

MIDDLE-CLASS

**Yamaha's new
XJ600 promises to
set the standard
for middleweights.
Can it hack it
against the
Zephyr 500?
Or is the XV535
the way to go in
this class?**

**MICK MATHESON
has the story;
PHIL AYNLEY
got the photos.**

WE'RE a couple of hundred kays from home on the last day of this comparo and I'm working the 550 Zephyr hard, hounding the heels of the Seca II piloted by Stuart Kennedy. Sixteen kilometres of tight bends ahead and I'm hungry to get past him.

Swoop in long and low, watching the leading Yamaha's pegs gently nick the tar. (I wonder how Robbie Thompson's going? Probably grinding away more Virago footpeg way behind us.) This is no easy task; the XJ steers so sweetly I have to use every bit of road knowledge

to keep up. And it has the grunt out of corners, too, despite a mere 50-cc advantage.

Suddenly the road opens up. Overtaking lane, too. Go, Zephyr, go! Side by side as the road narrows to one lane again, drawing us in to a fast left-hander. Kennedy's eyes meet mine: psych time. I decide to play the game to eight-tenths — fun is one thing but I'm not into stupidity. Kennedy goes to seven-tenths and I win. Ha.

Minutes later we're stopped, waving and gesturing after the dash. A big grin and wave from the passing Virago prove



KAWASAKI ZEPHYR 550 vs YAMAHA XV535 VIRAGO

STANDARDS

Thompson has had his share of the fun – and was not far behind at any time.

After 2000 km we all agreed on at least one thing: we'd had a ball. The bikes proved quite different to each other but packed more fun than their 500-600 cc might suggest. "There is life under 750 cc," quipped Kennedy.

In fact, if Yamaha had thrown the Seca my way without any introduction, I'd have looked at it and said it was smaller than its 600 cubes and then gone for a ride to come back and proclaim it a 750. Maybe not a 750 like the great water-cooled marvels available in the

\$10,000-plus category but certainly a big-bore to suit its 'standard motorcycle' tag. Out on the open road it smoothly whirred along in top, ready to ease past slower traffic without a downchange. A 110-km/h cruise puts you just above 5000 rpm, 1000 above the point the Yamaha starts to make good power and another 1000 or so short of where it gives a second kick before winding through to redline at 9500 rpm. With its impressive, seemingly-flat torque curve, this machine has the sort of mid-range others would kill for. It has the top-end advantage over the others, too,

and would match the 535's V-twin bottom end.

Kawasaki's 550 pulls the same top-gear overall ratio as the Seca, at about 21.5 km/h/1000 rpm. And it delivers its (estimated) peak torque 1000 rpm lower, at 5000. But this torque figure is only 40 Nm, compared to the Seca's 55.4. There's no obvious on-road indication of the Seca's extra 6.8 kW compared to the Zephyr but the fact the Seca is producing its 44.8 kW 1500 rpm below the Zephyr's peak of 10,000 really shows, with the Zephyr having to wind its willing tacho needle closer to redline ►





to keep up. Doing the gear-lever shuffle becomes second nature, Seca or no Seca . . . the 550 doesn't belie its capacity as the XJ600 does.

Meanwhile, there's the Virago. None of us expected a lot from it in this company, which is why we did a double take when it rolled slowly away from the Zephyr in top-gear roll-ons up to 120 km/h! At 140 the Zephyr wound itself up enough to begin propelling into the

"The 550 doesn't belie its capacity as the XJ600 does."

lead again but we invariably ran out of road by then — with the Seca already lengths away.

Mind you, this particular Kwaka was beginning to show signs of a hard life in the test fleet. Symptoms developed, indicating a sick bike: camchain slack, smoke-puffs on the overrun and, later in the test, a notable loss of top-end urge. I honestly don't know if someone, somewhere, has abused this bike, but engine wear after less than 8000 km is not the sort of thing you'd expect of a well-treated bike. Anyway, this could have been working against it in the roll-ons.

All of them pulled to an indicated 180 km/h top whack. Yep, even the 535 . . . downhill and tucked in. It's what you might call an irrelevant detail, of course. The 535 and Seca sing along at legal speeds, relaxed and willing. Lack of mid-range is the Zephyr's drawback here.

The Kawasaki surprised in comfort. Without a doubt the footpegs are too rearsert but you get used to it. And the slight forward lean they force made up for the lack of fairing when speeds rose. It was a shock to find the seat quite adequate for a few hours on the

highway. The Virago is great, more so for shortarcs because the footpegs-seat-bars layout is fairly close. Vibes set in from 100 km/h but they're not annoying.

But the easy winner here was the XJ600. A wide, high-density-foam seat, good footpeg placement and well-set handlebars showed just how much thought the jockeys at Yamaha have put into their new baby. Its touring comfort would do BMW's ergonomics team proud. With the exception of a vibration patch from 4-4500 rpm, it's much smoother than the others — brilliant in the 100-130 km/h zone.

The XJ's screen creates a bubble of almost perfectly still air to easily crouch down behind in sports fashion but up higher it makes for a turbulent ride. Both Thompson and Kennedy liked it, though, and voted it far better than the Zephyr's breezy ride. To me, being taller (185 cm), it was the one disappointment on the XJ.

For millions, the Virago's a joke, the Zephyr's only for understanding friends but the Seca's a real gem: a genuine seat, better-than-average footpeg positioning and great grab rails. Amazing. You really can tour two-up on it.

Rocketing along a back road at speed, we checked out the new Yamaha's abilities on a typically rough country route. Once again the Virago had receded but the Zephyr was up there in the running. Both the four-cylinder bikes are pretty basic in the chassis department but outshone themselves here. The general limit their handling imposed was 140 km/h over neglected roads but they'd be pushed faster.

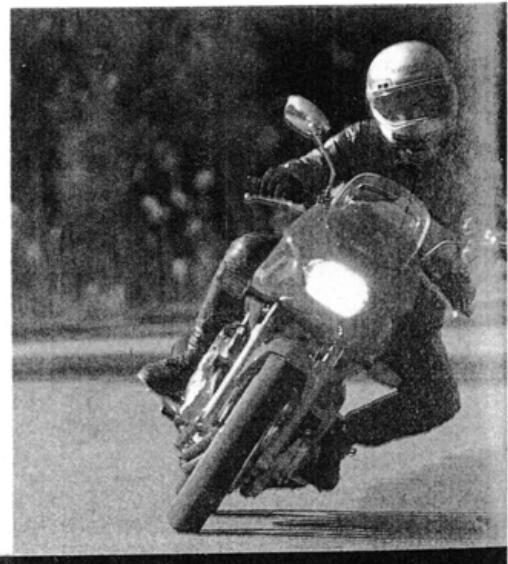
The respective handling was as different as their power deliveries. The Seca sometimes hinted at tyre and/or fork flex (forks are 38-mm units but seem a bit spindly) and always giving

that roly-poly ride of soft, long-travel suspension. But work up trust in its ability and it inspires confidence. A couple of times the rear end was bounced skyward but never dramatically.

The Zephyr was world's apart, exuding the assurance of its sporting cousin, the ZXR750, thanks to the remarkably stiff chassis. We expected tanksplatters but got no more than a few little wiggles from the 'bars. We expected poor suspension performance but were thrilled to find the rear end good and the front not overwhelmed despite lack of both spring and damping firmness.

Reflecting the long-standing tradition for custom-style motorcycles, the Virago is basically badly suspended. Too hard in its short-travel rear, too soft up front. The front is fine to live with but the rear units, even on the softest setting, pound the kidneys on bumpy roads.

The Seca's single non-rising-rate rear suspension unit is adequate but, like the Virago, only has spring pre-load adjustment. The damping rates were a little soft for hard riding on bad roads but, as Kennedy said, if you want a \$10,000 shock buy a \$10,000 motorcycle. The trouble is, the \$6000 Zephyr gets pre-load, rebound damping



and compression damping adjustments. We had them set on the minimum compression setting, number two rebound and the second or third pre-load notch which was comfortable, controlled and didn't upset the front.

With the Seca set on three or four for pre-load, the ride was fairly comfortable and handled the bumps but occasionally got out of synch on fast, bumpy sweepers. You'd feel it transfer the reaction to the front end but we never coaxed a fright from it.

Ah, but the Seca steers beautifully. Quick, responsive and effortless. Predictably, the Virago is ponderous through corners. In turn, the Zephyr is good and can be chucked around to your heart's content but ridden back-to-back with the Seca you notice it is slower, takes effort to pitch in and then won't respond nearly as well to mid-corner input. Aboard the Seca, if you spot a bump, steer around it — simple as that. At the limit, the Zephyr will understeer, threatening the front-end washout mentioned earlier. The Zephyr might have the suspension and chassis to just pip the XJ600 but the latter's steering prowess helps make it the choice on the open road.

Unless, of course, you're into the slow swinging of choppers like the Virago. It needs to be set up before a corner to get a good run through. You start using the footpegs to help out, too, pushing down either side to correct a line.

You also learn to avoid scraping the pegs on bumpy bends because once they fold up far enough the road is only going to bite into the more solid footpeg hangers, working up to a potential slide down the blacktop. The other problem for Virago punters is the tyres, Bridgestone Mag Mopuses. They didn't earn their Mag Hopeless nickname by accident. And you thought the days of piss-poor original equipment tyres were over . . .

Both the Zephyr and Seca could push their rear tyres beyond grip on a tight road but always controllably and not until the pace was getting well up for

the road. The Kawasaki usually reaches the edge of its tyres before decking the pegs — ground clearance is fantastic — whereas the Seca gives warning with its pegs most of the time.

All three bikes have good brakes. Again, the Virago is not up to the others but its single disc up front and drum at the rear offer good feel and sufficient power for the job. Hit both brakes and it squats in reassuringly, your feet comfortably taking much of the weight shift. The difference between the Seca and Zephyr is more related to feedback to the rider than outright stopping ability. The Seca's single front disc had excellent power but felt wooden, while the Zephyr's twin discs had great power, too, but were a little spongy.

By their nature, these bikes will all spend quite a lot of their lives around town. If it's town use only you're into, I reckon you can't beat the Virago. The great, torquey motor, only five gears instead of six, a laid-back riding position, low seat . . . the list goes on. However, the Seca is almost as good in most of these respects with the bonuses of good pillion accommodation and the fact you can rock a briefcase or similar to the rear seat more easily. With its great steering, the XJ is also as nimble through the traffic as the low-slung 535 — in fact, more so in stopped traffic. The Zephyr is fine, too, although more compromised because of its rearset footpegs which aren't the best in town.

Get out on the inevitable dirt road and you'd be looking at a similar story to around-town manners, except the Virago's suspension and shaft drive simply don't hack the corrugations. The fat rear tyre floats over the dirt but its saving grace is the long front end keeping the front tyre planted. The Zephyr's not bad, albeit with the odd severe bumpsteering. The Seca is OK, too, let down only by its more basic rear suspension.

You don't really notice the subtle differences in gear shifting on the highway but in the city the Zephyr was

a slicker gear changer, with a clutch action to match. Except for trouble finding neutral at a standstill, the Virago rates as highly. The XJ still had low kilometres on the dial — and it showed, with a firm, notchy gearbox and quick clutch take-up. No doubt this would all loosen up in time.

There's little between them at the bowser. They're all pretty miserly until the motors are worked really hard. However, the Seca's extra tank capacity was welcome, just giving it the touring range it deserves and leaving the Zephyr and Virago wanting on long trips.

One real plus for the Virago is a headlight which is much better than you'd expect from such a bike, with fairly good power and spread. The Seca's and Zephyr's are adequate but nothing spectacular. Indicators, tail lights and instrument lights all score well but the XJ's idiot lights can be hard to make out in direct sunlight. The Virago's switch-gear is old hat and not as good for it although the 'bar-mounted reserve' switch is a nice touch. The Kawasaki is the only one to get a choke lever on the handlebars.

None of these bikes have a centre-stand, a glaring omission, especially on the Seca. All three sidestands are reasonable, even if the Zephyr's is awkward to hook with your boot. Side-stand-activated engine kill switches are the go all round.

You're in for good mirrors whichever bike you opt for, although cop spotting on the Seca is harder, thanks to more blur from vibration on the highway. However, you won't get horns better than the usual standard — weak — and toolkits are as standard as the motorcycles. At least maintenance is simple in comparison to most bikes: everything is simple and accessible, in most cases. All only have two valves per cylinder. The Virago is the only one with screw-and-locknut valve adjustment but you'd have to slide the carbs off to reach the inlet valves. All bikes shed their clothes quickly and easily — even the Seca with its half fairing. The Virago boasts the ►





SECOND OPINION

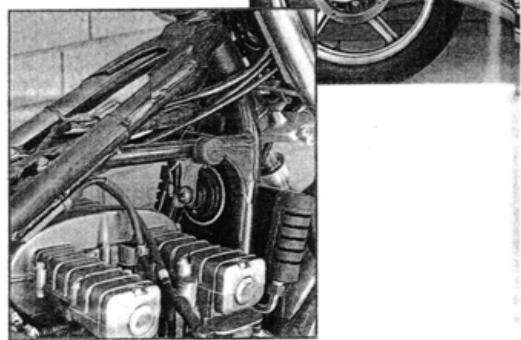
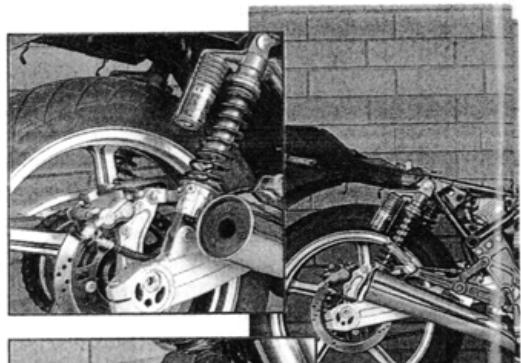
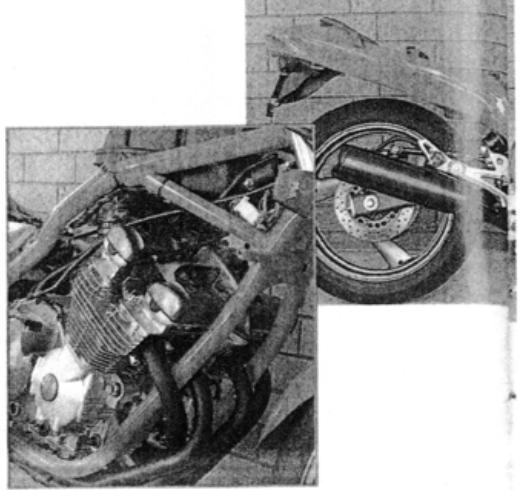
THE best thing about roadtesting is having prejudices busted. Two years of riding other people's bikes for fun and not much profit have overturned my opinions on just about every marque and model, eg, Harleys are now wonderful, BMWs are interesting and anything with footboards is beyond reproach. But I still suffer from prejudice. When the chance to be part of a team investigating three mid-price middleweights came up I thought we were headed for three days of mediocrity.

"They're not real motorcycles," I opined as we lunched on the bank of the Hawkesbury River on day one, "just regenerated versions of old ideas." Zephyr 550 out of Kawasaki GT550, XJ600S out of XJ600, XV535 out of XV250. Ho hum.

Then came the expedition to heaven on day two. Roadtest heaven exists on earth. It is called the Oxley Highway on a warm spring day. We punted the Oxley's magical 54 km of winding curves and my first mount through was the

Zephyr. Now, I've tackled the Oxley on everything from a Moto Guzzi Le Mans to an RGV250 Suzuki and that little Zephyr was as exciting as any — tach boiling above 7000 rpm, body in the fairing-less breeze and the chassis handling everything thrown at it.

Back down the mountain on the XV535. Slow, smooth and steady. Enjoy the air and the Virago's mid-range while improving the little chopper's ground clearance by chamfering the pegs through 500 corners. The grin spread wider. Back up on the XJ600 giving it heaps and just nicking the hero extensions on the pegs through the smooth, tight corners. By the time I got to Walcha the day was made. It doesn't take mega-buck machinery to get your rocks off — all three of these middleweights will provide low, medium and high-speed joy while keeping finances in the black. Pick of the pack was the XJ600, which is a simple, comfortable, very honest motorcycle which doesn't resort to any form of marketing trickery. — Stuart Kennedy





YAMAHA XJ600S SECA II

Manufacturer..... Yamaha Motor Co., Iwata, Japan
Test machine..... Yamaha Motor Aust., Wetherill Pk, NSW
Price..... \$6999 plus on-road costs
Warranty..... 12 months/unlimited km

ENGINE

Air-cooled, in-line, transverse, four-cylinder, four-stroke. Chain-driven double overhead camshafts operate two valves per cylinder via inverted buckets with shim adjustment. Wet sump lubrication.
Claimed max. power..... 44.8 kW at 8500 rpm
Claimed max. torque..... 55.4 Nm at 7000 rpm

Bore and stroke..... 58.5 x 55.7 mm
Displacement..... 598 cc
Compression ratio..... 10:1
Max. engine speed..... 9500 rpm
Carburation..... 4 x BDST28 Mikuni
Fuel consumption
Touring..... 5 L/100 km (20 km/L)
City..... 5.7 L/100 km (17.5 km/L)
Hard riding..... 7.9 L/100 km (12.7 km/L)
Av. on test..... 5.8 L/100 km (17.2 km/L)

TRANSMISSION

Gear primary drive through wet, multi-plate clutch to six-speed, constant-mesh gearbox. Cable-operated clutch. O-ring chain final drive.

FRAME AND BRAKES

Welded, tubular-steel, double-cradle frame. Telescopic 38-mm, non-adjustable front forks. Single rear spring/damper unit with three pre-load settings. Single front

disc brake with twin-piston caliper. Single rear disc with single-piston caliper.
Claimed front suspension travel 140 mm
Claimed rear wheel travel..... 110 mm
Front brake diameter..... 320 mm
Rear brake diameter..... 245 mm
Front tyre..... 110/80-17 57H Dunlop K275F
Rear tyre..... 130/70-18 63H Dunlop K275

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight..... 182 kg
Seat height..... 770 mm
Wheelbase..... 1445 mm
Rake/trail..... 25°/97 mm
Fuel capacity (incl. res.)..... 17 litres
Fuel reserve..... 3.5 litres

SPARES PRICES

Spares prices unavailable as we went to press.



KAWASAKI ZEPHYR 550

Manufacturer..... Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Akashi, Japan
Test machine..... Kawasaki Australia, Rydalmere, NSW
Price..... \$6000 plus on-road costs
Warranty..... 12 months/20,000 km

ENGINE

Air-cooled, in-line, transverse, four-cylinder four-stroke. Chain-driven double overhead camshafts operate two valves per cylinder via inverted buckets with shim adjustment. Wet sump lubrication with oil cooler.
Claimed max. power..... 38 kW at 10,000 rpm
Estimated max. torque..... 40 Nm at 6000 rpm
Bore and stroke..... 58.0 x 52.4 mm
Displacement..... 553 cc
Compression ratio..... 9.5:1
Max. engine speed..... 10,000 rpm
Carburation..... 4 x Keihin CVK30
Fuel consumption
Touring..... 5 L/100 km (20 km/L)
City..... 5.9 L/100 km (17 km/L)

Hard riding..... 8 L/100 km (12.5 km/L)
Av. on test..... 5.7 L/100 km (17.5 km/L)

TRANSMISSION

Chain primary drive through wet, multi-plate clutch to six-speed, constant-mesh gearbox. O-ring chain final drive. Cable-operated clutch.

FRAME AND BRAKES

Welded, tubular-section, steel, double-cradle frame with rubberised front engine mounts. Telescopic, 39-mm, non-adjustable front forks. Twin, gas-charged rear spring/damper units with five-position pre-load, four-way rebound and four-way compression damping adjustments. Twin semi-floating front disc brakes with dual-piston calipers. Single rear disc with twin opposed-piston caliper.
Claimed front suspension travel 140 mm
Claimed rear wheel travel..... 115 mm
Front brake effective diameter..... 272 mm
Rear brake effective diameter..... 217 mm
Front tyre..... 110/80-17 57H Bridgestone Exedra G547
Rear tyre..... 140/70-17 67H Bridgestone Exedra G548

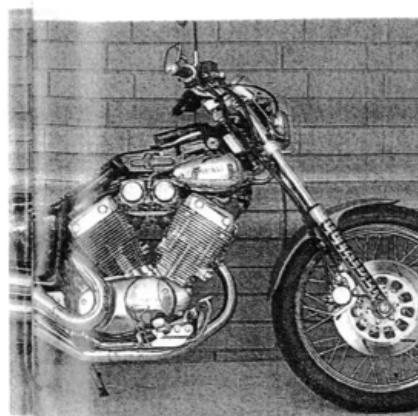
DIMENSIONS

Dry weight..... 179 kg
Seat height..... 770 mm
Wheelbase..... 1435 mm
Rake/trail..... 27°/104 mm
Fuel capacity (incl. res.)..... 15 litres
Fuel reserve..... 3.2 litres

SPARES PRICES

These are the Australian distributor's suggested retail prices. They may vary from dealer to dealer.

Oil filter.....	\$7.46
Clutch lever.....	\$29.49
Brake lever.....	\$65.59
Master cylinder (front).....	\$190.51
Front brake pads (two sets).....	\$163.62
Rear brake pads.....	\$81.81
Instrument assembly.....	\$997.80
Exhaust system (complete).....	\$948.73
Tank (painted).....	\$623.42
Front indicator.....	\$55.42
Rear indicator.....	\$55.42
Handlebar.....	\$51.93
Sprockets (pair).....	\$88.31
Mirrors (each).....	\$43.86



YAMAHA XV535 VIRAGO

Manufacturer..... Yamaha Motor Co., Iwata, Japan
Test machine..... Outrider Yamaha, St Peters, NSW; (02) 516 5977
Price..... \$6499 plus on-road costs
Warranty..... 12 months/unlimited km

ENGINE

Air-cooled, longitudinal, V-twin four-stroke. Chain-driven single overhead camshafts operate two valves per cylinder by rockers with screw-and-locknut adjustment. Wet sump lubrication.
Claimed max. power..... Not available
Claimed max. torque..... 48 Nm at 5000 rpm
Bore and stroke..... 76.0 x 59.0 mm
Displacement..... 535 cc
Compression ratio..... 9.0:1
Max. engine speed..... Not stated
Carburation..... Twin downdraught BDS34 Mikuni

Fuel Consumption
Touring..... 5 L/100 km (20 km/L)
City..... 5.6 L/100 km (17.9 km/L)
Hard riding..... 7.2 L/100 km (13.9 km/L)
Av. on test..... 5.8 L/100 km (17.2 km/L)

TRANSMISSION

Spur-gear primary drive through wet, multi-plate clutch to five-speed, constant-mesh gearbox. Cable-operated clutch and enclosed-shaft final drive.

FRAME AND BRAKES

Welded, pressed-steel frame with motor suspended from backbone. Footpegs and controls suspended from engine bars. Telescopic, 33-mm, non-adjustable front forks. Twin rear spring/damper units with pre-load adjustment. Single-disc front brake with single-piston caliper. Drum rear brake.
Claimed front suspension travel 150 mm
Claimed rear wheel travel..... 85 mm
Front brake diameter..... 300 mm
Rear brake diameter..... 230 mm
Front tyre..... 3.00S19 Bridgestone Mag Mopus

Rear tyre..... 140/90-15 Bridgestone Mag Mopus

DIMENSIONS

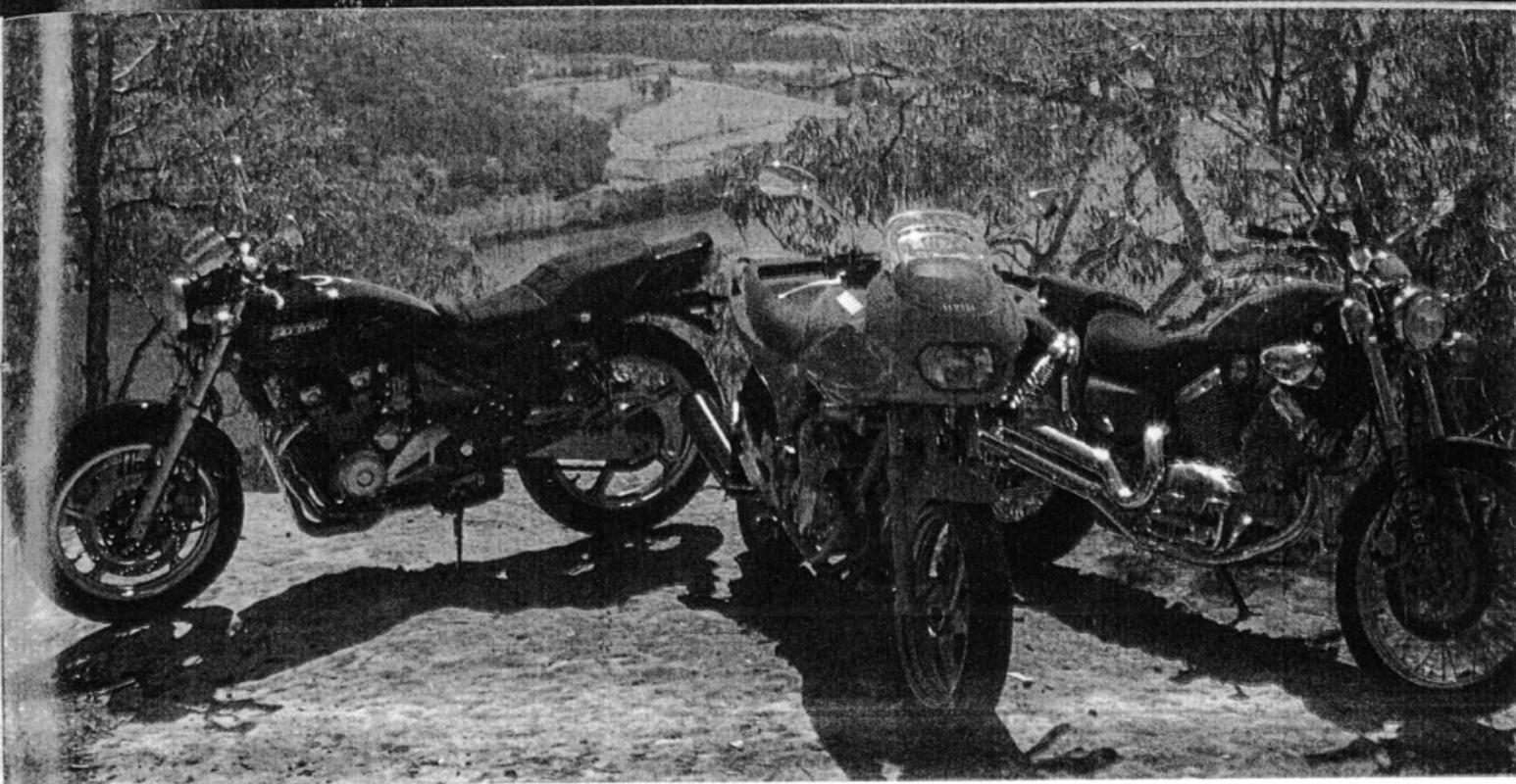
Dry weight.....	180 kg
Seat height.....	720 mm
Wheelbase.....	1520 mm
Rake/trail.....	31.5°/125 mm
Fuel capacity (incl. res.).....	13.5 litres
Fuel reserve.....	2.5 litres

SPARES PRICES

These are the Australian distributor's suggested retail prices. They may vary from dealer to dealer.

Oil filter.....	\$7.42
Clutch lever.....	\$5.80
Brake lever.....	\$7.42
Master cylinder (front).....	\$107.25
Front brake pads.....	\$53.95
Rear brake shoes.....	\$33.22
Instrument assembly.....	\$190.72
Mufflers (one-piece set).....	\$993.69
Tank (painted).....	\$385.08
Front indicator.....	\$31.92
Rear indicator.....	\$31.42
Handlebar.....	\$40.06
Mirrors (each).....	\$48.49

Best points: Wonderfully relaxed cruiser with willing, torquey motor. Comfortable and licence-friendly. Never too far behind the 'normal' bikes.
Worst points: Rear springs too hard. No centrestand. Poor tyres. Pillion perch. Footpegs scrape too early.



clean and easy living of shaft drive.

As they stand, the Zephyr is a little better than the Seca for loading luggage because of its great fold-out ocky-strap hooks — four of them — compared to the Seca's single retainer on each side of the pillion seat. Saddlebags easily loop over the Virago's pillion pad but a tankbag will prove awkward.

For quality of finish, Yamaha scoops the pool by a narrow margin. Both its bikes are beautifully finished. The Kawasaki's only drawback was the faded polish on the alloy, but to be fair it had more kays chalked up at the time. The Seca is a beautifully designed motorcycle — I haven't yet seen a photo which really does it justice. In the flesh it's stunning.

Overall, the Seca is an impressive motorcycle. Not perfect, perhaps, and the Zephyr gets the nod in certain areas, but in this company the XJ600S definitely comes out on top. It's got a great motor, excellent rider and pillion

accommodation, good looks and lots more. Yamaha isn't lying when it claims to have a real all-rounder here. The

"The Seca is a beautifully designed motorcycle. In the flesh it's stunning."

Virago makes a good showing beside both bikes, even if no-one expected it to beat them — it was always close behind on the road and definitely has strong points. The Zephyr ran closer to the Seca than we'd thought it would but basically, apart from looks and taut handling, it's slightly wide of the mark on most counts.

Except price. The \$7000 Seca's definitely a grand better than the Zephyr but when it comes to forking out, that difference is worth considering. We considered it and reckoned if the extra money was available, the Seca was the

go.

If the Seca II is the way of the future of basic bikes, we're in luck. I suppose it's ironic that first we saw a return to old-style twins with a few mod cons (VX800, NTV650), then the retro Zephyrs hit the scene with four-cylinder performance and now we're up to single rear suspension units and sporty fairings. The race has started again. However, I have a feeling the Seca — or bikes like it — will be the ideal standard bike design. Maybe a TDM850-motored Seca III.

The 535 already has a small but well-deserved following in Australia. The Zephyr 550 doesn't — it hasn't cracked the market here like it has overseas (would you believe both the 750 and 550 sold out in Britain?). If anything in this middleweight standards market is going to make a hit with Australian riders it'll be the XJ600S because now we have something smooth, refined, comfortable and capable which isn't going to break the budget. It's a ripper. □

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