

Which Bike?

SEPTEMBER
60p

50

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CUSTOM
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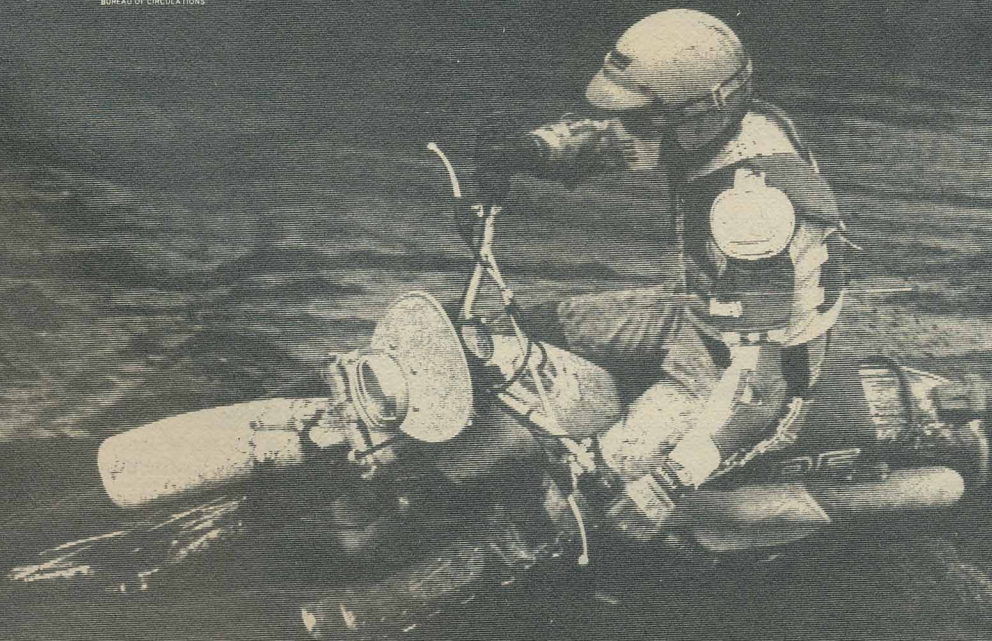
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CUSTOM

Opportunities for acting out our favourite custom cruise fantasies have been just about non-existent in the two-fifty bracket up to now. But bikes like Yamaha's XS250S, Suzuki's GS250T and (to a lesser extent) Cagiva's SST250 allows anyone to play the game.

Tests by *John Nutting*.

Photography by
John Perkins.



Conventional thinking goes along with the notion that any fashion that hits America sooner or later reaches our shores in the UK. Tell that to the men who sell motorcycles though.

If chopper-style machines (and I use the term in its loosest sense, because they are anything but choppers) were to have taken over here like skateboards and many other of the five-minute-fads then we would have been over-run by them over three years ago. But the manufacturers have been understandably cautious in offering anything but conservative styling, no doubt figuring that European bikers are more 'serious' than their Stateside counterparts. That's understandable. The sort of motorcycling that has given rise to the custom cult in the two-wheel world is peculiar



C RUISERS

CAGIVA SST250 SUZUKI GS250T
YAMAHA XS250S

62▷

◁59 to California since motorcycles and their use are more casual, more relaxed, ridden more slowly and generally rarely used out of town. It's therefore inevitable that style should become more important to the American buyer.

But here the message has taken much longer to sink in. And so the importers have been taking only tentative dips into the custom pool. Even Yamaha, who were the first with their 650 twin to exploit the popularity of flash styling, took their time here

◀ *With longer experience of custom models in America, Yamaha's XS250S looks the most extreme of the three bikes here – but you pay for it with an awful handlebar.*



▲ *Cagiva never made pizzas – but they did make ceramic pottery. Perhaps that's where they got their styling skill from.*

◀ *Here's the secret of why the Suzuki GS250T looks so tame – it's not a custom but a cheapo variant of the GSX250E with a tag of just £770.*

and only last year, and then in a small way, offered the XS750S and XS650S for sale.

Now however, most of the manufacturers feel that in 1980 we're ready to embrace the new-style bikes with all the laid-back enthusiasm (yawn) of our American cousins and they're offering ranges of tarted-up bikes in droves, right down to the 250cc bracket where the competition is hottest. Only exception is Honda, who feel

that, for the time being at least, their requirements are served by the little CM200T twin, so far the only model to get the chopper treatment.

In fact, the custom-style probably suits smaller bikes better, mainly because the higher handlebar is unsuitable for the faster speeds possible on bigger bikes. So it could be that the three machines we are featuring here could be more successful than you think.

The first is the XS250S Yamaha, and as you might expect since the company have had the most experience of custom styling, it looks more impressive than most. But it should do as it costs the most: £950 no less.

The second is Suzuki's GS250T. In many ways it's less radical than the Yamaha and therefore doesn't present as much of a cohesive picture. But from reactions to the bike, it could be more popular than the GSX250E that it's based on. And with a list price of £770, £119 less than the stock model it's incredibly good value.

The Cagiva, last of the three, only just qualifies as a custom machine because of its history. It started life as the Italian-made Harley-Davidson SST250 and as such provided real Stateside styling in line with the Milwaukee company's policies. When the Varese plant was sold to Cagiva, the SST250's appearance stayed much the same, but with a vastly improved detailing. It comes at quite a price though, £949, for what is basically a two-stroke single of no more sophistication than a £550 MZ TS250. We hasten to add that the Cagiva looks much better though.

ENGINEERING

The Yamaha XS250S's engine and frame package are identical to the standard XS250. The motor is a simple overhead camshaft parallel twin with two-valves per cylinder and a plain-bearing 180-degree crankshaft. Transmission is by primary gears to the wet multiplate clutch and six-speed gearbox. Final drive is by a 530 chain. Maximum power is the same as the stocker, with 27bhp claimed at 9,500rpm, though the rev counter has the red line at 9,000rpm.

Though the single down-

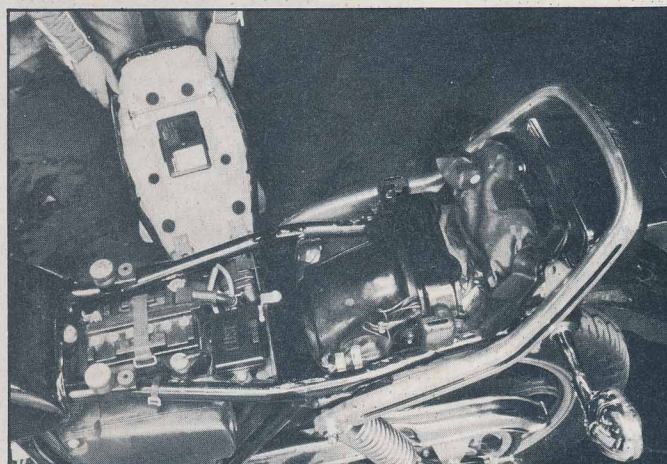
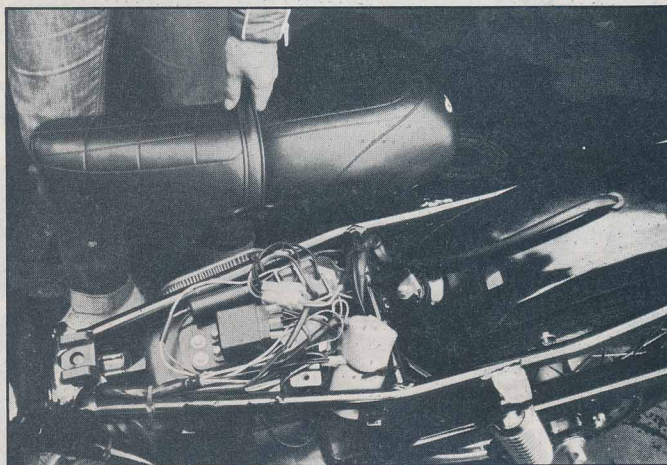
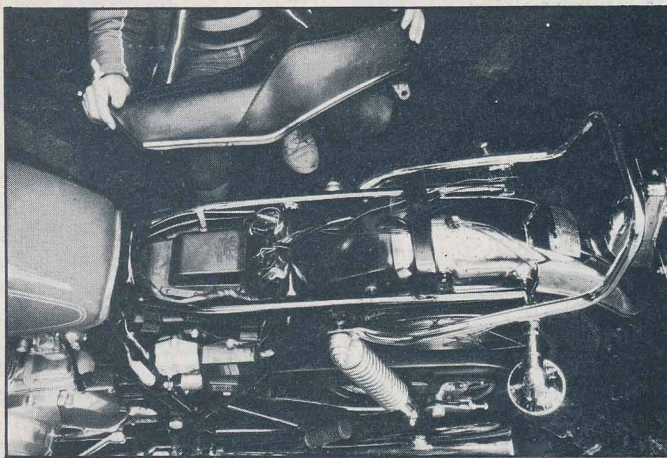
tube frame is the same the steering geometry differs because a pair of longer fork legs are used to lift the front end. Front wheel size is the same, 300S18 but a small and fat 120/90-16 rear tyre is used, both on seven spoke cast wheels. Since the rear tyre rolling diameter is an inch smaller, overall ratios are altered with a 41 (instead of 43) tooth rear sprocket to bring the speeds in gears back to standard.

General opinion of the Yamaha's styling was that it was superior to the standard model. The fuel tank is slightly smaller and blends in with the two-level lightweight seat that is removed completely to gain access to the toolkit and battery. Around the rear of the seat is a substantial light-alloy grab rail. Contributing to the compact looks are a pair of exhaust pipes that stop short of the rear wheel spindle and a rear lamp tucked under the grab rail.

Suzuki have gone for a similar look but failed to go far enough. As on the Yamaha, the Suzuki's power unit is the same as the stock GSX250E, being a very oversquare (60x44.2mm) parallel twin running on a plain bearing 180-deg crank. To balance out the vibrations from the crank there's a gear-driven balance shaft forward of the crank. And boosting the potential power is a cylinder head with twin overhead camshafts and four valves per cylinder. Power is variously quoted as between 26 and 29bhp at a heady 10,000rpm and this like the Yamaha is transmitted through a wet clutch and a six speed gearbox with a 530 final drive chain.

There's just an electric starter to spin the engine into life, supplied like the Yam by a 12volt, 12 amp-hour battery. Ignition is by magnetically triggered capacitor-discharge.

Cosmetics are provided by a smaller 2.4 gallon fuel tank and matching side panels, the tank on the Suzuki being mounted higher than on the Yamaha with a small plastic cover to mask the steering head and frame tubes. Suzuki don't go as far as to alter the exhaust system but use wire wheels, the front being 300-18 while the rear is a smaller 3.50-17. Similarly, the gearing is altered to provide the



Top: You won't find much under the Suzuki's seat 'cos it's bolted to the frame. Tools and whatnot are stashed under the side panels, which because of the asymmetrical frame are different sizes. Right side panel fell off due to a poor catch. Middle: Cagiva seat removal exposes tacky-looking electrics and foam-wrapped turn signal relay. Bottom: Double catch plastic seat on Yamaha lifts off showing fusebox, battery, and toolkit.

same speeds per 1,000rpm as the Yamaha, a smaller headlamp is also fitted, the Suzuki having a 45-watt 130mm-diameter unit compared with the Yamaha's 45-watt 150mm one.

The Cagiva appears to be an attempt to civilise a machine that was far from satisfactory in its original Harley-Davidson guise. It remains however a simple two-stroke single and this dictates to some extent the character of the bike. The

engine itself is now based on the Cagiva moto-cross unit, the chrome-lined alloy barrel sitting on cases that have substantially more room for transfer porting. Unusually for a two-stroke, the engine is very oversquare at 72x59.6mm, but usefully, lubrication is from a separate tank in the frame backbone with a throttle-controlled pump driven off the gearbox feeding the oil to the inlet

tract. Maximum power is around 28bhp at 7,600rpm.

Since the bottom end is from the moto-crosser, it is very tough, with a heavy-action multiplate clutch and a five speed gearbox. The final drive chain is bigger than on the Harley version, being another 530 unit. Carburettor is a 32mm Dellorto, ignition is by Dansi.

But for the Cagiva's engine, you'd think the bike was another custom job. Attention to detail on the bike is vastly improved over the SST250 I tested five years ago with better switchgear, paintwork, brakes and suspension. The overall feel of the bike is the same though thanks to its long 56¼in wheelbase, compared to the 54.3in of the Suzuki and the 55.3in of the Yamaha. It is also much lighter as you might expect of a two-stroke, being 286lbs dry compared to the Suzuki's 348lbs and the Yamaha's 372lbs. So there's lots of room on the machine.

PERFORMANCE

On custom-style machines, maximum performance is never or real importance. That's not to mean that it makes no difference what you're using by a long way. Typical is the comparison of the power delivery of the Yamaha and Suzuki.

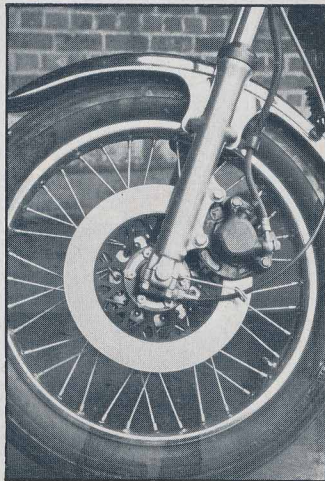
The Yamaha had a totally different feel from the Suzuki, due in main to a fatter torque curve at the lower end of the rev range. Since the motor didn't have the balance shaft of the Suzuki, the bike also felt more chunky and responsive. This was just as well since the six-speed gearbox had a lever action that could hardly be called creamy.

More than the other bikes, the Yamaha conformed to the popular image of the chopper (well, as near as you can on a 250cc machine) as being a raw and crude tool for casual use. It didn't appear to be that happy when revved hard, but could just the same handle a cross country trip at high speeds so long as the rider could handle the wind pressure from the tall riding position.

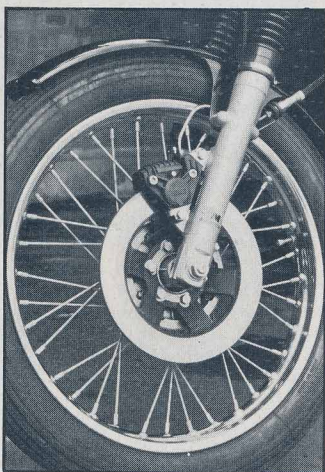
Top speed of the Yamaha is a bit slower than the stocker with the potential to hold 85mph if you can get your head down. A 70mph

legal speed can be held, just, even two up.

The Suzuki has more top end power, as you might expect from the specification, but this is at the expense of low end pulling power. So the top speed (and this is helped by the slightly lower handlebar) is better while for general use, the Suzuki felt weak at the knees. It also had a slight dose of hesitation in the carburetion of the 30mm Mikunis that spoil the throttle response in the mid-range. This wouldn't affect the flat out performance of course, which over the quarter mile adds up to a full second over the Yam (16.7 secs versus 17.7 secs) or the top speed of 88mph.



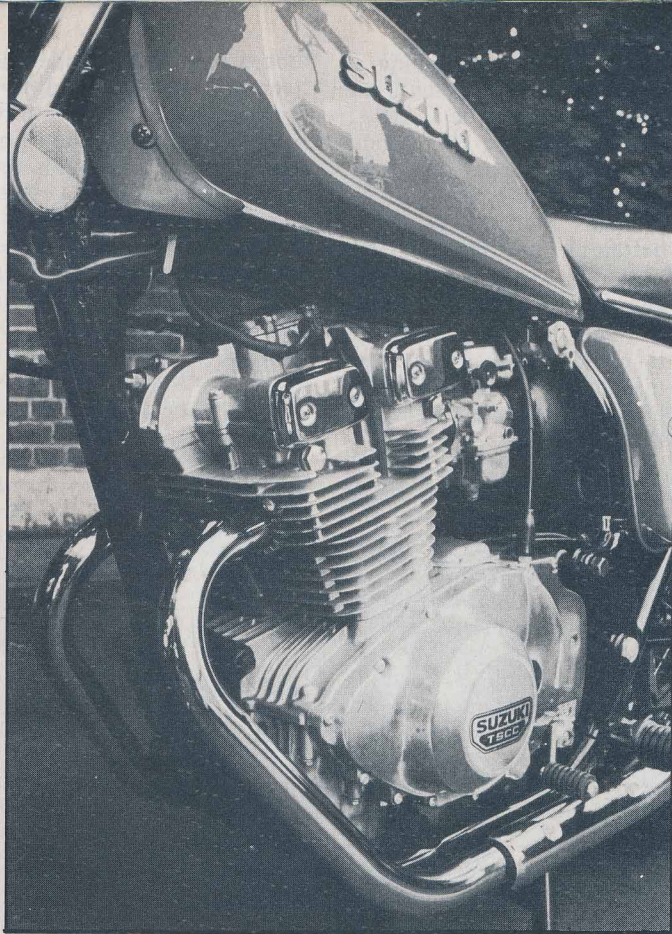
Suzuki uses excellent new-type disc brake.



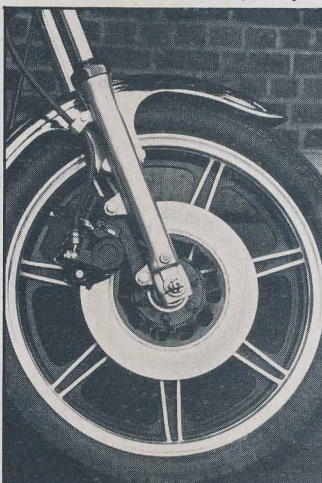
Cagiva has super Italian Brembo disc and Marzocchi fork.

The six-speed gearbox had a smooth precise action on the Suzuki and this helped if you needed extra urge for nicking down and overtaking.

Specification improvements on the Cagiva have livened the performance considerably. The bike could easily romp away from the Yamaha and Suzuki at lower speeds with punchy low end power and a slick five speed gearbox



The GS250T enjoys the same TSCC eight-valve power unit of the GSX250E that revs to 10,000rpm.



Yamaha disc has new floating caliper mount.

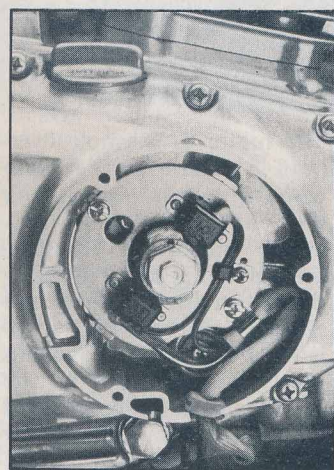
but would begin to struggle when aiming for its claimed top speed of just over 80mph. In many ways, the Cagiva is hampered by the limitations of its engine's simple specification: while this doesn't cramp the bike's speed (after all it can maintain a comfortable 70mph) its the manner in which it does it that spoils the picture.

ECONOMY

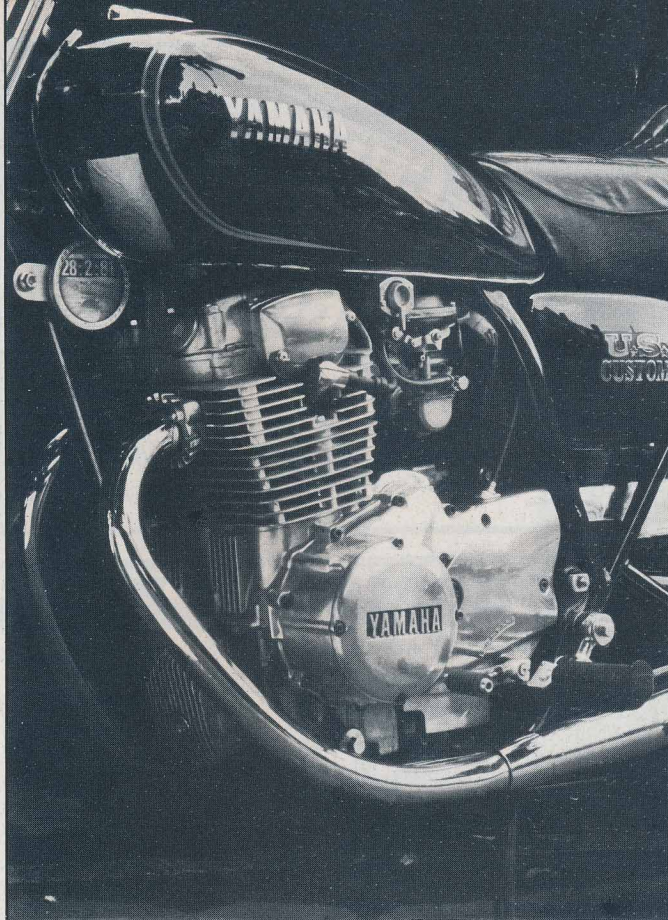
Both the Yamaha and the Suzuki mirrored the fuel consumption figures obtained in the earlier tests of the XS250 and the GSX250E. The Yamaha returned 65mpg which on the 3.1 gallon fuel

tank gives a useful range of 200 miles. The Suzuki was slightly more economic at 66.6mpg but the smaller fuel tank containing 2.4 gallons meant that stops had to be made at least every 140 miles. Ridden flat out both bikes will still return 50mpg.

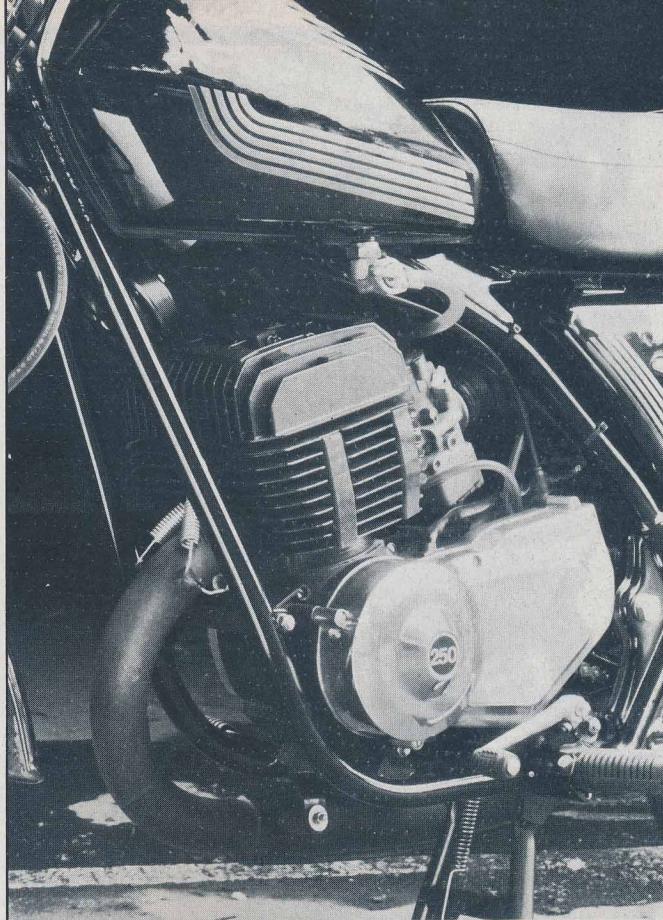
The Cagiva again reflects its old-fashioned engine performance in poor fuel consumption. We only got 41mpg which forced filling up every 90 or so miles. The oil tank has to be filled just behind the steering head every 1,000miles or so, compared to the 3,000mile oil change intervals on the Yamaha and Suzuki.



Suzuki ignition has magnetic triggers requiring no maintenance.



The Cagiva's two-stroke engine shows its moto-cross connections with a heavy clutch and spring clamps on the exhaust.



Custom styling suits the character of the chunky XS250 Yamaha twin's 180-degree power unit.

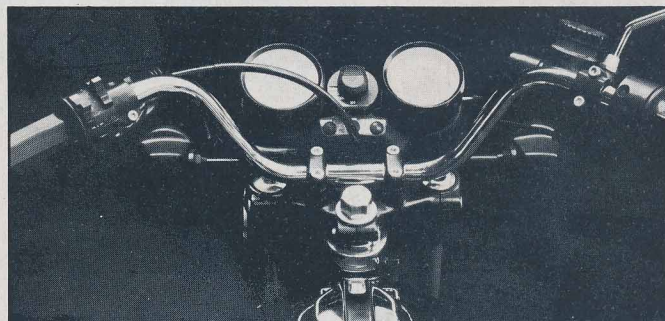
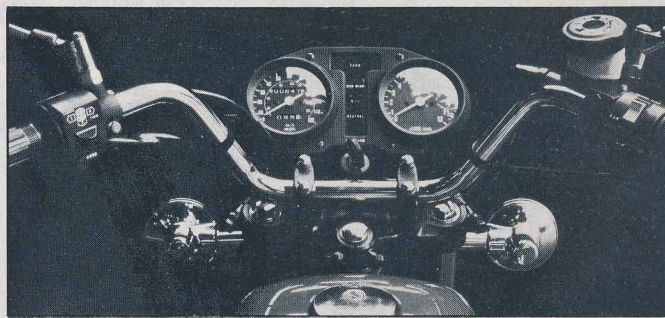
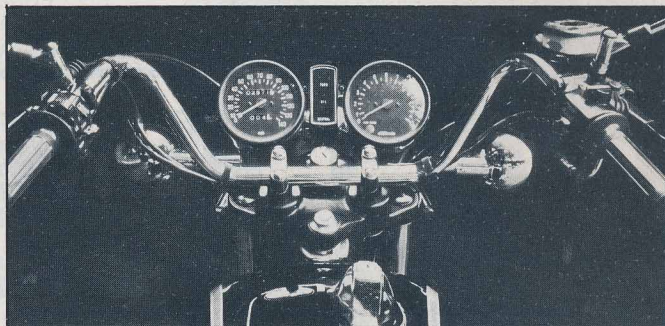


Main electrical components on Suzuki are under side panel.

HANDLING

Bikes that are modified for the sake of appearance at the expense of function always have shortcomings. On the custom machines coming from Japan now that means the handling suffers. On both the Yamaha and Suzuki, the front forks have been lengthened and this made the steering head angle more shallow as well as adding to the front wheel trail.

The sum total of the effects was that the steering was slower (the amount of response from a given amount of input to the handlebar or



Top: Yamaha pull-back handlebar looks good but ruins bike control. Middle: Suzuki's instruments and controls are uncluttered and easy to use. Bottom: Cagiva uses old-type Suzuki switches and cover for ignition switch.

weight transfer) and the tendency to run wide on corners was enhanced.

The suspension is softer on the Suzuki and the Yamaha so if you like your ride smooth that's fine but it doesn't do much for the stability in corners. Worse, the cornering clearance was limited and both bikes were far too easy to ground down.

All that might sound great but you were limited in options in a tight spot. The most awkward aspect of the Yamaha was its handlebar. The long pull-back grips interfered with control when filtering through traffic and their rubber mounts gave too much flexibility.

The Yamaha's Bridgestone Mag-Mopus tyres were grippy and gave a much more secure feel than the Inoue rubber on the Suzuki. When flicking into corners the Suzuki had a very light feel that we could only attribute to the tyres.

The brakes on the Suzuki could also overload the squeal the tyres, suggesting that they lacked the grip of the IRC tyres on the stock bike. Like the GSX250E, the GS250T uses a disc front brake with excellent power and feel



◀ Vibration and a hard seat was the most troublesome features of the Cagiva. Though smooth for an engine of that type, there was still enough high frequency buzzing through the seat to annoy the rider after an hour's riding. But the bike is hardly the sort of machine that would be used for motorway cruising. The Cagiva's at its best in twisty back roads when vibration of that sort's not a real problem. The hard seat is a problem though that Cagiva will have to correct. The padding was soft enough to allow the rider to hit the pan.

Being so slim, the riding

stance of the Cagiva was comfortable up to the top speed of the bike. The controls were fine but for the hard edges of the levers and the heavy competition clutch.

CONCLUSIONS

With a list price of £770 the Suzuki presents fantastic value for money, so the fact that the bike isn't quite so stylish as the Yamaha is of little consequence. You're buying the same bike, in effect, as the GSX250E with Twin Swirl Combustion Chambers and excellent performance that costs £889.

Yet there's only a slight sacrifice in handling, fuel tank range and comfort in exchange for the custom looks.

The Yamaha was the most popular for its rugged appearance, but since the bike costs £950 you'd expect it to be. A buyer would have to be aware of the Yamaha's potential electrical trouble on the bike and its need for closer maintenance attention.

The Cagiva's a good look-

ing bike but for its specification it is very expensive. In effect you're buying looks on the SST250, and no small measure of good handling. Perhaps if Cagiva went back to the more outrageous custom styling of the old Harley while retaining the high detail quality it would be a better buy.

CAGIVA S250 SUZUKI GS250T YAMAHA XS250S



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