

Yamaha XT600 Teneré

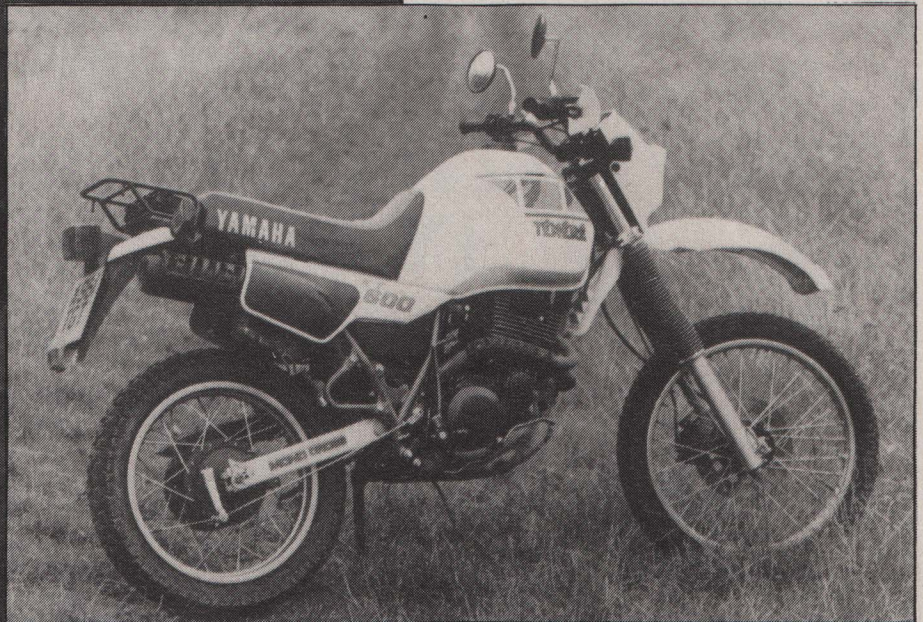
Bloody good or a muddy
dud? Graham Scott
reports from
high up in the saddle





For once we can actually thank the French for something. If the garlic crushers didn't take their pleasures in such a perverse way we probably wouldn't have the Ténéré at all. Their lust for breaking big bikes over long distances combined with their centuries-old domination of most of North Africa led to the development of the Paris-Dakar desert rally. With a macho-macho image it wasn't long before tough guys in Europe started squealing and stamping their little feet and demanding a replica.

The Ténéré actually looks remarkably like the racers that hammered across the North African moonscape this year. The Frogs even get a version in the original Gauloises blue colour scheme, but they obviously considered this too bad for the English health, so we get ours in road racing red and white.

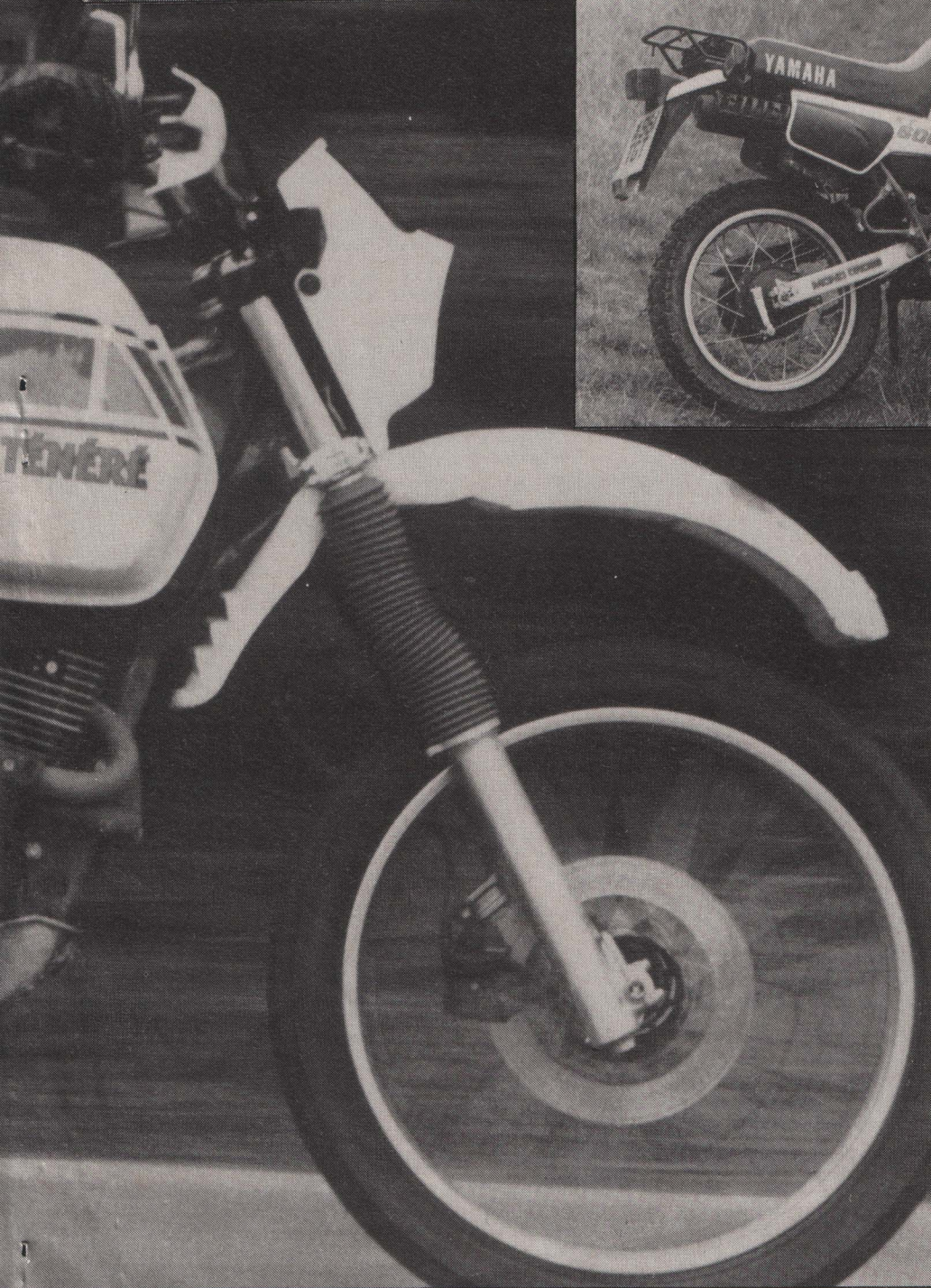


The bike is named after a God-awful stretch of empty desert deep in the Sahara, near the Chad/Nigeria border. Any machine that is called after this little hell hole had better have some pretty big guts in it. The Ténéré has. At a push (so to speak) I reckon it could even complete the Paris-Dakar course, though certainly not with *moi* on board. I toyed with the idea of how it would have been on my Cairo to Cape Town jaunt, but although it would have been the answer to a prayer on the fast, loose stretches, in the end its weight and unpredictable starting (see later) would have counted it out, despite the fact that it looks purpose built for the job.

This is all very wonderful of course, but has the ability to survive the Sahara any relevance to biking in this green and crowded land? The answer is definitely Yes, so long as you take it easy on the rough. Gentle green laning is a breeze. The 595cc single slogs out great gobs of torque from 2000rpm and will pull really strongly from about 2500. With a monstrous 10 inches of travel in the front forks and over nine in the Mono Cross, rising-rate rear end you can bop serenely on, secure in the knowledge that a tweak on the throttle at any revs will pull you effortlessly over any Rambler's Association member you meet, with only the gentlest of shakes to the kidneys.

If you start going for it rather harder it all starts to get a little too exciting. All that bulk and weight (for a trail bike) means that it needs plenty of manhandling and footing to keep it going where you want it to. If you want to take one on the dirt and go fast you had better start dreaming of wide open spaces. Those hand protectors are purely for show, as if you intend mixing closely with English hills and trees unless you are both good and strong you might well end up ceiling-studying in your local hospital.

The XT600Z would undoubtedly make a great loose track racer, as can be found in those spaces in Europe or America, as the power and suspension would mean miles of safe high speed. In England though about the only places you will find decent stretches of loose track are on what



pass for our roads, and this is perhaps where the Ténéré best belongs.

It makes a terrific roadster — for a trail bike. The first trail bike feature I encountered was the lack of electric start: I found this out after borrowing me dad's ladder and climbing up for a look. At five foot nine (bigger than Napoleon anyway) I found a seat height of 35 inches something of a strain, to say the least, but once on board the suspension sank several inches, so that I could just touch the ground both sides. Eek, I'm getting vertigo. To stave off the giddy feelings I concentrated on the kickstarter, which is thankfully linked by a cable to one exhaust valve, thereby giving simple decompression every kick.

Being a child of the electric start age, I regarded all this with some mistrust but it does actually work. Sometimes it would fire first kick or even when just pushing it round to get past TDC, but occasionally it would take ten lunges or so before it caught, just at the point when I was about to expire. It could just be my lack of technique but I never felt completely confident that it would go — although it always did in the end.

Once running, it warmed up quickly and would sit duff-duffing with few of the big-single shakes thanks to the balance shaft running off the crank. Once on the move I found out that the gearbox is meant to be all things to all men (and women of course). The first three ratios are fairly low and close together, for dirt donking, while the top two are spaced wider apart. If this was purely a road bike that torque would ensure that you only needed four ratios at the most, at least before the marketing department got to it.

Yamaha claim 36.2 ft/lb at 5500rpm, and 43bhp at 6500 (though see "Powertrain"). This is a single bhp less than for its stablemate, the XT600, which is pretty similar but with a smaller tank, and 5bhp more than for its predecessor, the XT550. This is gained by a 3mm bore increase and slightly larger carb choke diameters (to 27mm).

The head is a four valver, the valves operated by the normal chain-driven single cam and rocker arms. They draw from the twin carb arrangement found on the XT550, with a slider carb operating at low revs and its CV companion coming in when larger amounts of fuel are required. YDIS, one carb asks. They should be telling us. The system has been around for a couple of years now and seems to work without hitch or surge, so appears to be at least a partial answer to the two demands of performance and economy. Partial, because although the performance is good the fuel consumption was around the mid-forties, about 10mpg less than for the 550. Not very impressive.

The exhaust system was only partly impressive as well. Twin pipes exit from the head and lead into a single, very efficient silencer, well hidden behind the bodywork. It's a shame that they couldn't finish it in something more durable as rust was already nibbling away at the black paint and eating into the metal beneath. Never mind, Yamaha, it's not your problem now: it's the problem of the punters who bought your product.

The black-painted engine is dry sump, as on the 550, but instead of the oil residing in the frame tube it now has to commute rather further, to an oil tank behind the left side panel. An oil cooler sits above the left side crankcase to cure any heat problems, if there were any. It seemed completely oiltight, except that it was weeping a little around the tappet covers. Mind you, if I had been thrashed by the biking press so would I.

As I mentioned, there is absolutely loads of suspension travel. Following a commuter over what claimed to be a road in Kingston I watched him leave the saddle while I tracked easily over the worst of the council mayhem. There is plenty of scope for adjustment in the single De Carbon-type shock, but it copes perfectly if you just leave it alone. That meaty box-section swinging arm running on taper roller bearings rounds off a really excellent rear end.

You can also play around with the air in the front forks, but they tend to dive, dive, dive whatever you do. Under hard acceleration they wiggle and waggle as the weight rushes rearward and then they twist and compress as you hit the front disc, leaving your nose closer to the front monster mudguard than planned. During the two weeks of the test the forks must have walked further than I did.

Throughout all this the Dunlop tyres held on



pretty well, although you could make them squirm on the road and they clogged hopelessly in the mud.

Despite all this the Ténéré handles a treat on the road, whether on fast sweepers or the infield stuff. Weighing 324 pounds with a gall of gas, you can chuck the XT around in a way that would mean rupture or disaster on a bigger four. I had this point confirmed when following a friendly GS850. While he was busy scrubbing off speed prior to laying over 500 pounds down into the roundabout I could chuck the Ténéré in and boomerang out in some style, so long as I remembered to get the power on early. If I forgot it would tend to flop a bit, but apart from anything else it was great fun to flick it round bends and let the motor slog you out of the turn and heave you off down the next straight.

It's redlined at seven grand, and will pull strongly towards it in any gear from around the two-and-a-half mark, although as the needle gets past six it starts to lose interest a bit. There can't be much future in over-revving a piston of this size, so it's better just to hook up one and tramp on. The mid-range grunt is pretty impressive for a 600 and gives good performance in the area you most often use it. Sensible.

Top whack is a needle over the ton, but sustained cruising is at about 70-80mph, with the engine turning at around the 5500rpm mark. The mirrors will be blurred, but you can see behind you at all revs, but not necessarily clearly enough to make out if cars have blue pointy bits on top.

The front disc makes a good job of wiping off the speed if you get too carried away, and is backed up by a competent drum on the rear. Discs on trail bikes seem compulsory now, but this one worked well on tarmac or mud with just two-finger pressure, as so it should with only 324 pounds to stop.

So there you are, rolling along with that big single chugging away, suspension smoothing out all the bumps and a monstrous six-and-a-half gallon tank meaning you don't have to stop all day. Why then is that contented smile slowly faltering and fading after only about 50 miles? Because your bum aches. The riding position sits you upright in the saddle, with wide, high bars and forward pegs, and the saddle starts to compress and get uncomfortable. This is all the more irritating since if they had made the perch firmer and more compact they could have lowered that intimidating seat height. The Japs are funny

chaps.

The rear footrests get a nice frame loop to themselves, but the rear seat got a thumbs down for comfort. It would probably have been longer if they had not included a very useful little black rack — which is bigger than you find on some BMWs.

The twiddly bits on the ends of the bars are fair enough, but I was fascinated to see that the light switches are both on the left cluster, so you can turn off the excellent 60/55W quartz headlight instead of dimming it. I thought this complaint went out years ago, as did non lockable filler caps, but they are both here. The plastic filler cap means that you can leave over 10 pounds worth of fuel lying around unprotected. How naff.

The fuel tank, even with a placky filler, is the big styling success of this bike, and there is no denying the handsome lines of the brute. The knee cut-outs keep your knees together girls before flaring out towards the forks, so is not obtrusive at all. Mind you, you remember it's there when you are about to drop it on the dirt. The figure of £229 to replace it should concentrate your mind wonderfully. It's the big crowd puller though, that makes people stop and come and ask you about it, and kids run out at traffic lights, risking death by artic, to get a better look. Even if they don't recognise what it is supposed to be at least they notice it.

At the moment Yamaha have the Paris-Dakar scene to themselves, although it looks like being the next area of development for big singles with machines on the way from several manufacturers, including Honda and Suzuki.

Until they appear the Ténéré stands tall on its own (about 40 inches), and it's a fine machine. It proved to be an excellent commuter, getting me to work in an unusually relaxed state. In fact it can do just about anything you want it to, bar very high, very high mileage trips, and gives the impression that it could survive just about anything that passes under its wheels. At £2015 it's not cheap by any means, but what I most liked about it was its ability to back up its mouth. It looks like it could cross the whole continent of Africa, with its bad tarmac, dirt and sand, and I reckon it could. You can't ask more than that.

YAMAHA XT600Z TÉNÉRÉ £2015 including all taxes PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed — 101mph
Fuel Consumption — Overall 48mpg

POWERTRAIN

Air-cooled SOHC with four valve head. Capacity 595cc. Maximum power 28bhp at 5500rpm. (dyno rear wheel reading), maximum torque 36.2ft/lb at 5500rpm. Bore x stroke 95 x 84mm. Compression ratio 8.5:1. Induction by one 27mm CV and one 27mm slider Mikuni. Two into one exhaust. Dry sump lubrication. CDI ignition. Wet multi-plate clutch. Five speed constant mesh gearbox. Primary drive by gear, final drive by chain.

CHASSIS

Diamond type frame. Air-assisted 41mm telescopic forks. Mono Cross rising rate rear suspension adjustable for damping and preload. Front single disc and drum rear brake. Fuel tank capacity 30 litres (6.6 gallons). Weight with oil and full tank 357lb. Wheelbase 56.3in. Ground clearance 10.4in. Seat height 35in. Tyres Dunlop tubed 3.00-21 front, 4.60-18 rear.

PARTS BIN

*All prices include VAT
Indicator assembly £8.40, indicator lens 76p, forks complete £225.58, mudguard £28.95, tank £228.96, seat £121.07, silencer £35.91, complete exhaust £99.53, gearlever £12.83, brake pedal £12.83, footpeg £1.61, headlight assembly £53.25, brake lever £8.52, clutch lever £3.49, sidepanel £18.34, alternator cover £60.53, piston £30.31, conrod £25.95, head gasket £10.12, crankshaft £202.77, clutch £92.14, CDI ignition unit £166.75, drive chain £105.60, front sprocket £9.62, rear £23.06, battery £32.86.*