah, that's very fast. Such speeds would have your average big-inch multi shaking its head and using lots and lots of road. The Pantah slips through, well within its capabilities.

At the test track, I did manage to scrape the centerstand tang on the left, and it was hard work. Nothing scraped on the right. I was working on it when the rain started, which made me curse at first. Then I discovered the depth of character of this fine bike, it coped so well with the slippery track that I was soon actually enjoying mastering the difficulties.

There's nothing new about Ducatis that handle well. But here's some real progress. It's comfortable! The ride is supple, the front forks are free from stiction, the back gas shocks combine compliance with strict wheel control. Both are by Marzocchi, and well done chaps.

The riding position is as good as clip-ons are ever going to be, especially above 50mph, when enough airstream comes over the top of the screen to buoy up your head and shoulders and relieve the pressure on your wrists. Don't expect weather protection for much more than your chest, though. The fairing is more about wind-cheating, and looks.

Hmmm. Nearly finished, and I haven't mentioned the lifting handle yet. It's a whimsical touch, a sort of hinged footrest mounted upside down. Makes the trip on to the centerstand an easy hoist. Since there's no sidestand, we should be grateful.

Riding the new Pantah is an uplifting experience. Living with it, if only for a week, was a pleasure. It comes into the world with a hell of a heritage to live up to. From 450cc to 900cc, the previous generations have set the standard of road-bike roadholding.

The Pantah had to be superb even to compete. It fulfils that demand; every promise has been kept. I love it already and they haven't even started making them yet.