

# Giant Test

## Upper Middle Class - with Soul

### Honda CB550F v Suzuki GT550A

Testers: Peter Watson, Graham Sanderson

OUR BLOCKBUSTIN' August Giant Test of motorcycling's middle class — the 400s — concluded that these were the machines for discerning bikers who didn't need an extra 350 cc to support their drooping egos. We didn't manage to find a real loser in the whole bunch. So why join the upper middle class with a 550? Surely the extra cost isn't worth it just to stay ahead of the game?

We started the test asking even more questions. Would the CB550 turn out to be more than just a stepping stone between the well-established CB400 and CB750? Would the price difference between Honda and Suzuki make it worth buying a two-stroke triple now that the second era of the four-stroke is upon us?

In the end it turned out to be a classic confrontation between two bikes with a lot to offer besides more status. And it didn't revolve around those stale two-stroke versus four-stroke, three-cylinder versus four-cylinder arguments, but had much more to do with the direction biking's headed in the late 1970s.

## Honda CB550F

BRITAIN, as most British bikers will have noticed by now, is usually the last country to receive freshly designed models. While American and Continental journalists swan around on the latest exotica, we in GB are forced to console ourselves with appetite-whetting pictures in the weeklies and reports announcing that the sensational machine concerned won't be imported until nineteen - hundred - and - God - knows - when.

However, new machines are often peppered with teething troubles and it may take the introduction of refined and improved versions before the bike reaches the standard it was originally intended to meet. The CB500 had been available on both sides of

the Atlantic for five years except that in the States it was transformed into the CB550 in 1973 and, subsequently, the CB550F last year. So the latest derivative we've got over here is more than just an upstaged CB500. Having been through its transition period as the CB550 in the States, the bike is just about on the ball and it's been well worth the wait.

Honda now appear to be designing machines specifically for the European market rather than merely insulting European taste with that sit - up - and - beg riding position that the Yanks love so much. It's a trend we noticed with the CB400 first tested in these pages in July '75 and which became consolidated in the CB750F, a greatly improved version of four-piper CB750s.

Seating position on both the 400 and the new 750 was good and it's equally accommodating on the CB550. Footrests sprout just to the rear of the engine and the rider leans slightly forward on to the handlebars raised a couple of inches above the headstock. The bars are wide enough to afford bags of control through the turns, yet they're sufficiently narrow to maintain the rider's body in aerodynamic balance for those long motorway bashes.

I can almost hear the potential customer mulling over the comparisons between the 40 lb lighter and, at the time of writing, £166 cheaper CB400, and the heavier and £250 more expensive CB750, as well as pitching it alongside the GT550 Suzuki. Yet the CB550 is much more than just an in-betweenie in the Honda range; more than merely a compromise between 750 cc beef and 400 cc cheap thrills. We believe the CB550 provides one of the finest balances between performance, economy and handling quality in today's motorcycling arena. That may sound like a tribute normally reserved for the two grand-plus machine, but we thoroughly enjoyed the CB550 and consider it to be one of the better bikes to emerge from Honda's design team in recent years.

At £975, the CB550 is cheap enough to fall within easy HP reach of most bikers and possesses performance that makes you wonder why you ever considered buying the

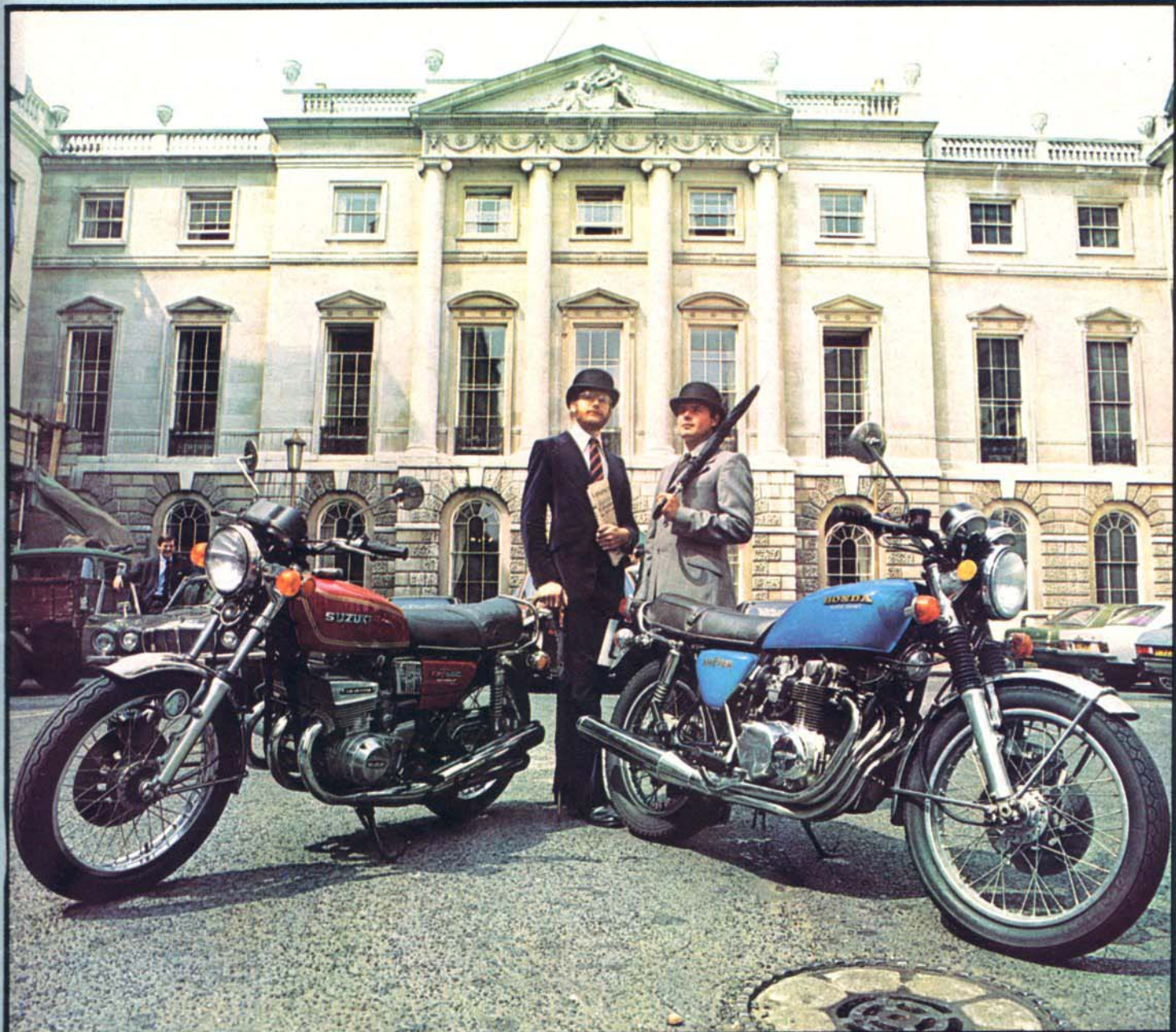
CB750. We dubbed the CB400 a Poor Boy's Musclebike; the CB550 is that and more. More weight, more muscle, more torque and more pure motorcycling enjoyment.

Thumbing the starter button on the right of the handlebar induces the crank to revolve and the Honda ticks over with the precision of a quartz wristwatch. Yet such is the efficiency of the fashionable four - into - one exhaust system that it creates a false impression that the 550's engine is mechanically noisy.

Round town the Honda felt more like the 750 than its smaller 400 cc brother, yet it was manoeuvrable and the tractability of second and third gears provided the right combination of acceleration with minimal use of revs. However, continuous subdued start-stop riding showed up a couple of flat spots below 5,000 rpm and with an overly strong throttle return spring I occasionally grabbed more revs than was really necessary. Still, right down to walking pace the machine felt balanced. Even tall dwarves of 5 foot 6 inches can foot their way through the traffic with a seat height of 31 inches.

But it's outa town where the fun really begins. Wind open the throttle to around 5,500 rpm and the Honda begins to come on strong. There's no power surge, just an enthusiastic urgency about the way the revs climb usefully to 8,500 rpm before power tails off. Revving to the 9,300 rpm red line has little effective value in terms of road speed and merely increases petrol consumption. All the time the exhaust remains quiet and the rider, in helmeted isolation, is barely aware of the high-pitched but heavily muffled scream that inoffensively finds an orchestrated passage through the system. There's just a faintly perceptible mechanical rustle from the motor to keep the rider company.

Performance is not excessive but at least it's all usable and it's available in quantities that will please all but the looniest speed freaks. The Honda nips up to well over 90 mph — VASCAR permitting — at any time of asking and keeps up 70 mph at a leisurely 6,000 rpm in top. Yet if you're anxious to find that extra 10 to 15 mph on top speed the throttle has to be screwed



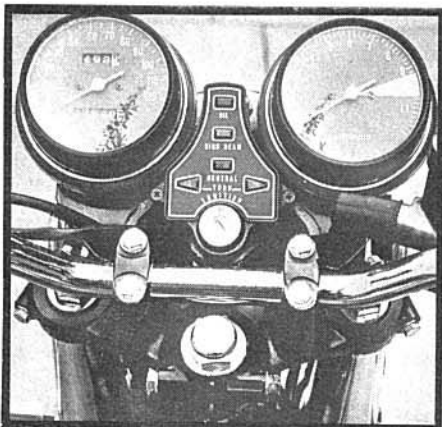
Photography John Wallace



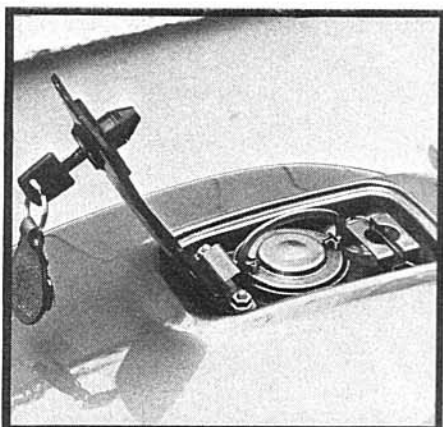
# Honda CB550F



*Stark but attractive styling is an improvement on CB400.*



*Instrumentation is up to Honda's usual high standard.*



*Horrid bathplug filler cap and flap are a result of US market requirements.*

viciously and fuel consumption rises in sympathy. When that's all in aid of knocking a couple of minutes off your ETA the strain seems to be an exercise in pointlessness. Tramping hard along the M4 unmercifully using revs, the Honda struggled to average 38 mpg. Even with more subdued and realistic riding, petrol consumption only staggered into the low forties. That's the price of performance, but proved quite acceptable in the Honda's case.

The frame is basically identical to that used on the CB500, although the front forks have come in for some internal redesigning and the rear suspension units have been updated and more heftily sprung. The Honda's performance, sporty appearance and excellent seating position encourage spirited riding, but push the 550 to its limits and you'll discover that the handling isn't quite up to the standard it's led you to expect. Chasing hard into a bend, braking, changing down and peeling into the turn in one swift motion induces a tail-end wiggle which serves as a warning that the CB550 is not, after all, a GP racer. Brake and change down well before you're into the

neck of the bend, accelerate right through it and the Honda drives round just dandy. It's just a question of tuning your own riding style and abilities to fit the feel, performance and handling of the 550. Once you've done that you'll discover how easy it is to drag the collector box across the blacktop on right-handers, contrasting with the much better ground clearance on the spartan but functionally attractive left side of the bike. Comments on roadholding have to be subjective in this instance since our test machine was shod with a pair of non-standard Continentals which broke away on several occasions in the dry. Wet weather performance remained untried due to the total lack of rainfall during the test period.

The brakes have evidently been set up to suit the machine's bulk and potential performance. Grabbing a fistful of the 11 inch front disc from any speed left it fade- and grab-free, and the rear drum brake just helps keep things in a straight line when you begin to stand the 550 on its front wheel.

Exterior dimensions of the 550 motor are identical to those of the CB500 but inter-

nally there have been many modifications. The clutch and gearbox have come in for some particularly extensive revision. The engine was hogged out by 2.5 mm per bore raising the capacity to 544 cc, and max torque output moved 500 rpm down the scale to 8,500 rpm.

Numerous styling changes have given the CB550 a fresh, polished image. Its re-shaped petrol tank now holds 3.7 gals and the toolkit is housed on the underside of the seat. Out front there's a large twin-dial set-up of speedometer and rev-counter, with an idiot light console neatly tailored to go in between them. The 550 shows its American connection only in the filler cap, which in bath-plug style is chained to the inside of the tank, and in the flap which hides the whole caboodle.

We tried to find serious fault with the 550 and failed simply because it's a competently designed motorcycle. Okay, so maybe the seat is an ass-deadener after 100 miles, and the rider is always aware of a high frequency buzz too fine to be called vibration, but nevertheless noticeable. But apart from the bleeping turn indicators the CB550 is not plagued with gimmicks. The styling is clean, even subdued, available only in just blue or orange. No flashes, no stripes, no unnecessary fuss.

The CB550 is an enjoyable motorcycle to ride because it's so "together": each facet of its design complementing the next. In the same way that the RD400 is the optimal development of the road-going two-stroke, we reckon the CB550 enjoys similar status in the four-cylinder four-stroke market, at least in the sub-900 cc category.

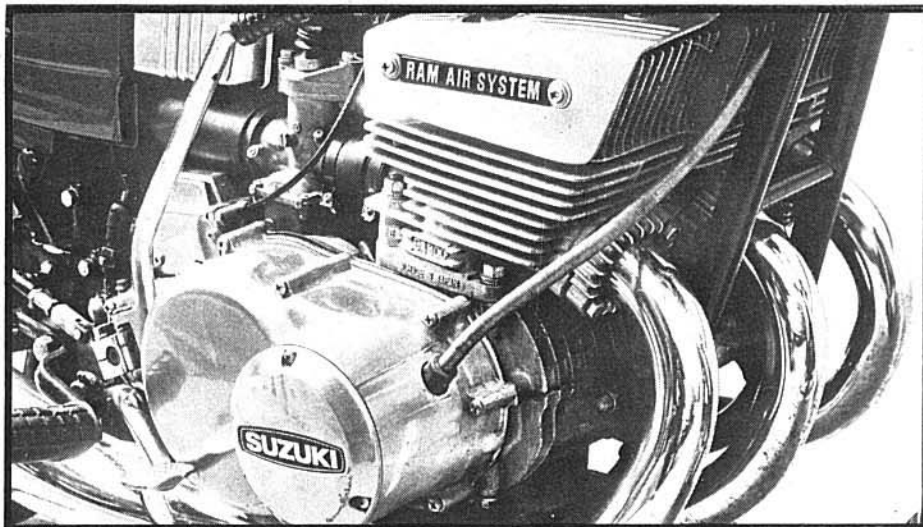
*Graham Sanderson*

## Suzuki GT550A

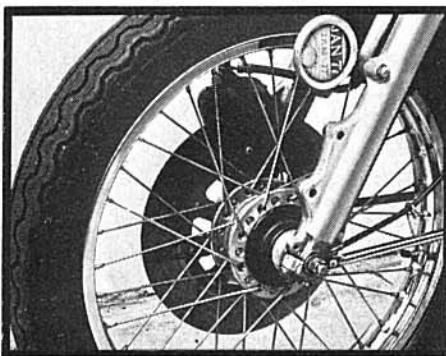
IT WAS Colin Curwood — freelance photographer of this parish — who really reminded me of the problem. Giving us some Long Distance Information on his 32,000 miles-plus GT550 Suzuki in June he observed that hurling such a machine round Silverstone and then bitching about the handling (as *Bike* did, many moons ago) is a pretty pointless exercise. Stick your neck, nose, elbows, bum and boots out on the street if that's where the bike belongs. I agreed; I still do. So what was I doing on a 550 in the *Isle Of Man* ferchrissake?

It just didn't seem right, somehow. Race week in the Island without a bike may be strawberries without cream, Coburn without Hughes, but I didn't really fancy my chances of beating Mike Hailwood's angle of lean round the course on a Suzuki triple. Or rather I did, but only after visiting

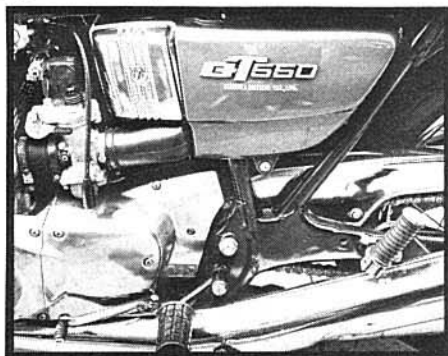
# Suzuki GT550A



Chunky three cylinder motor produces lashings of smooth torque.



Single disc is enough for all but the hardest charging.



Frame finish was typically nasty, even down to paint runs.

every *Bike* pub between Ramsay and Peel. Anyway, my route home across the mainland is specifically designed to test any street bike to the outer limits, so I settled for using the 550 as transport, pure 'n' simple.

Until these two maniacs hustled by me one evening, going round the course. The leader was on a Trident, giving his mate on the 750 Honda behind some work to do just keeping the horizon the right way up. I'm well aware that you'd have resisted this vulgar challenge to ego and riding skill and just continued plodding on towards the Chinese meal I was headed for, but I was due on the midnight boat and it was a nice evening and I hadn't really had a good blast all week and ... I tucked in behind the Honda and soon we were cruising in the high eighties, playing tag in and out of cars, combos, tractors and packs of bikes. The 550 was keeping up on the good surface, slipstreaming the four along the straights and nudging him through the bends on braking. Then the road deteriorated with that sort of sudden unexpected brain-loosening lurch you get crossing county boundaries. Using all the 550's amazing mid-range whizz to haul down the straight from one turn to another, I felt my internal organs cannoning off each other like the

26 *bike*

BBC had decided to hold the final of Pot Black in my visceral region. Liver off kidney down the centre pocket: that sort of thing. I gave in finally — cowardice is one of my more attractive attributes — and let the throttle slip forward beneath a limp and unresisting wrist. Try it yourself if you don't believe me, but don't eat first, okay?

Lack of rear suspension compliance must be one of the Suzuki's worst points, along with a poor riding position and inadequate fuel capacity. We've said it before about Suzukis and it still applies. Stiffer springs do not a better handling motorcycle make. We've also moaned about footpegs mounted so far forward that you find yourself hanging your heels on the passenger's rests for some relief on motorway drags. I've seen so many other riders at the same game to know that I'm not alone, but W. Haylock of this address informs me that the new GS750 Suzuki is built to accept normal human beings in reasonable comfort. Perhaps before long Japanese manufacturers will all be building bikes with old-style European riding positions, but until then ...

The GT550's thirst remains a problem in a country where — since the great gas crisis of '73 — garages shut up shop earlier and earlier and keep the shutters up on Sun-

days. Multiply 3.3 gallons by 31 and you get 102.3 miles, which is the sort of distance you can easily cover in a Sunday evening without ever sighting an open petrol station. On three occasions I stretched the 550's limited reserves of fuel — and my own patience — to the limit, droning along in fifth gear with a handful of revs on the dial. Twice I was overtaken by mopeds in my prayerful search for hydrocarbon distillate. Oh, the humiliation.

But I haven't mentioned the engine at all. Well, there's precious little to say. Mods have been so minor that it almost takes a storeman to spot them. Early electric starter motor clutches gave trouble and that's about it, because we know enough folk with high mileage examples to be sure that you'd have to be rather unlucky to cop an unreliable big triple. Most stunning internal mod on the latest A model is bores machined straight into the cylinder casting sans liners, but coated with Suzuki Composite Electro-Chemical Material (SCEM) or hard chrome t'me and thee. The GT250 is similarly constructed and benefits are claimed to be better heat dissipation, more constant piston tolerances and, therefore, more consistent power output. SCEM is further claimed to be ultra hard wearing and to present no problems for reboring.

Since its introduction in 1972, the GT550 has changed very little. The front drum finally faded away completely in '73 to be replaced by a single disc. Along with improved ground clearance a year later, this was the most significant performance improvement, and the less said about the original front brake the better. I've yet to encounter an owner who hasn't tried to uprate it in some way. And while we still find it far too easy to knock chunks off the road with the GT380's centre stand, I never succeeded in making its bigger — and much smarter — brother kiss the deck. Instrumentation was 'improved' for '75's M model with larger idiot lights under smoked acrylic sheet and a digital gear indicator. I found great reassurance in looking at this instrument and always discovering that the figure displayed was still the right way up: a worthwhile addition for those of a nervous disposition.

Best thing about the rubber-mounted motor is its vast acreage of usable power, spread from anything over three grand right up to the 8,000 rpm redline. Maximum torque — a hefty 38.7 ft/lbs — is developed 2,000 rpm below that figure and it shows in magnificent mid-range pzazz. Even five gears — the GT 750's — seem one too many on occasion, so smooth is the urgent surge of three cylinders. But you have to take the rough with the smooth. The Suzuki three may be way silkier than Honda's four most of the time, but just as you're about to sail smoothly over the legal limit at 5,000 rpm in top, an ugly patch of vibration shows up. It lasts from just below 70 mph to just over 80 and hammers through to your feet. There's no alternative to choosing either a 65 or 85 mph cruising speed. No prizes for guessing my choice.

Suzuki's greatest achievement in producing the 550 was to succeed in complete understatement. Inevitably it was compared with the early Kawasaki 500 triples, whose bowel-loosening performance left a legend which has tended to rub off on all air-cooled stroker threes. Instead the 550 looks staid, almost portly, but, nonetheless, attractive. Its frame may look just like a collection of tubes holding two wheels apart, tacked together with aesthetically repulsive gusseting, but it handles despite the rear springs' attempts to prevent it holding a line. It may not wheelie its way into your affections, but a standing quarter time in the 13 second bracket from 543 cc ain't to be sniffed at.

As I looped across England, the bike really began to grow in my estimation. A quick warm-up down the M6 to Knutsford had us threading in and out of the deadly day tripper traffic I hoped would be well clear of the Peak district by the time I got into the Macclesfield - Buxton - Matlock groove. It's a route well worth exploring if you want to learn something about your riding and the bike you do it on. Combined with stretches of both M6 and M1 and a final mad dash across Leicestershire and Rutland on the A606, it features everything from a series of devastating uphill and down dale hairpins, steep valley descents and climbs and finally a wide, lolling stretch of blacktop curling over the rolling English countryside. Now that the M62 has drained it of heavy truckers, all you have to contend with are other loons who think it's a great way to go home.

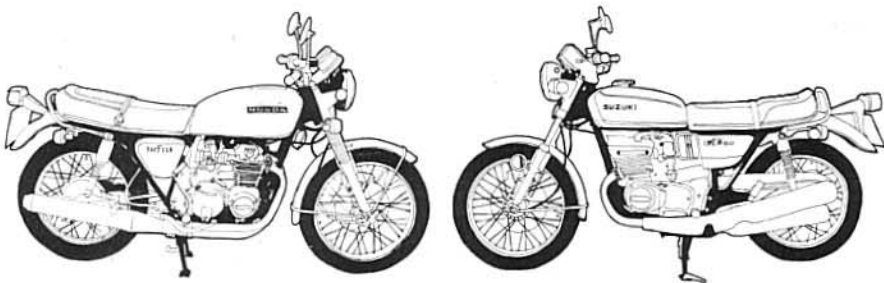
At first I was baulked all the way into Macclesfield by coaches and caravans, until things thinned out on the twisting climb up to the brief plateau before Buxton. Arms played round a bulging tank bag, I began to feel speed fever taking over easing the Suzuki into tight uphill curves, picking it up and squirting the power on simultaneously. No wriggles or twitches, just power and plenty of it whenever it was required.

So far I'd failed to miss a cog in the positive, if slightly clunky, box and the brakes were holding up under a fair amount of punishment. Even my hind quarters weren't protesting: this is a road which demands total concentration or it's splat into some picturesque stone wall or a long echoing scream down into a charming roadside chasm. Heading down into hairpin after hairpin with precious little engine braking had me grasping the brake lever yet more fervently as I gave in to the tempo of a ride that was rapidly getting out of hand. Under the hypnotic effects of swinging rhythmically through bend after bend I kept on wanting to do it faster and faster and faster still. The brake pedal sagged lower and lower and the disc seemed to require more and more pressure. I'd have given all the digital gear indicators in Hammamatsu for another.

By now it was getting dark and I'd flipped on the lights. Switchgear remains unchanged and a model of standard, sens-

*continued on page 77*

# Checkout



	HONDA CB550F	SUZUKI GT550
<b>Engine</b> .....	SOHC 4 cyl 4-stroke	3 cyl 2-stroke
<b>Bore x stroke</b> .....	58.5 x 50.6 mm	61 x 62 mm
<b>Capacity</b> .....	544 cc	543 cc
<b>Compression ratio</b> .....	9:1	6.8:1
<b>Carburation</b> .....	4 x 22 mm Keihin	3 x 28 mm Mikuni
<b>BHP at RPM</b> .....	50 at 8,000	53 at 7,500
<b>Max torque at RPM</b> .....	30.4 ft/lbs at 7,500	38.7 ft/lbs at 6,000
<b>Primary drive</b> .....	Inverted tooth chain	Helical gear
<b>Clutch</b> .....	Wet, multi-plate	Wet, multi-plate
<b>Gearbox</b> .....	5 speed	5 speed
<b>Electrical system</b> .....	AC generator	12v 280w alternator
	12v 12ah battery	12v 11ah battery
<b>Lighting</b> .....	45/40w headlight	50/40w headlight
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>		
<b>Wheelbase</b> .....	56 ins	57.5 ins
<b>Seat height</b> .....	31 ins	32.5 ins
<b>Overall width</b> .....	30 ins	30.25 ins
<b>Ground clearance</b> .....	6 ins	6 ins
<b>Kerb weight</b> .....	444 lb (inc 1 gal fuel)	452 lb (inc 1 gal fuel)
<b>Fuel capacity</b> .....	3.7 gals	3.3 gals
<b>EQUIPMENT</b>		
<b>Trafficators</b> .....	Yes	Yes
<b>Electric Starter</b> .....	Yes	Yes
<b>Trip mileometer</b> .....	Yes	Yes
<b>Steering lock</b> .....	Yes	Yes
<b>Helmet lock</b> .....	Yes	Yes
<b>Headlight flasher</b> .....	Yes	Yes
<b>Others</b> .....	Lockable fuel cap, audible turn signals, twin mirrors	Lockable fuel cap, twin mirrors, gear indicator
<b>CYCLE PARTS</b>		
<b>Tyres (front)</b> .....	3.25 x 19 Bridgestone	3.25 x 19 Japanese Dunlop
<b>(rear)</b> .....	3.75 x 18 Bridgestone	4.00 x 18 Japanese Dunlop
<b>Brakes (front)</b> .....	11 in disc	11.75 in disc
<b>(rear)</b> .....	7.5 in drum	7 in drum
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>		
<b>Top speed (prone)</b> .....	111.11 mph	107.91 mph
<b>(sitting up)</b> .....	106.38 mph	98.03 mph
<b>Standing ¼ mile</b> .....	14.48 secs	13.93 secs
<b>Speedometer error</b>		
<b>at indicated 30 mph</b> ...	28.30 mph	27.67 mph
<b>at indicated 60 mph</b> ...	57.14 mph	57.69 mph
<b>Fuel consumption (overall)</b> .....	42 mpg	38 mpg
<b>(ridden hard)</b> .....	38 mpg	31 mpg
<b>Braking distance</b>		
<b>from 30 mph</b> .....	23 ft 6 ins	30 ft 6 ins
<b>from 60 mph</b> .....	134 ft	126 ft
<b>PRICE</b> .....	£975 inc VAT plus	£889 inc VAT plus
	£6 delivery	£7.50 delivery
<b>Guarantee</b> .....	12 months/unlimited mileage	6 months/6,000 miles
<b>Supplied by</b> .....	Honda (UK) Ltd, Power Road, Chiswick, London W4 5YT	Heron Suzuki GB Ltd, Beddington Lane, Croydon, Surrey