



SUZUKI

185 SIERRA

ROAD TEST

Small in size, but big in power

■ The gap between 125 and 250 dual-purpose machines is a hard one to fill. The manufacturer must decide to design his machine to include the best features of the 125 (light weight, nimble handling, low cost) along with the desirable qualities of a 250 (lots of power and torque). This "in-between" sized motorcycle can make an owner very happy if it's been done properly, and Suzuki's Sierra fills the bill.

Starting with the basics of their off-road 125 model, such as the frame, Suzuki was off to a good beginning. They needed only to refine here and strengthen there so that the once 125 could accept the now more powerful new 183cc engine unit. But don't get the wrong idea. The 185 Suzuki may have borrowed some items from the smaller 125, but it's an altogether different motorcycle to ride and enjoy. It's got a personality all its own.

The frame, taken from the 125 Duster, has been strengthened and reinforced in areas of stress created by the new engine. A single toptube and downtube join at the steering head, while a pair of smaller tubes extend under the engine and curl up to join with the toptube. This main frame section is amply cross-braced to provide rigidity and prevent flexing. Seat, rear fender and shocks mount to the sub frame and swinging arm section. A perforated, stamped steel skid plate attaches to the frame for rock protection. Welds left something to be desired, but the black finish was applied nicely.

Suspension chores are carried out in a fine manner. Front forks have ample travel and good rebound and damping characteristics, but also feature adjustable spring rates for riders of different weight. The cam-type adjusters are located in the top of each fork tube, and can

be twisted with a screwdriver to allow soft, medium or hard settings. It only takes a few minutes to change.

Rear shocks are surprisingly good for Japanese units, and are five-way adjustable. Progressively wound springs are painted black, departing from the chrome finish found on most machines.

The forks do a good job of soaking up the little undulations along a backwoods trail, but at the same time they don't get snowed by the huge thud of a jump or the crashing blow of a deep hole. Over rippling surfaces the rear shocks don't pump up and quit working, and as a result the rear end of the machine doesn't hop all over the trail with the rider fighting for control. You guide the Sierra, it doesn't guide you.

Steel rims (19-inch front, 18-inch rear) might be heavier than comparably sized alloy units, but they resist dings more easily and don't clog with mud. The wheels on the Sierra come with rim locks and balance weights, something you don't find on many dirt bikes. A nice touch, we think.

The brakes on our 185 test machine surprised us. The front unit is quite small but stopped much better than we thought it would. The rear unit, too, is light weight, yet it really works. So often brakes of this size give problems when it's time to slow down. The ones on the Sierra had lots of feel so that the rider could descend a steep hill without locking the wheels, an important asset on any dirt machine. Also, they allow a rider a margin of safety when riding on the street.

The IRC Trials tires are a good compromise for dual-purpose riding, but are more suited to the dirt, like the Sierra. Tread patterns are the same front and rear, and the



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The Sierra is very slender and the exhaust system is tucked well in and covered by a chrome guard to protect the rider's leg.

There's power enough to easily lift the front wheel in first gear, and the weight distribution prohibits "looping" and makes the Sierra an exceptional hillclimber.

sizes are just right for most riding. Ground clearance with the stock tires is an ample 9.5 inches, the lowest point being the rear brake pedal where it wraps under the right footpeg.

A study of Suzuki models, both street and dirt, will show that many items follow no set pattern on the machines. For example, the ignition switch on some models mounts between the instruments in a convenient location. Other models have the switch sitting under the tank on the left side, where the rider must hunt to find it and where it is also more apt to collect debris in off-road maneuvers. This is true of the Sierra's also. Another item of non-conformity is the fuel petcocks. Some are the conventional off-on-reserve jobs, while others are the diaphragm-controlled type that tend to be confusing. The Sierra uses the standard valve, without the "prime" position.

Finally, fenders on the off-road machines differ from model to model. One will use thin-gauge steel (the Sierra does), and another will use the far superior polyurethane plastic. There seems to be no rhyme or reason for the model-to-model differences. Strange.

Suzuki's 185 Sierra does follow normal practices with its engine unit, however, and it's quite similar to the one found on the smaller 125 Duster. The piston-port two-stroke single is simple and compact, with an emphasis on "narrow." The unit produces 17.5 horsepower at 7000 rpm and has a torque rating of 13.5 lb.-ft. at 6000 rpm, which is a fair amount of power for a bike as light as the Sierra. The power-to-weight ratio is impressive. Roller bearings support the crankshaft while needle bearings are used at the big and small ends of the connecting rod. Even though many of the components appear to be similar or identical to the ones found on the 125 Duster, it's not necessarily so. Crankcases are strengthened and reinforced to a higher degree, and the five-speed gearbox is more robust. Even the clutch has been beefed up.

More than adequate cooling is provided by virtue of very large cylinder and head finning, always appreciated on a hard, day-long ride. Also worthy of note are the rubber inserts fitted to the cylinder fins that effectively reduce mechanical noise emanating from the engine's internals. Manufacturers are becoming more noiseconscious day by day and little items like the inserts reflect this.

The seat is fat and comfortable even for two-up riding, but it's a bit slippery for seat-of-the-pants control.



A 24mm Mikuni carburetor draws its air through a polyurethane filter element, which unfortunately is very difficult to service. To get at the filter you must first remove the oil tank and fuss with things you shouldn't have to fuss with to clean the air filter. A machine ridden on dusty terrain may require several filter cleanings in a day; to have to go through all the motions that you have to go through on the Sierra just to clean an air filter, is ridiculous. At least it's a foam element and not the paper type. That would be worse yet.

The 185 Suzuki has a primary kickstart feature, which allows the rider to start the bike in any gear simply by pulling in the clutch and giving the starter lever a lick. While the gearbox on our machine shifted without a snag, neutral was impossible to find when the engine was running. We don't think it was simply a fault with our particular bike; we've found that it's a common problem with many of Suzuki's dirt models.

The exhaust system on the Sierra is mounted high and well tucked in so as not to interfere with the rider's

movements. It's well silenced, and even contains a spark arrestor unit, a great item to have in dry areas where there is always a fire danger. The rider is protected from the hot pipe by a chromed leg guard, which is sufficient to protect a person riding along as a passenger.

The 185 will make a fine Enduro bike with few changes, and will make an even better just-plain-fun machine for the average rider. It is light at the front end to enable you to loft the wheel over ruts or water crossings, yet not light enough to cause looping problems when climbing a steep hill — and this one's a good hillclimber!

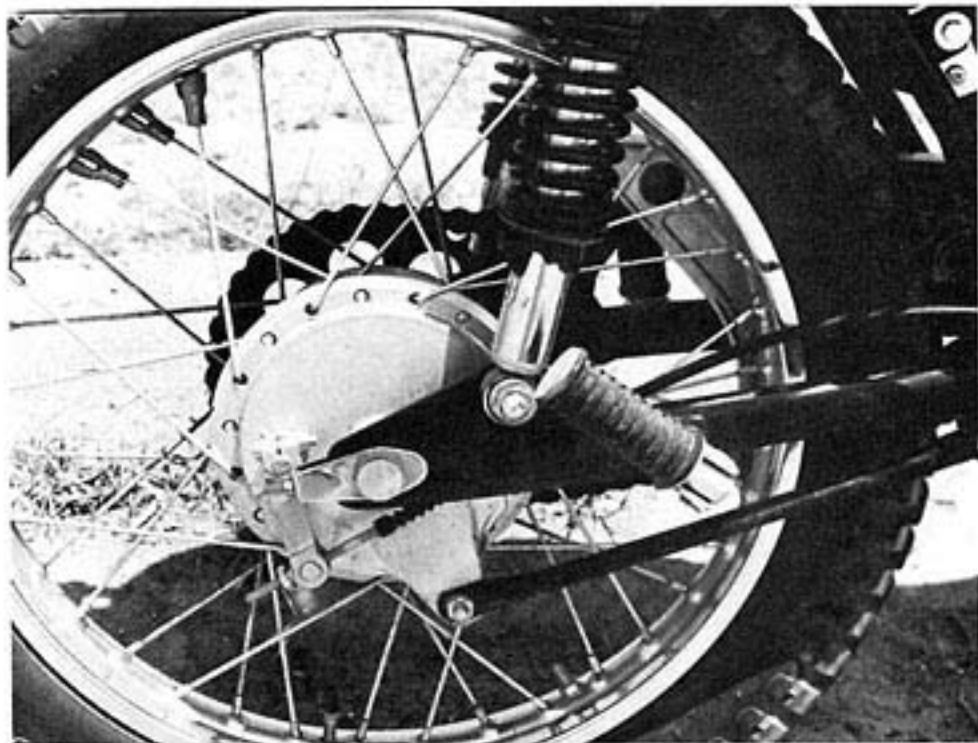
If sliding corners is your thing, you'll like this little Sierra because it's happy in this kind of situation. Responsive is its middle name. It'll jump, leap, climb, slide, stop, or meander peacefully at the rider's will. And it'll do it without playing tricks on the rider.

You take that and add it to all the other nice features — like a fat 12,000 mile/12 month warranty and a low purchase price — and what have you got? You've got a pretty darn good motorcycle, that's what you've got! ●

*Jumping comes easily and
the very rigid frame keeps the
bike and rider tracking
straight and true.
Suspension is very good for
a Japanese machine.*



*Wheels have rim locks and
balance weights.
Just another indication of
how hard Suzuki is trying*



SUZUKI 185 SIERRA

SPECIFICATIONS

Price \$649.
Distributor U.S. Suzuki Motor Corp.

ENGINE

Type Piston port two-stroke single
Displacement 183cc, 11.2 cu. in.
Bore/Stroke 64 x 57mm, 2.52 x 2.24 in.
BHP@ RPM 17.5@ 7000
Compression ratio 6.2:1
Carburetion (1) 24mm Mikuni
Transmission 5-speed
Ignition Suzuki capacitor discharge

WHEELS AND BRAKES

Frame Single toptube, single
downtube, tubular steel
Suspension telescopic fork/swinging arm
Tires 3.00 x 19 front
3.50 x 18 rear
Brakes s.i.s. front/rear

DIMENSIONS

Weight 225 lbs. wet
Wheelbase 52.8 in.
Seat height 32 in.
Ground clearance 9.5 in.
Handlebar width 33 in.
Fuel capacity 1.8 gal.