

## SUZUKI SP400

# BUSINESSMAN'S TRAIL BUDDY

*Twice Around The Loop, Then Home, Jimmie!*

**By the Dirt Bike Staff**



We've got to admit, when we first took a look at the 1980 Suzuki SP400, we were stricken. Not with awe, and not with fear. It was more of a curiosity trip. Could this gorgeous hunk of metal actually withstand the abuse of off-road riding, or would all of its nifty chrome attachments snap off like the buttons on a JC Penney \$2.95 shirt?

These were fair questions, though. If you gazed upon the outer extremities of the Suzuki, you could instantly detect the overwhelming design for street purposes which has been incorporated into the SP. Chrome from front to rear. From the shock springs, to the handlebars and both rims. And as for those

bars, they don't even have a cross-bar. The blinkers are another sore spot for the SP. They are not the rubber units of the TS line, but chromed rods that are just itching to be snagged on a branch and bent into a fishhook.

If the SP were to be categorized, it would have to be put in the "Businessman" class. It looks like something you would find a brownshoe riding in to the office on, then occasionally taking out onto a smooth fireroad for some entertainment away from the stock market. All of the cosmetics point to the pavement rather than the trail, with the exception of the leading-axle front forks and the spiked footpegs.

### **First Impressions**

The first time we hit the trail with the SP, the only thing we thought that it could handle was some easy fireroads. So, that's all we took it on for the first day. What we were surprised with was how mellow the engine was. The 396cc four-stroke pulled very smoothly all through the range, without any sudden surges or explosions of power. It was a nice torquey motor, with a bottom end that would pull every gear at slow speeds without stalling. It was happy motoring up and down the fireroads, not giving any complaint at loafing up a hill at low rpm, or charging up the next, screaming.



As for the handling, the SP took the roads all in stride. The trials tires on both ends left a bit to be desired in some of the climbs and fast, sliding turns, and there is really no excuse for Suzuki not putting the claw action units on this motorcycle. The suspension was very soft, but not plush. It can take the light abuse of an easy fireroad comfortably, with no hopping or skittering around.

With the success we had the first day with the SP, we got a little more curious as to just what else this machine could do. All of the psychological deterrents of the chrome accessories began to fade away, and we headed for a little back-country cowtrailing in the hills. Beginning with easy to moderate trails, the SP was rolling fine. It didn't give the fighting feeling that the TS250 did when turning tightly or scooting up a little grade. But, again, the tires made it very difficult to fully enjoy the ride.

When we hit the rough loop with the SP, we found the bike's limits. The suspension cannot handle harsh bumps.

They go right through the bike and have to be absorbed by the rider, and the overall mass of machine is readily felt. The tires didn't even stand a chance, and all of the rigid chrome accessories began to bend as they were careened off of branches and rocks. Oh well, it would have been too good to be true, anyway.

### SUZUKI SP400 Specifications

ENGINE TYPE	Single-cylinder, four-stroke, S.O.H.C.
BORE AND STROKE	88x65.2mm
DISPLACEMENT	396cc
CARBURETION	Mikuni 36mm
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	2.2 gallons (8.5 liters)
LUBRICATION	Wet sump
TRANSMISSION	Five-speed, constant mesh
GEARING, FRONT/REAR	17/23
IGNITION	PEI
WHEELBASE	(1375mm) 54.1 inches
GROUND CLEARANCE	(255mm) 10 inches
STEERING HEAD ANGLE	32 degrees
WEIGHT (CLAIMED)	(105 Kg) 231 pounds
INTENDED USE, MFR.	Street/trail
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Japan
PRICE (APPROX. RETAIL)	\$1639
DISTRIBUTOR	

U.S. Suzuki  
13767 Freeway Dr.  
Santa Fe Springs, California 90670

As for how the SP works out on the street, this is questionable. The bike is fine for short hops, but the low off-road gearing limits the top end considerably. On the highway, some taller gearing will be necessary, as the 17/23 front and rear sprockets aren't enough. The trials tires can't stand the rain grooves in the freeway, and the saddle is hard and uncomfortable. The one amazing thing about the SP, and the best reason to buy one for the street, is that we got 70, yes, seventy miles to the gallon. Although the 2.2-gallon tank is quite small, the range is acceptable with all of that distance from every gallon of petrol.

### Bits and Pieces

There are some little things on the SP that make it work off-road almost as well as it does on. If you'll recall the test on the TS250 Suzuki (June 1980), we said that the bike felt real heavy in the turns. With the SP, you'd expect a longer, heftier bike, but in actuality it is an inch shorter at the wheelbase, and weighs an incredible 40 pounds less.

One very strange thing you'll notice while aboard the SP, is that it's one of the few bikes where you can actually see the fork legs down alongside the wheel, while looking down from above the gas tank. The thin tank allows for this, and it can also give you a psychological advantage of thinking that you're actually turning tighter than you really are.

As for the bars and levers, everything is very comfortable, and the dog-leg levers are easy to grab and pull in. The speedo and tach are easy to read, but they don't come equipped with built-in lights, so night viewing is impossible without street lights all over the place.

### Final Loop

While the SP400 looks like Bob's Business Machine, it's got a lot more to it than just the chrome and cosmetics. It works for the occasional cow-trailer, and with its 70-mile-per-gallon range, it will take you a long way between gas stops. But there are a few things that will make it an even better bike. Claw action tires are a must, along with some higher gearing. If you could put a set of rubber-mounted blinkers on the Suzuki, then you wouldn't need the rubber mallet so much after a tough trail or two; and finally, if you can tell yourself that the bike will go somewhere other than the smoothest fireroads, you'll have some good ole four-strokin' fun with the SP400. □