

Half A Dozen Of The Other

Instead of ice-cream, the Benelli brothers made the six-cylinder 900 Sei. Is it, we wonder, the Italian alternative to a CBX? Sam W Totter ponders, while Colin Curwood gets the pictures.

THE CHAMBERS ESSENTIAL ENGLISH Dictionary has, among its definitions of the noun *pose*, the following: 'A character, attitude or manner put on to impress others, a pretence.' And the verb *to pose*: 'To take a position esp. for effect.' If you're considering taking up the art of posing or if you already practice it but don't gain the level of proficiency you're after, then I'd say you could do a lot worse than to buy yourself one of the sharpest looking bikes around. Like a Benelli 900 Sei. People everywhere look and ask questions. Pump attendants, retired Army officers, foreign students and slick suited execs in Rover V8s were impressed. 'Is it Italian? How many cylinders has it got? What'll it do? How does it handle? How much did it cost?'

To begin with, I was quite happy to oblige, to answer their questions and sometimes even elaborate, but after a while it became a bit of a nuisance. What I expected to be a two or three minute fuel stop once turned into a ten minute discussion about the virtues of the Benelli, followed by the guy telling me the problems his brother had with his Norton Dominator. The Benelli is that sort of machine. It inspires conversation. I shouldn't really complain as I've no objection to people nattering about motorcycles, it's just that when I'm out riding, I don't necessarily want to talk. It's one of the drawbacks of being a part-time poseur.

There are two obvious reasons for all this interest being shown in the Sei, and they are the daunting engine and the crisp styling. First, the engine. To the casual observer, six cylinders and six downpipes look really impressive, but inside there are virtually no design features not on Honda's CB500 Four. Benelli are often accused of copying Honda's design, but it should be pointed out that Benelli produced their first four cylinder motorcycle engine in 1938, over a decade before Mr Honda bolted his first motorised bicycle together.

The 900 is the second six cylinder Benelli. The original 750 Sei was bored and stroked to reach the present capacity of 906cc. A single overhead cam remains, but the profiles have been changed to complement the increase in displacement and to give it a flatter torque curve. The 900 still has only three Dell'Orto carbs which is convenient for those who are lumbered with servicing the beast, but I think their 24mm throats could be enlarged. The 750's mechanical points ignition has, thankfully, been junked in favour of the almost compulsory electronic type, but for some strange reason the generator equipment has been relocated from above the gearbox to the

left end of the crankshaft on the 900. This is strange when you consider that Japanese engineers have been busy mounting generators behind the cylinders on the CBX and Yamaha XJ650 to *reduce* engine width, but perhaps the people at Benelli thought it looked odd where it was, so they moved it!

Changes have also been made in the exhaust department. Those six wonderful howling pipes that graced the 750 have been replaced by a pair of boring Silentiums. The same or similar silencers are now stifling the sound and performance of nearly all the big Italian bikes, with the exception of Laverda Jotas which have their pipes made in the UK. Noise limits in Italy are now extremely low and are apparently vigorously enforced. It's inevitable that the same will happen over here and it's a shame.

So . . . what'll it do? In the standing quarter it achieved a best (and fluky) time of 13.18 secs and a best top speed of 112.35mph. With figures like that it is tempting to be scathing about this bike, especially as all the other quarter mile times were in the high thirteens, and it took a keen and lightweight Jim Lindsay to nudge it into the 12s. (John Green, the chief Benelli connoisseur at Elbymotos in Essex tossed the air filtration and exhaust systems of his personal Sei into the waste bin, fitted an Italian aftermarket 6 into 1 and jetted up accordingly. Apart from it being noisy he reports a quite staggering increase of performance. 'It gives XS elevens and Jotas a bloody hard time.' Yes, John. When can I have a ride please?)

Out on public roads, the standard machine's apparent lack of superbike performance didn't bother me. The way in which the engine delivers its power was satisfying enough. It's as though the bike is propelled by a huge electric motor without a trace of vibration and dollops of torque. Unfortunately, low down power and the 900's considerable bulk make it awkward to ride slowly in congested urban areas, because opening the throttle even slightly instantly releases too much power. Couple that with an equal portion of engine braking, and you've got a stop go, stop go situation with plenty of lurching. The only solution is to disengage the clutch frequently, which becomes tiresome as the action is pretty heavy.

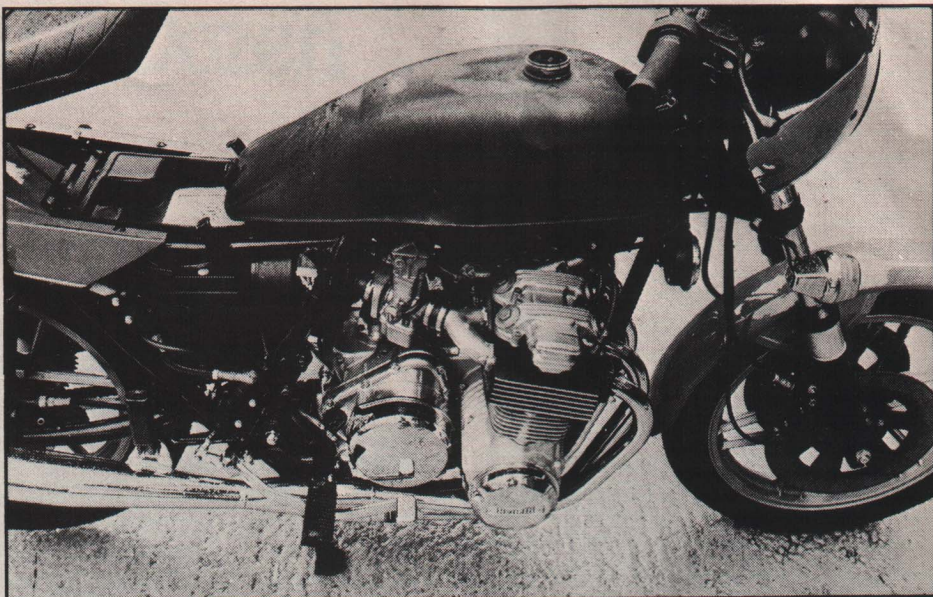
The clutch is acknowledged as being a weakspot on this model. When I collected it from TKM, the importers in Chiswick, I was specifically instructed not to slip the clutch under any circumstances. Not necessary, they said. This is largely true, but at the test strip I would have preferred to have given it a good hard dose of slipping rather than having to



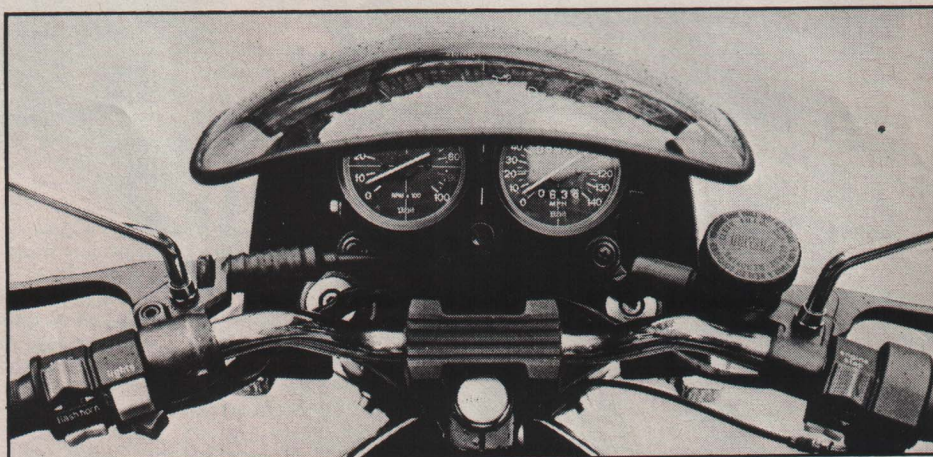


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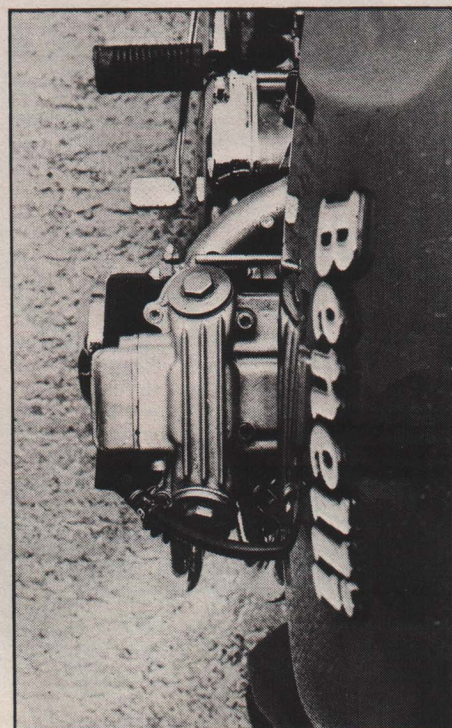
Right: Stripped of its flashy fibreglass sidepanels, the big Benny looks a little like a beached porpoise. Note the saddle which doubles as an airbrake.



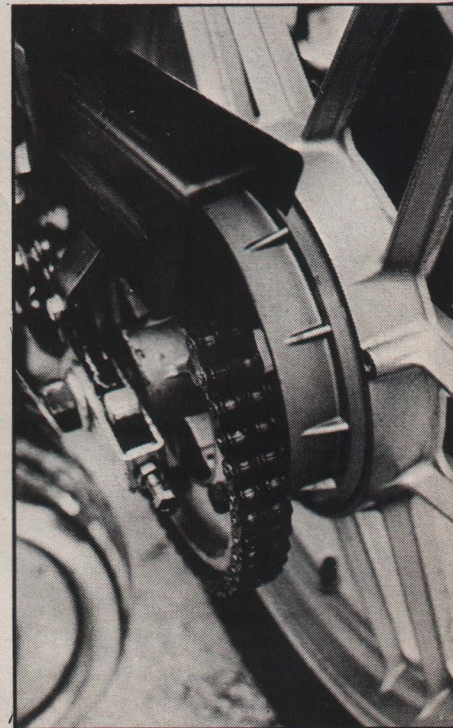
Right: even at standstill it's doing 5mph at 500rpm! Screen keeps curious flies off the idiot lights — curious eyes too.



Right: Sixpot block hangs out a bit under the famous Benelli ice-cream parlour awning. Great for cooling, furlrowing car doors, and impressing pedestrians.



Far right: Hefty duplex chain transmits the Sei's generous torque to rear Phantom tyre. Flimsy chain guard stands no chance.



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dump it at 6,500 rpm, and then deal with a wandering, tyre smoking slide. In any case, I took heed of their warning and the clutch presented no problems apart from a hint of drag when hot, which made finding neutral tricky. Almost every big bike is easier to ride at speed and the Sei is no exception. Blasting down motorways and fast A-roads at high speed is accomplished with consummate ease.

Okay, a CBX will tear the Benelli's headlamp off, in terms of straight line performance, but a CBX rider would really have to be on the ball to lose the Benelli through the twisties. During the test, I took a trip down to GR Bikes in Sussex and their sales manager Tim Burgess offered me a ride on their CBX demonstrator. In direct comparison with the Benelli, the CBX has a better riding position (due to the rearset foot pegs). The gear change, clutch and throttle controls are less stiff and its speed is excessive. But in the braking and handling departments, the Benelli is definitely a winner. The CBX is not bad, but it lacks the stability of the Phantomshod Benelli. The huge triple Brembo discs on the Sei are more powerful than the Honda's and the Guzzi type linking system is convenient in the wet. If you use only the Sei's brake lever on the handlebar, the right hand front discs works well as an individual unit, unlike those of a couple of other Benellis and Guzzis I've ridden.

Of the two 900 Seis I had on test (reason later) the older, well-thrashed one gave a much smoother ride. The recent model has stiffer forksprings because the earlier ones were inclined to misbehave slightly at the front end when ridden enthusiastically. I had no complaints about either, so would consequently prefer the more supple but adequately damped softer springs. Both types were prone to slight leakage from the seals but the rear units are perfectly acceptable.

Not too soft nor too hard, they don't let any of the undercarriage touch down under spirited cornering other than the tips of the footrest rubbers.

The switches and instruments are up to the usual Italian standard which is not as good as Jap. Using the indicators requires concentration because of a lack of detentation at the three positions. This is complicated by the flyscreen which obscures nearly all of the many idiot lights and 'Vaguelia' instruments. Criticism should also be directed at the headlamp, for being less than brilliant, and the side-stand. You need a really long left leg to retract it when seated, and the motor won't start unless it is. This means that to warm it up before you set off in the mornings, you'd better have it on the centre stand.

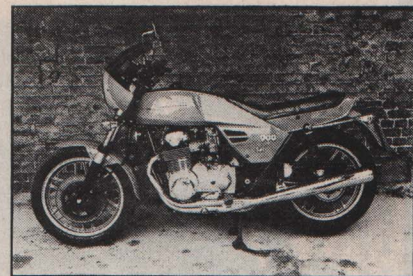
The thinly padded seat looks like a nightmare for a long-distance rider, but to my great surprise the Benelli's seat didn't hurt mine, even after a three hundred mile round trip. I wouldn't fancy riding pillion for that distance, however.

Holding its various liquids is not something the Benelli's particularly good at. I've already mentioned the fork seals but what demands more urgent attention is the motor. The barrel/cylinder head studs are bolted in the normal way to the upper crankcase half. The holes into which they fit are sometimes drilled too deeply — right through the metal just above where the plain bearing crankshaft lies. As these engines run with high oil pressure, the oil finds its way up the studs, around the nuts at the top, and out into the open where it spoils the look of the machine and lubricates your leg below the knee when travelling fast.

I thought there may have been a cure for this so I took the first 900 back to TKM's for a check-over. The second, well-thrashed one didn't leak as much, but it did consume oil like a two stroke. Owners of Benelli 900s must

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CHECKOUT



BENELLI 900 SEI

Engine	sohc 6 cyl
Bore x stroke.....	60 x 53.4 mm
Capacity.....	905.91 cc
Compression ratio	9.53:1
Carburation	3 x 24 mm Dell Orto
Bhp at rpm.....	77.4 at 8300
Max torque at rpm	53.3 ft/lb at 6500
Primary drive	Chain
Clutch	Multiplate, dry
Gearbox.....	5 speed
Electrical system	12 v 20 ah battery, generator, electronic ignition.
Headlamp	40/45w

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	56in
Seat height	30in
Overall width	28in
Ground clearance	7in
Weight.....	553lb (wet)
Fuel capacity	3.63 gal

EQUIPMENT

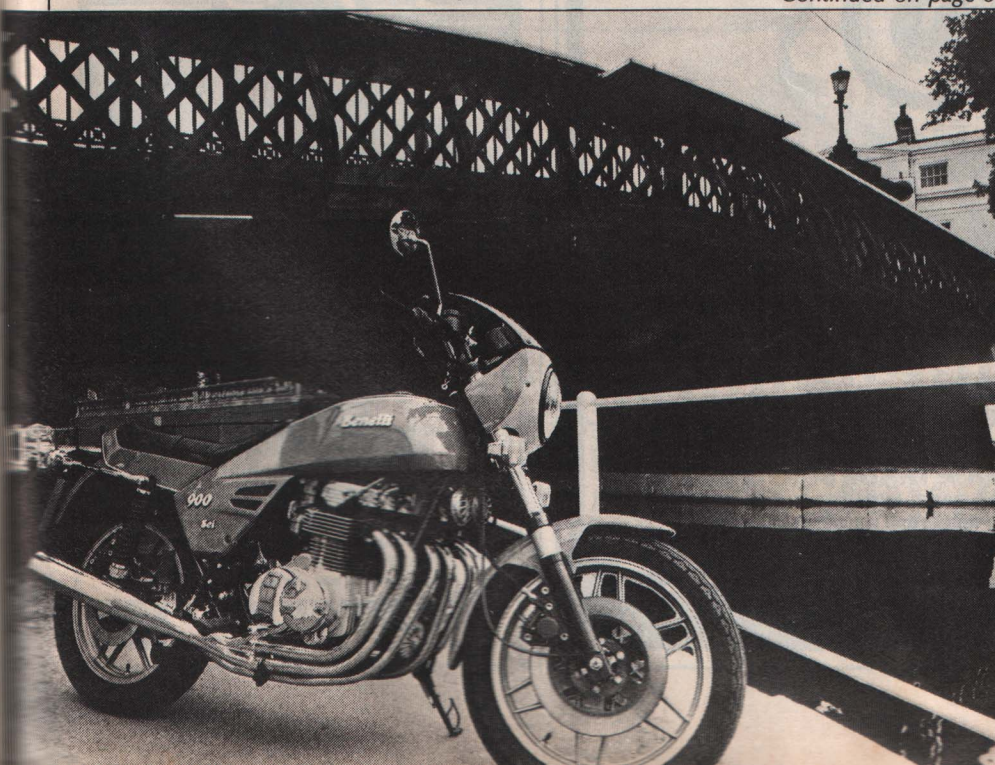
Indicators.....	Yes
Electric start	Yes
Trip odometer.....	Yes
Steering lock.....	Yes
Helmet lock	No
Headlamp flasher	Yes
Others	Twin mirrors, flyscreen, twin horns, locking filler cap

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres	
front.....	4.00 x 18 Pirelli
rear	4.00 x 18 Pirelli
Brakes	
front.....	.2 x 11.8in discs
rear	10.2in disc (linked)

PERFORMANCE

Top Speed	
prone	112.35 mph
sitting up.....	105.4 mph
Standing ¼ mile .	13.18 secs/100.24 mph
Speedometer error	
at indicated 30 mph	27.28 mph
at indicated 60 mph	52.61 mph
Fuel Consumption	
overall	39.86 mpg
ridden hard	34 mpg
PRICE	£2,799
Guarantee	12 months/unlimited mileage
Supplied by	TKM
	Chiswick, London.



STRAIGHT THROUGH CUSTOMS

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Suzuki GS250T

THE WORD 'CUSTOM' IS ENOUGH TO turn me right off any vehicle. It conjures up pictures of jacked-up Mk.II Cortinas with furry orange dashboards and matching dice, or Lambrettas bristling with enough lights to put a Fowler's showman's engine to shame. If a machine has to be customised to look good, it's usually a disaster to begin with. So I was surprised to discover that the Suzuki GS250T Custom is just as fine a machine as its standard sister, the GSX250, tested in *Bike* in June '80.

To begin with, the styling is subtle and restrained — no unnecessary garish chrome or tacky stick-on transfers usually associated with so-called customs. The riding position, although more upright than the GSX, remains safe and comfortable. The handlebars are high and wide enough for perfect control in urban conditions without being so tall that cruising at speed becomes a drag. The seat is low, comfortable and well positioned. The shapely teardrop fuel tank tapers gently rearwards to triangular side covers which are unfortunately still those cruddy plastic efforts that we've come to expect from Japan. They're also a real bitch to fit properly.

A sturdy chrome grab rail runs around the seat unit and is secured by the top damper mounting. The huge rear light unit is a definite life-saver but two bulbs inside would make it even better. Instruments are mounted in a neat black plastic moulding and incorporate oil pressure, neutral, indicator and full beam warning lights. The finish of the paint on the frame and tank is excellent and the chrome plate is quality stuff.

The Suzuki's most endearing quality is just how much fun it is to ride. I found it difficult to ride sensibly, due mainly to the feeling of complete confidence it inspires in the rider. In town, the machine is a delight — so light and manoeuvrable that it can be slid through traffic by just shifting body weight. In fact, for commuting and riding through dense traffic, it's hard to think of a better bike.

Although very softly sprung, and with long fork travel, the Suzuki is well damped and the

handling is almost faultless, effectively destroying the myth that to handle well a machine's suspension must be rock hard. Even with its fairly wide and square 350 x 18" rear tyre, the bike can be leaned well over without losing grip. Both tyres are Inoues, a new name to me. They cling tenaciously to the road in the dry and seem to be made of a softer compound than many Japanese tyres, which should mean that their wet weather grip is also good. The rear tyre, however, showed considerable wear after only 2,500 miles. A classic case of swings and roundabouts.

Brakes are excellent and well balanced with a powerful positive disc up front and a full width drum at the rear. The disc on our test bike was noticeably scored, which shouldn't happen after such a low mileage. This also happened to the GSX and ought to have been corrected by now. The combination of good tyres and brakes gives the bike uncanny stopping ability, which again enhances its suitability for city use.

The ergonomics of the machine are just about right. Dog leg levers controlling the front brake and clutch are light and sensitive to use, while footrest and pedal positions are ideal and minor controls well thought out, though the vertically moved main/dip switch could definitely be improved. It is combined with the indicator and flasher switch and it's easy to move the switch too far down, which instead of dipping the headlight, causes it to flash at oncoming traffic. The headlight is large and bright with a good cut off on dip and two large rear mirrors provide good rear vision that's so essential when looning through traffic.

The GS250T's engine is also used in the GSX and benefits from the now familiar twin swirl combustion chamber cylinder head. Twin camshafts operate eight valves and the motor will spin freely into the red in all gears except top. It's a good idea to keep a close watch on the tachometer, when windgirding — those joyous screamings could all too easily become graunching grindings.

The Suzuki motor does have a reasonable spread of power but it's beyond about 6000rpm that the machine really takes off. This, allied to one of the slickest six speed

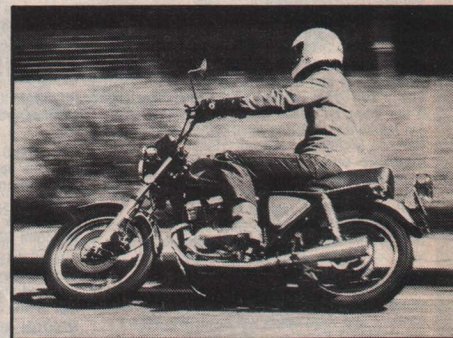
gearboxes we've tested, makes for a very tractable, versatile bike indeed. The engine and gearbox castings are superbly made, totally oiltight and nicely polished and lacquered. The twin Mikuni carburettors open smoothly and the motor has no annoying flat spots anywhere in the rev range. Our test bike did, however, suffer from stalling but this was almost certainly due to being badly set up.

The GS250T has a powerful electric start which spins the engine freely — just as well, as no kick start is fitted. Choke is always needed in the mornings or after cooling down, and the choke lever is on the left hand side of the carbs. Being situated under the petrol tank it's easy to forget to turn it off, 'specially when you're half asleep.

To me, the GS250T is proof that in the 250 bracket, modern is definitely best. It's clean, quiet, stylish, economical (at worst 50mpg), fast, and above all fun. It has a few niggling faults such as the side panels and dip switch, but if a perfect bike were to be built, we'd all be out of a job here.

How boring old veggies can still happily plod around on 250cc BSAs, Nortons, Triumphs etc, and how others can be conned into paying grossly inflated prices for that old 'mystique', I just don't know. Next time you see an oily smokescreen preceded by an ageing Brit 250, why not flag him down, carefully peel away his blinkers and offer him a ride on your GS250T? You'll probably make a friend for life.

Patrick Smith



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be well acquainted with the markings on their dipsticks, if you'll pardon the expression. Fuel is lost in three different ways. Primarily through the carbs in the normal way at 34mpg if ridden hard, then also through the fuel cap if the tank is full and the braking hard, and lastly from around the transparent plastic bowls on the fuel taps. When the engine is hot and the bike stationary and not being cooled by the wind, the plastic distorts and copious amounts of fourstar can drip to the ground if the taps aren't turned off. The

importers are aware of almost all the problems that I've mentioned and with the good level of communication they enjoy with the factory, I'm confident that they'll jointly get'em all sorted. But I've got to tell it like it is . . .

£2799 is a lot of bread even for this shapely lump of Italian hardware, but there is now a twelve month unlimited mileage warranty, and spares prices are competitive. The unique duplex rear chain for example, cost about forty quid, no more than a conventional chain for a big bike, and it requires very little adjustment.

The Benelli 900 isn't really a tourer. It wouldn't make much of a racer and it blatantly isn't suited to commuting tasks. So it must be a play bike for the financially fortunate, sort of like a Harley Sportster only different. One thing's for sure, it'll bring out

the poseur in you, and that might just be what you need.

Sam W Totter

