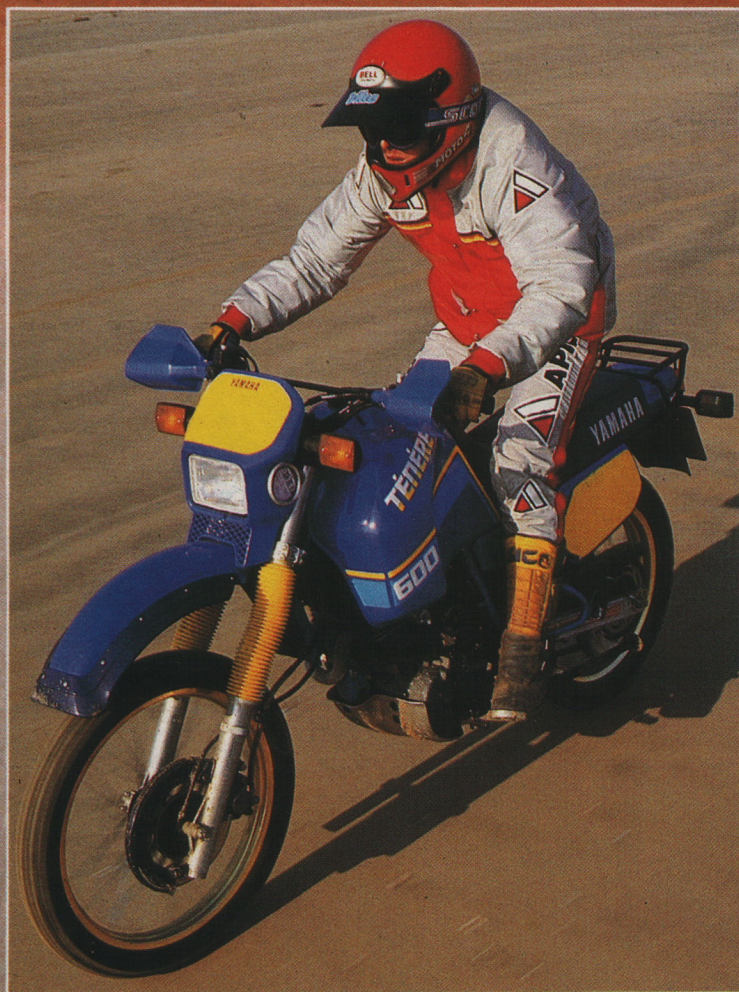


AGAINST THE GRAIN OF THE

Willis waxes dangerously spiritual, philosophical, animal, vegetable and mineral



Photography Tony Sleep

Flat, featureless sand shimmers away towards the horizon. The sun burns with an unmerciful ferocity up in a cloudless blue dome of a sky. The solitary rider blinks stinging sweat from his eyes, staring with a desperate concentration from behind dusty tinted goggles, nervously glancing down at a speedometer registering ninety-plus before returning rapidly to the lookout for almost imperceptible patches of softer sand known, oft ruefully, as 'feche-feche' right across North Africa's Sahel region.

Fighting back fatigue and the effects of relentless heat, he instinctively reacts to the lighter tone of rapidly approaching terrain and stands on the big Ténéré's cleated footpegs, thrusting body weight as far back as it'll go, nailing the throttle even harder to get the front wheel as light as possible. Gripping the bars tightly, palms already slimy with perspiration, our hero swallows back his rising panic and prepares to combat the potentially deadly high-speed tankslapper that will try to wrestle the Yam from his control should the front tyre dig into treacherous softness rather than glide over its crust.

He need not worry unduly, however, because this is one of several situations that Yamaha had in mind when the Ténéré was designed. As the rear Bridgestone Trailwing tyre loses its battle for complete grip and begins to spin, the back end develops a side-to-side shimmy that would frighten the unwary or inexperienced but poses no real threat. The growl of all 595cc of what is still a basically engineered, raw, four-stroke, single cylinder engine concept despite its four valves and trick combination of slide and CV carbs deepens as it takes the strain, giving a reminder of how torque should be treasured. With barely any loss of speed, the 'feche-feche' is suddenly behind him, his trajectory effortlessly straightens and he relaxes. Not for long.

Riding the naked stretches of our planet, abandoned by nature and mankind, is not a little like sensory deprivation. Bare and as obvious as things might seem, they are not. The thin black shadow of a steel marker pole impaled in such nothingness should be a blatant monument to human presence and domination but it isn't. Every kilometre across the very heart of the Sahara is supposedly commemorated with similar devices set in concrete-filled oil drums. Paris-Dakar Rally competitors, for lack of any other viable target, have been known to crash into them. The Ténéré's pilot realises just in time, reflecting on the irony of a narrowly-avoided dose of pain with so little available to cause it as he amends blasting *towards* the marker to riding *past* it with a frantic if minor weave. The bike doesn't complain. ▶

SANDS OF TIME

whilst feigning mastery of Yamaha's XT600ZE Ténéré in its natural habitat

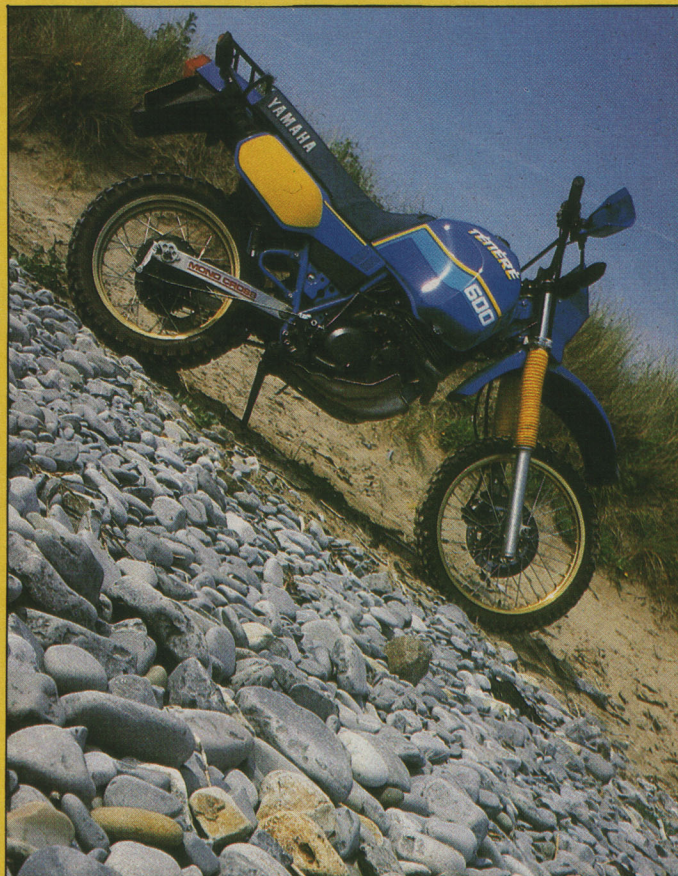




The line of dunes to his left start to recede and suddenly the sun-baked sterility beneath his tyres becomes uneven and potholed. The bike bucks and twists as he struggles to slow down and he becomes extremely grateful for the full ten inches of suspension travel provided by a leading-axle front rig. He is acutely conscious of, and grateful for, the stiffer springing in the '86 model's fork, remembering its predecessor's tendency to hit the stops, throwing the bike wildly out of shape.

The rear suspension, with its Monocross rising-rate system, is generally successful at keeping its wheel in contact sufficiently to use power to escape trouble and the increase in unsprung weight dictated by Yamaha's penny-pinching retreat to a steel swing arm from the previous model's alloy item is hardly noticeable. Our boy knows, though, that continual abuse of the 9.3in rear travel will lead to overheating of the de Carbon-type shock, lacking as it does a remote reservoir like comparable items on Yamaha's motocross bikes, and a subsequent loss of

Nothing like shifting sand in the shifting sands (pardon?)



Sonauto Gauloises sponsors' colours stand out in the wilderness

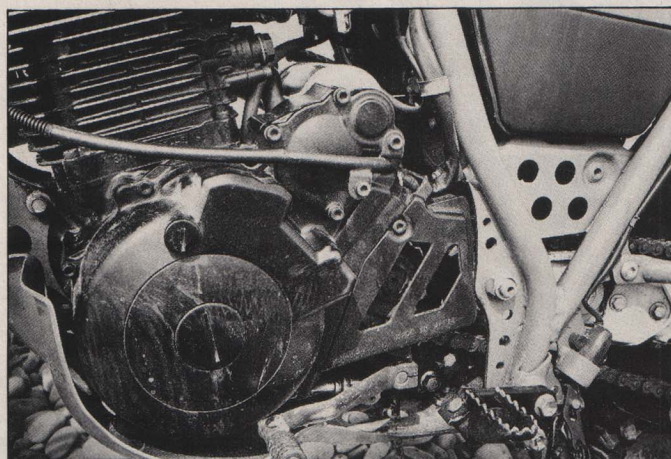
damping effect.

He goes for the smart option, heading back towards the interminable dunes. Once onto harder and smoother going, he steers in a graceful and fast arc by hanging off the bike's nearside and applying spurts of power to the back wheel, the sidetread of its tyre spitting plumes of fine sand into the air as the tortured rubber spins in a controlled slide. Irrespective of its obvious bulk, the Ténéré feels, steers and handles like a true dirtbike in such special conditions, and its rider becomes almost overwhelmed with an atavistic urge to do as much damage to what little remains of adjacent ecology — an emotion familiar to most off-road hooligans — as he brutally kicks his way up through the notchy gearbox in search of a lonely and purely theoretical holeshot, a victory over self.

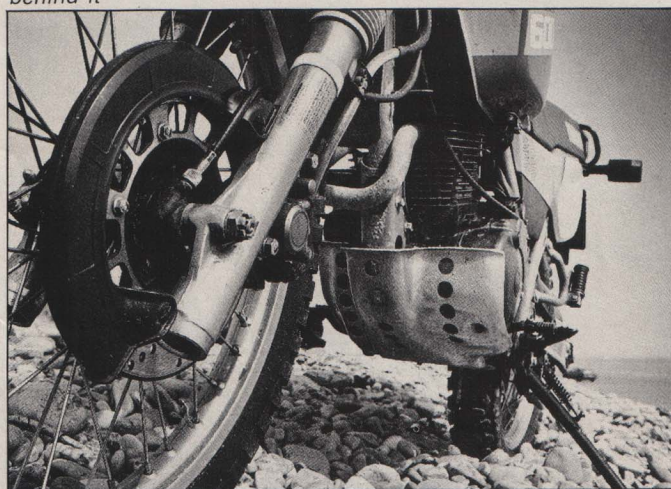
Punishment for this retreat from reason is swift. He has got far too close to the dunes and is about to reap the bitter harvest of allowing concentration to slip. The front wheel ploughs into deep sand, tucks in and is overtaken by the rear as the ►



Instrumentation has remained XT basic



Electric starter is a welcome add-on. Fuel pump hides directly behind it



Well-guarded disc, long-travel suspension and meaty bash plate are for more than show

bike peremptorily performs a classic endo, ejecting the rider in an equally classic fashion over the bars. Undaunted and unhurt by his flailing maelstrom of arms and legs causing a minor sandstorm, he gets back on his feet and sprints to pick up the bike, fearful of fuel loss considering the isolated circumstances. It is undamaged, the side of the new-style pannier tank being completely unmarked. He is right to worry, though, because the relocation of the '86 Ténéré's enlarged six-litre airbox under the centre of the tank has considerably reduced its capacity — from 32 litres down to 23 — cutting range under everything but the most arduous conditions from over 300 miles of autonomy to only about 230 miles.

The revised tank shape is not without advantages as containing fuel in lower-slung side panniers has noticeably reduced the centre of gravity — further aided by a reduction in the altitude of both oil tank and toolkit to positions alongside the rear shock thanks to the airbox's change in location. The slimmer tank, which is less susceptible to crash damage, and the handling improvement from an attack on the earlier model's top-heaviness have to be weighed against the necessity for a fuel pump on this bike, though. When the nearest spares counter is some significant distance over an inhospitable horizon, these considerations matter...

He climbs back on, stabbing the starter button to effortlessly rekindle the fire, thankful not to be wasting energy and oozing valuable bodily fluids from gaping pores with frenzied use of the kick lever. Even beyond the bounds of civilisation, an electric foot is worth the extra weight. The Ténéré takes a little time to get properly moving again, chucking large quantities of soft yellow sand into the air as

it digs a deep rut in bottom gear. Gradually, the bike wins its battle and he boots it up a gear, aiming away from the worst going without, fortunately, burying it up to the axles.

Back on a steady bearing, the rider returns to full-throttle exploitation of the XT600ZE's not-inconsiderable power. He thinks back to the claimed 44bhp of the bike it superseded. He ruminates, as the miles of emptiness are relentlessly consumed under the Ténéré's splendidly capable wheels, on the uprated engine's move towards better breathing and, therefore, more power at high revs. Apart from the bigger airbox, it's got bigger valves, more radical cam profiles and the secondary CV carb's venturi diameter has been increased from 27 to 28mm.

The manufacturer now ▶

YAMAHA XT600Z TÉNÉRÉ

Price (inc taxes).....	£2399
Guarantee.....	12 months/unlimited mileage
Engine.....	Aircooled sohc single
Bore x stroke.....	95 x 84mm
Capacity.....	595cc
Comp. ratio.....	8.5:1
Carburation.....	27mm Teikei
Gearbox.....	5-speed
Electrics.....	60/55W headlamp; 12V, 12Ah battery

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres.....	Bridgestone Trailwing
Front.....	3.00 x 21in
Rear.....	4.60 x 18in
Brakes, Front.....	260mm (10.5in) disc
Rear.....	170mm (7in) drum
Suspension, Front.....	Telescopic, air-assisted
Rear.....	Monocross, infinite preload, 5-way damping adjust

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	1450mm (57.1in)
Seat height.....	890mm (35in)
Weight (inc 1 gallon fuel).....	160kg (354lbs)
Fuel capacity.....	23 litres (5.1 gals)

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claims a robust 46bhp but Motad's Bosch dyno only discovered 35.3 horses at the back wheel. When the original Ténéré came out, this same device found a mere 28.6bhp but Alan Baker's lads appear to be suffering hallucinations typical of the desert because they 'remember' a figure and power curve identical to the new one. Whether Yamaha objectively went to all that technical trouble for nothing, as our boy blasts across the scorching wastes he cannot help but feel that he is interfacing with a quicker and more stable bike.

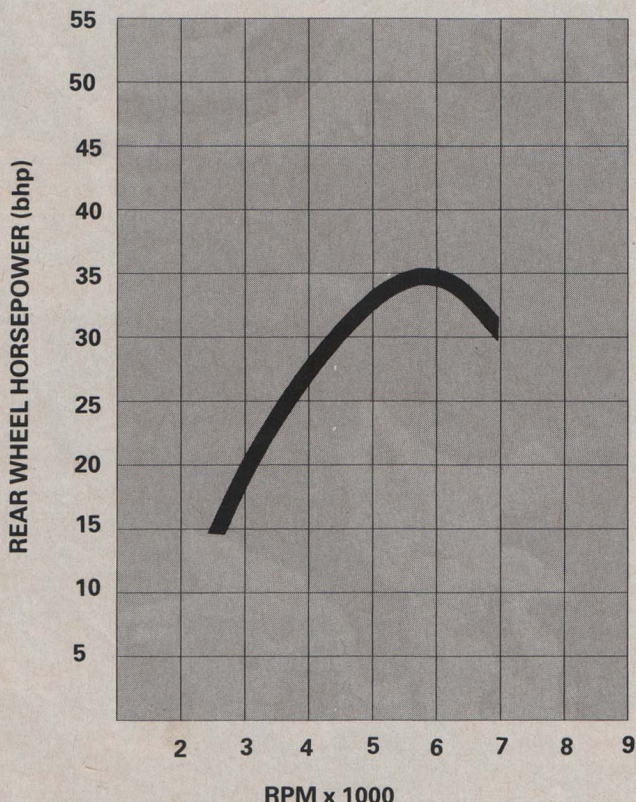
The thought of hallucinations — those mean tricks of the desert — is never far from the edge of his consciousness. His tortured eyes, straining into the heat haze ahead of the bike, suddenly perceive a strange coalescence, a sharper definition with lines of bright blue and green. Is it a mirage? Oh well, time to stop playing games. I rolled off the throttle and then brought the Ténéré to a straightline stop with both wheels locked and skimming the sand, some distance before the beach faded into Laugharne Sands, the inlet curving away past Ginst Point to Laugharne village with its picturesque ruined castle on the edge of reed beds and the



Profile is slimmer if not exactly, er, slim

boathouse where Dylan Thomas used to marinate himself in after-hours drinking bouts whilst scribbling 'Under Milk Wood'. The Welsh poet's infatuation with the demon drink wasn't far from my mind as I stood next to the bike, waiting for the photographer-laden truck to catch up, thirsty enough to drain an entire barrel of the already-sampled-and-approved local Buckley bitter.

Alright, then perhaps the seven-miles-long Pendine Sands, facing Carmarthen Bay and famed for Parry Thomas's



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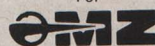
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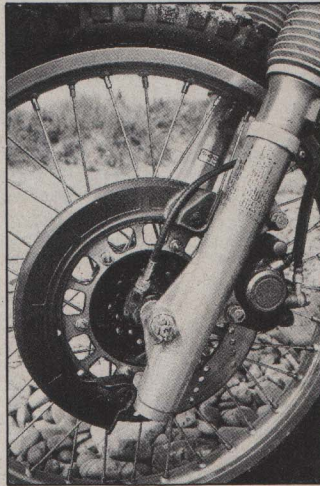
TOWNSEND'S

ill-fated attempts to get ahead of Campbell in the 1927 World Land Speed Record trials (Thomas's aero-engined car, 'Babs', snapped its drive chain and left the poor chap without a head), is a far cry from Africa's blistering heart. But on one of the first really hot British summer days, a slight adjustment to reality courtesy

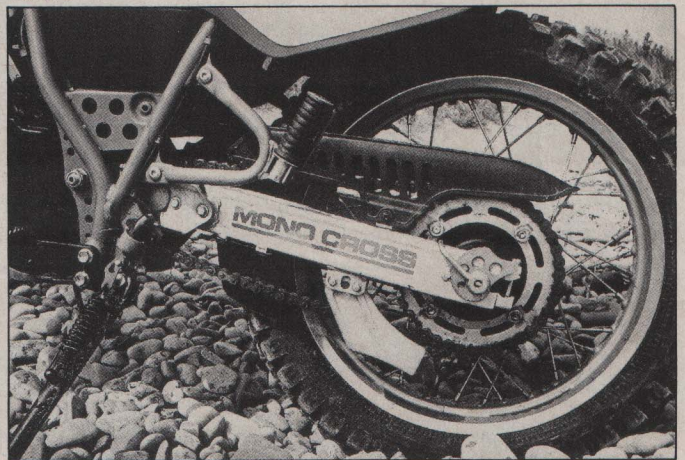
of the more fertile end of the Willis imagination got it pretty close.

The Yamaha XT600ZE Ténéré is, after all, a fantasy motorcycle. It was created as a serious rally bike by Jean-Claude Olivier, boss of French Yamaha importer Sonauto, and has repeatedly proved its worth in countless desert raids, principally the mammoth Paris-Alger-Dakar bash.

Almost incidentally, it makes a fairly good street bike too but its ability to provide fertile psychotherapeutic fuel for those of us trapped in urban dream spirals must be the real reason that the thing is well-established as Europe's top-selling motorbike. Virtually none of the tens of thousands of Ténérés, new and old, littering the cities of our continental cousins will ever make the Big Trip, but their owners still cherish the ideal, the very possibility. Now what did I do with that Good Pub Guide to Southern Algeria? ■



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