

features

slouch through the speed traps, recording 132mph top speed and a standing quarter-mile time of 12.5 seconds, but it's fair to say that it was blown into the weeds by the GSX with its 137mph and 11.3 seconds.

What those figures conceal is that on the Replica I was tucked in behind the fairing in, for that bike, the normal riding position. On the GSX at that speed, it was necessary to lie flat on the tank, feet on the pillion footrests and clutch hand off the 'bar and onto the fork stanchion, to get as much body as possible out of the wind to avoid being blown off the bike. Coming back from MIRA along the long sweeping curves of the A47 - remember that we'd already had an adrenaline pumped day of high-speedery - we, er, bopped along at, er, a relatively respectable pace. The Ducati, despite developing a slipping clutch from the brutal standing starts, just held the road - no drama, lots of fun, it was so safe it could have been any speed. The GSX, fine handling motorcycle that it is, pops the rider up into such a position that he really has to fight to stay on. Whereas I could have maintained the pace for a while longer, Barry was exhausted in having to hang on.

Perhaps it's unfair to align the Replica with other big bikes; its sole purpose is high-speed motivation and it does little else with ease. Through towns, it's quite quick nipping through traffic because of the positive control of the brakes - so good that it takes a while to become accustomed to their ferocity - the precise steering, and narrow lines of the bike. But the crouched position kills your wrists, gives your neck the time-honoured crick, and your back a permanent ache. Prolonged town use gets the motor hot and bothered, giving off an aroma reminiscent of a chip pan fire. You get irritated with the gearchange - not the world's most wonderful with several short linkages - the heavy clutch action, and stiffish throttle. In fact, just a few minutes of contact with the real world is enough to send you scuttling back to your own private domain.

One of the cleverest ideas on the Replica is the seat which can be converted from a single, large-humped racer to a dual bumpad. A foot-long section of the rear hump has three screws holding it (and the seat) in place. Remove these and the rest of the seat is revealed. Replace the three screws and you're away. The only other manufacturer to come up with a better idea for these dual roles is MV Augusta who once had a sliding rear hump. Right at the very end of the seat is the Ducati's reasonable toolkit, including a long box spanner which, somehow, is supposed to reach the crank-case oil level dipstick negotiating the one-piece fairing.

Unfortunately, the fairing wraps right around underneath the bike and doesn't have quick-release catches such as Dzus fasteners. It's an effective shape, penetrating the wind with no trace of instability, well-finished and securely mounted at the front, at the sides and at top, across the steering head nut. The tank has a small elastic strap at the back but is also bolted to the chassis at the front. Not much steering lock comes with the Replica and what there is is further restricted by the proximity of the 'bar ends to the tank when turning, pinning down your thumbs.

The lack of sidepanels (which are fitted to the 900SS) gives good access to the battery on the left, and rear carb on the right, but not a lot of security. The bike worries me with its trust in humanity since there's no protection for the toolkit and a number of parts can be got at easily. However, the front carb is tucked away inside the fairing so deeply that it requires the arm and wrist of a rose-jointed monkey to perform the necessary action of tickling the carb for cold starts.

No choke or air filters are fitted to the monster 40mm Dell'Ortos, just a wire mesh grill to fend off inhaled leaves, jeans and legs. And with the front carb's bellmouth pointing invitingly skywards, it's advisable to carry a small polyethylene bag to put over it and so prevent rain entering. The bike starts easily, thanks to the electronic Bosch ignition which provides a nice progressive spark advance.

The engine, transmission and chassis are virtually identical to the 900SS apart from the rear shock absorbers being 20mm (0.78 in.) longer. This is to accommodate the extra 38lb weight of the fairing, bigger tank, brackets etc., and also because the rider is sitting further rearward. These shocks are still the one-way damped Cerianis we complained about when we tested the 900SS (Nov. 78) and don't match the superlative performance of the double-action Marzocchi forks. These absorb bumps without wallowing, track accurately through even the longest sweeping bends and provide gallons of feedback on what the Pirelli Phantom tires are up to - usually gripping like hell. They run at high pressures, 29lb/sq in in front and 36lb/sq in rear.

With the full fairing having such good aerodynamics, the Replica ran up to the redline in fifth gear easily for the top speed tests. Ducati repeatedly advise that 7,900rpm is the absolute limit with maximum power at 7,000rpm. But it's probably from the bottom line that the Duke's power is best exploited. The desmo valve gear allows a ridiculous amount of valve open time (and there's special racing cams available which extend this even further), and power simply floods in.

The Replica comes with standard SS gearing, having a 15/36t final drive but all sorts of other sprockets are available including a 35t which would raise top speed by about 3-4mph. This would also further increase the miles per gallon which is already pretty fantastic at an overall 56mpg including several hard riding sessions. First gear is fairly tall, needing more clutch slip than the average Jap to pull away, but after that the gears are closely spaced.

Ideally, the Hailwood Replica, like the standard 900SS, is for the biker who either has alternative rat transport for mundane things such as getting to work, picking up spares and collecting the washing, or who lives within walking distance of all these routines. Obviously, you've gotta have a lotta dough as well and, at 2,899 Pounds, you're not really getting much for your loot. It's a fairly basic package - no mirrors, for instance - with a confined, selected role. Now, why am I determined to get mine this year?



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