

# Midweight Giant Test



## **Suzuki GT380** **v** **Yamaha RD350**

A balls-out road burner and a slick city runabout come together in a class that used to be the underpowered and overtaxed poor relation to the real men's machines. Testers: Graham Sanderson and Dick Pountain. Photography: Colin Curwood.





BIKES SEEM to come in all shapes and sizes these days since the tradition of having the clearly defined capacities of 125, 250 and 350 cc (etc.) was blasted into the history books several years ago.

Honda and Kawasaki, for instance, have added 400 cc machines to their ranges, but since they have already been ravaged by *Bike* testers we decided to look at some other bikes in the middleweight arena.

Suzuki's GT380 has been around for some time but it's three years since *Bike* allocated editorial space to this three-pot stroker, and strangely enough we have never tested Yamaha's RD350. The obvious answer was to pair them off in a Giant Test; if we could get hold of them that is.

Once again it was Apple Motorcycles who came to the rescue by persuading one of their customers, in this case Tony Bulley, to lend us his brand new 380. And London-based publisher Dick Fountain filled the Yamaha slot by giving an account of his five-speed twin.

We were pleased to find that it wasn't only the price of the Suzuki that had changed. A front disc brake replaced the old drum unit and the high-rise bars have been jettisoned in favour of a flatter, more comfortable pair. It boasts different carbs, designed specifically for the American market, and also minor changes in the electrics department.

Dick bought his Yam earlier this year and had clocked just over 3,000 miles when we coaxed him into writing the verbiage that follows. His bike differs little from the latest six speed model that supercedes it.

# Suzuki GT380

EVERYTHING is relative, that's f'sure. But in the GT 380's case relative to what? It's weight and comfort almost make it a tourer, but whoever heard of a 380cc tourer? Perhaps it's a subtle roadburner? The brisk acceleration and genuine top speed of 95mph are nothing to sneer at, but the machine's entry into the boy-racer stakes are hampered by the occasionally weird antics of the suspension set-up. So you see, before a bike can be tested one must try to assess into which biking bracket it falls. But this middleweight is the exception to the rule. To put the three-pot stroker into a Class of Its Own would be too patronising and yet there is an air of delightful arrogance about this product which almost sets it aside from the crowd and makes comparisons with other machines a somewhat inadequate method of testing. The Suzuki is above all else better than good but not quite excellent. It is a superb example of styling; a real eye catcher capable of selling the £609 deal on looks alone; the type of super-smoothie that prompted comments like, "no wonder British bikes don't sell like the Jap ones," and "are you sure it's only a 380, mate?" "ain't she a beauty?", and "wish I had one of those, dad."

Riding turned out to be as carefree and easy as I had hoped. For me, it put back the leisure into the pleasure of motorcycling. There were no aches and pains after riding in strong wind, no battling to keep the revs in some ridiculously small power-band and no real horrors in the steering department.

Zapping along comfortably in the high seventies and eighties was as simple as riding the Suzy at 20mph. Snicking through six gears induced beautiful sounds from the four pipes; a crisp crackle that only popped its way into the nauseating tinny two-stroke rattle when changing down from second to first. Yup, there sure is a lot to be said for three cylinders, and plain smoothness comes near the top of the list. Accelerating hard in first with no vibration up to five big ones and precious little after that was, in the words of that cigar advert, "sheer enjoyment". The slightest tingle which arrived at 5,000 rpm in all gears increased marginally to about six grand and then faded. Zipping through the gears with five reassuring clicks into the almost clinical silence at five thousand in top was quite sensational. Sensational not in the sense of being hurtled down a drag strip by some wild beastie, but the more subtle sensation of enjoying a perfect meal; you don't eat too quickly because it is so good. Well, the Suzy is like that, too.



# Suzuki GT380

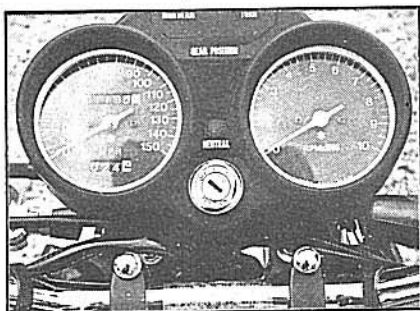
You're cruising on air at 5,000 revs so why go any faster; savouring the flavour of wind whistling past your face without the usual drone of motor and exhaust reverberating around your head was so relaxing. The seat merely adds to this satisfaction since it is conspicuous only by the way it protects from that nasty motorcycling disease, numb-bum.

Unfortunately it's not long before you get shaken down from the Cloud Nine indulgence into reality. Reality, that first hits your back pocket by demanding a gallon of petrol every forty of so miles. A high seventies bop to London tarn soon axed the consumption to an excessive 36 mpg and the best figure I obtained was 47 mpg. Perhaps the industry is getting to the stage where the correlation between cc and petrol consumption is becoming more diverse than ever. Forty-seven represents very careful, slow riding, which doesn't do justice to the willing 371 cc mill which pulls smoothly, without fuss from three thousand revs, and makes the power-band syndrome something of the past. But if you've got a machine that laughs at 70 mph why not let it indulge in a little self-titillation, despite the financial consequences? Handling was another point which limited the Suzuki's progress in the excellence stakes. She didn't so much deal with corners as tolerate them. Smooth surface cornering was no trouble, but put the wheels over a few bumps at speed and there were signs that all was not well. After all 402 lb is really too much of a mass to sling around and a rear end wallow is a sufficient warning, especially on someone else's machine. Treat her with respect and the rider will reap just rewards for the consideration. The lesson is not to be overbearing but to co-operate and ease her over those bumps. Informed sources say that British tyres and Girling rear suspension units improve cornering.

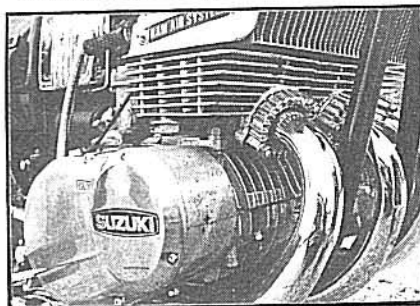
Braking was steady, progressive and respectably powerful; perfectly adequate in straining the 37 bhp bike down to nought miles an hour. Both brakes worked well to the point of locking although it was easier to lock the rear wheel since the cable operated brake possessed less feel than its front partner which was guilty of fading once the disc was hot.

Signs that the industry will do almost anything to be different were shown by the inclusion of a digital readout panel between the neat speedo and rev counter showing what gear is engaged. It's just a novelty and Suzuki would have probably been better advised to pay just a little more attention to

the finish. Welding around the steering head and swinging arm areas could have been neater, and chrome on the grab-rail and the rear mudguard under the seat was a little grainy. Parts of the alloy engine castings were left rough as well. These are alas, the giveaway hallmarks of mass production, a niggling reminder that nowt's perfect. But there were some nice finishing touches such as reflectors on each of the four winkers, chrome fork shrouds and the grab rail itself. The 380 is similar in dimensions to its bigger brother, the GT 550, and it seems a pity that the smaller model lacks that cherry on the cake, the electric starter. After all it seems rather unrefined to have a kick-start a machine with the looks of a superbike, the comfort for touring and enough acceleration to raise a few eyebrows.



*"Ground control to Major Tom". Well, the Suzy's instrument panel does look like something out of Cape Kennedy. Just as efficient too!*



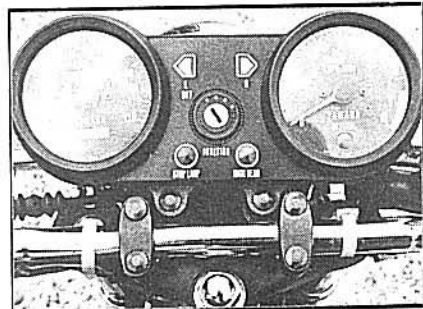
*Just goes to show how the camera can lie, or bend the truth at least. The 380 mill may look pretty awesome but it's really gentle and well-mannered.*

The 380 certainly lives up to its Gran Turismo tag and embodies many qualities which are not too often found in one machine. Its touring capabilities are unquestionable and yet hampered by the high petrol consumption. Its potential boy racer image is let down to some extent by the handling. But the Suzuki is not a case of engineering superfluity. Three cylinders sharing 380 cc may sound a little excessive but the whole plot feels right, has no real vices and performs well. The interesting combination of several of the better facets of other bikes all grafted into one culminates in the all-round motorcycle. And like most all-rounders performs most tasks with comparative ease; excelling at little but rarely failing its duties.

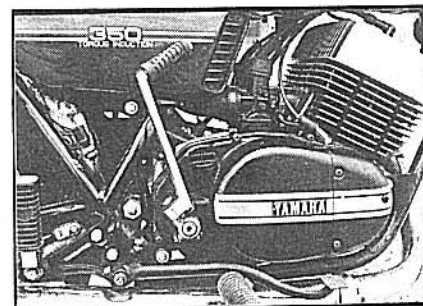
Graham Sanderson

# Yamaha RD350

THE RD 350 was a far from obvious choice for my biking requirements. Much of my riding is done in Central London, and my boy-racer days lie at least ten years in the past. Flying in the face of commonsense however, I bought the little brute and now, six months later, I'm besotted by a love for it which borders on perversion. (Eagerly my trembling fingers eased into her smooth



*Dick Pountain has derived many hours of pleasure by blasting over the fives on the rev-counter. The cockpit is legible, neat and sensible.*



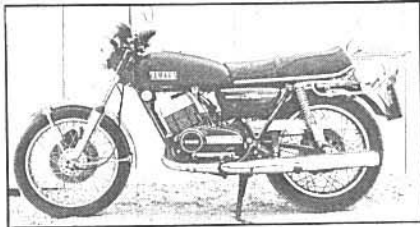
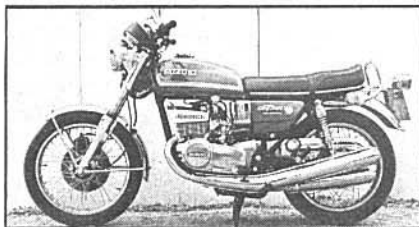
*Horse delivery on the Yam is provided by the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde motor which is nevertheless quite happy to footle around in traffic.*

hard bellmouth and lightly brushed the cold, unyielding throttle slide...').

That our unlikely match has proved so successful is due to the Jekyll and Hyde character of the RD 350. Contrary to all the accumulated Biker Wisdom about hot two-stroke road burners, the RD is as sweet, docile and tractable as you could wish in town traffic. Homicidal taxis, little old ladies and even the proverbial beer truck are all smoothly and easily by-passed with a minimum of tap dancing on the gear shift. Yamaha claim that their torque induction reed valve system is to be thanked for this, but the 350 cubes must help, as their smaller twins are more spiteful and highly strung.

But allow the tach needle to pass 5,000 rpm and the discreet Dr. Jekyll grows hair all over his face. A power band which you

# CHECKOUT



**SUZUKI GT380M**

**YAMAHA RD350**

Engine .....	3-cylinder, 2-stroke	2-cylinder, 2-stroke
Bore and stroke .....	54 x 54 mm	64 x 54 mm
Capacity .....	371 cc	347 cc
Compression ratio .....	6.7:1	6.2:1
Carburettors .....	3 x 24 mm Mikuni	2 x 28 mm Mikuni
BHP @ RPM .....	37 @ 7,500	39 @ 7,500
Primary drive .....	Helical gear	Helical gear
Clutch .....	Multi-plate, wet	Multi-plate, wet
Gear ratios overall .....		
(1) .....	19.8:1	17.1:1
(2) .....	12.7:1	11.8:1
(3) .....	9.4:1	8.8:1
(4) .....	7.7:1	6.9:1
(5) .....	6.7:1	5.9:1
(6) .....	6.0:1	
Electrical system .....	Alternator, battery/coil ignition	170w alternator, battery/coil ignition
Lighting .....	25/25w headlight, 8/23w tail/stoplight	35/35w headlight, 8/23w tail/stoplight
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>		
Wheelbase .....	55.5 inches	53.50 inches
Seat height .....	31.5 inches	31.5 inches
Ground clearance .....	5.7 inches	6.8 inches
Handlebar height .....	40.5 inches	—
Kerb weight .....	402 lbs (with 1 gall fuel)	330 lbs (with 1 gall fuel)
Oil capacity .....	3 pints	3.52 pints
Fuel capacity .....	3.3 gallons	3.52 gallons
<b>EQUIPMENT</b>		
Trafficators .....	Yes	Yes
Electric starter .....	No	No
Trip mileometer .....	Yes	Yes
Steering lock .....	Yes	Yes
Helmet lock .....	Yes	Yes
Headlight flasher .....	Yes	Yes
Kill button .....	Yes	Yes
Toolkit .....	Yes	Yes
Spare parts .....	No	No
Others .....	Mirrors, gear indicator	Mirrors
<b>CYCLE PARTS</b>		
Tyres (front) .....	3.00 x 19 Bridgestone	3.00 x 18 Yokohama
(rear) .....	3.50 x 18 Bridgestone	3.50 x 18 Yokohama
Brakes (front) .....	10.5 inch disc	10.5 inch disc
(rear) .....	7 inch s/s	8 inch s/s
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>		
Top speed .....	95.8 mph	96.8 mph
Standing $\frac{1}{4}$ mile .....	15.2 seconds	—
0-30 mph .....	3.2 seconds	2.7 seconds
0-60 mph .....	8.5 seconds	7.3 seconds
Speedometer error:		
at indicated 30 mph .....	27.2 mph	28.2 mph
at indicated 60 mph .....	55.6 mph	56.9 mph
Fuel consumption .....		
(overall) .....	42 mpg	45 mpg
(ridden hard) .....	36 mpg	40 mpg
Braking distance .....		
(from 30 mph) .....	28.5 feet	28.5 feet
(from 60 mph) .....	139 feet	149 feet
PRICE .....	£609 inc VAT	£530 inc VAT (new model £580)
GUARANTEE .....	6 months/6,000 miles parts only. Labour 3 months	6 months/4,000 miles parts and service
Supplied by .....	Apple Motorcycles, Lower Bond Street, Hinckley, Leics.	

# Yamaha RD350

could peel potatoes with emerges, and from there on up the RD begins to behave more like a TZ than a mild commuter. Even after months of familiarity I can still get a big thrill and a sprinkling of goose pimples from opening it wide in the lower gears.

The Yamaha twin engine in its various capacities is well established by now as a solid and potent piece of engineering. Starting from cold requires use of the choke and one or two lazy prods on the kickstart. Once under way the engine produces no very extraordinary impressions except performance. It's smooth, though not as uncannily smooth as the Suzuki triple; the faint tingle of vibration vanishes as revs rise and only reappears near the red line. The exhaust note is inoffensive and rather unexciting; a metallic popping rising to a muted howl as you gas into the power band. The clutch is light and positive, and like the rest of the motor, seems to be unburstable, as it needed no adjustment after the track testing.

Mine has last year's five speed gearbox, which is crisp and easy, only the occasional clunk into first tells you that it's shifted at all. The ratios are perfectly spaced; in fact I've decided not to bother with the six-speed conversion, since the bike won't pull into the red in fifth. Without an extra five or six horses to pull it, a sixth cog would merely be an overdrive, at the mercy of hills and headwinds.

If it gets you off, you can raise a wheelie in first and second or spin the rear wheel on wet roads. Personally I can do without it. As a highway cruiser though, the RD is astonishing. On 100 mile plus trips it will cruise at 85 (90 on the clock) without a trace of overheating or fatigue. In fact it feels friskier after such a thrashing than after a day of carbon-depositing town riding. Incidentally, plug oiling, the Yamaha disease, has been no problem except during early running in. As I do a lot of stop-start riding I had a Yamaha mechanic adjust the oil pump a fraction, which cuts down smoking and fouling at low speed but leaves plenty of lubrication at high speeds. (For God's sake don't mess with the pump yourself unless you wish to become a long thin stain down a motorway lane.)

Handlingwise the RD is as good as anything I've ridden. (Admittedly I'm a poor judge of handling since my career started on a C15 with a bent frame and went on to an A10 with a bald sidecar tyre on the back. Since then *everything* has felt good by comparison.) The tubular frame is a replica of the racing TZ frame. Suspension is well on the stiff side of luxury, and with the rear



# Yamaha RD350

shocks on medium foreload it sticks like glue around fast bumpy bends, inspiring confidence if not outright folly. Brown trousers need not be worn. The Japanese Dunlop Gold Seal tyres behave well enough wet or dry. No doubt convinced *Bike* readers will whip on the Konis and TT100s before they'll throw a leg over it, but I can wait till replacement time comes up. The brakes are excellent, capable of locking the wheels if you want them to, and the disc has lots of that testers' favourite cliché, 'feel'.

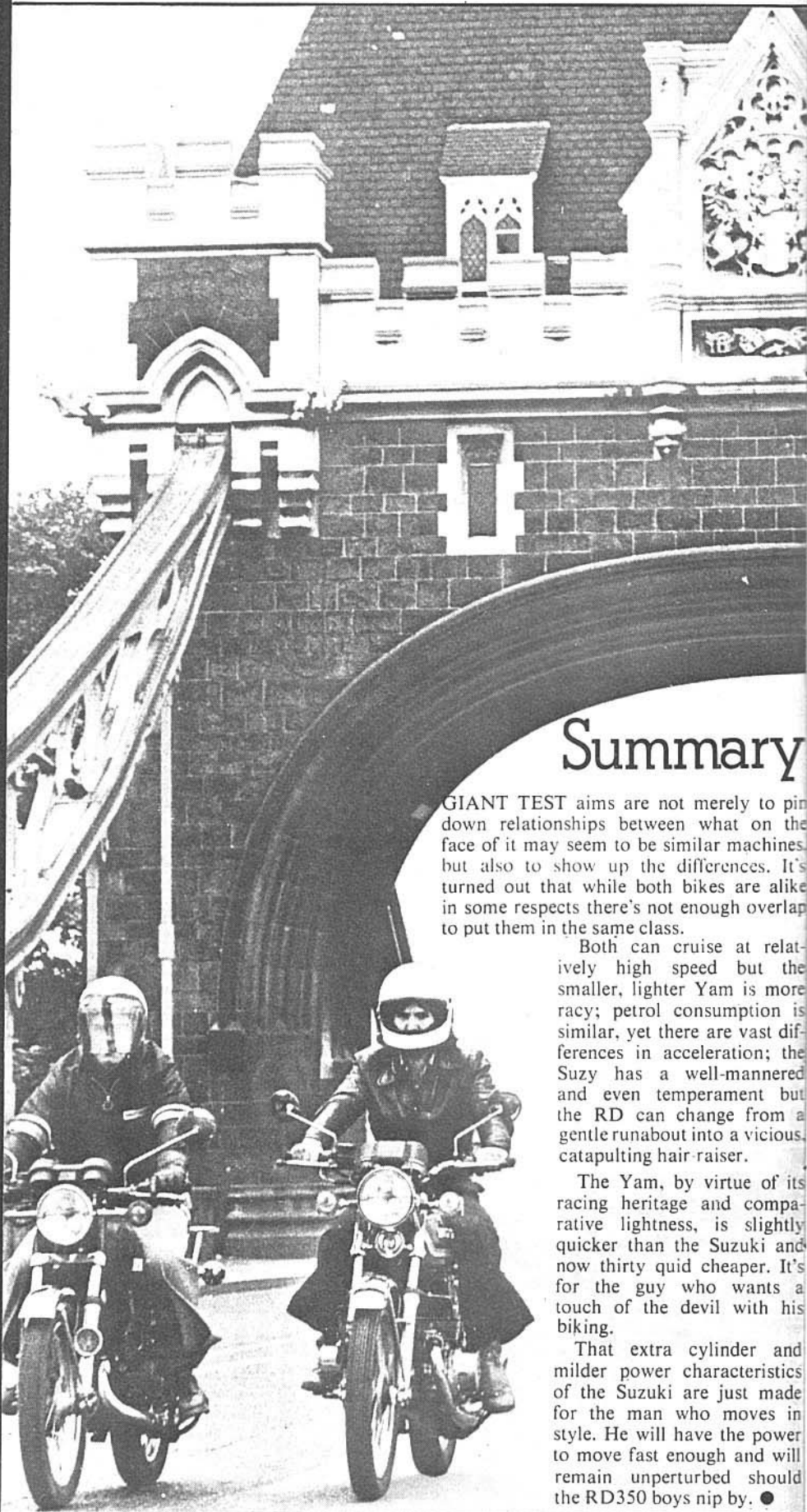
Add together these features, combine with a weight around 330 pounds and you have a package which is as quick between A and B as almost anything you can name. There are plenty of superbikes with a higher top speed and a quicker standing quarter on the test track. But given a stretch of real life road with lumps and twisty bits to haul them round, the Yam would provide most of them with a good run for their money (the money in question being over £1,000 in most cases, or almost twice the price of the RD). Admittedly in doing so the Yam would use as much gas as the average superbike, but what do you want already, miracles?

Controls and electrics are what you'd expect by now from the Orientals, first class and well placed. As for reliability, nothing has dropped off, leaked or broken since it left the showroom. The only modifications I've made are to fit a carrier, a nearside mirror, and straight bars which to my taste give a nicer riding position than the stock bars. Someday soon a quartz-halogen headlamp will go in if one turns up that fits.

Regarding its vices, I've yet to find a serious one, unless you count 40 mpg from a 350 as a vice. A few minor gripes are the chain guard which allows crap to spray the back number plate after you've lubed the chain; the awkward tool stash under the tank (Honda have nice plastic trays), and no helmet lock. And it's disappointing that in these days of proliferating idiot lights, Yamaha can't produce a low oil warning light for the two-stroke tank. With 700 miles odd between fill ups it would be easy to forget to check it on a long motorway thrash...

All considered, the RD is a very loveable bike: it's finely judged blend of civilisation and brutality should appeal to anyone who wants an oil-tight, hassle free mount which still has that old time quality known as Balls.

Who knows, in ten years' time the Yamaha RD 350 may be remembered as the Gold Star of the Seventies (if you'll excuse the blasphemy).  
*Dick Pountain*



## Summary

GIANT TEST aims are not merely to pin down relationships between what on the face of it may seem to be similar machines, but also to show up the differences. It's turned out that while both bikes are alike in some respects there's not enough overlap to put them in the same class.

Both can cruise at relatively high speed but the smaller, lighter Yam is more racy; petrol consumption is similar, yet there are vast differences in acceleration; the Suzy has a well-mannered and even temperament but the RD can change from a gentle runabout into a vicious, catapulting hair-raiser.

The Yam, by virtue of its racing heritage and comparative lightness, is slightly quicker than the Suzuki and now thirty quid cheaper. It's for the guy who wants a touch of the devil with his biking.

That extra cylinder and milder power characteristics of the Suzuki are just made for the man who moves in style. He will have the power to move fast enough and will remain unperturbed should the RD350 boys nip by. ●