




PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID GOLDMAN



THE OW01 & THE pussycat

Superbike crews are already queuing to get their hands in the rigging of Yamaha's megabucks OW01. Will it pluck the RC30's whiskers or won't Honda give a hoot? Pea-green Brown puts to sea

The gap was closing fast. A few laps ago the bike ahead had been no more than an occasional speck in a screen framed by serpentine air ducts and a tacho whose needle bounced off its 12,500rpm redline with each change up through the close-set gearbox. Now the rider ahead was in my sights, and I almost had time to read the name on his leathers as he sat up and braked for the Donington Park chicane.

Pressing my elbows harder into my sides out of the wind, I kept my helmet's chinpiece embedded in the red-topped petrol tank for a few fractions of a second longer than normal. The tarmac patch I'd been using for a marker flashed past and suddenly I too was braking for all I was worth; sitting up and pulling on the handlebar lever and not feeling the 150mph wind in my

chest because the force from two massive steel discs was trying to throw me over the bars as I trod down three gears, settled the balls of my feet on the footrests, slid my bum across the seat and prepared to flick the Yamaha FZR750R down into the corner.

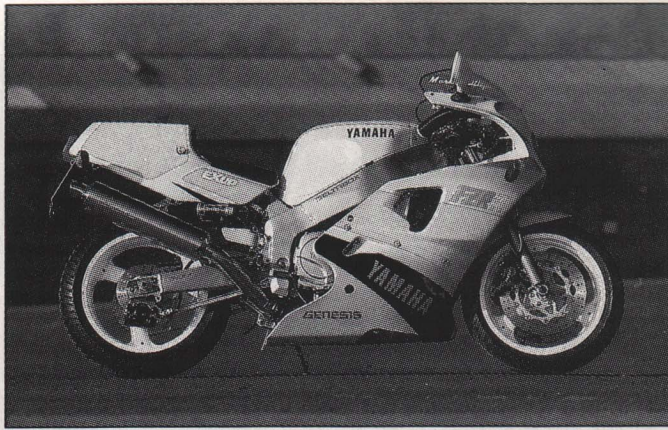
For an instant I thought I'd overdone it. Barrelling towards the bend with the brakes on as hard as I dared I was suddenly aware that I was travelling faster than was normal for my position on the track; perhaps *too* fast for the tyres to grip if the bike were thrown on its side at my pre-arranged peeling-off point. Suddenly everything was happening too quickly; the video was jammed on Fast-Forward. Committed, I squeezed the brakes harder still for the last few yards, praying for the front Dunlop not to lose traction, then eased

them off and tipped the bike right with a nudge on the bars, shifting my weight inwards and easing the throttle open once more.

The Yamaha swept into the bend with its composure totally unruffled, missing my usual apex by perhaps six inches, its front end seemingly drawn to the correct line by the force of some huge magnet. I was momentarily conscious of my right knee brushing the ground, of the single silencer's muted sound cutting in right behind me, of the bike feeling impeccably stable, its rear tyre not even squirming as I clambered across the seat and twisted on the power to accelerate out of the chicane.

And just as suddenly I was back on the next straight, the bike ahead perhaps a few feet nearer as I once again made myself as small as possible behind the OW01's low screen and click-click-clicked up through the gearbox in pursuit.

Two laps later a yellow flag billowed to end my test session as I waited to pounce from out of the slipstream, but as I cruised back to the pits on a wave of adrenalin I knew the vain chase had taught me enough about Yamaha's new



FZR750R. That moment of fast-forward frenzy in the chicane would have upset almost any production bike – and upturned quite a few. The OW01 hadn't even noticed it. The bike's reserves of handling and suspension had barely been scratched.

Which is perhaps how it should be for a bike costing £12,700, more than twice as much as Yamaha's similar-looking, fine-handling and considerably more powerful new FZR1000. For the OW01 is no ordinary FZR; no normal alloy-framed-and-clip-on'd replica racer for the masses. This motorcycle, even more than the Honda RC30 whose championship-winning

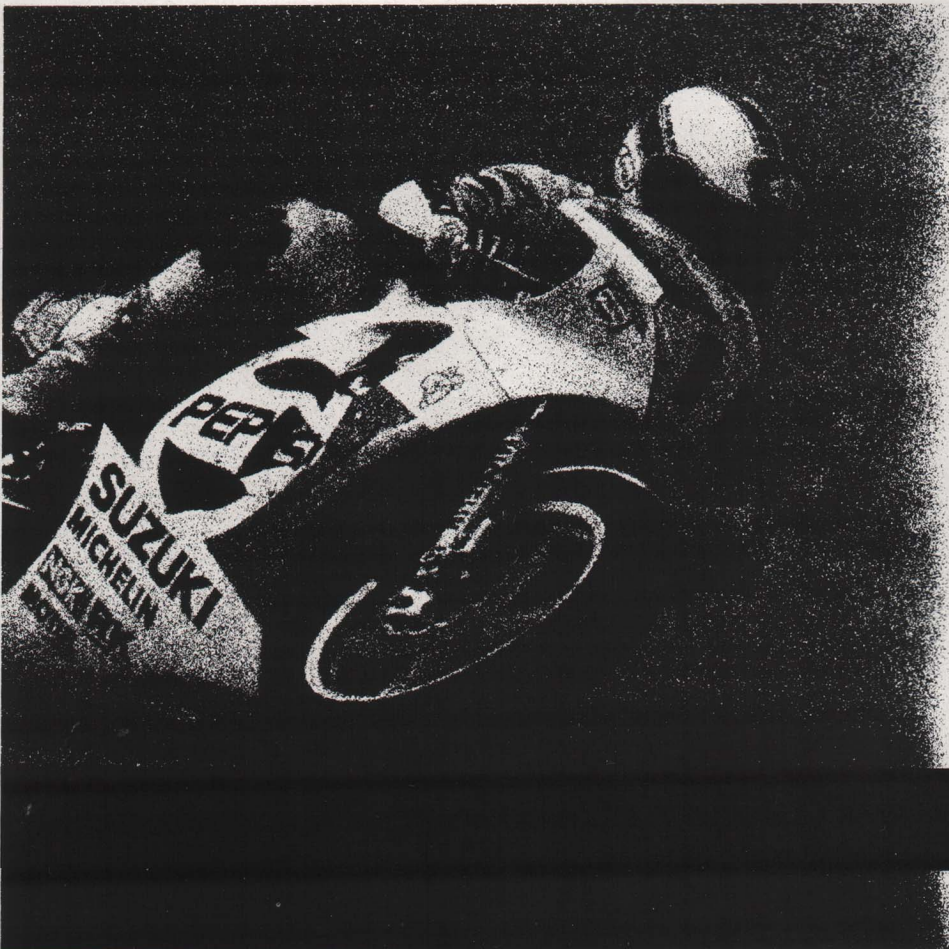
dominance it's so obviously intended to challenge, is the genuine item: a top-specification, kitted-out, track-ready, no-expense-spared racing motorcycle that just happens to have been legalised for use on Her Majesty's public circuits too.

The V4 Honda's arrival a year ago set the racing world on its head and heralded a new breed of roadgoing motorcycle, proving that there was a market for a vastly sophisticated and specialised machine – at a vastly inflated price – providing it did the business on the track. Faced by a gridful of RC30s, riders in the 750cc class soon had three alternatives: spend ten grand

plus (including race kit) on a Honda themselves; put up with getting blown off every weekend; or race something cheaper instead. Like Scalextrics.

Kawasaki and Suzuki have made gestures of retaliation this year, producing alloy-framed 750s that will sell for sensible money, will make very nice road bikes, and which – race kits or not – will doubtless still get left far behind on the track. Yamaha, on the other hand, has picked up the gauntlet and slapped Honda round the face with it.

They might be billing the FZR750R as a limited-production replica of their '88 YZF750 factory racer, but the bike code-named the OW01 makes no pretence at being anything other than a competition machine. While the Honda requires an extensive (and expensive) kit of parts – including cams, pistons, valvegear, clutch and radiators, with an alternative swing arm and rear shock linkage also available – to prepare it for the track, the Yamaha comes virtually set for action. Its own race kit costs a comparatively piffling £2415 and includes little more than non-road-legal carb kit, exhaust and ignition systems,



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with an alternative set of fork springs and a few gaskets, spark plugs and sprockets thrown in.

Not that even a fairly knowledgeable enthusiast would appreciate the difference should he set eyes on – or even throw a leg over – the 750R. At a standstill it's really just another red, white and blue FZR: low handlebars set in the cockpit of an aggressively pointy twin-lamp fairing; distinctive, humped petrol tank (albeit with a figure-of-8-shaped cutout ready formed to accept a double-dump quickfiller); smooth alloy frame spars bulging out from the steering head, round and out above an angled-forward engine, then down towards the swing arm pivot.

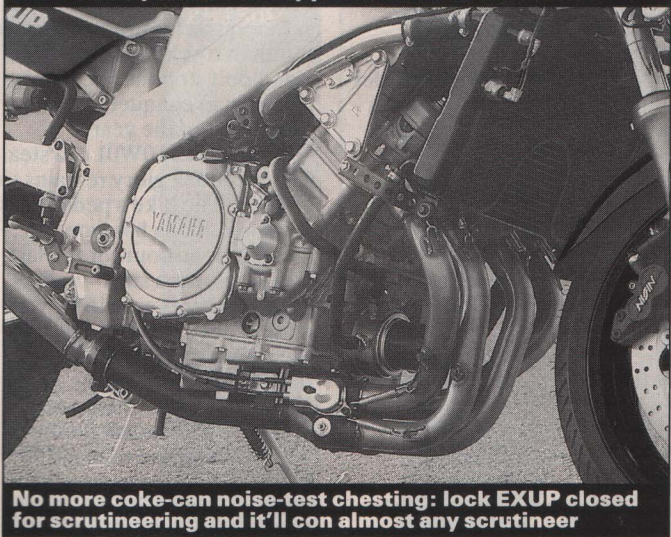
But look further and you start to notice a few clues to the OW01's breeding and price. A host of adjusters adorn both ends of the stout front forks; and a pair of gold-coloured chambers, bolted below the seat on each side of the bike, are linked to the bike's vertically-mounted rear suspension unit. Front brake reservoir sits inboard, on the top yoke; the brake lever is adjustable for hand size. The speedometer and row of cockpit warning lights can be removed to leave the tacho and temperature gauge in situ; lower down, the bottom half of the fairing is secured by quick-release fasteners. Bolts by which the aluminium rear subframe can be detached are just visible under the front of an exclusively single-person seat, the rear of which is fitted with a pair of small, drilled for removal-not lightness knobs like the ones GP bikes have for hooking up a racing rear-wheel paddock stand.

Much of that huge price tag is explained by high development costs, close manufacturing tolerances and a greater than normal degree of hand-assembly in production, the rest by the fact that barely a yen seems to have been saved in specifying parts.

The forks' stanchions are 43mm thick, like the FZR1000's, but their diameter is about the only similarity. The OW01's units poke through the top yoke and are scribed to give 15mm of vertical adjustment. Unlike Honda's RC30, the Yamaha has provision for fork preload adjustment, in infinitely small increments; like the Honda, the Yam has small screws in the top and bottom of each leg to allow independent tuning of



Jettison indicators, can and airbox, re-tyre, rejet, and recalibrate your brain: hey presto – instant Bol winner



No more coke-can noise-test chesting: lock EXUP closed for scrutineering and it'll con almost any scrutineer

both rebound and compression damping.

The rear shock is peerlessly provided by Öhlins, the Yamaha-controlled Swedish company who have long kept the likes of Eddie Lawson in suspension. Opposite the normal remote oil reservoir (complete with compression damping adjuster) attached to the right of the rear subframe, the Öhlins has a matching gold chamber (designed by a Brit!) on the left to provide easy hydraulic setting of spring preload. A knob at the bottom

of the shock alters rebound damping; a bolt at the unit's top mount (under the seat) allows the bike's attitude to be varied by altering the length of the shock. Apart from these things and the unit's almost infinitely variable internal valving, the OW01's suspension is really very basic...

Front brakes, like the FZR1000's, are 320mm discs gripped by four-pot calipers whose top pistons are larger than the bottom ones for a supposed improvement in

lever feel and pad wear. Wheels also ape the bigger bike's: 17-inchers front and back, with rim widths at 3½in front, 5½in rear to take Michelin's single-sized radial race tyres. The FZR will come with Michelin road radials fitted, although our bike wore Dunlop Sport Max covers instead. The three-spoke wheels are made not of magnesium but of aluminium; horrendously heavy, I hear you whinge, but I guess they'll do to carry the wets. (At 412lb dry, the Yam's total is within a few pounds of the RC's.)

The frame is also aluminium, of course – a massively strong Deltabox construction, as is the triangulated swing arm. Like the new FZR1000 motor, the 750 mill is a stressed member of the chassis. But the smaller bike's frame differs in having no downtubes, merely Bimota YB4-style triangular mounting plates that bolt to the top of an engine whose transverse cylinders are tipped back to 40 degrees off vertical from the old FZR's 45-degree angle. (The new FZR1000 has an even more upright 35-degree powerplant.)

The new motor stands no taller because its bore and stroke figures are squashed from the old FZ's 68 × 51.5mm, giving 72 × 46mm dimensions that make it even more oversquare than Mary Whitehouse. This in turn allows all 20 valves to grow in size (intakes from 21 to 23mm, exhausts from 23 to 24.5mm, in case you're interested). More importantly, Yamaha have followed Honda's RC30 designer in attaching two-ring pistons to the end of conrods sculpted from ultra-lightweight, ultra-strong (and yes, ultra-expensive) titanium alloy.

The motor keeps cool via a single flat radiator, apparently having no need for the RC30's pair of intricately curved items, both of which need replacing for race use. And it breathes cool air that has passed through plastic ducts from fairing top to an airbox in front of the tank, then down through a bank of downdraught flat-side Mikuni carbs. At 38mm the carbs are big, virtually identical to the units on the FZR Thou but with removable tops to aid needle changes. At the other side of the engine, the four-into-one pipe uses Yamaha's EXUP exhaust valve to boost midrange power. The EXUP gubbins pokes through the bottom of the fairing and, like the header pipes, is retained when the race kit silencer is

fitted.

EXUP or no EXUP, you don't expect much in the way of low-down power from a self-styled racing bike that claims to chuck out a whopping 121bhp from 749cc. First surprise on riding the OW01, then, is how tractable it is. At a standstill the bike feels like any other FZR, albeit one whose footpegs are even higher than usual. Pulling away it's still normal; there's no drama, no fuss, not even the high-g geared RC30's feeling that you've mistakenly selected third.

The FZR750R simply accelerates uncomplainingly from 2000rpm all the way to the red, gaining speed steadily – undramatically, even – without a single power step worthy of the name. It hasn't the midrange grunt of its litre-bike brother, by any means, but a decent chunk of the original FZ750's impressive torque remains. My first lap of Donington was completed exclusively in top gear and the Yam didn't mind one bit.

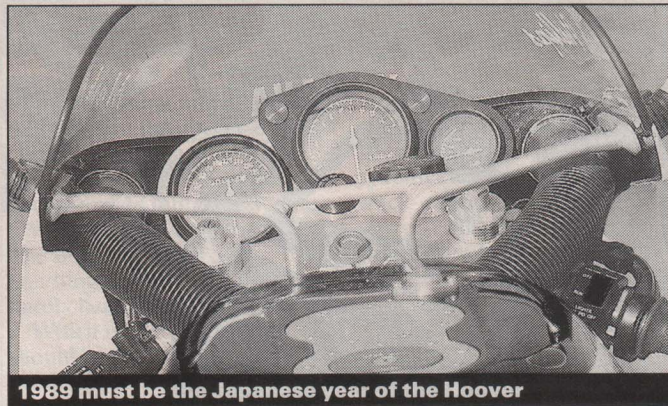
Give it some revs, on the other hand, and the OW01 flies forward like no FZ750 on earth. Those 121 claimed horses make it the most potent 750 roadster ever, and clean aerodynamics should make it the fastest too. The FZR1000 has been known to clock a genuine 170mph top speed and, while the less-powerful 750 surely won't approach that figure, Yamaha test rider Dave Bean has run the two back-to-back along German autobahns and claims there's not a lot in it...

The OW01 was also tested extensively at the uniquely demanding Nurbrügger racetrack and elsewhere, and that development showed in the way the chassis nonchalantly soaked up whatever abuse I threw at it through Donington's comparatively baby's-botty-smooth bends. Suspension was outstanding, especially as, with no time for fine-tuning, all the preload and damping settings were simply left on a middle position.

Just occasionally the front end gave the lightest of wiggles when hard on the brakes, but fork damping adjustment would doubtless have eradicated that. Despite having no steering damper fitted (there's a lug on the frame to bolt one on), the bike was almost flawlessly stable, barely reacting as I let the brakes off while banked deep into a bend, hardly twitching as the power was reapplied in

large doses on the way out. The soft-compound Dunlop Sport Max tyres stuck to the tarmac like eggs to a supermarket shelf, and the brakes gripped like a salmonella victim to the bog-roll. Perhaps they didn't quite have the power of the RC30's sublime stoppers, though, and the lever felt slightly spongy despite standard-issue braided steel lines.

Steering was neutral and



1989 must be the Japanese year of the Hoover

very precise, but not as quick or as effortless as I'd expected. Honda's RC30 has a wonderfully instant, immediate feel to its steering and gives the impression that its clip-ons are bolted directly to the front wheel axle. The Yam, which at 100mm has 9mm more trail (and also a 40mm-longer wheelbase), went exactly where it was pointed but needed more rider input; like many bikes, it was quite taxing to lift from right to left through the fast downhill sweep of Craner Curves. Lengthening the OW's shock to raise the rear of the bike might have helped, had there been time to try it.

Elsewhere the FZR was delightfully easy to ride, and even reasonably comfortable. After a dozen or so laps my long legs were starting to feel cramped (on the other hand the high, non-adjustable footpegs keep your boots considerably further from the ground than their RC30 equivalents), but only the Mitsui man's frequently-waving yellow flag prevented me from riding round in circles till the fuel ran out.

He could have saved his strength: minutes later I was glad to be standing in the pits as the mighty OW01 was pushed in by another rider, his face red with embarrassment and his boots black with oil. A large hole in the engine gave us an unexpected view of the fabled titanium conrods, one of which appeared to be of a novel five-piece construction. The party was abandoned with

much muttering from Yamaha personnel, whose excuse the next day was that the hand-built, pre-production engine had been assembled with two of its big-end bolts insufficiently tightened.

If that's the case and the fault was a one-off, as seems likely, then one poor Yamaha employee has doubtless since made his contribution to Japan's weighty suicide list. If not, and the problem is

generic to the FZR, then the first batch of bikes – due to be airfreighted here in the first week of March – will probably be reported missing somewhere over Bermuda while the problem is sorted out. Yamaha will at least be encouraged to recall that the rash of early blow-ups Honda suffered after introducing their titanium treader 12 months ago didn't stop the RC30 from going on to conquer the world by the end of the year.

Whether the OW01 can steal that racetrack glory remains to be seen. The bike's pedigree is good – Yamaha has won the Suzuka eight-hour for the last two years, for a start – and its performance is sure to be very close to the Honda's. Despite the Yam's massive price tag, the cost of a race-ready FZR750R will be no greater than that of an equivalent VFR750R by the time the Honda's more expensive race kit has been included.

Besides, the RC30 has already shown cost to be of relatively minor importance at this ratified level of the market. When the stakes are high, a few grand either way matters little. All that counts is which bike is the faster.

'OWLING PUSSYCAT

Sometimes I can be so helpful it's embarrassing. "Can you help us out, Mac?", queried Team Loctite boss Steve Parrish during pre-season tyre testing in Jerez down in sunny Spain, "The OW needs its last few

miles of running-in, and everyone else is busy. Just 100km or so should do." Well, what would you have said?

Two hours and about 150 miles later (the speedo cable didn't reach the speedo, on account of it was somewhere in Hertfordshire), I'd done my good deed for the day. I felt good, but not from the rosy glow cub scouts get from a record-breaking Bob-a-Job week. I'm open to argument (two week's-worth on this and any other contender, to be precise), but from where I'm stood the OW01 is the best streetbike in the world.

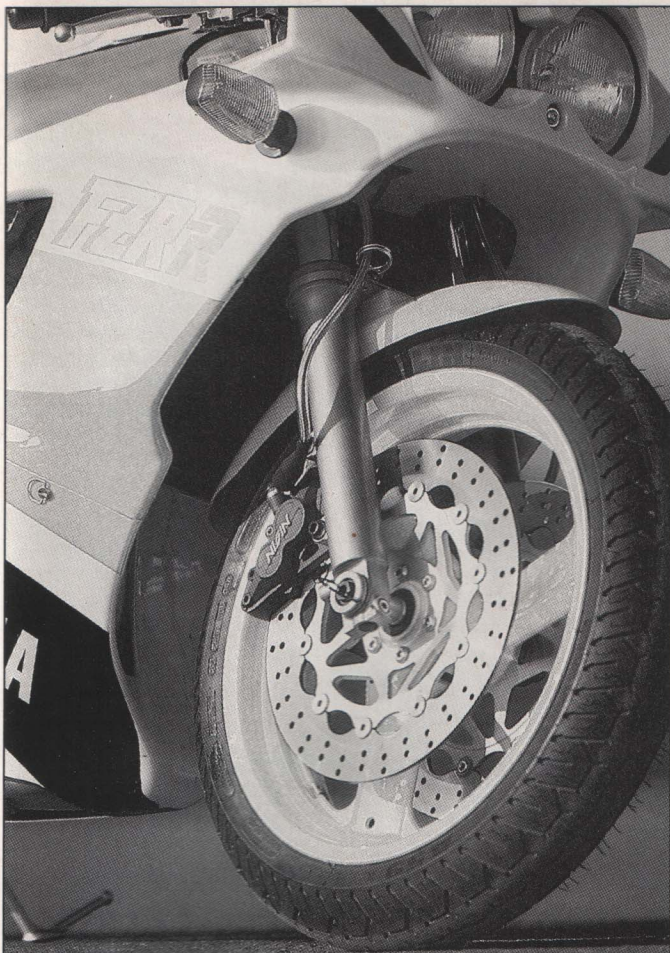
An assertion like that needs some qualifying. The OW isn't the smoothest, most comfortable or economical motorcycle in creation. No, it's too compellingly single-minded for that. But, for a bike that could crush out-and-out racing four strokes of very recent history, it's so tame as to be disappointing. Until, that is, you clock what the tacho's up to, de-scale your mental arithmetic, and discover that you're going quicker on pock-marked back roads than you'd dare go on the M1 on most lesser tools.

My route on the Yam was basically a left turn out of Jerez circuit (with a pause to convince the security man I hadn't nicked the thing), 50 miles or so of autoroute, then another left into the mountains and the joyful sensation of being utterly lost and hoping never to be found. Much of the motorway was bumpy, grooved and harsh. By contrast all of the backroads were smooth the way motocross tracks are smooth. Either way, the OW didn't give a monkey.

Even set up as it came out of the crate, the Öhlins rear shock was an object lesson in controlling the rear end. Hit a bump, and the wheel rises; leave the bump and it returns whence it started, under total, uncanny control. So simple and yet so rare. 85 years after the first monoshock, why aren't they all like this?

Up front the multi-adjustable forks (between forks and shock there are 241,670 setting permutations) are just as accommodating. True, the OW rattles you around more than a plushy tourer, but the excellence of the damping permits more yielding travel than you'd imagine, whilst still letting you in on every whisper of dialogue between road and tyres.

'Eadbangers will be



"Big Mouth" fairing takes after Lawson's '88 GP tool. Brakes take after a smack in the gob with a wall

impressed by the way you think your way from peel-off to apex, only to find that the Yam got there about five yards ahead of you. On the evidence of a briefish road ride it simply isn't possible to say how it compares with the RC30, but the steering's quite quick and accurate enough for me, the stability simply awesome. 12,000 rpm in top, over some of the bumpiest roads imaginable, couldn't faze it one bit. (It felt like about 90 mph, although it was actually nearer 150). The OW is going to be some Isle of Man tool.

Despite Roland's impression of stepless power, I found this OW - frame number 000004, engine 001001 - needed buzzing above 7500 to get the best from it. Below that, and right down to tickover, it has genuine, solid punch, but 7½ is where the real action starts. The engine - solidly mounted all-round - has harshness of feel and ear that might offend the odd GL1500 owner; anyone else would simply be glad that they remembered to put the 'owl in the pussycat.

Yamaha are making 1000 OW01's of which 125 are earmarked for the UK. If one's got your name on it, you're a lucky sod.

YAMAHA FZR750R (OW01)

Price	£12,700
Importer	Mitsui Machinery Sales, Oakcroft Road, Industrial Estate, Chessington, Surrey
Warranty	12 months/unlimited mileage
Engine	Watercooled dohc 20-valve transverse four
Bore x stroke	72 x 46mm
Capacity	749cc
Comp. ratio	11.2:1
Carburation	4 x 38mm Mikuni Cv
Gearbox	6-speed
Claimed power	121bhp @ 12,000rpm
Claimed max torque	57.1ft. lb @ 9250rpm
Electrics	12V 8Ah battery; 2 x 60/55W headlamps

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres, front	120/70V17
Rear	170/60V17
Brakes, front	2 x 320mm (12.5in) discs
Rear	210mm (8in) disc
Suspension, front	43mm telescopic with stepless preload adjust; compression and rebound damping adjust
Rear	Ohlins single shock with hydraulic preload adjust; compression and rebound damping adjust

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	1445mm (57ins)
Weight (dry)	187kg (412lb)
Fuel capacity	19 litres (4.2gal)

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