

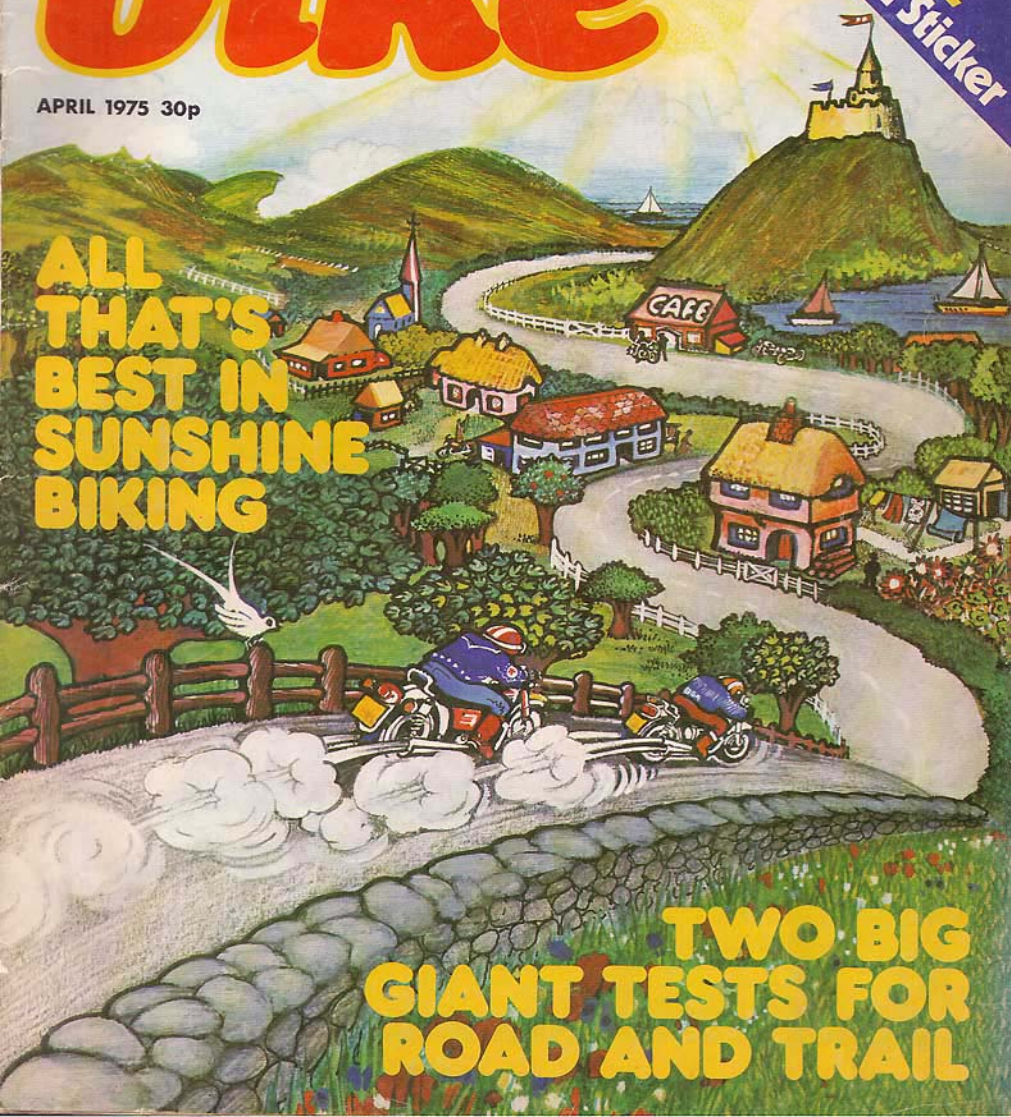
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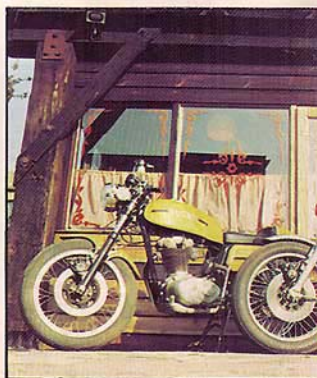
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TWO BIG
GIANT TESTS FOR
ROAD AND TRAIL








GIANT TEST

Spring Fever

What we wanted was good time biking on a sane man's budget. What we got, with a 450 Desmo Ducati and Kawasaki's new KZ400, was pretty close to the ideal.

TESTERS PHIL MATHER AND MIKE NICKS
PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN WALLACE



WHILE THE oil crisis and all its dire implications is here to stay, denizens of the Western world are doing their frantic best to stave off the worst of its ill effects. In biking, there's already a swing towards more practical, less extreme machinery. Which is sad in some ways, because it was good to have been through the days when you could dial all hell into a 500 Kawasaki and not worry that much about the fuel it was burning up.


The descent to saner (we'll avoid that noxious word *sensible*) levels may not be that unpleasant, however, as you'll gather if you listen to riders of the new classics such as Velocette Thruxtons, Norton SSs, Triumph Tbirds. They quote figures like 70 mpg at 80 mph, and even if all their claims aren't entirely true, it's still obvious that that kind of biking can involve those necessary items, fun and pleasure.

So what we set out to find for this test was a couple of bikes that represented the ethos of the mid-seventies — bikes with a touch of skinned back realism, yet the kind of machines that you'd be glad to ride on a spring morning, if that doesn't sound too trite.

Two-strokes were out, and so were the more exotic musclebikes — let's face it, once you get into the £1,500 league that's escapism, not realism, delicious though it might be. But the new KZ400 Kawasaki was an obvious choice: a four-stroke, just

two cylinders, and intended as a very blatant rival to the kind of mid-weight Honda that the nicest people have been riding on American boulevards for many years now. Davick (do we need to say it) Motique supplied that one.

The other choice just had to be a Ducati, for the simple reason that present day fuel prices have focussed a lot of attention on these Italian singles. Having already sampled the 350 Desmo (Ton-Up 350s, August '74), we aimed this time for the 450. Now comes the bit where we Declare Our Interests, for the test machine is actually owned by a *Bike* staffman, none other than our illustrious ass. ed. William Haylock. It was there for the asking (he trusts us, you see), and it saved possible problems in obtaining an official demonstrator at a time of year when importers' new-season test bikes are invariably still locked in customs warehouses or even still on the high seas. Now if you suspect that testing a colleague's machine pressures us to say nice things about it, you haven't been reading *Bike* for very long. And anyway, when we took over the big yellow Duke it still hadn't been run in, so Haylock hadn't yet been able to bend our minds either way. Instead we sent him up north with a trailer load of dirt bikes and tried to forget we'd ever heard of him (just hope that motor'll be OK after all that 12,000 rpm treatment).



Ducati

450 Desmo

BLASTING down a country road, spring sunshine warming the rush of air on my face; stretched low over the tank watching the blacktop twitch and squirm over the rim of the rev counter. A determined right fist holds the throttle wide, the bike pounds unfaltering over the humps and bumps, never wavering from the chosen line — *its* chosen line. For this machine, like no other I have ridden, seems to have a mind of its own. It assesses the hurtling tarmac, the dips and climbs and sweeping curves, and it whispers softly in the back of your mind — faster, faster, lower; lean me, I'm yours.

A confession — over the last few months my motorcycling had deteriorated to a monotonously uncomfortable drone to and from work. There were always more pleasant ways to spend the evenings, always more relaxing things to do at weekends than teeter precariously along oily, rain-slick city streets. And after the twenty minute routine of hauling on riding suits, tugging up thick soled clumpy boots and easing bursting zippers over beer gut and a dozen winter woolies, when it finally came to strapping on that goldfish bowl of a helmet it was always raining, raining, raining.

But with it the Ducati brought the sunshine, dry roads — it revived a flagging enthusiasm with the first ride and as our partnership blossomed I became addicted to its company. I rediscovered a kind of motorcycling I thought no longer existed, cosseted as I was by the insipid oversophistication dictated to us by so many modern manufacturers.

You only have to fire the motor to discover what I mean, although there are some who would argue that looks alone are enough to seduce even the most casual passer-by. The staccato bark of the megaphone exhaust shatters any misconceptions of outdated, plodding singles, drowning what little mechanical noise the desmodromic motor emits, mellowing to a burble at tickover. Mick Walker, canny enthusiast and Wisbech based UK spares distributor for the marque, supplies the 'phones to order in place of the restrictive factory silencer. The 32 mm Amal concentric carb is, however, his own free option to the original 29 mm square slide Dell'Orto.

These are the only alterations that are regularly made to the standard specifications. The rest of the bike, that robust, over-square power house and five-speed box, and the low slung racing set-up, are stock all the way from far flung Bologna. Make no mistake though, the Desmo designation stands for production racer, not café racer. This is no tarted up road sluggard with sipping, over geared, over silenced and detuned

motor and the handling dexterity of a pogo stick.

Mick Walker advised a running in period of 1,000 miles — over 300 miles more than the factory's 1,000 kilometres, but with a rev maximum set at four and a half grand the Ducati was already turning speeds well into the sixties. After the first oil change — the Ducati prefers Shell or BP to any other — we eased the performance up little by little until at the close we would nudge six grand through the gears. At this stage oil began weeping from behind the ignition pick-up cover and I fixed a fractured rear light earth contact for the second time around.

The oil leak was the result of a failed seal which was quickly replaced during the 1,000 mile service. Ignition timing and valve clearances were checked, the rear chain was adjusted and the tyres prodded in affirmation that all was well and the gutsy single was about ready for some heady 7,000 rpm treatment. Throughout this period the machine returned a consistent, wait for it, 85 mpg!

Looking the Ducati over presents problems for those who would draw comparisons with contemporary machines. It lacks much of the gadgetry we have come to expect on a production bike — rear view mirrors, turn indicators, neutral indicator — but then it holds no pretensions of competing in that market. The frame geometry and resultant handling cannot be faulted and combination of disc front and drum rear brakes arrests progress with such impressively smooth effectiveness you have to be pushing things along hard before you realise just how well they do work. Biggest omission these days, of course, is an electric starter, probably the most soulless addition to any bike and one that will never, but never, appear on a Duke big single. Doubt if there's one up to the job anyway.

Starting definitely requires "the knack"; you ease the piston over tdc on compression and then *swing* the lever around its full movement. Automatic ignition advance (for those who remember manual advance/retard) allays any fear of a kick back and so long as the carb is well primed whether the motor is hot or cold, the fire lights regularly at the second or third attempt.

In all fairness, and before I lapse irretrievably into lyrical adulation, the Ducati picks up black marks for a totally inadequate tool kit (there is ample stowage space behind either side panel) and poor quality glass fibre on the panels and seat which crazed badly for no apparent reason in non-stress areas. Lighting remains a six volt affair although the lack of power is only really noticeable on grim nights, while in marked contrast the headlamp mounted ignition and main beam warning lights blaze brilliantly into the rider's face — a dangerous thing if you've got a few scratches on your helmet visor.

Believe it or not, there are still a few things we take very seriously and speed testing is one of them. Mike Nicks had

already turned in some impressive figures on the Kawasaki 400 so it was only to be expected that I should regard the Ducati session as a blow for blow shoot-out pure and simple. Imagine my frustration when, after the first timed high speed run, the motor cut out and refused to restart. Haylock paced round and round the silent machine, mumbling curses or incantations or both into his beard; I tried to look knowledgeably perplexed. We had a figure of 93.5 mph and a bike that wouldn't run. Over in Wisbech somebody's ears were burning.

My opportunity to meet Mr Walker was thus born of unfortunate circumstance, but as long as the Ducati charisma kept the sun shining and there was still a chance that I might ride the bike away, all was well with my world. Mick suspected a failed pick-up on the electronic ignition system — handling spares for the entire Ducati range is invaluable when it comes to instant diagnosis — so while we chatted about past experience and future developments the mechanics set to work.

The carb change from Dell'Orto to Amal wasn't really that necessary, but it did give the better performance. Oh yes, the Italian plugs are useless, they fail the first time you give the bike any stick, so they chuck them away and fit an NGK or a Lodge. "What's yours got?"

"A Marelli."

I hadn't seen anybody move that fast on two legs for a long time. Out in the workshop a mechanic had just replaced the ignition system, smiling to himself, thinking "Ha, that's got ya." Mick burst in crying "It's the plug, it's the plug." There followed



Single v twin, 436cc v 398 cubes. But despite massive differences in design criteria, both bikes produce almost identical performance figures.

some subdued murmuring, the rattle of a deftly wielded spanner or two, then a familiar throaty roar. Yep, it was the plug all right.

Before I made my getaway I mentioned the earlier performance figure in relation to the seven thou rev ceiling and as the bike was obviously well undergassed for everyday use we replaced the twelve tooth gear-sprocket with a thirteen. Back on the road though, the Ducati still revved freely up to the red line; even in top with the clock registering a healthy ton plus I had to consciously hold back my throttle hand. In reality — the cold light of the speed trap if you like — that extra tooth was worth another six miles per. Nothing to go into raptures over I guess, but acceleration was affected not one bit (the Ducati continued to lick the Kawa off the line), fuel consumption on more sober days hovered around a remarkable 80 mpg, and tireless cruising speeds were comfortably up in the eighties and low nineties.

Despite my obvious enthusiasm for this single I'll have to admit it's not really the sort of bike I'd want to own personally. For a start I'd want a dual seat and, dare I add to my blasphemy, touring bars; and for a roadster, the gear and rear brake levers could use a touch of chrome. No, I can't say I really noticed the engine vibration at all; there are no footrest rubbers and the bar grips are really thin, so had it been as bad as some make out I would have been reduced to a quivering jelly inside five minutes riding.

I'm purposely missing the point of course — the Desmo is a pure racer, a dream machine straight from the crate, no messing with custom goodies in a desperate bid for "that look". How sterile those glassed-in battleships appear in the light of the nimble Duke. Motorcycling is not all straight lines and jumping on everything in white faced desperation at the first hint of a bend; motorcycling, and the Ducati 450 Desmo, is keeping it on all the way.

Phil Mather

kawasaki

KZ 400

BY AN ODD paradox, riding the KZ 400 made me recall something I'd read recently about the problems of British Rail. Apparently, at intervals of about every half year, the well meaning politicians and/or civil servants who happen to be wielding power at the time decide that poor old BR's plans for future spending need some revision, either upwards or downwards. This stop-go tampering has bungled on for some considerable time now, and all it has achieved

26 **bike**

is to place BR's overall strategies in a state of shambles, and to shatter the confidence and nerves of the very people in the organisation who might be able to effect a recovery.

Clearly, no such typically British woolly-mindedness is tolerated out at Kawasaki Heavy Industries. They surely have one of the crispest, most far-seeing planning departments in the entire motorcycle world — and the vital ability to get their visions to the showroom floor stage with unerring accuracy. How else do you explain the successes they've scored in recent years with a string of boldly original designs?

They did the notorious two-stroke triple range, which matched the ball-busting tone of the late sixties and early seventies to a T. They followed up with the Z-1, which caught just as accurately the more mature mood of what a motorcycle historian could term the late superbike era. And now here comes the KZ, perfectly timed to mop up the fall-out from the oil crisis riptide. The uncanny phasing of this latest move is almost enough to make one suspect that somebody's concubine out there in oil-land isn't being too discreet with the pillow talk after those torrid Arabian nights... (Hello

Mr Kawa, this Sheba calling from Baghdad. Master mumble last night that all industrial world be in big trouble from next year. 1973. Oil price going up four times... same cheque next month? OK, bye now).

With the KZ, Kawasaki have set out to design what used to be a very commonplace item, and now isn't — the do-any-task totally versatile motorcycle. Once again, they've succeeded. In the thousand miles that we covered with the KZ, we commuted on it, we used it for hard-running business trips, we did some lazy type leisure biking on some of those freak summer-like days that kept breaking in February, and it was equally good at each level.

Let's answer immediately the burning question of the era — what'll she do? (to the gallon, of course, and not that out-dated old miles per hour recklessness). According to Kawasaki publicity blubs the KZ returns 100 mpg at a steady 37 mph, which is the kind of meaningless drivel that every bike and car producing company in the world is now churning out in the white heat of energy crisis paranoia. Coming down to reality, we can report that the best figure we achieved with the KZ was 65 mpg on a 40 mph drone up the A1 in fog. It did 50 mpg



Above: Kawasaki instruments avoid modern trend to gimmickry, and are much better for it. But switches on the left 'bar can be a fumble. Ducati falls down with meagre dials that just don't match the bike's otherwise bold image.

Above right: Single front discs — 11 in on the Desmo, 8.9 in on KZ — slow both machines. Lighter overall weight helps Ducati to stop quickest.

Right: Both bikes are neatly styled; right side of Ducati, with megaphone style exhaust, is definitely its best viewpoint.



in overall use, and 43 mpg when the full sweep of the rev counter was exploited hard and often, all of which seems quite acceptable. No doubt these figures will excite letters from readers whose Velos and Matchless are more economical, but maybe the short answer to that is that you can't buy those bikes new anymore whereas you can get a KZ or a CB360 Honda.

The 400's performance made for a blend of surprise and mild disappointment. On the test strip it ran through the traps at over 98 mph, with the motor spinning a couple of hundred rpm past the 9,000 rpm red line. As usual with these ultimate speed sessions, that was with the rider wearing leathers and tucking in behind the bars flat track style. Yet back on public roads, admittedly with the rider sitting conventionally, the bike wasn't that interested in exceeding an indicated 80 mph. It was also noticeable how often hills or headwinds would knock the regular top gear cruising speed of 75 mph back below 70 — just like riding one of the Kawasaki triples, in fact. But then what should you really expect from a general purpose 400 cc twin that runs on two-star fuel?

Acceleration is rapid, aided by a sweet gear change action and five well matched ratios, but probably the engine's best qualities are its flexibility and smoothness. Japanese bikes are not generally noted for low speed pulling power, yet the KZ can be run as low as 15 mph in top gear and it will still move away smoothly without snatch. Remember again, it is only a 400, which makes it a lot closer to being a 350 than a 500.

The KZ has a 360-degree crank just like any vibratory old British twin, but a system of counter-rotating balancers irons out any roughness to a quite amazing degree. There are two of these balancers, one spinning at the front and another at the rear of the four-bearing crank, and the whole caboodle is



linked by endless chain. It really works too, for there isn't a hint of vibration anywhere in the rev range — except at the rear view mirrors, which dissolve into hopeless blurs above 65 mph, just when you really need them.

The single overhead cam is also chain driven, and a further chain, this time a self-adjusting Hy-Vo type, looks after primary drive.

The KZ has been rather too obviously dubbed "The Son of Z-1", but does it really share any common components with the 900 cc four? Well, as the man at Kawasaki UK said in a frank comment, "They probably use the same oil and the same rear light bulb." There are, however, three bikes that it just cries out to be compared with — the CB360 Honda, another attempt at making everyman's mid-deweight, Kawasaki's S3 400 cc two-stroke triple, and believe it or not, the old 350 Triumphs.

We'd say without much doubt that the KZ is a better machine than the 360 Honda. They both share similar performance ranges, but the Kawasaki seems more thoughtfully constructed, it handles better, and the Honda vibrates while the KZ doesn't. As to the S3, it really comes down to how much speed you want at the cost of fuel consumption. The two-stroke is 10 mph quicker than the KZ on top speed, and about a second better through the standing quarter. In terms of general road use, these figures mean that the S3 is significantly faster — at a cost of an overall fuel consumption nearly 20 mpg worse. And as for the Triumph, well, said the tester modestly, some of us are just too young to remember them old-time bikes. Maybe it's the KZ's exhaust note that made us think of Triumph twins, because it does make a very British sound.

I've already mentioned that the KZ handles better than the 360 Honda; in fact, it corners and tracks better than a great many Japanese machines. Usually with Jap stuff we find ourselves feverishly wrenching rear units into every conceivable position, and meddling with steering dampers (if fitted) in a vain attempt at finding some kind of reasonable compromise. With the KZ, we left things as they came, and it went all right. It wriggles if it's really pushed, but then, it's not intended to be a street racer.

What was bad was the Yokohama rubber. In the wet, you can't trust it further'n a politician's election-time promises. Maybe all the bikers take to the bullet trains when it rains in Japan.

Kawasaki seem to have a better understanding than most manufacturers of the importance of riding position. The KZ has handlebars that are a good compromise between all the possible uses you can find for the bike, so that the so-familiar problem of neck ache and back ache never crops up. The seat must be good because we never really noticed it, it has a handy grab rail, and there are all sorts of other useful refinements: the flip-up seat is lockable, the

Checkout



	DUCATI DESMO 450	KAWASAKI KZ400
Engine	Single cylinder, desmodromic ohc	sohc parallel twin
Bore and stroke	86 x 75 mm	64 x 62 mm
Capacity	436 cc	398 cc
Compression ratio	9.3:1	9.0:1
Carburetors	Amal 32 mm	two 36 mm Keihin
BHP @ RPM	n/a	33 @ 9,000
Primary drive	Helical gear	Hy-Vo chain
Clutch	Wet, multiple	Wet, multiple
Gear ratios, overall		
(1)	16.09	18.81
(2)	11.32	12.30
(3)	8.83	9.30
(4)	7.20	7.61
(5)	6.35	6.51
Electrical system	6v 80w alternator, electronic voltage regulator, electronic ignition	150w alternator, 12v battery/coil ignition
Lighting	35w/35w headlight, 5w/21w tail/stoptlight	35w/35w headlight, 5w/21w tail/stoptlight
Tyres (front)	Pirelli 3.25 x 18	Yokohama 3.25 x 18
(rear)	Pirelli 3.50 x 18	Yokohama 3.50 x 18
Brakes (front)	11 in disc	8.9 in disc
(rear)	6.3 in s/s drum	7.1 in s/s drum
DIMENSIONS		
Wheelbase	53 ins	54.75 ins
Seat height	29 ins	31.5 ins
Ground clearance	7 ins	7.0 ins
Handlebar Height	33 ins	39.5 ins
Kerb weight	308 lbs (with full tank)	386 lbs (inc 1 gall fuel)
Oil capacity	5.5 pints	5.4 pints
Fuel capacity	3.5 gall	3.1 gall
EQUIPMENT		
Trafficators	No	Yes
Electric starter	No	Yes
Trip mileometer	No	Yes
Steering lock	Yes	Yes
Helmet lock	No	Yes
Headlamp flasher	No	Yes
Kill button	No	Yes
Toolkit	Yes	Yes
Spare parts	No	No
Other	Steering damper	Twin mirrors
PERFORMANCE		
Top speed	99.97 mph	98.04 mph
Standing 1/4 mile	15.16 secs	15.22 secs
0-30 mph	2.83 secs	4.02 secs
0-60 mph	6.83 secs	8.82 secs
Speedometer error		
at indicated 30 mph	27.0 mph	30 mph
at indicated 60 mph	55.1 mph	56.3 mph
Fuel consumption		
(overall)	79.5 mpg	50.4 mpg
(ridden hard)	73.8 mpg	43.3 mpg
Braking distance		
(from 30 mph)	28 ft	29 ft
(from 60 mph)	125 ft	155 ft
PRICE	£669 inc VAT	£609 inc VAT
GUARANTEE	6 months/4,000 miles	6 months/5,000 miles
Supplied by		Davick Motique, 11 High Street, Long Eaton NG10 1HY.



Above: Kawasaki kit (on right) easily wins battle of the wrenches.

Left: KZ motor looks an awful lot like a Honda unit, presumably an intentional though possibly unwise move by Kawasaki.

tool kit is better than average, the oil level for the wet sump system is checked through a window instead of by a dipstick, and basic maintenance items such as points, air filter and oil filter have deliberately been made easily accessible. A positive crankcase ventilation system collects unburnt fuel at a filter near the carburetors and recycles it, reducing hydrocarbon emissions by a claimed 40 per cent.

That underseat area, incidentally, is plastered with no less than seven stickers containing all kinds of advice from the useful to the inane: to quote item one on the 19-point Daily Safety Check sticker, "Handlebars

not loose". Well now, is this a motorcycle or a Seven-Forty-Seven on runway one at Heathrow?

There is one major complaint about the KZ — or at least, about the one we had on test. It showed that old Kawasaki four-stroke flaw of light failure. Dip beam packed up, and later the tail light. A publication that had the identical bike before us reported that both main and dip beams blew on them. We rang Kawasaki's service man John Gravett in uptown Staines or wherever it is to ask "Wenzitgonnabeputrice?" and he said the regulator and vibration problems that used to cause the failures had

been identified and rectified, and that he was sure the test bike must be an isolated case. However, as the Z-1 electric in the Rickman CR tested in last month's ish also displayed lighting failures (which we forgot to mention then, tut tut), we're reluctant to accept that explanation until we've actually ridden a couple of fault-free four-stroke Kawas.

Mike Nicks

SUMMARY

IF YOUR first reaction to this Giant Test was that an Italian sporty big single and a Japanese nice-bike-for-the-masses make a weird pairing for comparison purposes, look again at the performance figures in the Checkout panel. In terms of all-out speed, the Desmo and the KZ are about as close a match as it's possible to find.

Having justified our apparently odd choice of machinery — oh, what the hell, let's be honest and admit that they were the only two bikes in anything vaguely approaching a similar class that we could scrape together at the time! — we'll now stress that the test bikes arrived at that almost identical speed level from design standpoints that are literally continents apart.

The Kawasaki in many ways is like the kind of machine your elder brother might've had a lot of fun with a while back, except that it's got a load of modern refinements — the mere fact that it doesn't vibrate is still something to wonder at in a vertical twin. It also has adequate all-round performance — which is really more important than the straight-line speed trap stuff — and by contemporary motorcycle standards, it's economical. At £609 — only just over half the price of a British Leyland Mini — it's also back in the price range that motorcycles should be filling.

Some people would dismiss the KZ as bland — but they'd be missing the point. The KZ comes over as what is familiarly termed "a good bike", and such critics would be better off looking over the 500 Kawasaki triple — or the 450 Ducati.

The Desmo Ducati is an out-and-out sporting motorcycle, a latter day "clubman's racer" if you like. What it lacks when compared to the general trend of today's machines — this has nothing to do with the sophisticated power unit which stands head and shoulders above the crowd for superb quality and craftsmanship, but more the niceties of everyday riding — it makes up for with the handling, braking and power characteristics of a thoroughbred.

Sadly in the past such machines have been set apart and inevitably aside. We should be thankful that Ducati Meccanica have persevered with a basic design the majority has passed over and take the opportunity they are offering to sample that rare blend of two wheeled excitement, satisfaction and safety that once was the corner stone of our biking heritage.●