

The Ultimate Streetbike Magazine

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Kawasaki GPZ500S

A different sort of tiny twin for those who like good things in small packages
John Cutts assesses Kawasaki's new sports baby

It took a long time to get going on Kawasaki's new 500cc sports twin. It was raining hard as usual when I collected it. The mechanic handed over the keys and swiftly disappeared while I sat in the rain wondering why the bike didn't seem to be warming up. Oh well, it is a twin, I thought. And the bottom of the motor is from the LTD450, so what do you expect?

I got less than a mile down the road before I realised that something definitely wasn't right. The engine was spluttering, misfiring, going on to

one cylinder, sometimes not pulling or responding at all. I took it back and the mechanic reappeared 30 minutes later saying he'd had to disconnect the sidestand cut out, maybe the rain had got in there. Ah ha, I thought, we've had trouble with those buggers on Kawasakis before. On the 500, they've even redesigned it so the switch is now in front of the pivot, usefully tucked away and neatly inaccessible because of the bellypan. It was still raining but at least now I was off, away and running. Or sort of.

I got about the same mile down the road before

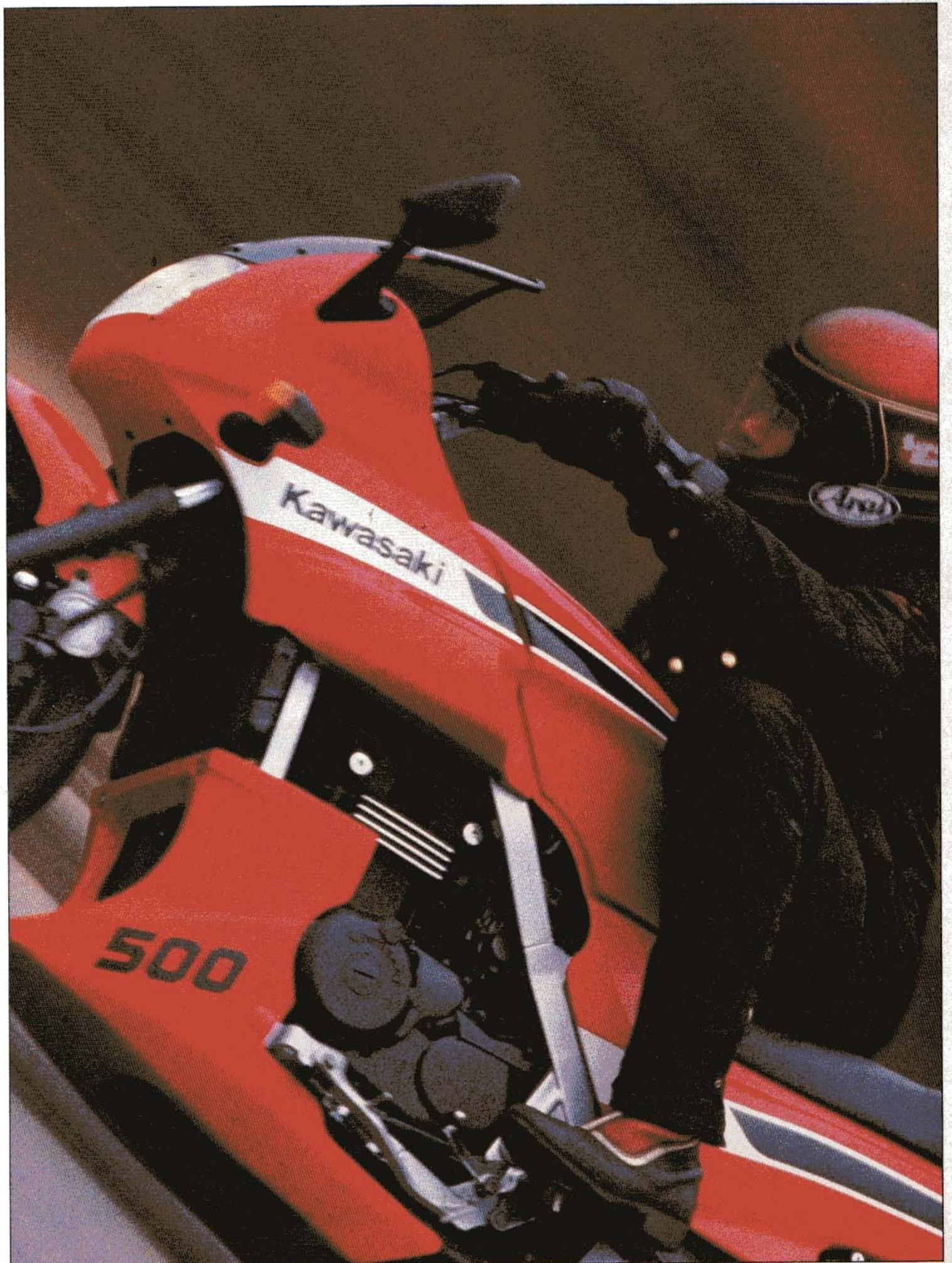
I pulled over because the engine was running worse if anything. Choking and dying all the time. I just about got it back to the factory without having to push. I explained all this to the mechanic, who listened disbelievingly to my story because hadn't he just disconnected the stand cut out and test ridden it for four miles and it was alright then, wasn't it. I said there was no way I was venturing on to the motorway with it whereupon he took off for an 18-mile test ride during which the bike ran perfectly and never missed a beat — until, when within sight of the factory gates, the main fuse popped and everything died.

It took two senior Kawasaki technicians about an hour to trace the dodgy electrics. They cheerfully blew a dozen fuses and even donated some knuckle blood to the wiring loom as they probed for continuity, pulled apart connector blocks and replaced red-herring components like a slightly wet kill switch. In the end it was tracked down to a humble spacer on the ignition coil. Or rather not on the ignition coil but embedded firmly into it. The coil's mounting bracket bolt had missed the spacer and wedged it up tight against a terminal where it took 2000 miles to eat through the insulation and fail. Finally, I was off and away. It had stopped raining too. Oh happy day.

The Kawasaki never missed a beat during the rest of our time with it. My first impressions of its performance have become my abiding memories of it — a fast and fluent little performer but particularly noteworthy because of some smooth yet killer acceleration between 7000 and the 11,000rpm redline. Spinning hard it feels like a two-stroke. Which is downright weird because low down around town, it feels like a plonking single and nowhere does it really feel like a twin except perhaps in the unremarkable midrange where there's more vibration and twin tingle than there is when you're revving the nuts off it. A very nice sensation hitting that powerband and screaming into the distance, oh yes.

It's a bit of a chameleon, the GPZ500S. Unusual too. I don't think there's ever been a twin quite like it. Certainly there's nothing in its class — it has more in common with a VF500 than a VT. It shares the powerband characteristics of LCs and NS400s and it'll chase modern GPZ600s and 750s, running with them on the tight stuff if





getting left for dead hauling straightline top speeds. It would be interesting to run the 500S against a crisp 600 Pantah but it's been a long time since any of us have seen one. And all this from a motorcycle that feels uncannily like a KLR600 around town complete with primary chain drive slop and exhaust thrap. Weird eh?

Maybe we shouldn't expect easy answers. The engine features the arranged marriage of an LTD450 bottom end with the top end off the 1000RX. It's a bored out 450 with a one up, one down crank and all the breathing taken care of by the same size, lightweight valvegear that appears on the big flagship. The valve timing is different, the lubrication has been updated, there's a crank driven balancer and the motor is rubber mounted to kill the vibes. There's a bigger airbox but the same 34mm semi-flat slide carbs that fed the 450. It really is the strangest partnership — the return of the LTD450 (not a bad little machine in its own right) after it met the nemesis of Ninja.

The whole unit has had a thorough reworking. Half a Ninja is a blasé description really. But since most of you won't have sampled the custom charms of the LTD450, it'll have to do. Let the engine do the talking.

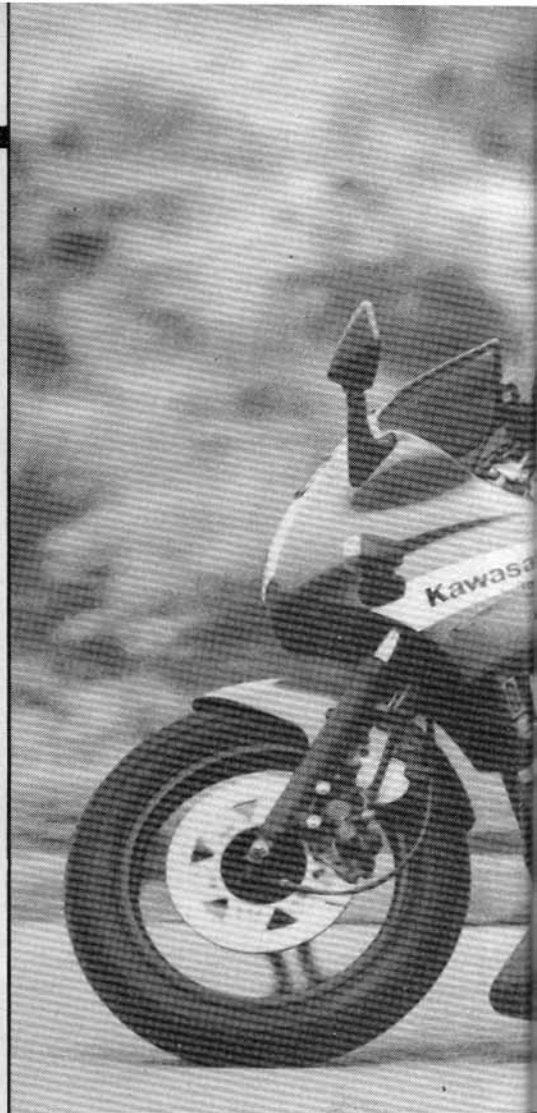
Our test bike consistently hit a top speed over 120mph even with a six-foot, oversuited rider struggling to tuck in. The best speed seen was 125mph. It made exactly the claimed maximum output of 60hp on our rolling road dyno and that's at the tyre. The dyno figures can't quite convey the thrill and excitement of that 7000 to 11,000rpm powerband because it feels different on the road. Crack the high numbers on the tach and you can see 11,500, 12,000rpm no problem, until a rev limiter cuts in at 12,000-plus. On the dyno, repeated tests said that maximum poke was available at around 9250rpm. Kawasaki say 9800 but what the hell, an 11,000rpm redline is

pointless. Although it redlines easy, you're not actually going any faster. The graph shows how much the power is tailing off above 9500. But then consider the flatness of the curve — torque aplenty combined with a distinct powerband. Weird. Flat out, the airbox doesn't seem to flow enough. Who knows what a less restrictive airbox/exhaust might release? As stock, it redlines through six gears yet there's a spare 2500rpm to lure the tuner.

For the road user, Kawasaki have assembled an excellent unit. A motor for everyman. It's not good pulling a high gear and cruising at low revs because the engine likes a headful of at least 2500rpm and it's low geared off the line so why not burn some revs and enjoy it. The midrange is nondescript but torquey. There's the usual noise regs dip at 5 to 6000 but then it sings and with a very sweet exhaust note the higher you go. You can't help but admire the output. A bit lumpy low down, some tingle in the middle but silky smooth high up, on tune and screaming revs and horsepower.

The vibration never reaches the mirrors (which are difficult to set up because of the bike's narrow profile) and your throttle hand only gets a tingling massage. The clutch needed adjustment only because it was used extensively in snarled-up, town traffic. The transmission was excellent. Totally un-Kawasaki-like, a really slick gearbox, easy fast changes and a delight to snick through. The bike ran a bit hot in town but didn't get too bothered. It really is the most remarkable little motor.

Acceleration, torque, traction, rideability aplenty, even the fuel efficiency is rather good — 47mpg average, easy 50s and nothing below 42mpg over a full tankful — a bit misleading this 'cos you're simultaneously trying to ascertain the full tank range (and hence throttling down a bit)



T R U E • S T O R I E S



... the bonds kept coming, and so did the rain.





KAWASAKI GPZ500

but however you whip it, there's 160 miles minimum before reserve. The tank holds just under four gallons and if you stuck to the maximum torque rpm of 8500, you could definitely have both 100mph performance and 50mpg.

On the all-new chassis, things aren't so efficient and clearcut. The square-section steel cradle frame warrants no comment. The right downtube unbolts for motor removal and it's claimed to be light at 36lb. The dry weight (373lb) is commendable as is the ground clearance (nothing touching up to an impressive 4.7in). The wheelbase is shortish, the rake and trail acceptable, the steering fast and easy. Maybe too fast and easy . . . I feel stupid trying to explain my reservations about the handling without really being able to identify the problem. But there appears to be an unholy trinity at work — 16in wheels front and back, unadjustable suspension all topped by a bulky, long-legged, tall rider who likes to know (or at least feel) what the tyres are up to.

The suspension seemed firm up front (36mm telescopics, 5.5in of travel, no possible adjustment) but the Uni-Trak rear (3.9in of wheel travel) felt soft. When I tried to adjust the preload I found neither a skinny toolkit C-spanner or a variety of decent tools would do the job. The problem was access yet again. No room to manoeuvre or apply leverage without bashing your knuckles into a frame rail. Some sort of bent spanner or trick extension would probably do the business but even a Kawasaki mechanic irreverently reckoned that adjustment was a weekend job. The owner's manual refers you to your dealer. Laughably, the 500S brochure boasts that the "Uni-Trak rear suspension adjusts for optimum performance" and shows you a pin-sharp photograph of the wrong,



I laid it into the right, then the left.



The tyres clung on. No sweat.



NOTHING'S AS TRUE AS AN ARROW.

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➤ Arrowmax, a revolutionary, directional tread pattern ➤ cuts through water like a knife with its critically angled arrowheads ➤ gives rapid, precise and stable cornering thanks to a unique circumferential component set in the tread pattern at *15°, 30°, and 45° to the centre, plus a hint of triangularity on the front ➤ offers massive grip in any road conditions due to its new, ultra grip sports compound and its race bred profile, specially tailored to minimise changes in road-tyre contact area at any angle of lean ➤ promotes straight line stability at speed with its classic centre groove tread design ➤ is H and V rated ➤ and increases performance significantly because it is designed specifically for forward motion. ➤

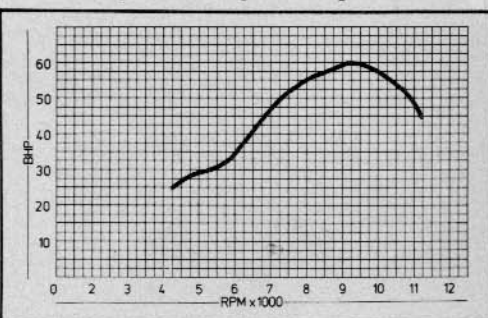
*ANGLES VARY IN CERTAIN SIZES.

DUNLOP TYRES



Undoubtedly the 500S suffers an identity crisis in a market where everything sporty has four cylinders unless it's a two-stroke twin or triple. Yet it has all the performance of two-stroke in a nice, rounded four-stroke package. Speed and acceleration and fuel economy and excellent rideability. A hot engine in a compact chassis with tiny wheels and big brakes. It won't be everybody's cup of hot fat but it's certainly different and it's a welcome addition to the true middleweight ranks. There's never been a 500 twin like it.

Maximum power 59.6hp at 9250rpm



Kawasaki GPZ500S (EX500-A1) £2599 including all taxes

PERFORMANCE

Top Speed — 125mph
 Fuel Consumption — Hard Riding — 42mpg
 Average — 47mpg
 Best full tank range — 200 miles

POWERTRAIN

Liquid-cooled, DOHC, eight valve parallel twin. 498cc. Bore x stroke 74 x 58mm. Compression ratio 10.8:1. Claimed maximum horsepower 60bhp at 9800rpm. Claimed maximum torque 34ft/lb at 8500rpm. Twin 34mm Keihins. Two-into-two exhaust. Six-speed, constant mesh gearbox. Wet multiplate clutch. Wet sump lubrication. Transistorised electronic ignition. Primary drive by chain. Final drive by chain

ROLLING CHASSIS

Square-section steel double cradle. Front suspension by 36mm telescopic with 5.5in of travel. Rear suspension by swingarm and Uni-Trak single shock adjustable for preload (see text) 3.9in of wheel travel. Wheelbase 56.7in. Seat height 30.3in. Ground clearance 4.7in. Rake 27.5-degrees. Trail 3.5in. Dry weight 373lb (wet weight 420lb). Fuel capacity 3.96gal (18lit). Brakes: single 11in front disc with BAC; rear 6.3in SLS drum. Tyres: Dunlop 100/90-16 front and 120/90-16 rear. Colours: Ebony and Firecracker Red

PARTS BIN

All prices include VAT

Fairing (main cowling complete) £231.89; indicator assembly £2.52; indicator lens £2.53; front forks (complete assembly) £360.81; front mudguard £34.01; rear wheel £153.59; tank £175.24; seat £112.98; silencer (muffler only) £56.43; downpipes £27.75 each; gearlever £3.38; brake pedal £16.61; footpeg £6.99; headlight assembly £29.91; brake lever £5.48; side panel £35.89; piston £19.27; ring set for one piston £13.96; conrod £35.73; brake gasket £13.96; crankshaft £254.52; clutch (complete assembly) £192.75; ignition unit £118.22; drive chain £59.94; front sprocket £10.78; rear sprocket £11.21; oil filter £7.45; battery £56.69

non-adjustable end of the shock. All in all, it's not the sort of palaver you want to be saddled with when you and Doris fancy a Sunday spin.

I reckon it could be sorted pretty easily and set up a bit harder but then . . . There are question marks over the wheel sizes and the tyres. Very few bikes have 16in wheels front and back. And significantly, the fashion in the vanguard of development which is GP racing is away from 16in hoops. The experts say they give quicker steering and nowt else. Less stability, less feel, less feedback. And they're only talking about a 16in front let alone a 16in rear. My own feeling is that 16in wheels are becoming a fast dying fad very much like anti-dive. A 16in front can be useful for a road rider but a 16in combination makes everything too remote. No feel, no feedback, is it under-tyred or what . . . why does the rear tyre squirm in low to mid-speed turns but not at higher speeds? In the end I invented my own word for the handling which is squiffy — a combination of skitterishness, plain wandering and tyre squirm. If you're very precise you can always get away with it. But this isn't a very positive feeling and there's a persistent, nagging doubt that the tyre is going to dump you on your head.

Then there's the riding position . . . sitting on 16in wheels with a 30in seat height, a large rider can feel uncomfortable. Cramps and fatigue plagued me while heeling it over around a roundabout for a photo session. The saddle is okay but the pegs are a bit too far forward and the

bars are a shade too narrow — they're dropped slightly from the flat position but they're mounted off three inch risers. Response from the 16in front wheel is quick and adept. The whole bike is nimble and agile. It's slim, small and low — best at going through tight sections and high-speed slamming stuff; worst at day to day commuter travelling. A bigger rear tyre and an accessible spring might transform it. The handling/roadholding could definitely be improved though it's difficult to know whether your average road user will need or want to. With everything else about the 500S being so good, it's the kind of handling subtlety that you could easily live with/adjust to.

It's certainly well-braked. You need more pressure than on a twin disc set up but the BAC, smaller leading piston system gave good stopping distances. The rear drum was useable too. The instrumentation/switchgear was typically excellent though the horn suffered some delay — water in the works no doubt. This bike saw an awful lot of rain during our two week test.

Surprisingly, the half fairing was rather good at deflecting wind and weather away from the rider's head though it could do nothing to protect the rest of him. Why is the middle part of the fairing missing? Cost-cutting? Whatever, the bike is dead stable in a straight line up to its top speed and with everything low and tiny it cuts through the air a treat. By the way, it's not true that the belly pan is an optional extra. That's how they come out of the crate.