

# NOBILE

## Savage

Pete Nielsen goes native on the biggest road thumper of the lot — Suzuki's LS650

**W**e were maybe a mile from Suzuki's headquarters on the outskirts of Los Angeles when the rationale behind the LS650 Savage first became apparent to this hack. The kid manning the petrol pump opposite the freeway on-ramp was maybe 16, maybe 18, and he fell as deeply and instantly in love with the big single as only a teenager can. Plugging the filler nozzle into the black petrol tank, his lip trembled and his eyes misted over as he took in the dazzling chrome, the knee-level seat and the rakish cissy bar.

"God-damn, that's the most beautiful bike I've ever seen.

It's a Suzuki? Sheeit, it looks just like a Harley, man. Jesus, lookit the engine, man, and that pipe. Bitchin', man..." He was still gabbling as I wheeled the LS650 (I refuse to call it a Savage) off to one side to allow something 20 feet long, eight wide and five high an unimpeded run at the Unleaded Super pump. His offside had to come out of the office to fill the car and shot a filthy look at the kid, who by now was on his knees caressing the chromed belt-drive cover and gazing deeply into his reflection in the battery box while firing out salvo upon salvo of lurid praise. Having spent too long in England to feel comfortable near such uninhibited enthusiasm, I ▶





SUZUKI

Harley

AUGUST 1988 biker 65

Photography Jack Burdette

# NOBLE Savage

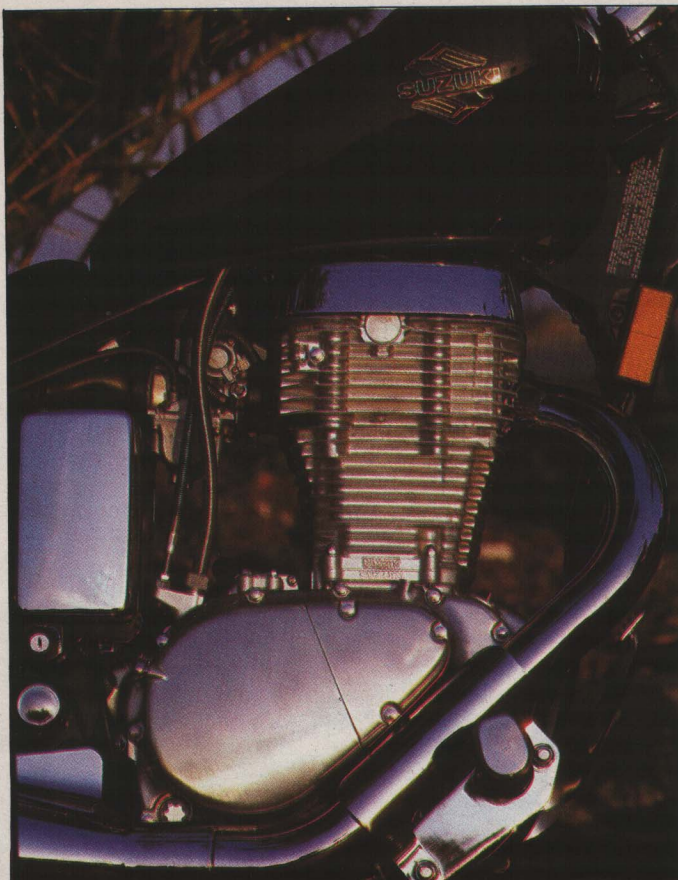
backed a few feet clear and wondered whether Suzuki America paid the kid a retainer to assail the ears of journalists filling up test bikes. Perhaps that's why there was stuff-all gas in it when I picked it up.

The kid was never going to shut up. "How much does it cost? *Two grand?* Hell, I can just about afford the repayments on that..." And so another one bites the dust. Maybe. It was a scene that repeated itself twice more over the next three days, during which time I saw maybe a dozen other examples chuffing slowly down the boulevards or parked up at the beach. All spotless, none with more than 500 miles on the clock, all ridden by youngsters. "This is an entry-level bike," announced a Suzuki PR person when I collected the machine, which in English means it's a learner bike. Now probably only the Americans could blithely pass off a 652cc banger as greenhorn material, but that's what it is, all right. Not that someone old enough to shave wouldn't get a buzz out of that slogging bottom-end grunt...

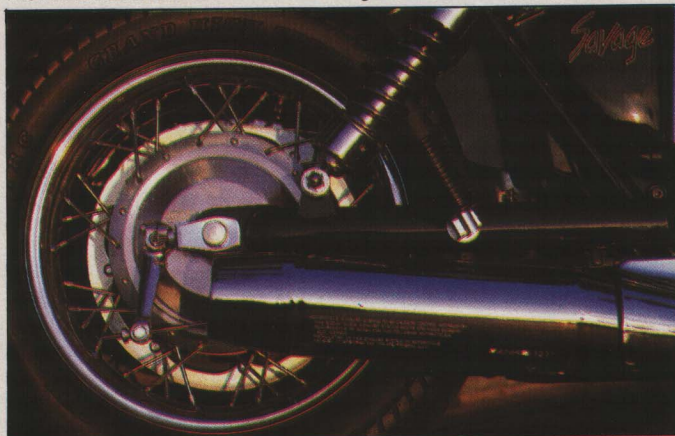
Suzuki no doubt learnt its lesson from Honda, whose 250 Rebel was one of the two-wheel hits of 1985 (in Japan as well as the USA, surprisingly). The Rebel's selling points were basic enough; low-maintenance engine (Super Dream), cruiser styling, light weight, cheap price tag. Ideal for beginners. Since there's no capacity limit in the US for learners, Suzuki reasoned that a low-performance bigger bike built to the same parameters might suck a few more new customers out of the four-wheeled woodwork.

And so it has. Introduced in May, the 650 has been selling steadily ever since. Its purchase price is a downmarket \$1999 plus freight, taxes, dealer prep and all the other hidden extras, which will still leave a dude with plenty of change out of two-and-a-half thou — enough for a pair of engineer's boots, a few pairs of Levi's and a black leather jacket. Crash helmets are optional.

For this meagre outlay, say around £1,500, the Yankee neophyte is buying a



The noble heart wot beats within the Savage breast.



Low-rent shockers do their best to keep meaty muffler off the deck.

motorcycle that duplicates the feel of a rough and (nearly) ready custom bike to a surprising degree. It's about perfect for chuffing around town at commuting speeds, acceptable for short trips at cruising speeds of up to 70 mph and downright excruciatingly painful to ride for non-stop distances of over 70-80 miles. Its cycle parts are basic verging on crude, its engine is well enough engineered to probably outlast any owner.

Based on the DR600 engine, the LS650's powerplant looks radically different from any other big single to come out of Japan. The huge pot has a singular (groan) visual impact matched by no other single that's been built in the last 20 years or so, betraying no outward sign of its camchain or

DOHC, four-valve head specification. Cylinder dimensions are 94 x 94mm, dead square and about as far away from the comparatively free-revving big singles made in Japan these days as any self-respecting Velo owner would want to go. A meaty flywheel helps reproduce a gut-tickling bottom-end response that'll snap your head back like nothing I've ridden since a 500 Matchless single, and that was longer ago than I'd care to remember.

Ignition's electronic, air and oil filters aren't beyond the reach of the average idiot and if the worst does come to the worst after the warranty's expired, a rebuild should be pretty inexpensive.

Chuck in a set of casings that tuck alternator, starter motor,

ignition gear and all the rest away neatly, and you've got something that looks like an archetypal British single, the way they should have been. Of course, nothing could be further from trad Brit concepts than the rest of the styling package. The single front frame downtube splits into two at base gasket level to support the engine, and the headstock's well braced and gusseted. Right back to the box-section swingarm, everything's good old-fashioned sturdy steel.

Of course, all the metalwork's been tailored to fit the Yank recipe for sure success, the good ole arse-on-the-ground laid-back easy ridin' look. The Americans somehow view this as a traditional look, but for European sales success Suzuki are going to have to wrap that engine in something a little more upright. Feet-first is all very well, as long as you don't ride more than 20 miles non-stop.

With a wheelbase of 58.3 inches, the Suzuki's quite a small bike, just like the 750 Intruder. There's not a lot of room for big chaps. At six feet or 5' 11", depending on who I'm talking to, the LS650 was a little on the tight side. You get to choose between pullback and straight 'bars — the test bike wore a straight set, which made for a reasonably comfortable forward lean with boots well up on the pegs mounted on plain chrome brackets just beneath the front of the engine. Reasonably comfortable up to a point, that is. The seat's quite wide and well-shaped, but the padding compresses so much that you're sitting on the seat pan inside ten minutes. A long run back from canyon country on the Eastern outskirts of LA had my arse numb and my thighs aching, torture that was relieved only when photographer Burnicle hopped on the pillion seat for a 30-mile run back to his temporary abode. Vociferous complaints from the skinny pillion perch grew steadily in frequency and volume until, by the time we'd reached the coast, they'd become an uninterrupted monologue threatening permanent disability to the Suzuki stylists responsible for the thinly covered brick behind the pilot's seat. Since it was obviously intended only as a means of ferrying teenage girls home from discos, with a detour along the beach so the pulsating vibration soaks through the miniskirt ►

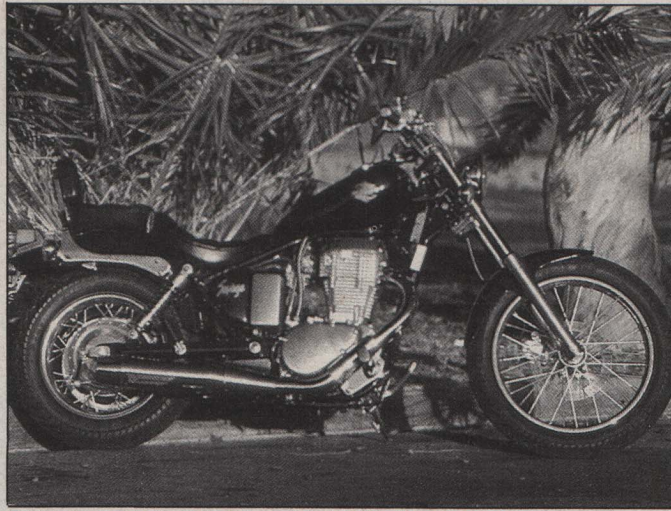
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sufficiently to facilitate swift removal of knickers. I had no choice but to ignore his plaintive cries and curses.

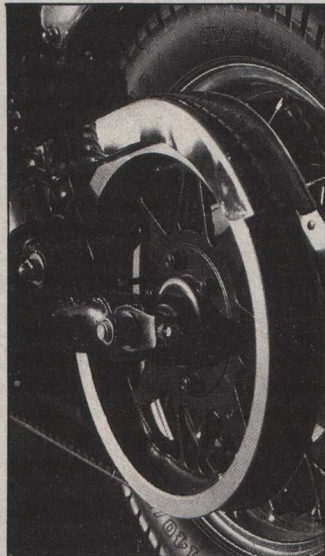
In action the engine performed as well as it looked, again up to a point. The starter motor sounded as though it had a hard time cranking the big piston over against the 8.5 to 1 compression ratio, despite the automatic decompressor, but once it rumbled and coughed into life the big thumper would happily pull two people away from a standstill on idle. The lack of a rev counter didn't help, but revving it out until the individual thuds merged into a roar made for respectable acceleration away from traffic lights. At low speeds the steering feels heavyish and slightly awkward to begin with, a definite wrench on the handlebars being required to bend it into a corner and a definite countersteering pressure necessary to keep it headed in the same direction all the way round. Take your hands off the bars and the LS650 will stand up and try to dive into the bushes on the outside of the road. Again, after a hundred miles it had become second nature, and it certainly wasn't what I'd call dangerous.

Progress up through the four gears is punctuated by a series of coughs and backfires on the overrun. I don't know whether this was due to the way our bike had been set up or if it's endemic to all examples of the breed, but what the hell, let's just call it built-in character. The exhaust note is certainly rather gratifying in any case, without being loud enough to ruffle the hairs growing out of the ears of the Marsham Street Mafia. At steady throttle settings the bike behaved well enough, though the limitations of the single counterbalance soon became apparent.

So do the limitations of the gearbox. Perhaps the rough and notchy change was due to the length of the linkages from the forward-mounted gearlever, or perhaps our bike, with only 180 miles on it when picked up, was still too new and tight and the box might have smoothed out with more use, but shifting was nowhere near clean. It was a bit like riding an old Beemer — pull in the



Cruiser styling is stuff dreams are made of for Yank adolescents.



Arse end of belt drive dominates wheel.

clutch, wait for everything to slow down, light a fag, change, let the clutch out and open it up again. The clutch, luckily, was smooth and light and well up to its ill-defined job.

That's more than a chap can say for the counterbalancer. Up to 50 mph in top there's a little vibration through bars or footrests, although you're always aware of that dirty great piston leaping up and down beneath the tank, but press on a bit and the buzz through the handgrips grows in intensity until at 70 mph you're headed for a dose of white-knuckle syndrome. It's also apparent through the footrests but to nowhere near the same extent. A handful of rubber engine mounts would serve this bike well. At the end of a 200-mile ride punctuated by frequent stops I was driven to drink between the vibes and the hellishly uncomfortable seat, though I settled for a few cool beers at a convenient bar.

Perhaps the vibes would have been even more vicious were it not for the cushioning effect of the drive belt, which



Serious lack of clocks.

besides filling up an otherwise plain left side of the machine with its huge rear sprocket (pulley?) and chromed cover helps make the bike an even better bet for the mechanically inept. If Suzuki has done as good a job as Kawasaki and Harley, then this means of transferring engine bangs to rear wheel rotation could find itself expanding its niche in the Suzi range. Sensibly, Suzuki has also gone the same way it did with the Intruder and bunged a spoked wheel on each end of the LS650. The combination of 19-inch front and 15-inch wheels doesn't work too badly, and to my horror the bike even displayed a fair bit of ground clearance, enough to make swinging through tight corners halfway enjoyable instead of the nightmare it usually is with custom bikes. Even the bargain-basement suspension coped well enough with the 650's limited performance. The long front fork is, as you'd expect, soft in springing and short of damping, but it took a really bumpy stretch of road

before this sad fact was truly driven home through the base of my spine when, in tandem with the rear shocks the resultant sensation was akin to sliding down a flight of steps on one's arse.

Strong as the engine is at the bottom end and what feels like the midrange, the top end is surprisingly weak. I didn't see more than 80 mph on the speedo, and I even had to duck my head to do that, mounted as it is in the teardrop tank, and from 60 upwards acceleration is kind of short. I suspect that exceedingly low gearing is to blame here, along with carburation calibrated to deliver maximum oomph at low throttle settings. It's just as well the bike won't go that fast, because the single disc brake is only saved by the machine's light weight. It feels just great until you have to stop in a hurry, which is when you wish there was an option for a twin-disc front end. The back brake is adequate for sedate stops from sedate speeds too, but no more than that.

All in all, the LS650's real saving graces are its engine potential and its low price. Even at California's 75 pence per gallon gas prices it's cheap to run, returning the equivalent of 50 miles per imperial gallon or 100 miles per tankful. As for the styling, well, it sells in the US of A where pose means cool. And who knows, there might come a day when it works over here. I probably won't be around to see it, but each to their own. For sure that engine would make a great base for a competitor to Honda's XBR500 or Yamaha's SRX600, given a spot of rubber around the engine mounts. ■

## SUZUKI LS650G SAVAGE

Engine.....	DOHC air-cooled 4-stroke single
Bore x stroke.....	94 x 94mm
Capacity.....	652cc
Carburation.....	Mikuni BS40SS
Gearbox.....	4-speed
Electrics.....	12V 12AH battery, 60/55W headlight

## CYCLE PARTS

Tyres.....	IRC
Front.....	100/90-19
Rear.....	140/80-15
Brakes, front.....	Single disc
Brakes, rear.....	Drum
Suspension, front.....	Telescopic oil-damped fork
Rear.....	Twin shock absorbers, 5-way adjustable preload

## DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	58.3ins
Seat height.....	26ins
Dry weight.....	344lbs
Fuel capacity.....	2gals