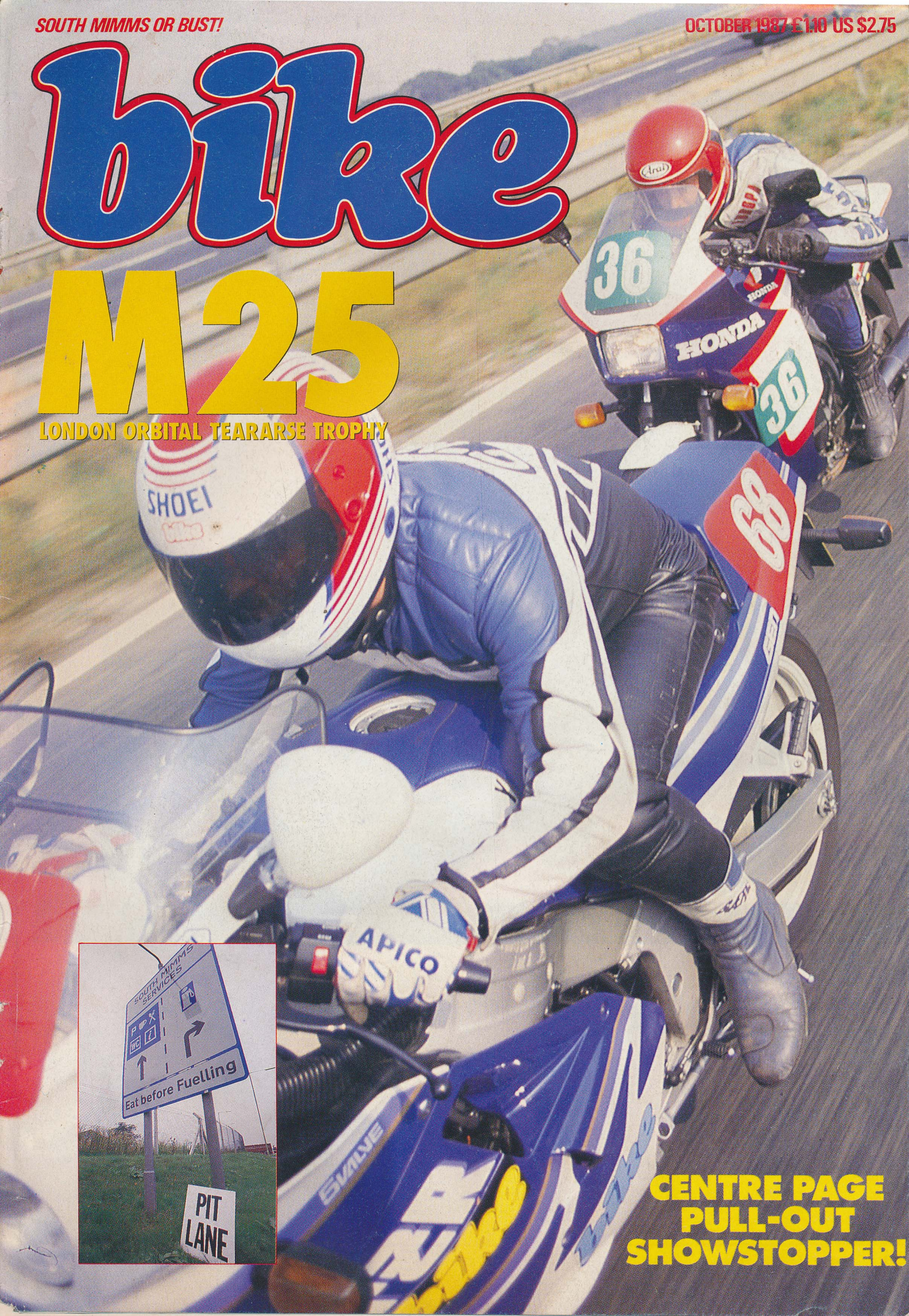


bike

M25

LONDON ORBITAL TEARARSE TROPHY

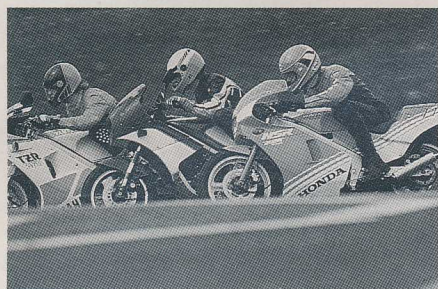


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PULL-OUT
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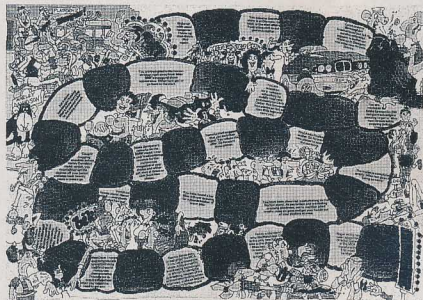


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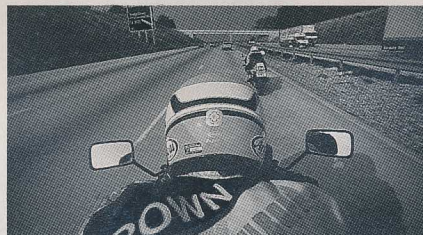
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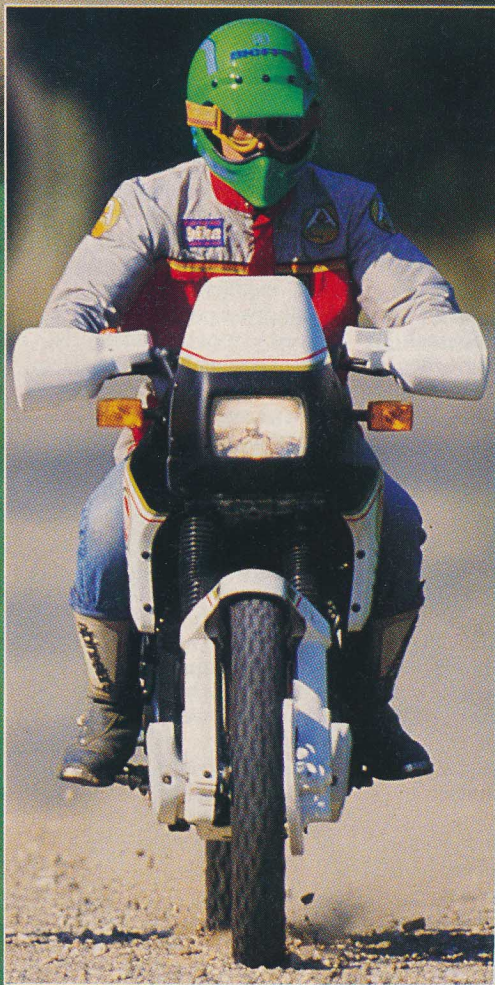
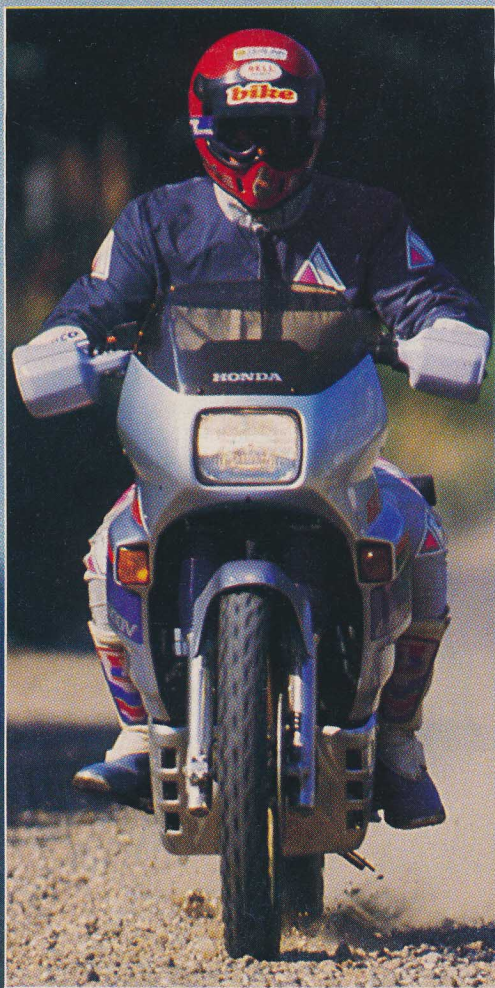
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THE HAN



The largest living all-terrain animals share vee twin motors and project roughly similar profiles. Willis tackles Transalp with Elefant...

When Honda unleashed its large dose of 'rally touring' flannel accompanied by the 600V Transalp, I inserted a few gratuitous sideswipes into a heap of indulgent intellectual jargon and cleared off to subject the motorcycle to a baptism of the mud, blood and obstructive shrubbery of

traditional British trail riding. This wasn't what the Big Aitch's marketing boyos had intended for their new concept bike (which is probably why we did it) but annoyance at the degree of dilapidation inflicted on their formerly pristine test sample was tempered by our honest admission of the Transalp's surprising ability to cope with being treated like a

WINIBAL

SYNDROME



motocrosser in drag.

Several months later, having purloined a long-term-test Transalp from Suspicious Of Chiswick, I was once again up on the pegs without a lump of tarmac in sight, slaloming the bike down a steep and tortuous mountain track in fourth gear, the throttle dead except for an occasional blip to help the front wheel over or round any

particularly monumental pink boulder. I was approximately 1000 miles due south of the last scene of Transalp abuse, sweat saturating my helmet lining and trickling down my back under the rucksack, not from the physical effort of controlling the bike but entirely due to a blazing sun hung in the flawless and brilliant blue dome of a typical

Provençal sky, generating a good 40° Celsius of desperately dry heat. My behaviour was moderated by an intense desire not to damage the bike — because it was the only one I had and I didn't fancy a long-distance jogging holiday in motocross boots — and an even more intense desire not to damage myself, obviously because the thought of Willis

dying of dehydration, alone in a French wilderness with only a few snakes and scorpions to admire his fractures, would have given far too much satisfaction to my many enemies.

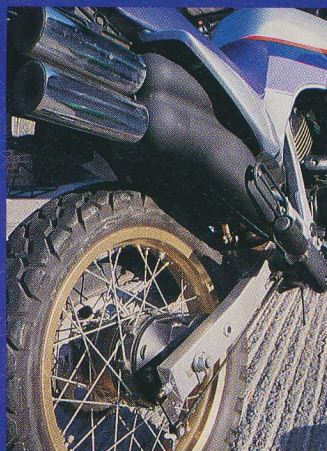
The Transalp had made a red-eyed 12 hour dash from London to Provence via the dubious delights of the French motorway system without giving ▶

THE HANNIBAL SYNDROME

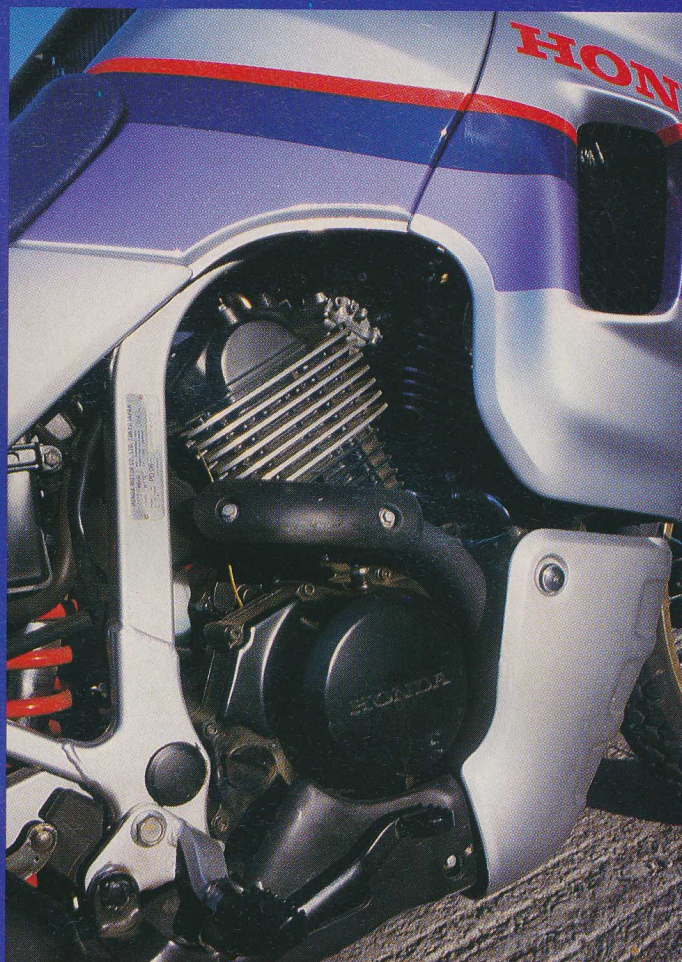
me arseache or using any petrol at all. This might have had something to do with it being parked on the loadbed of the *Bike* truck for the duration of the journey south... Once ensconced on the borders of Vaucluse and Alpes de Haute Provence, though, the pick-up got parked in the shade and forgotten. I adopted much the same attitude to Her Outdoors, who got parked up on the terrace, admiring the Luberon ridge through the rim of a wine glass, oo-la-la-ing and collectivising childcare *en famille* while I disappeared to explore the Transalp's potential for extended rural delinquency and a huge number of far-flung village cafés dispensing the reviving chill of *bière blonde*. I began to understand what civilised 'rally touring' was all about.

Relaxed comprehension didn't last. The Transalp burbled merrily round a blind buttress of that mountain flank to greet a display of just how successfully spring meltwater can demolish a veritable trail motorway. Bowling along about 30mph too fast for the dramatic change in conditions,

I hung onto bike and sphincter control grimly, plunging down a succession of raw rock steps and unreconstituted rubble. Remembering that I had faithfully promised Honda that I wouldn't be doing any of this serious stuff, I somehow stayed on as the bike bucked and leapt its way towards the bottom of the Doa valley and the picturesque wasteland left by two centuries of ochre quarrying, the suspension working above and beyond the



Vast and amazingly quiet *zorst* keeps the anti-noise lobby out of Honda's earholes



Transalp's 583cc lump hides under and behind plastic — don't be conned by the 'alloy' tint of the bashplate!



Provençal poulterer's style council obviously think it's a bit of a turkey, though...

call of duty and every bit of brochure bragging about trick spokes minimising the threat of wheel distortion or collapse being taken at its word. My relief at discovering self and motorcycle the right way up and still rolling as the track levelled out and reverted to the relative luxury of baked earth and frost-shattered stone, aggregated by nature's extremes, was overwhelming. The Transalp, despite its manufacturer's almost embarrassingly modest claims, had underlined its excellence once again.

That incident apart, I was a

In a way, the Transalp's incredible flexibility of handling and general surefootedness are its finest features. It doesn't insist on a specific riding style like most trail bikes. On the road, it can be ridden with a fair crack at scratcher's precision despite having a front wheel five inches greater in diameter than current vogue or it can be flailed around with all the flair of a gung-ho street supercross starlet. The choice is yours... One can only assume that forward weight disposition and steering geometry combine to tame the usual trailie front end



Transalp's well-concealed suspension linkage is part of an extremely efficient pogo package

lot more at risk of needing to proffer Form E111, while reclining in the comfort of a Gallic stretcher, through pushing my luck on the road rather than off it. Access to rough stuff that looked interesting on the map required blitzing miles of twisty and narrow Departmental blacktop and this was just as much fun, with the Transalp in its element.

The bike had arrived wearing Yokohama rubber that seemed generally more consistent than the strange combination of Bridgestone Trailwings on our earlier test victim. The best southern Frog backroads are the ones with bare macadam turning sticky in the sunshine. On these, even Pneumants would probably behave like slicks and the Honda could be ridden off the edge of its tread — and was. Most of the roads, though, collect an often treacherous layer of rolled-in chippings to reflect the sun's heat and make them less susceptible to melting. Hairy slides on the frequent hairpins are a regular ordeal but the Transalp's trailie credentials mean it can be steered with back wheel power, everything hanging loose, probably a lot more accurately than Mamola's GP bike.

tendency to take a terminal walk sideways but, if this is the case, I don't understand why the same front end isn't disastrously heavy and end-prone on the dirt.

Part of it, of course, is that anything with wide bars and a sit-up-and-beg riding position makes working at manhandling and shuffling rider weight (a significant factor in my case!) relatively easy operations. The Transalp's 583cc mill helps too, piling on revs eagerly to give instant relief to the front suspension and the wheel a fighting chance of avoiding a journey to the centre of the earth.

The more I rode it, the fonder I got, although we all have to nag our loved ones and the Transalp deserves constant ear-bashing for its unpleasant high-speed vibration. Nevertheless, however good a motorcycle it actually is, British sales figures have fallen well behind Honda's expectations. This could be blamed on the idiosyncrasies of an island race, seeing as the Germans and French have been snapping them up. Personally, I think it's worth bearing in mind that our continental cousins have had plenty of time to get bored with their flood of Paris-Dakar mucho macho machinery and

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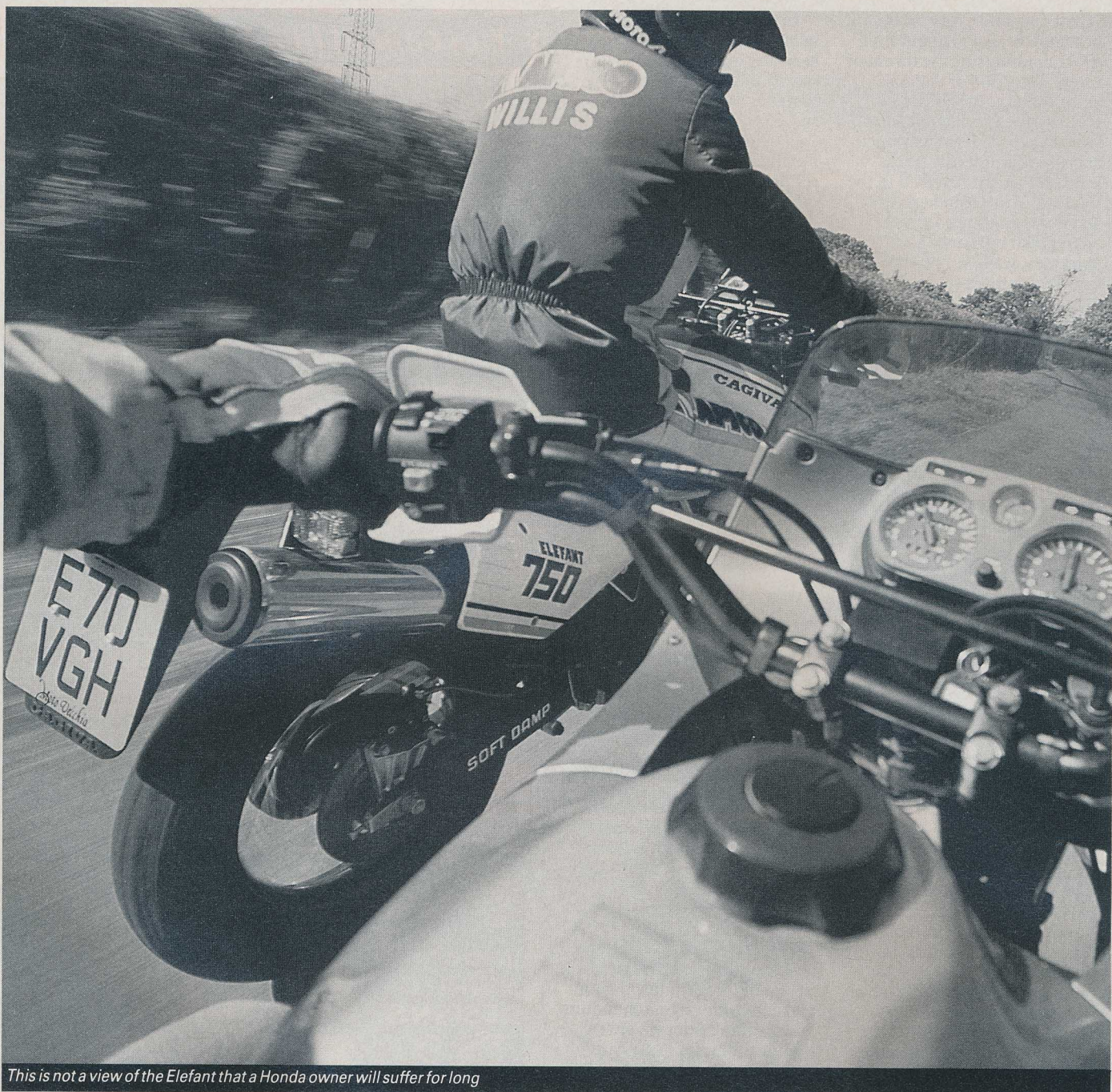
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This is not a view of the Elephant that a Honda owner will suffer for long

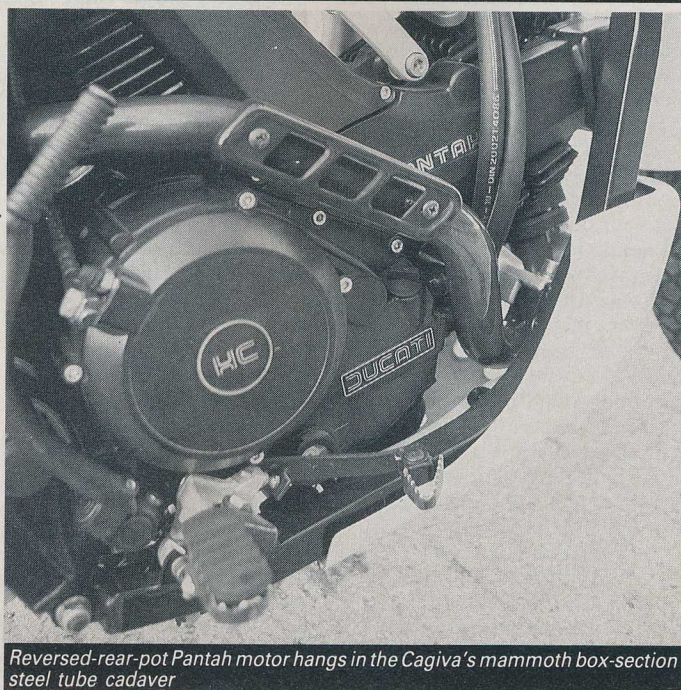
THE HANNIBAL SYNDROME

are game for something a bit different and less poseur-orientated. The Brit market, though, has taken longer to warm to the idea of monster trailies and needs a more aggressive profile than the Transalp can offer. It would be sad if the bike's plump acres of plastic, unsullied by the logos and slogans of high velocity neo-colonialism across Africa, are responsible for condemning it to being the '87 Honda model dealers would like to forget, if only they could sell the ones still bolted to their showroom floors, but as there's no accounting for taste, this may yet be the truth.

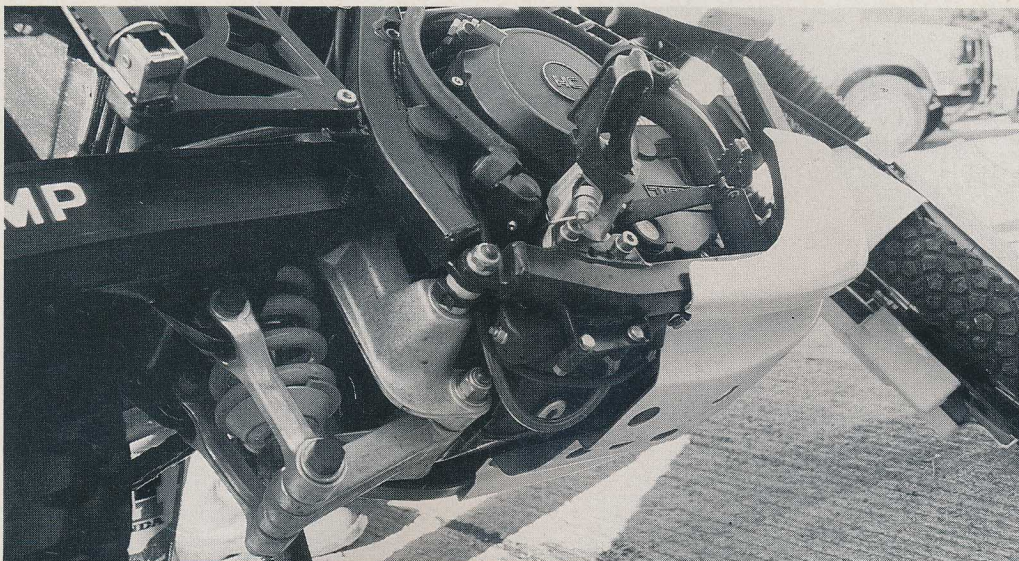
If it is true, then there is a heavy irony to be perceived in that the only other motorcycle

boasting a similar theoretical conception and parallel specification sells in such minute quantities as to elevate the Transalp to gilt-edged stock status on comparative sales charts, despite possessing all the detailed styling subtleties of the bulging-codpiece shitkicker genre that the Honda lacks. The Cagiva 750 Elephant is made by Italians, and Italians still lead the world in expressing pointed masculinity and up-front ego extension through bike design, even if they can't pump up enough financial, technological or developmental muscle to pluck a sparrow without taking a break for lunch.

The Honda Transalp's



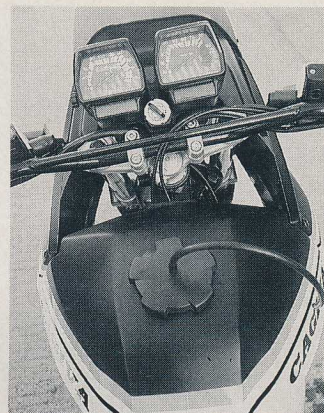
Reversed-rear-pot Pantah motor hangs in the Cagiva's mammoth box-section steel tube cadaver



The yellow (it should have been gold-plated) spring on shock for the fabulously wealthy regular customers of Ohlins helps justify Elefant price tag

silhouette vaguely resembles that company's winning NXR Paris-Dakar bikes but deliberately avoids exploiting victory-strutting 'replica' glad rags. Cagiva, while enjoying considerably less success with their own proto desert sports equipment, cane the glamour angle for all it's worth. The Elefant comes in full 'Lucky Explorer' regalia of Cagiva's main rally sponsor, coffin nail purveyor Lucky Strike. This includes lots of sinister matt black bits and all the dirt poseur peripherals like disc stone guards and stanchion protectors that are entirely superfluous on an urban trailie but vital to the important business of looking dead horny.

And there's no doubt that the 750 Elefant looks, feels and sounds hornier than the Transalp. Its classic air-cooled Ducati engine is in approximately the same state



Lucky Strike's colours-to-cough-by decorate the Cagiva tank behind a fairing skinnier than is healthy

of soft tune as the Paso's but has Bing carbs instead of a twin-choke Weber or the 650 Elefant's Dellortos. Their effect is to dramatically improve low and mid-range torque at the expense of power and outright performance.

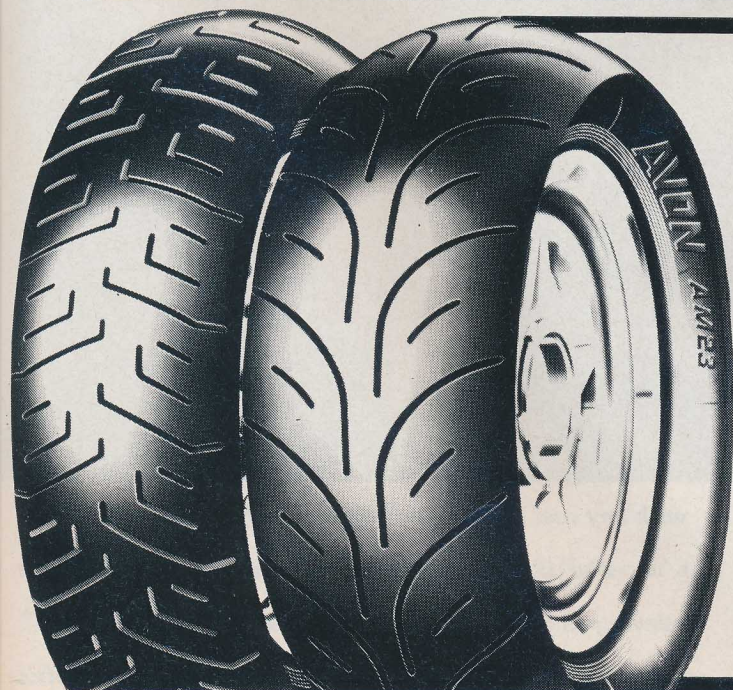
But if it earns street cred brownie points by booming out a satisfactory woofle and has bags of bottom-end grunt, besides all the flash visuals, it's suckered by the Transalp on virtually every practical level. Despite the engine's power characteristics and clearly stated off-road pretension, the Elefant is aptly named - the thing's so front-end heavy (and just plain heavy) that only some wop loonie with a brain stunted by mother fixation would ever consider assaulting even the mildest trail and hope to survive such a guaranteed nightmare. It's really a road bike dressed-up and then it still feels like a bit of a high-rise lorry. . . . Unlike the Transalp, which will happily show its belly pan to the citizenry upon request, the Elefant's obesity and a dry clutch more suited to ▶

Cagiva Elefant Honda Transalp 750 600V

Price.....	£5495	£3099
Importer	Cagiva-Ducati GB Ltd, Petworth Industrial Estate, Petworth, W. Sussex	Honda UK Ltd, Power Rd, London W4
Guarantee	12 months/unlimited mileage	12 months/unlimited mileage (24 months engine- transmission)
Engine	Air-cooled, 4-stroke longitudinal 90° vee twin	Liquid-cooled, six-valve, 4-stroke longitudinal 50° vee twin
Bore x stroke	88 x 61.5mm	75 x 66mm
Capacity	748cc	583cc
Comp ratio	9.3 to 1	9.2 to 1
Carburation.....	2 x 32mm Bing	2 x 32mm VD type
Gearbox.....	5-speed	5-speed
Electrics.....	12V	12V

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres.....	Metzeler Enduro	N/A
Front.....	90/90 x 21	90/90 x 21
Rear	130/80 x 17	N/A
Brakes, front.....	260mm disc, 4-piston caliper	276mm disc. Dual-piston caliper
Rear	240mm disc	130mm SLS drum
Suspension, front	Air-assisted telescopic fork, 210mm travel	41mm Showa telescopic fork, 200mm travel
Rear	Soft Damp rising rate. Preload/damping adj. 195mm travel	ProLink rising rate. Preload adj. 190mm travel



WINNERS

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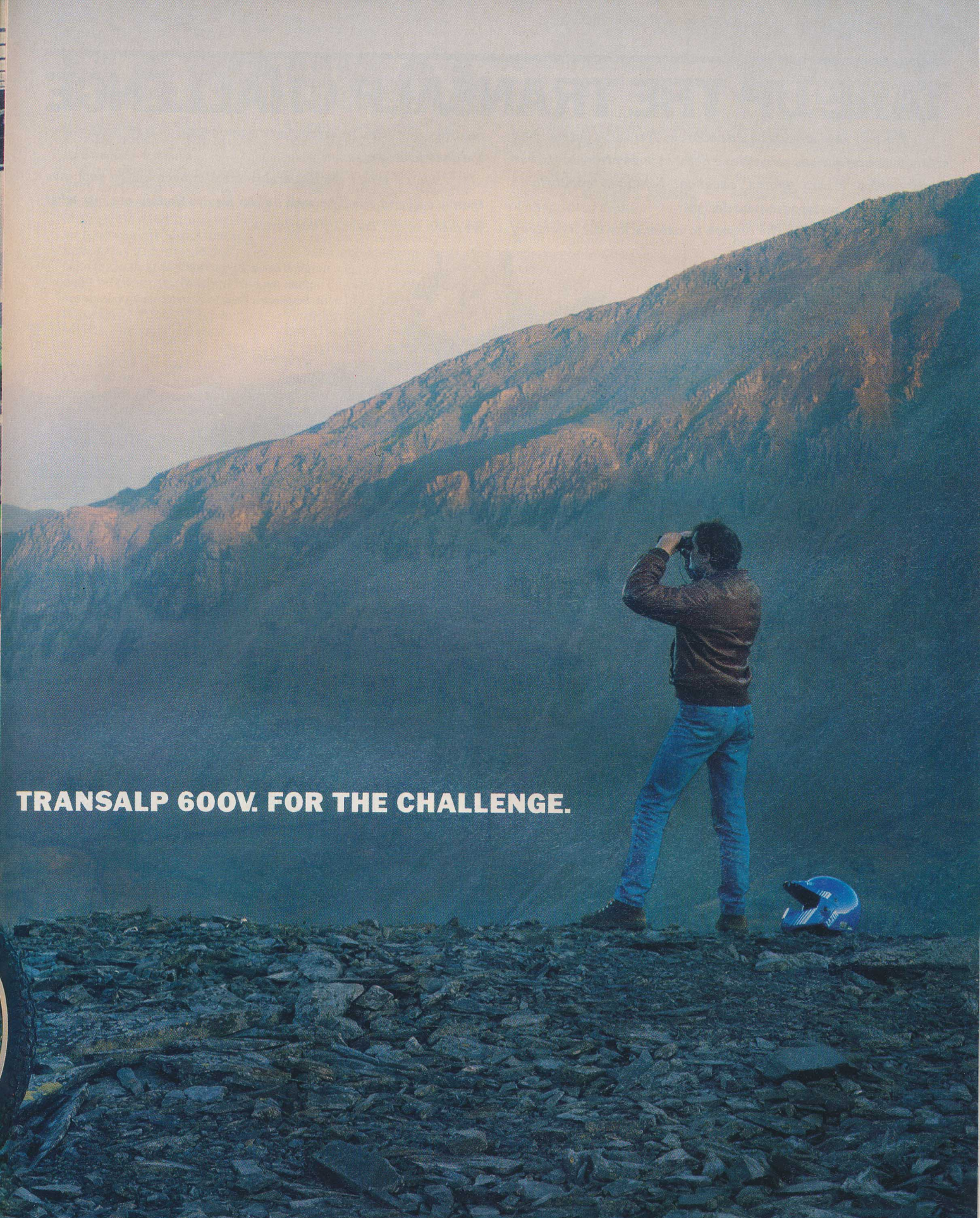
No ordinary bike could be equally at home on the mountain range or cruising down the autobahn.

But then the Transalp is no ordinary bike. Developed from machines specially built for the demanding Paris-Dakar rally, the 600V presents the kind of challenge no one

with any real spirit of adventure could resist.

The flexible 600cc V twin liquid cooled engine allows you to take every kind of terrain in your stride.

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THE HANNIBAL SYNDROME

a road racer also deprive Lounge Bar Luigi of the right to wheelie – it won't.

After dragging the Transalp back from France and after weeks of thrashing it in almost all possible conditions, we weren't exactly happy to only have a day to compare the bikes side by side, but beggars can't be choosers. Without the surgical precision of Roland butchering a dead horse at MIRA, our performance assessments come only from hammering the pair round Hampshire and West Sussex lanes, plus a couple of tame dirt roads. The Cagiva handles alright on the road but doesn't outhandle the Honda. The surprise was that, hacked hard through the gears, the bigger capacity Elephant not only failed to outperform the Transalp but couldn't actually keep up with it.

Paying a cool two and a half grand more than for the Transalp – that's right, knocking on for twice the price – may seem a cruel burden to bear when the vastly cheaper bike will put it in the shade, but there are excuses. That mythical 'Italian exclusivity' is inevitably one of 'em. Some people are prepared to pay a premium for standing apart from the crowd. Another explanation hangs on the odd bit of luxury spec that Cagiva/

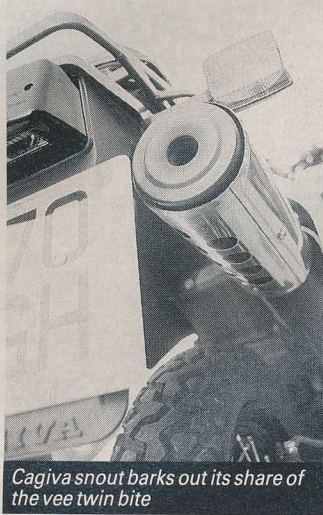
Ducati insert into their bikes, like the Elephant's seriously trick rear shock, a frightfully expensive Ohlins jewel with remote damping adjustment and a rightfully earned competition pedigree as long as a Czechoslovak bread queue.

Although I personally think Cagiva's Elephant has all the image enhancement goodies and pure 'style' that the Transalp lacks, it is also only fair to say that certain aspects of this further undermine the bike's day-to-day usefulness. A complaint against the Honda when we first tested it was should the bike get dropped – an almost inevitable occurrence during off-road excursions –

the fairing was sufficiently bulbous to kiss the deck and kiss its owner off in the direction of an additional excursion to the expensive end of a parts counter. But the inevitable splintering of Transalp ABS needs to be set against the Elephant's triumph of image over usefulness in the frame-mounted fairing department. Both hide radiators – in the Transalp's case we are talking water and the Cagiva's oil – but the Honda plastic functions as realistic rider protection while its Italian brother majors on cosmetic superiority. Another upset is the Elephant's handlebar – the nearest thing to a clip-on riding position while maintaining a pretence of MX cross-braced tiller, conspiring to suck the pilot's weight

inexorably onto the front end.

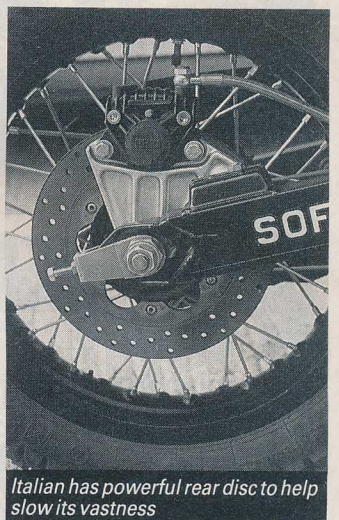
Effectively, the Cagiva Elephant's role in commercial life is to both exaggerate the Transalp's superiority and stress its weaknesses. This is tough on both bikes. Perhaps the real lesson is that Honda should ask the Castiglioni brothers to set up a rent-a-stylist service or give their home-grown variety free rein without the imposition of dodgy long-term marketing strategies. Conversely, it's about time Cagiva, ostensibly the most forward-thinking of European manufacturers, pirated some slant-eyed R&D chaps and production engineers, never mind accountants to replace the current crop who come up with a straight price and then add an extra nought . . . ■



Cagiva snout barks out its share of the vee twin bite



Metzeler dual-purpose 'enduro' boot does heavy goods duty



Italian has powerful rear disc to help slow its vastness



Like all big trailies, though, both bikes perform at their very best when pilots are safely ensconced in or near licensed premises, bragging about double jumps they've known and loved . . .