

**MCM
Road Test**

Suzuki SP370



**If you want to dig dirt, do it by four-stroke.
John Robinson tries Suzuki's town and country stump-puller.**

SUZUKI'S LATEST dual purpose bike had a lot going for it before the machines even reached the UK. The SP370 has a compact, four-stroke, single cylinder engine, kept simple with a single camshaft and the whole machine has a tidy, functional appearance which looks right.

People seem to like four-stroke singles, for a whole variety of reasons. It could be simple nostalgia. It may be simply that they are different in a world where small pistons prevail. They can give very good fuel economy and they nearly always give better traction in slippery, off-road conditions. Whatever the reason, they are popular and Suzuki have obviously seen a good opportunity to cash in on this public acclaim.

A quick glance through the SP's specification gives even more encouraging evi-

dence of the bike's potential. The claimed dry weight, at 274lb, is 6lb lighter than the KL250 which in turn was deliberately made a shade lighter than the original XL250. So the Suzuki beats that, plus all the promise of more power and more flexibility from its bigger engine.

Comparing upwards it appears to be smaller, neater and more manageable than the XT500. The Suzuki is offering the ideal compromise; more off-road plonkability with less weight, more street performance with comfort and refined handling from the long-ish travel suspension.

If you had to set down and make a list of all the good or desirable qualities in today's trail and commuter bikes, and then average them out into a single machine, you'd probably come up with something close to Suzuki's specification.

My first rides on the SP370 seemed to confirm that they'd got it just about right. There seemed to be very little which could be changed to give any further advantage to the owner. My only reservation, for off-road riding, was that the motor didn't have a lot of ground clearance.

After riding it in a variety of conditions, ranging from wet tarmac to wet mud, my opinion is pretty much the same. The ground clearance could be better and the 370 also needs handlebars which are as robust as the rest of the bike.

I spent a week riding the Suzuki on ordinary roads before I got a chance to try the new motor off-road. My first reaction to it was a simple, "I want one". For general running about, travelling in to work, and so on, it was hard to find fault with the Suzuki. It was comfortable with

an easy spread of power plus handling and brakes which were well up to contemporary standards. Agility is always a good point with trail bikes and in tight spaces the 370 could be wriggled around like a 125. But as soon as a gap opened up the motor had enough acceleration to make use of it. It got away from traffic with no trouble and was easily capable of main road, long distance cruising.

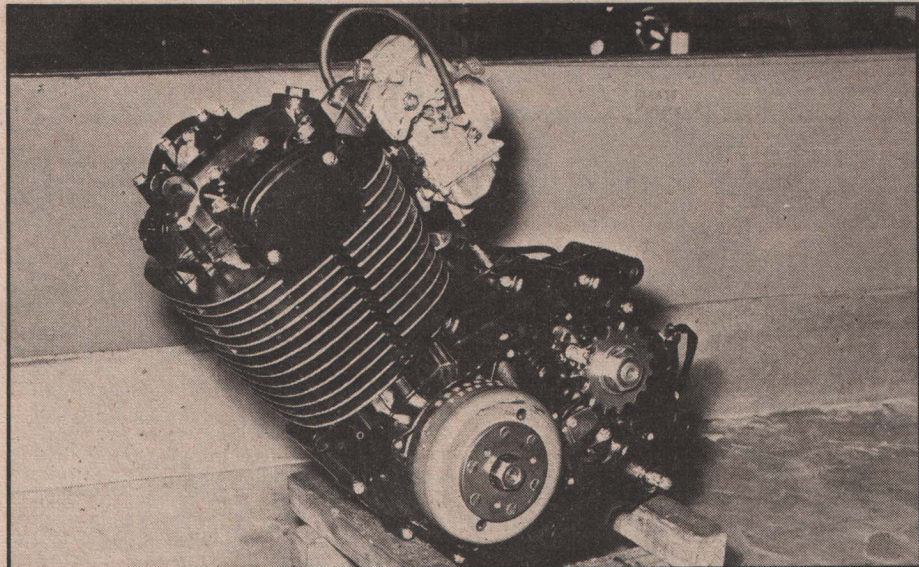
This is where it showed its biggest advantage over most other trail bikes. It could function as a true roadster with its ability to cover long runs without (a) boring the rider silly, or (b) screaming the motor to pieces. A top speed of around 85mph puts 60 to 70mph cruising well within the engine's comfortable range, marred only by a tingling vibration at 60mph. This benefit of a slightly bigger engine also pays off in the Suzuki's role as trail bike; the rider isn't confined to local trails or complicated arrangements involving trailers or trains. The Suzuki will get out to where the interesting trails are quite comfortably under its own steam.

Fuel economy — another potential advantage of this kind of engine — wasn't amazingly good but at least it was consistent. The SP varied between 58 and 63mpg and it didn't seem to matter how it was used. I ride bikes basically to get the maximum enjoyment from them and, with the exception of the 1200 Harley-Davidson, fuel economy rarely comes into this. I adjust my riding behaviour to suit the way the bike responds, but for each model we test I make a conscientious effort for at least one tankful, to ride economically. The Suzuki's response was barely measurable, it obviously disliked the idea as much as I did. On the other hand it could be belted nearly flat out along a motorway or run hard in first and second gears while we all made fools of ourselves in a muddy wood — and the fuel consumption still didn't change a lot.

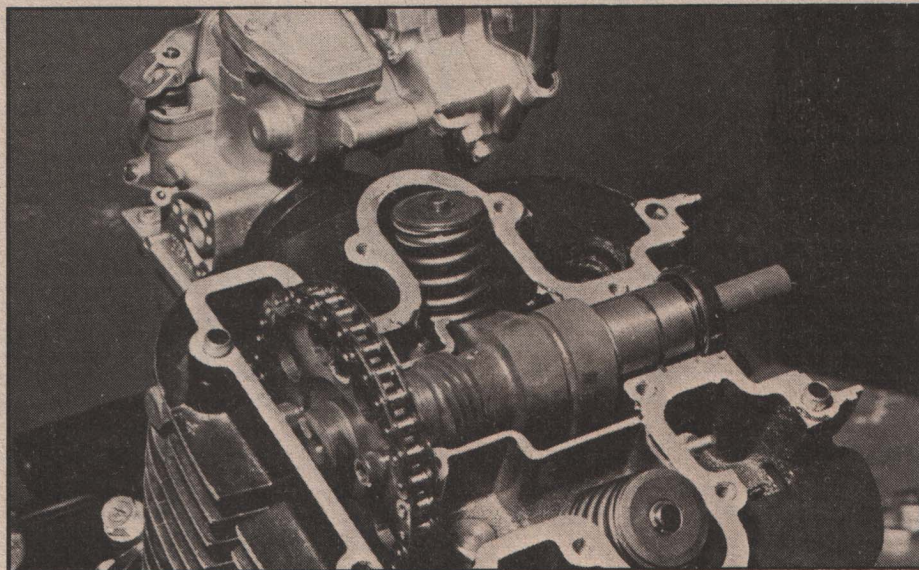
The tank takes just under two gallons, and leaving reserve in reserve, you could look for a range of about 90 miles. It's better than most trail bikes but it still leaves 30 or 40 miles to be desired.

Starting — the big single's potential drawback — didn't seem to be a problem. Like the Yamaha, the 370 has a little window in the cam box and it arrived with explicit instructions on how to ensure a first time fire-up. Having nudged it over compression the starter meets some more resistance, at which point a chromed screw head appears in the window. Assuming everything is switched on you are now ready to leap into the air and descend upon the kickstart with a mighty swing, reminding yourself not to twiddle with the twistgrip. This method was pretty infallible for cold starts and the only times it didn't fire up first go were when I didn't get a good, confident swing on the starter. Hot starting was slightly more problematical; the engine seemed to want about one-third throttle and it didn't much matter where the engine was set, in fact it responded better when the kickstart was pumped at random.

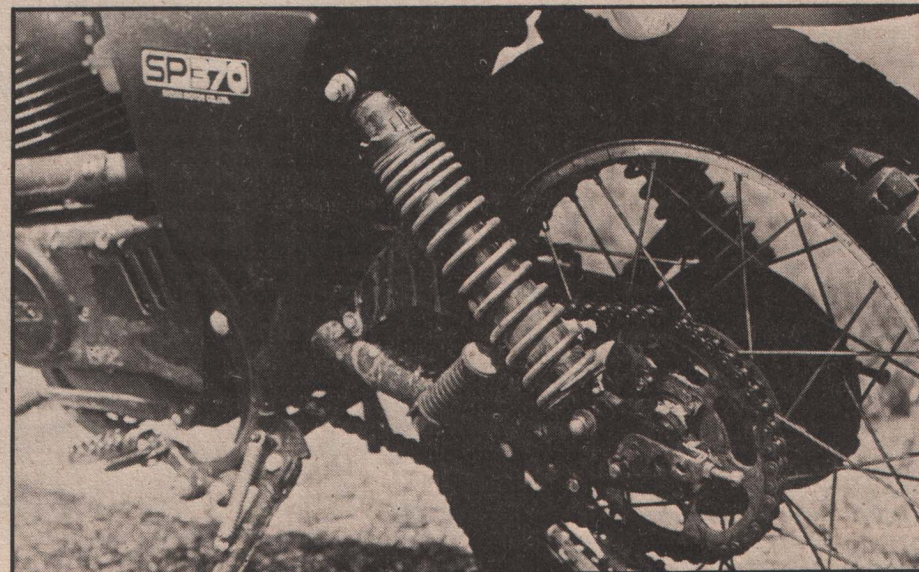
It warmed up quickly and cleanly, although this was at the height of summer which must have been worth a degree or two Fahrenheit if not Centigrade. From there it would chug off combining the imperious thumping of the old BSA singles



Compact: the 370 single makes a neat, small package.



OHC drive. The valve rockers are carried inside the cover.



De Carbon gas-oil shocks gave a good ride on and off-road.

Suzuki SP370

with the slick controls and rubber-mounted gadgetry which refuses to fall off that's typical of all Japanese bikes. The motor won't take a lot of throttle below 3,000 but when it does decide to accept a fully open carb it steps right on to peak torque. At 4,000 it's pulling as much as it ever will and the engine load goes into a steady decline. The horsepower takes a long time to catch up, finally peaking at 7,500rpm, a little way over 20bhp. It gives what were classic performance curves before the Japanese started making motorcycles.

It feels more impressive on the road than it did on the test bed. The engine is obviously in a very soft state of tune and although the torque comes in on a downhill slope with its peak in the first half of the 8000rpm rev range, it gives just the sort of pulling power you want in slippery conditions.

The performance may be gentle but the throttle response is crisp and the gearing is low; the 370 will stand up on its back wheel just as easily as the peaky two-strokes. With this kind of machine, a soft engine and a fairly heavy chassis, the way it handles will define just how adaptable the bike will be.

Handling

I am always surprised by how well trail bikes handle on tarmac — especially as their tyres are designed to do little more than meet ACU trials regulations. The SP370 was no exception and stuck to the road like somebody had told it had to. Physically it was quite comfortable, the seat, the handlebar arrangement, the suspension all played their part to give the Suzuki a relaxed ride. The de Carbon gas-oil rear shocks needed to be set on the softest pre-load as the units were obviously meant to deal with the heavier loadings of off-road bumps and jumps. They certainly kept the back wheel under fairly rigid control and the machine steered through bends precisely, it was light to flick through from one side to the other and, unlike many trail and enduro models, there was no great tendency to wobble or weave at higher speed.

Once again, it was hard to fault the Suzuki's behaviour but there remained some undefinable niggle — somehow it didn't feel right, or, to be more accurate, I suppose it was me who didn't feel right. The bike obviously had the capabilities

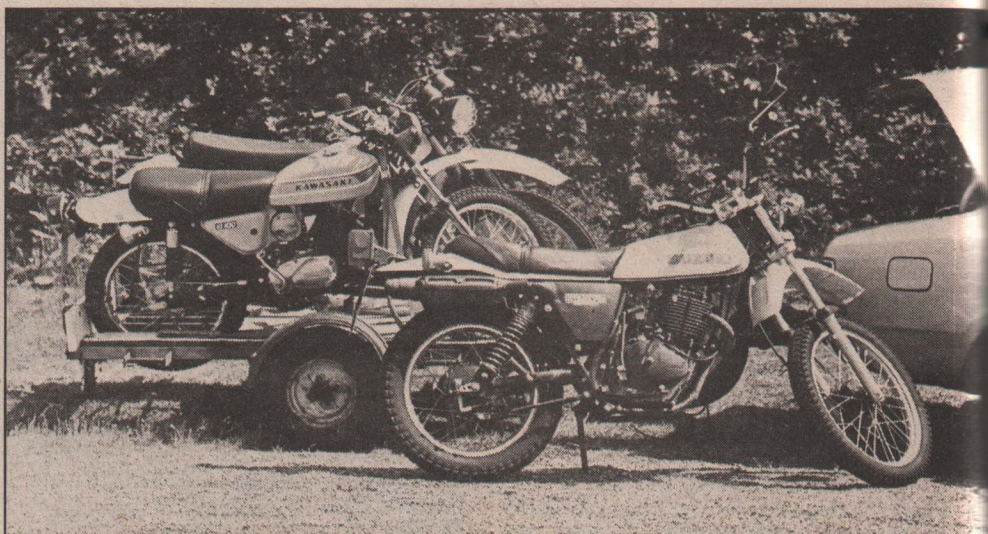
and I felt that I wasn't using them. For a street/dirt compromise the Suzuki was looking pretty good; performance, comfort and handling were all there, plus the ability to get out where the trails are, for the all-round, all-purpose machine, the 370 had it made.

We took it off-road — probably not to the best location for the full extent of the bike's abilities — and the problem I had felt before showed up in strength. I came to the conclusion that the riding position wasn't quite right. The angles were all wrong, the Suzuki was difficult to control in places where it should have been easy. Looking at the bike later, I think that the footrests need to go further back and probably higher up. It sounds trivial but we've noticed before, particularly on our competition bikes where we've been able to chop and change things around, that when you get a riding position that fits, it all suddenly clicks into place. The bike feels better, the handling seems to improve, you get more confidence and what starts off as an *apparent* improve-

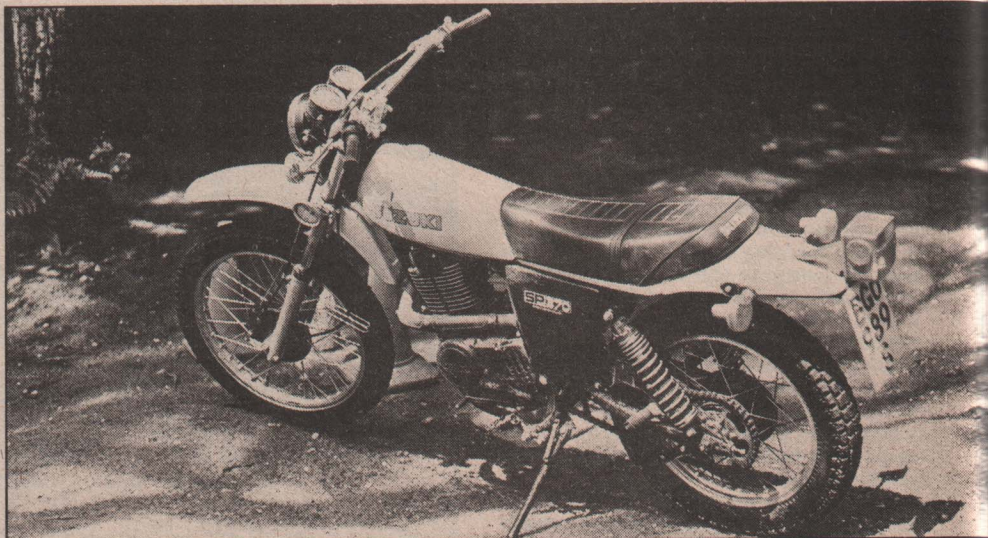
ment turns into a real and measurable change in the machine's behaviour.

We'd taken some bike to a training ground run by Warley Sports Centre, a woodland course with lots of wet, muddy slopes and slippery tree roots. At least it would give the four-stroke a chance to prove its tractive abilities. The first laps were the biggest struggle of all, exploring both the course and the Suzuki, I was trying to plonk along in first and second gears and not getting on too well. Later, when I was able to hook it up into third, its behaviour improved no end. One problem was that it would slide away quickly — as bikes will if the ground is slippery enough — but as the steering and throttle were corrected it would come back into line so rapidly it was forever trying to high-side me.

It was worse at low speeds — on the quicker stretches the Suzuki stabilised itself noticeably and was much more pleasant to ride. With a bit of momentum it was also easy to drive up slippery slopes and find traction. The low-speed handling



The Suzuki's strong point — it doesn't need a trailer to get out into the wilds.



Functional lines make the 370 a good-looker but it would benefit from more detailed attention.

was made worse by the harsh transmission. Although there is a cush drive inside the rear hub, switching from over-run to power caused snatching and this, coupled with poor throttle response made for a jerky drive.

The Suzuki doesn't have a particularly tight turning circle but the throttle and drive problem made it difficult to ride the bike in full-lock, feet-up circles. It also made slow corners in the wet more of a problem than they need have been because the drive would come in suddenly and unpredictably.

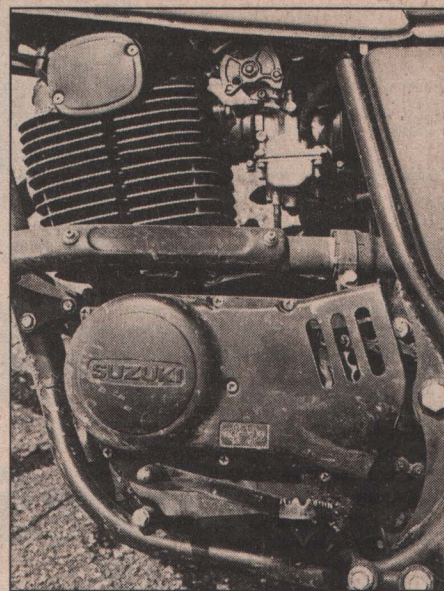
Bent bars

The bike fell over a few times during the off-road session, each time below 10mph, yet each time the handlebars got bent inwards and had to be straightened. This isn't an unusual experience for a trail bike and obviously handlebar braces do serve some purpose, so it's hard to see why Suzuki chose to omit one on their machine.

The only other flaw was the lack of ground clearance — considerably less than that of a Yamaha DT175MX which we also took along — although it didn't cause any real problems. Probably on the more open spaces of the moors or Salisbury Plain the 370 would have been much more at home — the tight, nadjery, Essex woodland was not the best place for the Suzuki to show off its abilities.

All in all, the SP370 has got a lot going for it. As a compromise trail bike it works pretty well, as a street commuter it delivers without any fuss and as a more serious dirt bike there's plenty of potential. It would benefit from some closer attention to detail.

The deciding factor for a would-be buyer is the price: instead of comparing it directly with the other four-stroke trail bikes, I'd be inclined to look at the alternatives. On the dirt bike scene, your £825 is getting very close to the price of some serious enduro machinery; for road use it could buy you a lot more performance than the 370 has to offer.



Performance & specification

ENGINE

SOHC, single cylinder, single Mikuni VM32SS carburettor, contact breaker and coil ignition, wet sump lubrication, 6V 100W generator, 6V 4 Ah battery.
 displacement..... 369 cc
 bore x stroke..... 85 x 65.2 mm
 compression ratio..... 8.9:1
 claimed output: 25 bhp at 7,500 rpm

CHASSIS

front tyre..... 3.00 x 21 Inoue
 rear tyre..... 4.00 x 18 Inoue
 wheelbase..... 55.9 in
 castor..... 58 deg
 trail..... 5.74 in
 overall length..... 86.6 in
 overall width..... 33.3 in
 fuel tank..... 1.9 gal
 dry weight..... 271 lb

PARTS PRICES inc VAT

front mudguard..... 11.42
 speedo cable..... 1.38
 handlebar..... 7.54
 exhaust system..... 46.22

£ piston and ring set..... 21.01
 contact breaker points..... 3.42
 list price..... 825
 warranty..... six months or 10,000 miles
 Importer: Heron Suzuki, 87 Beddington Lane, Croydon, Surrey.

TRANSMISSION

Gear primary drive to five-speed gearbox, final drive by chain.
 primary reduction..... 3.045
 final reduction..... 2.800
 overall gear ratios: 22.48; 14.92; 11.04; 8.53; 6.98

MAX SPEED		SS¼ mile	speed in gears at 8,000 rpm				
85 mph		n/a	1st 28	2nd 44	3rd 57	4th 70	5th 85
Fuel consumption				oil used	brakes from 30 mph		
best 63 mpg	worst 57 mpg	average 60 mpg	range to reserve 90 miles			nil	30 feet

HOW IT COMPARES

model	price £	max speed	av mpg	SS¼	bhp*
Suzuki SP370	825	85	60	n/a	21.4
Suzuki GS400C	850	101	63	15.5	33
Kawasaki KL250	699	80	63	18	16.6
Yamaha XS400	870	106	51	14.6	33
Yamaha XT500	940	83	56	16.4	25.8

