

ROAD
TEST

GS 550



Suzuki's new performer will be the one to beat

This latest Suzuki four-stroke had a lot to live up to before it even rolled a wheel. The GS750 came along and drew admiring praise everywhere it went, in short, Suzuki seemed to have hit the right formula and we were expecting the 550 to be well-bred, politely mannered, *flyer*.

My introduction to the new four was at our test track and in many ways the Suzuki didn't disappoint us. Clocking an effortless 112 mph along the straight it is, with the exception of the old H1 Kawasakis, the quickest stock bike in (or around) the 500 cc class. And "effortless" isn't just a cliché thrown in to fill up the line, it really did perform easily. Along the braking strip it stopped in 21 to 22 feet from 30 mph and despite the plaintive howls from the tyres it repeated the trick time after time. It ran 14.2 seconds consistently through the standing quarter and made it look as dramatic as a moped on full noise.

The 550 feels much bigger than it ought to. It seems at least the size of a 750, an impression which is compounded by the heavy steering and the short, flat bars. Front and rear, the suspension was too firm but at the expense of passing bumps on to the rider it kept a tight rein on the handling. The ride didn't reveal any cornering problems except that The Suzuki is possibly too good for its standard tyres.

The DOHC motor appears to be almost identical to the GS750 with new, almost square, bore and stroke dimensions giving the 549 cc displacement. Considering its high-speed performance the motor's flexibility is astonishing — it can be ridden down to 1000 rpm in top gear before it starts jerking and juddering. It will pull smoothly and cleanly from 2000 rpm,

although it won't take full throttle until the motor is above 3000. Then it picks up strongly, hesitates around 5000 where the torque falls into a hole before zooming up to the 9500 redline and beyond if you're not quick with the gearshift in the lower gears.

With this wide spread of usable rpm it's surprising that the engine drives through a six-speed gearbox, with very low overall gearing at that. Bottom gear is, if anything, too low and most of the time the Suzuki is happy to pull away, or rumble along slowly, in second. Sixth gear is by no means an overdrive — peak revs in top gear match the 550's theoretical maximum speed almost exactly.

5000 rpm in sixth gives a mere 60 mph — not so "mere" when you project the speed up to 9500 rpm but low enough to make you want to

change into "seventh" as soon as the bike hits its cruising speed.

Maybe this is why Suzuki fitted the digital gear indicator. I can't see that this would be of much use to an owner who rode the machine regularly, although I get lost quite happily going up and down through six ratios. As one who has to ride a wide variety of machines and get used to them in a short period of time the gear indicator does have some value — if only to prevent an inadvertent shift into the roadster's low bottom gear in mid-corner.

The low gearing amplifies the already healthy torque of the motor; this, the heavy feel to the

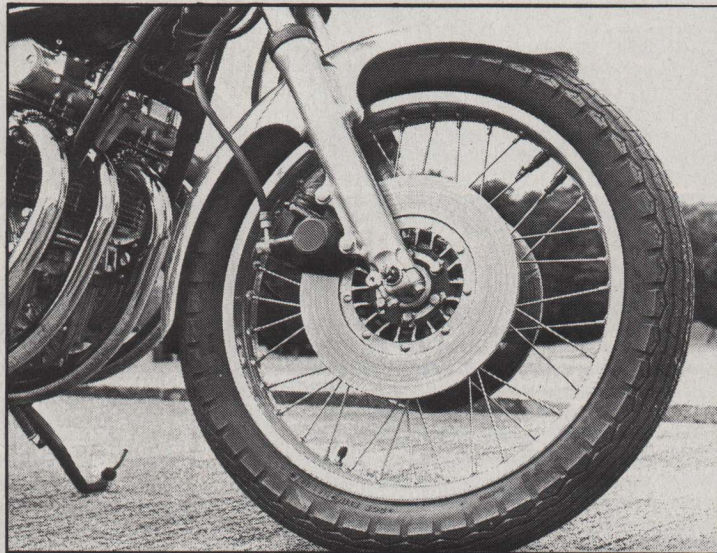


The highly civilised instrument panel includes Suzuki's digital gear indicator.

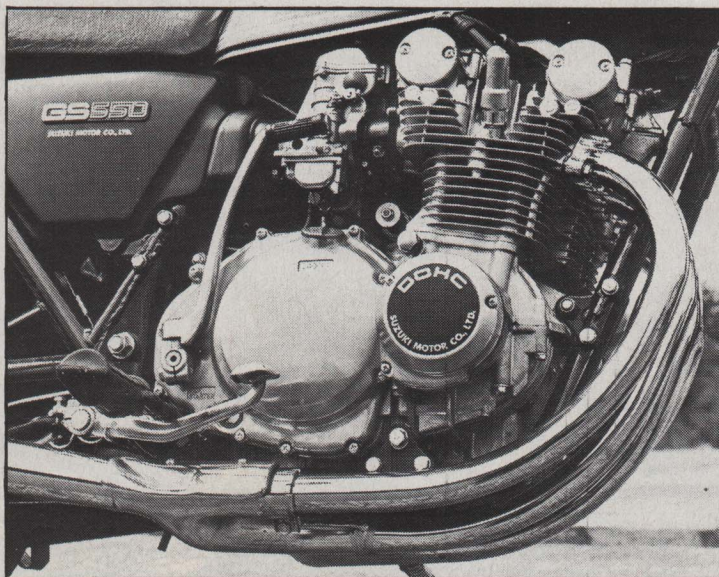
GS 550



*Twin front discs and rear drum matched performance, and were quite adequate in the wet.



An even spread of torque and power to 43bhp and six gears give the GS550 a big edge over rivals.



machine and the massive engine braking when the throttle is backed off all suggest performance in big letters. This is a machine you have to respect and get to know slowly. Chasing speed figures at a test track was not the best introduction to it.

At the end of this session I was left in two minds about the GS550. It was undeniably quick and despite a day of belting about with the throttles wide open it was still giving 42 mpg. There was nothing I could point to and say "This is wrong", but I still wasn't happy.

The ride home changed all that. After an hour or so of boring dual carriageway the seat started to get uncomfortable — but then I'd been riding all day. Otherwise the ride was just about perfect. The handling, not pushed to such fine limits as at the track, was faultless, the heavy steering became a relaxing, *self-steering*, it hurtled up to legal limits and held a 70 mph cruise with no trouble and no fuss.

While the riding position was comfortable, the suspension was too stiff for bumpy roads, although I would sacrifice this for safe handling any time. The only things I didn't like were minor points like the tank which was too wide at the back and the mirrors which show as much elbow as they do road.

And 140 miles after leaving the track I was convinced that the 550 was every bit as good as it was supposed to be. I was even more pleased because at that stage the Suzuki had not gone on to reserve — in fact with moderately hard road use it would travel some 145 miles on its main tank but at least the Japanese are waking up to what is a reasonable range for a motorcycle. The reserve tank itself holds about seven pints, which is a pretty fair margin.

The brakes, I forgot to mention the brakes. At the track we were getting stopping distances which were so impressive that we re-ran the tests and double-checked the speedo accuracy to make sure nothing had gone wrong. Stopping in 22 feet from a true speed of 30 mph is equivalent to a deceleration of nearly 1.4g. I've only seen three or four roadsters stop so convincingly dead. I know that a Vincent was once credited with a similar performance back in the '50s and no doubt we'll get letters reminding us of this (and of the speed of Velocettes, etc.). My sceptical mind assumes they might have taken the speed straight off the speedometer — I'm not saying I don't believe it, just that I would dearly like to see it done.

The Suzuki's twin front discs and rear drum brake kept this level of power right up to top speed. Using the usual braking markers around the track I was finding that I'd slowed down too soon and had to accelerate up to the corners. The degree of feel through the lever and pedal was as good as any other set-up I've used — so good you could even find maximum braking grip on bad surfaces.

The GS750's brakes let it down in the wet but the 550 has the drum brake in reserve. Water on the discs did make a noticeable difference but without spoiling their performance — you'd never find grip to match their full power on a wet road anyway.

From being in two minds about the Suzuki to reckoning it one of the nicest bikes I've ridden took about four days and a certain amount of fiddling with the rear springs and the tyre pressures.

On the softest rear spring pre-load the suspension was about right when a passenger was carried. The wheel movement is only 3½ inches anyway and the stock springs are just too hard. Full bump on the

front forks gives about six inches of movement but the clean section of the stanchions never went higher than 3 inches above the lower legs. And that included riding over bumpy lands and using the brakes to the maximum.

The tyres never really felt up to the full performance of the bike. The Japanese Dunlops had presumably been fitted since new and by the time the Suzuki had 1700 miles on the clock they were twitching over raised lines and felt skittish on wet roads.

Heavy steering probably emphasised this. It is a product of a 61-degree castor and almost five inches of trail superimposed on a 58 inch wheelbase which suggests that the heavy feel is anything but accidental. On most machines you can twitch the bars at high speed and get a reaction — sometimes setting up a violent weave. On the 550 the bars stay absolutely rigid; you cannot make them budge, the bike will not weave.

Obviously a lot of attention has been paid to front wheel stability, as another example the disc brake calipers are slung behind the fork legs where their mass will be as close as possible to the steering axis. So perhaps it wasn't surprising to find the bike overly sensitive to a front tyre which was a few pounds soft. This and the belief that the pressure was correct lead to my only misgivings about the Suzuki.

The addition of a couple of psi in the front made all the difference. I would still prefer softer suspension and the firm handling seems like it would marry well with the rigid feel given by, say, Continental or Michelin tyres.

With an even spread of torque and smooth power up to the 43 bhp peak and six gears with which to use it all, the 550 has more than an edge over comparable machines. Used hard the fuel consumption dropped to 42 mpg, on average it gave us 51 mpg — which is about par for the sort of performance we were getting — and it didn't appear to use any oil at all.

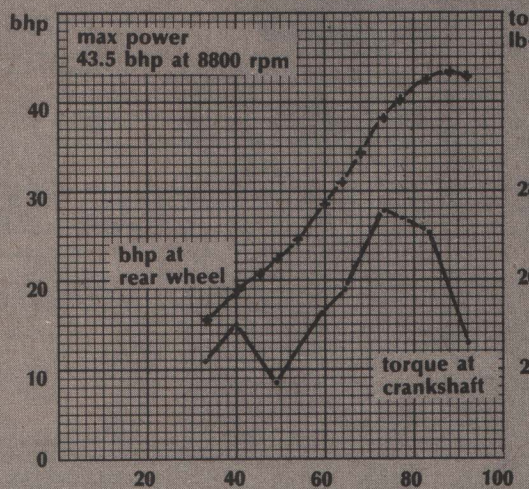
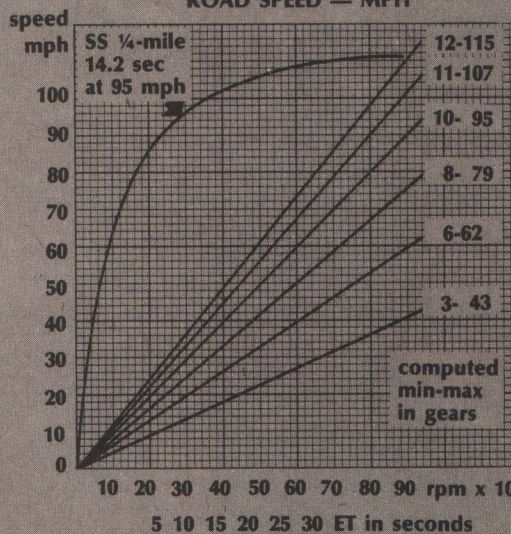
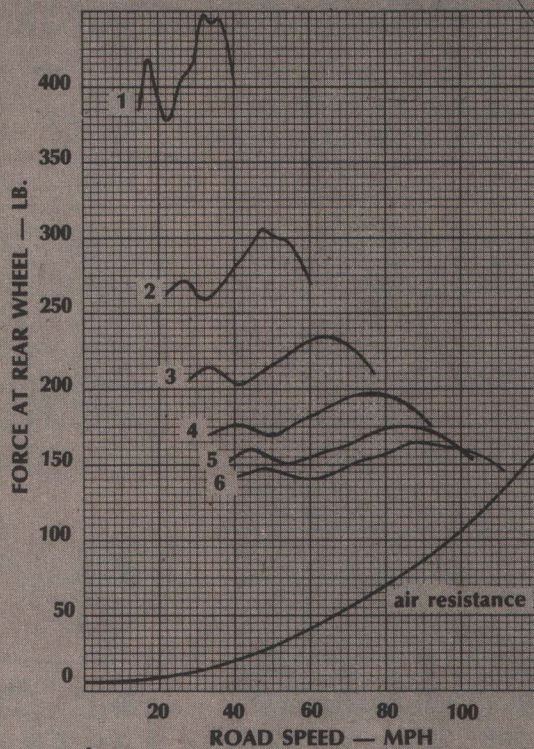
The motor went through a patch of vibration at about 6000 rpm, which was possibly the cause of the rear tail-light failure, the only blot on a very clean copy-book.

Having got used to the Suzuki — particularly its almost European ride and handling — it began to seem too much of a good thing. For general road uses it is an exceptionally good compromise: it is docile and gentle, easy and unobtrusive in traffic yet there is more than enough performance there if you want to work it up through the revs and have fun with the gearbox.

The controls are laid out to suit the rider, the switchgear is particularly convenient, the instruments cocked up so they can be read with minimum distraction and the seat is deeply padded with ample room for a passenger. What complaints there are seem petty in the face of all this: in addition to the details already mentioned there is no grab rail for a passenger, no front brake stop-light switch although one is shown in the wiring diagram. The handbook also mentions the new chain design, which is endless. They claim that a dealer is required to remove it and also that a "heavy" oil is needed to lubricate it and not a specialised chain lube.

Fuel consumption is not inspiring although it's no worse than other comparable bikes and at least the tank's range is reasonable. And the Suzuki is hardly a penny-pinching economy model: at almost £1100 it is not far short of the cost of the GS750 and £100 more than the Honda 550s. Whether it fits into a similar slot in a desirability scale remains to be seen — I'd say it is a bargain.

Performance & specification



TRACK CONDITIONS:
dry, slight tail wind, ambient temperature 60 deg F.

PERFORMANCE:

max speed 112mph
ss 1/4 mile 14.2sec at 95mph
braking from 30mph 22 feet
fuel consumption,
best 56mpg
worst 42mpg
average over test 51mpg
oil consumption zero
speedo error 4mph fast at 70mph

ENGINE:

DOHC four cylinder, wet sump, four Mikuni VM22SS carburettors, twin contact breaker and coil ignition, 12V alternator feeding 10A-h battery.
displacement 549ccm
bore x stroke 56 x 55.8mm
compression ratio 8.6:1

TRANSMISSION:

Gear primary drive to six-speed gearbox via multi-plate clutch. Final drive by chain.
primary reduction 1.978
final reduction 3.333
gearbox ratios: 2.666; 1.777; 1.380; 1.173; 1.045; 0.956.

CHASSIS:

twin hydraulic disc front brake and sis rear drum brake. Five pre-load position rear dampers.
front tyre 3.25 x 19
rear tyre 3.75 x 18
castor 61deg
trail 4.7in.
wheelbase 57.7in
overall length 85.6in
overall width 33.5in
dry weight 448lb
test weight 472lb
front/rear ratio 47.5/52.5 per cent
oil tank 4.2 pint
fuel tank 3.7gal

PARTS PRICES Inc. VAT

front mudguard £14.55
handlebar £5.99
speedo cable £3.14
cb points (each) no price yet
exhaust system (complete) £43.10
set of pistons/rings £53.80
list price £1,087
warranty 6 months/6000 miles
Importer: Suzuki GB, Beddington Lane, Croydon, Surrey.

HOW IT COMPARES

model	price inc VAT	max speed	av mpg	ss 1/4 mile	dryweight
Suzuki GS550	1087	112	51	14.2	448
Honda CB550	1005	105	45	13.9	421
Honda CB500T	925	103	50	14.8	452
Yamaha XS650	1008	103	50	13.9	475
Yamaha XS500	989	100	47	14.6	425
BMW R60	1899	98	48	15.9	441