

Harley vs. Yamaha: Duel On American Dirt

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SPECIAL
EDITION

CYCLE GUIDE

SPECIAL EDITION:
Suspension Buyer's Guide

CYCLE GUIDE TESTS
Yamaha's Slick Seca 550
And Race-Ready IT465

CBX vs. R100RS

Can upstart techno-dazzle
Beat a heritage of refinement?



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QUOTE:

"We'll run even up with any company from any country in the world. But not on fixed rules, which is what we have for '82. That's selling the country down the river—and we've been sold, damn it!"

—Pg. 58

ON THE COVER:

CBX and R100RS, the two finest sport tourers that lots of money can buy, pose for Baron Wolman's Nikon in the world's most elaborate photo studio.

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ROAD TEST:

Yamaha XJ550 Seca

The Sabre-jet smile hides a killer's instinct for hunting apexes.

BY LARRY WORKS



Prepare yourself for some disorientation when you first ride Yamaha's new Seca 550. Not anything as radical as an inner-ear imbalance, just a little role confusion. To start with, you don't just push the Seca out of the garage and into the driveway. You remove the wheel chocks and roll it out of the hangar. Then, instead of snapping closed your helmet's visor, you pull forward on the canopy and latch it into place. And finally—and most assuredly—you don't simply ride off.

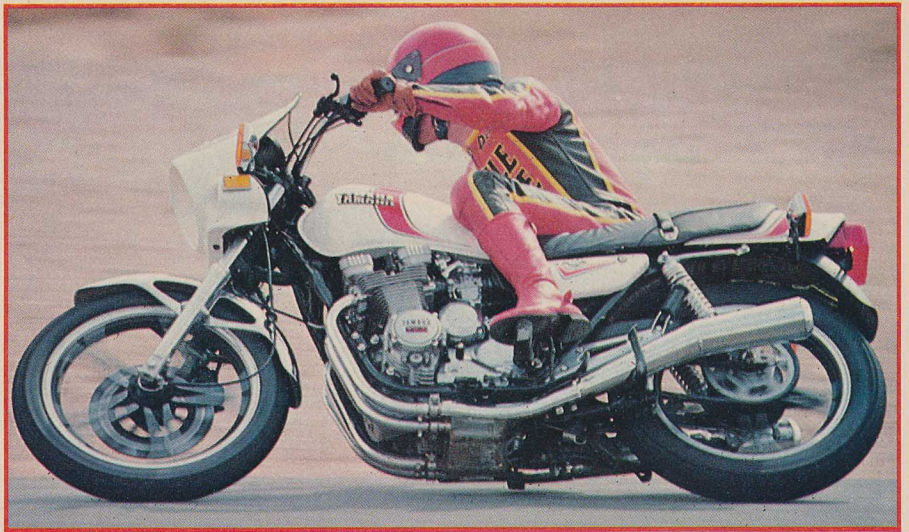
The impression the Seca conveys is decidedly aeronautic, but it's not entirely the result of its jutting, Sabre-jet snout. And the natural cockpit effect of the drooping handlebar that continues the sweep of the windscreen around the instrument bank doesn't quite account for it, either. No, the Seca's airy attraction is the almost unmistakable conviction that from the moment you apply a little throttle and feed in the light clutch you are no longer bound by ground physics. From the first turn that you simply bank through and forget, you know that you're at the controls of something uncommonly good.

As you pilot the Seca through the hardest series of twisting apexes you can find, the point is driven home. The handling is light, responsive. Flick left and dial in a little more thrust, flick hard right and get the nose down; you're through any combination of sweepers, hairpins or whatever, all with a maximum dose of good kinesthetics and a minimum of effort. The Seca transforms your thoughts into maneuvers just as surely and quickly as if a length of cable passed through the back of your helmet and tied your brain stem into some control box hidden behind the fairing.

If you started to pull the bike apart to satisfy your curiosity about that miniature control center, you'd be sorely disappointed, though. There's simply no trickery, no techno-magic involved whatsoever. So, if you sorted through every piece that makes the Seca as good as it is, the list of ingredients you'd end up with might look pretty mundane. No single piece accounts for the absolutely spot-on relationship that exists between the Seca and almost any stretch of pavement. It's a thoroughly unremarkable collection of bits that achieves its measure of greatness only by having been assembled in the right combination.

One key element in the Seca's recipe for pavement prowess that *would* turn up right off is low weight. At 418 pounds, fairing and all, the Seca is eight pounds lighter than last year's KZ550, 24 pounds lighter than Suzuki's GS550 and a whopping 50 pounds less than a CX500 Custom. Of course, many of the power-to-weight bene-

Continued



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© 1981 HELIOTROPE PHOTOS

BETTER THAN STOCK: Yamaha Seca 550

The way it should be.

• Some bikes you just can't leave alone. The Seca 550 is like that. Inside the civilized Seca, the perfect 550cc street bike, we knew there lurked Super Seca, a Sunday afternoon apex-strafer capable of ripping the throat out of any KZ550 foolish enough to wander into its path. And so we set about making a monster out of Yamaha's sophisticated handiwork.

Naturally, we began with the suspension. The engine has horsepower enough, although dropping a tooth from the countershaft sprocket might give it more of an edge when it comes to out-dragging KZ550s away from the corners. The suspension was more crucial though, because it permitted too much front-end dive and furnished too little rear-end control for squeezing the last bit of speed from the engine.

We found the solution by following the lead of Yamaha's Doug van Almelo, who tunes the Seca 550 that John Glover has used to humiliate KZ550s in Box Stock road racing at AFM events. The fork's standard 10-weight fork oil was replaced by the same quantity of PJ-1 20-weight oil for more damping control, and then one-inch spacers were inserted into the fork tubes to keep the fork from plunging to its stops so readily under braking.

Van Almelo uses S&W Street Stokers on the back of his Seca, but we were anxious to try Interpart's Mulholland LTG shocks. Derived from a motocross design, the \$145 LTGs incorporate oversize damper rods, finned shock bodies and an internal gas-displacement bag for durable, fade-free operation. The LTGs also are tunable and rebuildable. Unfortunately, they weren't yet available in the proper eye-to-eye length for the Seca, so we had to settle for shocks three-quarters of an inch too long. A soft spring was fitted so the stock ride height could be maintained and the Seca's steering geometry would be relatively unaffected. We'd ordinarily include different tires for any Better Than Stock project in addition to the new suspension, but the Bridgestones were too good to frivolously spend an unnecessary \$120.

The last modification involved a change in the riding position and the look of the bike. First we removed the fairing. While the fairing concept is appropriate for 550 riders, we didn't like the way this one compromised the bike's styling. Also, experience on the racetrack revealed that it did nothing for high-speed performance. The OEM handlebar also looks ungainly, but its replacement by a \$27 Superbike Bar from

K&N was also motivated by a desire to open up the riding position for larger riders, and encourage the kind of crouch consistent with precise steering control.

In the end, we didn't create a monster after all. The fork felt fractionally harsher in ride quality, but the Seca didn't pitch back and forth on the freeway like the usual oversprung, short-coupled rat racer. The narrow handlebar made engine vibration slightly more noticeable, but the riding



© 1981 DAVID DEWHURST

position made long-distance cruising pleasant even without a fairing. We only lacked the rearsets fitted to the Euro-550 (do you hear us, YPDI?) to finally attain ergonomic nirvana.

More importantly, the Seca Super gained a more taut stance in the corners. Front-end dive wasn't eliminated, but it was certainly more controlled. Interpart's shock dyno revealed that the Seca's stock shocks already offer more rebound damping than the usual Yamaha units, but the added control furnished by the LTGs was immediately apparent. Suddenly the Seca had developed the feel that makes the CB750F so rewarding to ride. A low center of gravity helps it heel over effortlessly compared to a KZ550, while the sensation of neutral steering heightened by our suspension modifications gave it surgical precision when it came to clipping apexes.

We could tell after riding the stock Seca on the racetrack that an even better motorcycle lay within. What proved surprising, though, was how quickly the Seca showed its KZ550-eating mettle with only a few inexpensive modifications. Indeed, this Super Seca revealed less about the bike's potential than about how good the stocker is to begin with.

—Michael Jordan

fits of the Seca's slim design would be wasted if the end result of all that paring turned out to be a microbike. It isn't; the Seca strikes a fair balance between the shorter-coupled KZ and the full-on spread of the CX.

As you'd expect after a trip to the scale, the Seca's light weight starts with a compact engine package. Much of the same technology that went into keeping the Maxim 650 trim also keeps the Seca off of the overweight list. Externally, at least, the Seca's engine appears to be nothing more than a Maxim 650 engine that's been run through one more cycle of Yamaha's corporate compacter and then had an endless, non-O-ring chain grafted onto where a shaft used to be. And there are some obvious similarities. Both 650 and 550 keep engine width to a minimum by laying the alternator behind the bank of cylinders rather than hanging it on the end of the crankshaft. The result for both engines is substantially less girth. In the Seca's case, it's an engine that, at less than 16 inches across its widest point, is narrower than Yamaha's own XS400 twin.

Beyond placement of the alternator, though, the two engines diverge. Rather than use the 650 Maxim's straight-cut gears to spin the alternator shaft, the Seca runs a Hy-Vo-type chain with a slipper-type tensioner. The adjuster is hydraulic and manually set, with a second plunger and spring to minimize chain slap. Also, the 550's transmission output shaft is positioned directly behind the input shaft rather than above it as in the Maxim.

Something else you'll find on the 550 that doesn't appear on the 650's mechanical readout is the Yamaha Induction Control System (YICS). The system connects each cylinder's intake tract with the other three in the network. Then, during each cylinder's stroke, YICS draws a small fuel/air charge from the other three links in the chain and injects it into the cylinder's main intake port through a sub-intake port set just above the intake valve's seat. The YICS port shoots its charge into the combustion chamber at a high velocity and at an angle calculated to impart a swirling effect, which produces increased turbulence of the fuel charge and, theoretically at least, more efficient combustion.

Supposedly, the effect of the YICS system, which isn't on the domestic 400cc model from which the Seca is derived, is to increase fuel economy. Well it might be. Our test bike averaged mid-50s mpg on the highway at just about any speed, with fuel consumption increasing to 44 mph when the Seca's wick was twisted hard in full-on sporting mode. One more thing passed on

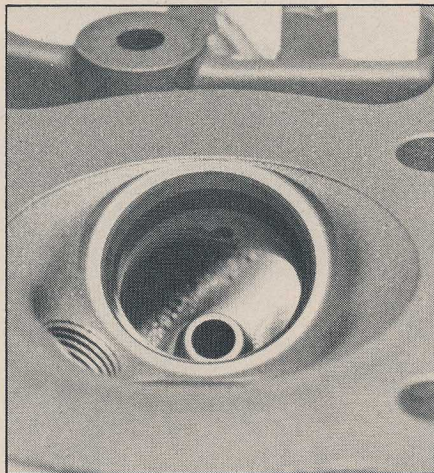
by YICS is the need for a special tool when synchronizing the carbs. The tool, part number TLM110802500, passes through the rear of the intake manifold to seal off the sub-intake ports so that the YICS is disrupted and each of the Seca's four 28mm CV Mikunis can be adjusted separately.

If you continued to look for secrets that account for the Seca's strengths, the valve train would offer few clues. Good two-valve-per-cylinder design, thoughtful application, yes. But tricks, no. The Seca's dual overhead cams are driven by a roller chain, which is in turn kept taut by a dual-spring tensioner that doesn't require adjustment. The valves are set in the standard Yamaha external-shim method, and the shims are some of the few items common to the 550 and 650 engines.

All the way down the line the Seca disavows most gimmickry. In fact, you could begin to wonder if Yamaha didn't just hang a fairing onto the Seca in part to conceal an otherwise mechanically conventional motorcycle. And you wouldn't be too far from wrong. In the development of the Seca 550 from a Japan-only 400cc model, Yamaha's U.S. product planners wanted styling akin to the radical lines of the new 750 Seca. The idea was to create an indentifiable look—much like the unified styling of Yamaha's own Specials—that would highlight the new high-performance line. It didn't work out that way. The cost of producing the Seca 550 is relatively high, and it didn't allow for a major restyling job. And so, any styling licks applied to the Seca 550 had to begin from basically the same lines as the Japan-only bike. The fairing was added to give the Seca a long, low look, which it accomplishes despite its shortish wheelbase. Another of the fairing's purposes was to keep the pearl-white Seca reminiscent of, but not too close to, the looks of Yamaha's discontinued RD400 Daytona Special.

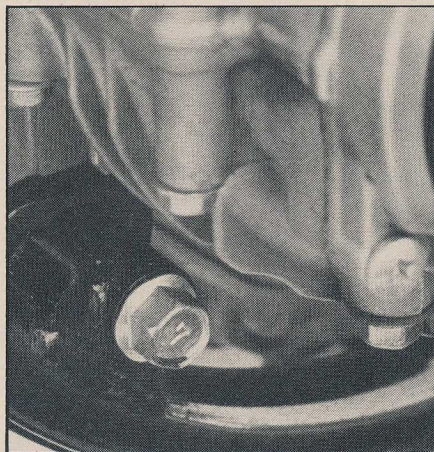
Inside of that nosecone you will find a few small concessions to flash. Above the conventional speedometer and tachometer—separated by warning lights for oil pressure, high beam and neutral—is another instrument case. On its left side is a voltmeter, while on the right is a fuel gauge that continues to operate even when the ignition is off, automotive-style, and is calibrated to put the needle squarely on "E" when the 550 is ready to go on reserve. The gauge is quite accurate, so that when it starts reminding you that it's time to refuel, it's not telling you to panic; you've still got more than one gallon—or 50 miles—before the tank runs dry.

Aside from the added instruments, the only other out-of-the-way bit on the Seca



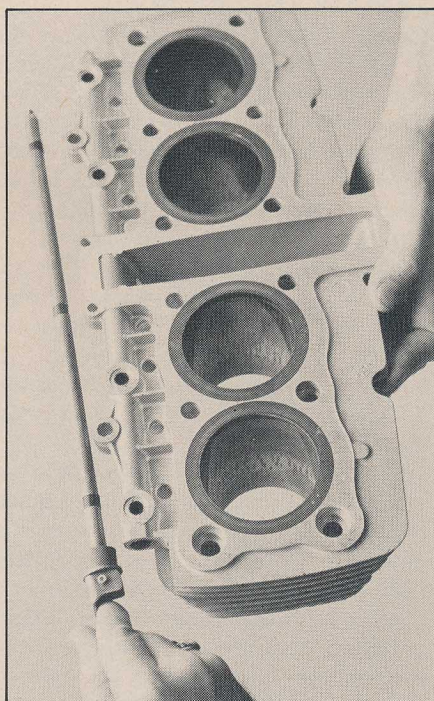
YICS sub-inlet ports swirl fuel mixture

Tiny turbo-jets for more mpg.



Rubber mounts kill engine vibration

And go on to conceal the evidence.



Special tool seals off YICS ports

Giving the carbs a synching feeling.

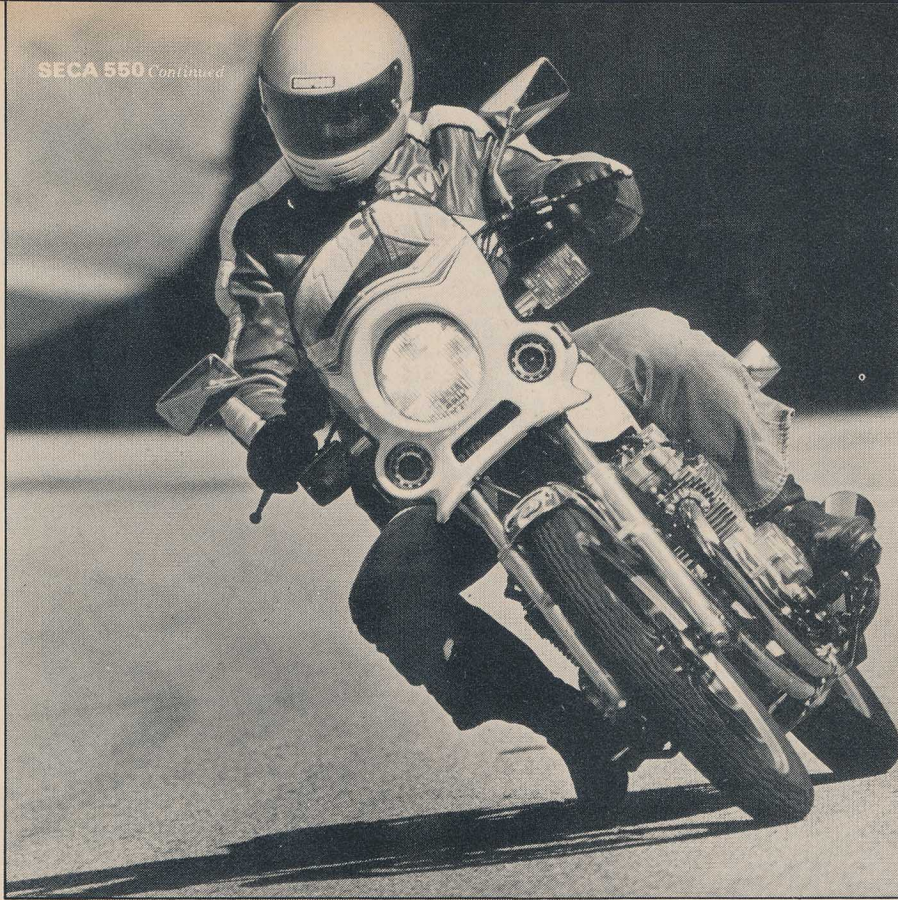
550 is one that you might never notice. It's an ignition cutoff that only comes into play when you try to keep the engine running in gear with the sidestand down. It won't work. Put the 550 in gear with the stand extended and the engine dies, whether you've got the clutch in or out. And if you try to start the Seca in gear with the stand down, all you get is the voltmeter needle swinging up to the center of its arc and the oil-pressure warning light winking as the starter button is depressed. So if, for some reason, you forget about the cutout, you could waste lots of time digging around in the Seca's underseat fusebox trying to find out what blew.

But a few more gauges and a stand-mounted kill switch don't really begin to qualify the Seca for any Hi-Tech awards, and they're really the most visible blips on an otherwise flat readout. Not even the YICS seems all that earth-shattering. Even the mild-steel, double-downtube frame is nothing if not SOP, just as the single front disc/rod-operated rear drum brake arrangement is plain fare. And the suspension setup—a no-adjust fork with a single anti-stiction bushing, coupled with shocks adjustable only for preload—make the Seca 550 sound like a rolling *deja vu* for 90 percent of the street bikes you've seen, read about or ridden for the past five years. A cipher. A drone.

So if all you cared about were the numbers, features and theories, you might count the Seca as a high-performance write-off. But you don't and it isn't. In fact, you can shoot all that spec-sheet myopia down in flames in your first five minutes in the Seca's saddle. That humdrum 523cc engine still managed to rip off a quarter-mile at 12.994 and better than 101 mph. So much for all those notions about two-valve engines running out of steam at the top end. That run-of-the-mill braking system still managed to haul the Seca to a stop from 60 mph in 119 feet. And that laughable, virtually Stone Age suspension still manages the best highway ride of any middleweight motorcycle, bar none.

There's no proof short of the tasting that can prepare you for the smoothness of the Seca at speed. Between rubber motor mounts and an engine that doesn't seem to vibrate much anyway, you've got to fly by instruments at first unless you're anxious to have a roadside shuffle while you wait to sign for your ticket. That's why three of our testers returned with bitter complaints about the bike's wildly optimistic speedometer. It just *couldn't* be going that fast and that smoothly, they bemoaned. But a check of the speedometer showed that it was spot-on.

Continued



The culprit was the Seca's uncanny smoothness. Engine vibration reaches its peak at about 5000 rpm, which translates to 62 mph in sixth gear. At its worst it is only a slight tingle through the handlebar, though, not even enough to add a shimmer to the mirrors. Above 6000 rpm the tingle departs for places unknown and the 550 really comes on the cam. You've got power up to 9000 rpm in all gears, and even to the 10,000-rpm redline in all save fifth and sixth. But you don't have to rev it that hard just to get moving. The Seca's flat torque curve provides a steady rush from almost any engine speed without digging deep into the gearbox.

Determining your actual road speed is complicated by the fairing, which directs a steady blast of wind at chin level from 40 mph on. Oddly, the noise level doesn't seem to increase after 40 mph, when it starts to block out the engine noise completely. The rest of the bike also leaves you guessing at road speed, and the footpegs don't even offer a clue. The same isn't true for the passenger pegs, though, which emit a healthy buzz at almost any engine speed.

If you normally count on road shock to keep you abreast of your speed, don't. The low unsprung weight of the Seca's new cast wheels and the single-disc/drum brakes combines with a supple fork to soak up jolts and simply make them go away. The price you pay for that disappearing act is a sharp nosedive under heavy braking, but the fork's dual-rate springing is deceptive;

it never seems to end its travel in a metallic clank, no matter how quickly it started to dive. And despite a spongy feel at the front brake lever and noticeable flex of the 35mm fork tubes, the Seca still stops without a shudder.

Performance at the other end of the scale doesn't feel like a tradeoff for the Seca's expertise on the highway. The steering is quick but not nervous in hard cornering, and the low *cg* and low overall weight let you flick the Seca rather than muscle it into a turn. That flick can be pretty severe before anything touches down, because the undercarriage is tucked in nicely. You really have to *want* to make sparks before you do. Even in the hardest running, adjusting the shock preload collars is redundant, and racetrack testing required only the second notch. It seems that the faster you ride, the more built-in goodness you begin to notice. So if you've really got to have wallow, it'll have to come from the aftermarket; the Seca's \$2529 pricetag doesn't include any.

What it does include, though, is a straight shot of high performance, a quick reminder that wide-range performance is no longer the province of large-displacement machines. A 550 that serves up balance, a startlingly comfortable ride and rewarding engine response also earns the performance title. The Seca 550 does all that and more. It turns any ride, from an apex-strafto to a familiar milk run into . . . a mission. ●

Ride Review

• Call me a styling chauvinist. I always have trouble falling in love with a bike if it looks strange to me—and the Seca looks really strange. Its fairing seems all out of place with the high bars, and the tank graphics appear to have slid back to the wrong spot.

But when I ride the Seca, I'm blessed with the inability to see the styling, so the bike becomes a real joy. The only reminder of the fairing is the blast of air that strikes at helmet level, and the paint scheme becomes something for other motorists to worry about. I'm too busy enjoying the nimble handling and the subtle, yet considerable power of the tiny engine. Forget the RD? Heck, the Seca could even make me forget my Honda 400F, and that's not easy. I guess the answer lies in trying to ride the Seca without looking at it. Come to think of it, that sounds like fun. —Riley Tharp

• Okay, you adults, listen up. Let's cut the gee-whiz enthusiasm for a second. Sure, you know the Seca 550 might make RD owners renounce their two-stroke religion. But you should really care about this bike because it doesn't make you feel as if you've strayed into a Saturday kiddie matinee with Buck Rogers on the screen.

Maybe because Yamaha comes to high-performance four-strokes from a mind-set obsessed with ride quality, the Seca 550 affords the most adult behavior yet in a medium displacement bike. The rubber engine mounts absorb high-rpm sting, the suspension withstands abuse with a celestial equanimity that Suzuki would be proud of, and the riding position is calibrated for people taller than the average munchkin.

Sure, this is a great bike. But it's great because Yamaha knows where racing bikes end and street bikes begin.

—Michael Jordan

• Yamaha's Seca 550 reflects what the middleweight class is becoming for motorcycling: a harbor for high-performance sportbikes. Its shark-nose fairing and droopy handlebar say the Seca is meant to go around corners with roadrace precision. And thanks to quick, responsive steering, it does. But that's where the roadrace heritage ends. The Seca's suspension was bred for the road—the public road. Which isn't a bad thing, mind you. After all, it's a street bike, not a four-banger TZ.

But you'll see Seca 550s on the roadrace tracks anyway, because the 550 Box Stock class is going to be the hotbed of grassroots roadracing for 1981. Secas will be in the fray, but only after suspension mods, including heavier fork oil and new rear shocks. In the meantime, the Seca remains one of the best all-around sportbikes—for the street. —Dain Gingerelli

Yamaha XJ550RH

SPECIFICATIONS:

Importer: Yamaha Motor Corporation (USA)
6555 Katella Avenue
Cypress, California 90630

CATEGORY: street

SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE: \$2529

ENGINE

Type four-stroke transverse vertical four
Valve arrangement double overhead camshafts
Bore and stroke 57.0mm x 51.8mm
Displacement 528.7cc
Compression ratio 9.5:1
Carburetion four 28mm Mikuni constant-velocity
Air filter disposable paper element
Lubrication wet sump
Starting system electric only
Ignition transistorized pointless;
dual electronic pickups, dual coils
Charging system 12-volt; AC generator / voltage
regulator / rectifier

DRIVETRAIN

Clutch wet, multi-plate
Crankshaft-to-jackshaft Hy-Vo chain; 1.048:1 ratio
Jackshaft-to-transmission straight-cut gears; 2.321:1 ratio
Final drive # 520 chain (5/8-in. pitch, 1/4-in. width); 16/45,
2.813:1 ratio
Gear Internal Overall MPH per
gear ratio gear ratio 1000 RPM
I 2.73 18.70 4.0
II 1.95 13.32 5.6
III 1.55 10.57 7.1
IV 1.24 8.48 8.8
V 1.04 7.09 10.6
VI 0.90 6.16 12.1

SUSPENSION/WHEEL TRAVEL

Front 35mm stanchion tube diameter /
4.1 in. (104 mm)
Rear 5-way adjustable spring preload /
5.8 in. (146 mm)

BRAKES

Front single-action hydraulic caliper,
11.8-in. (300mm) disc
Rear drum, single-leading shoe, rod-operated

TIRES

Front 3.00H19 Bridgestone Mag Mopus L303
Rear 110/90H18 Bridgestone Mag Mopus 3716

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Weight 418 lbs. (190kg)
Weight distribution 47.4% front, 52.6% rear
Gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) 860 lbs. (390 kg)
Wheelbase 55.8 to 56.8 in. (1416 to 1441mm)
Seat height 32.3 in. (819mm)
Handlebar width 29.5 in. (749mm)
Footpeg height 12.8 in. (324mm)
Ground clearance 5.8 in. (146mm), at exhaust crossover
Steering head angle 27.0 degrees from vertical
Front wheel trail 4.29 in. (109mm)
Frame tubular mild steel, double front downtubes
Oil capacity 3.1qt. (2.9l)
Fuel tank steel, 4.2 gal. (16.0l), including
1.1 gal. (4.0l) reserve
Instrumentation speedometer, odometer, tripmeter resettable
to zero, tachometer, voltmeter, fuel gauge

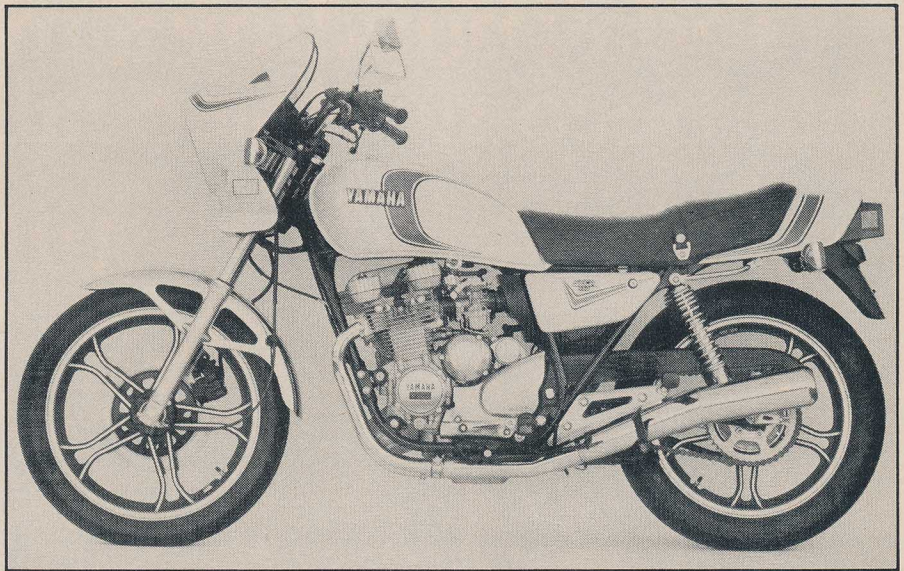
PERFORMANCE

Fuel consumption 44 to 55 mpg (19 to 23 km/l)
Range, maximum 185 to 231 miles (298 to 372km)
Range, reserve only 48 to 61 miles (77 to 97km)
Speedometer error, 30 mph indicated 29 mph actual
Speedometer error, 60 mph indicated 58 mph actual
Best 1/4-mile acceleration 12.994 sec., 101.69 mph (164 kph)
Top speed (calculated) 121 mph (195 kph)
Stopping distance from 30 mph 31 ft. (9m)
Stopping distance from 60 mph 119 ft. (36m)

WARRANTY: 6 months

AVAILABLE COLORS: New Pearl White

All weights and measurements are taken with machine
unladen and fuel tank empty.



COMPARATIVE TEST DATA:

Make	Quarter-Mile, sec / mph	Top Speed, mph	Weight, lbs	Stopping Distance From 60mph, ft.
Yamaha 550 Seca	12.99/101.7	121	418	119
Kawasaki KZ550	13.45/97.1	103	426	150
Honda CB500 Custom	14.12/92.9	102	468	146
Kawasaki KZ650 Custom	13.16/100.2	116	483	125
Honda CB650	13.29/99.9	113	447	131
Suzuki GS450ST	14.09/92.5	100	397	127

PERFORMANCE:

