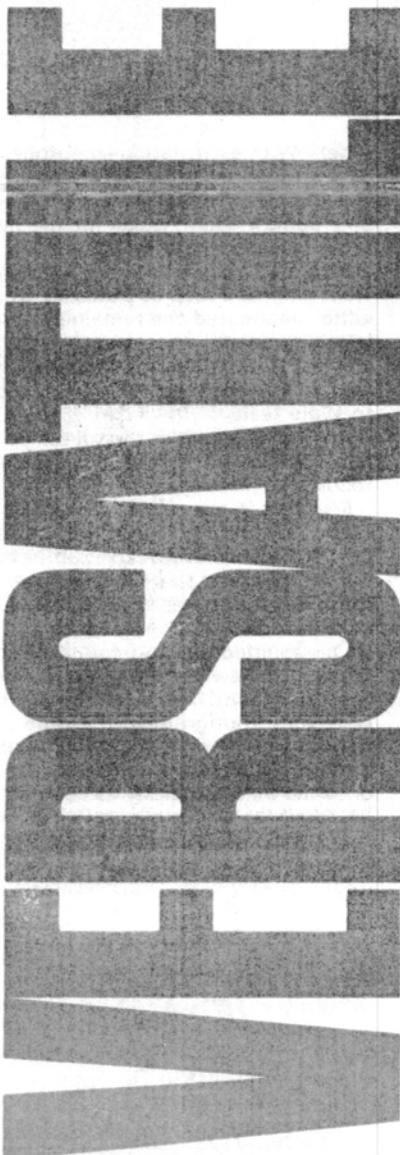
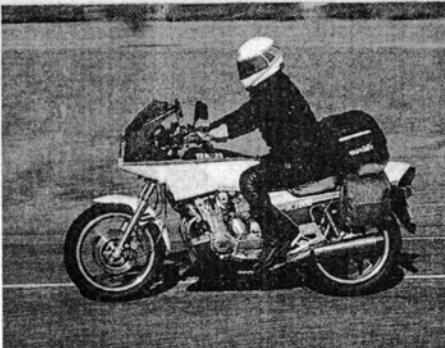


**The XJ900 gets
a face-lift for
1987 and Chris
Hill finds the
comfortable,
competent all-
rounder is now
better value
than ever**



YAMAHA XJ900FT



Ring ring, ring ring. "Good morning, BIKE AUSTRALIA."

"G'day. I was wondering if you could help me?"

"Sure, what's up?"

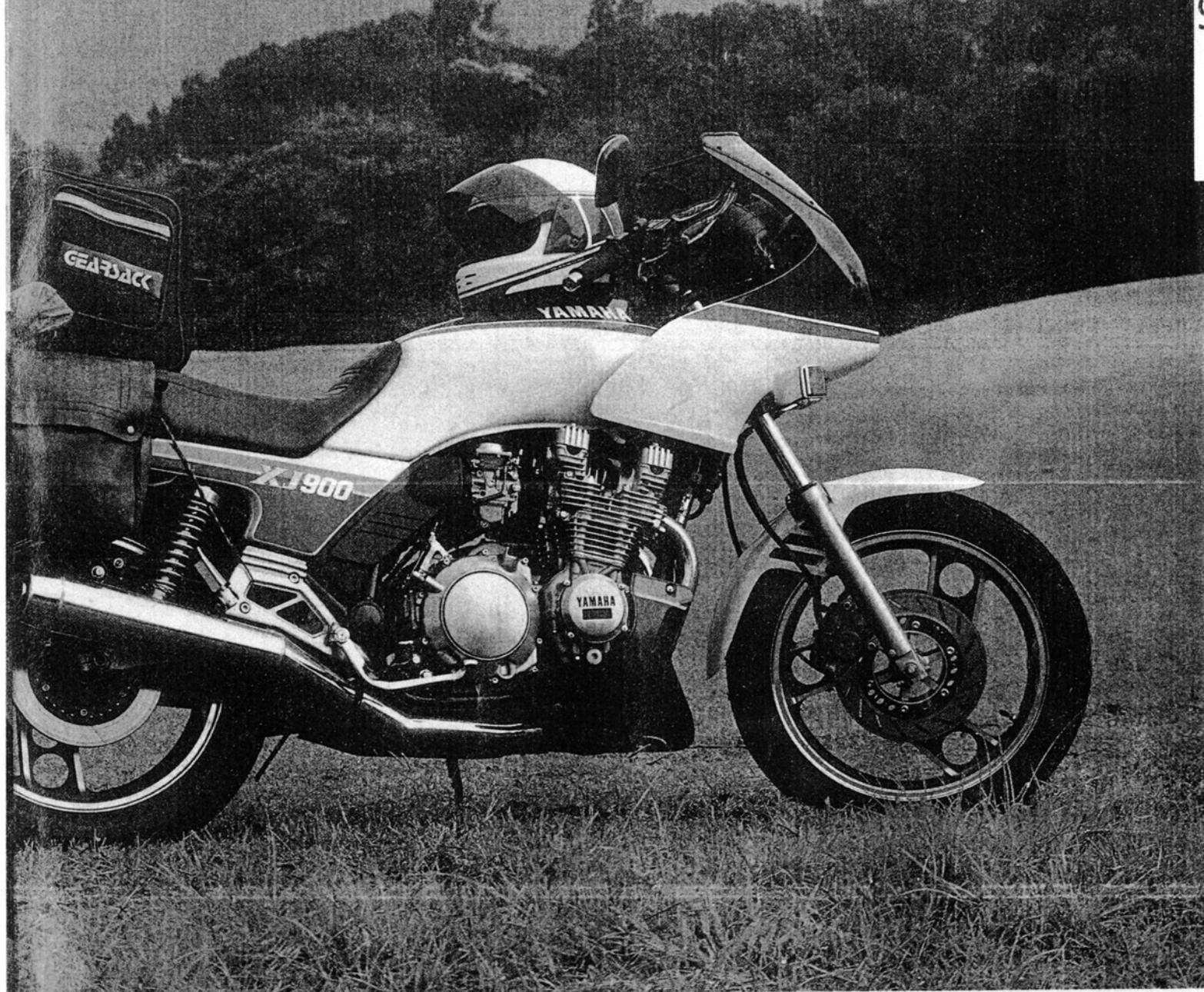
"Well, I used to ride bikes some years ago, but I got married and had to give it away to buy the house and then the rug rats came along. Now I want to get back into bikes but strewth, I don't know where to start. Everything's changed. Seems you can't get a decent roadie which won't put near a \$10,000 hole in your hip pocket and isn't a high-tech hyper blaster which leaves you with white knuckles and brown pants every time you dial it on."

"Are there any big bikes around which are easy commuters, good for day rides, comfortable tourers and which won't break the bank? Oh yeah, I want to ride it in my spare time, not work on it, so it's got to be reliable and low maintenance."

"Hmm. Yes mate, Yamaha XJ900. Smooth, torquey motor, comfortable seating, shaft drive, reasonably good power, brakes and handling and reliable as the light of day in Broken Hill. And at around six grand it's one of the best value big-bore bikes on the road."

"Hey, sounds like a go. Thanks, I think I'll check one out."

"No worries, let me know how it



goes. Bye." I was glad to have been able to help, but I felt a bit guilty. After all, I had never actually *ridden* an XJ900. A quick call to Yamaha and a week later I was on the road, happy to be discovering the bike was as good as my recommendation.

John ("let's go!") Lapka had turned up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed to accompany me for cool, early morning start. A nudge on the rotating collar choke and a stab on the starter button saw the 36 mm constant velocity carbs fire up the XJ instantly. A moment later the choke was off and the bike settled down to a smooth, quiet idle while I loaded the rest of my gear.

The XJ takes luggage with a minimum of fuss. The tank accepts a tankbag without any drama and two small handles for lifting the bike onto the centrestand jut out just enough to stop saddlebags from scuffing the sidepanels. A gearsack or duffle bag across the pillion seat would give you all the extra carrying capacity you could want and there are enough places to attach ocky straps.

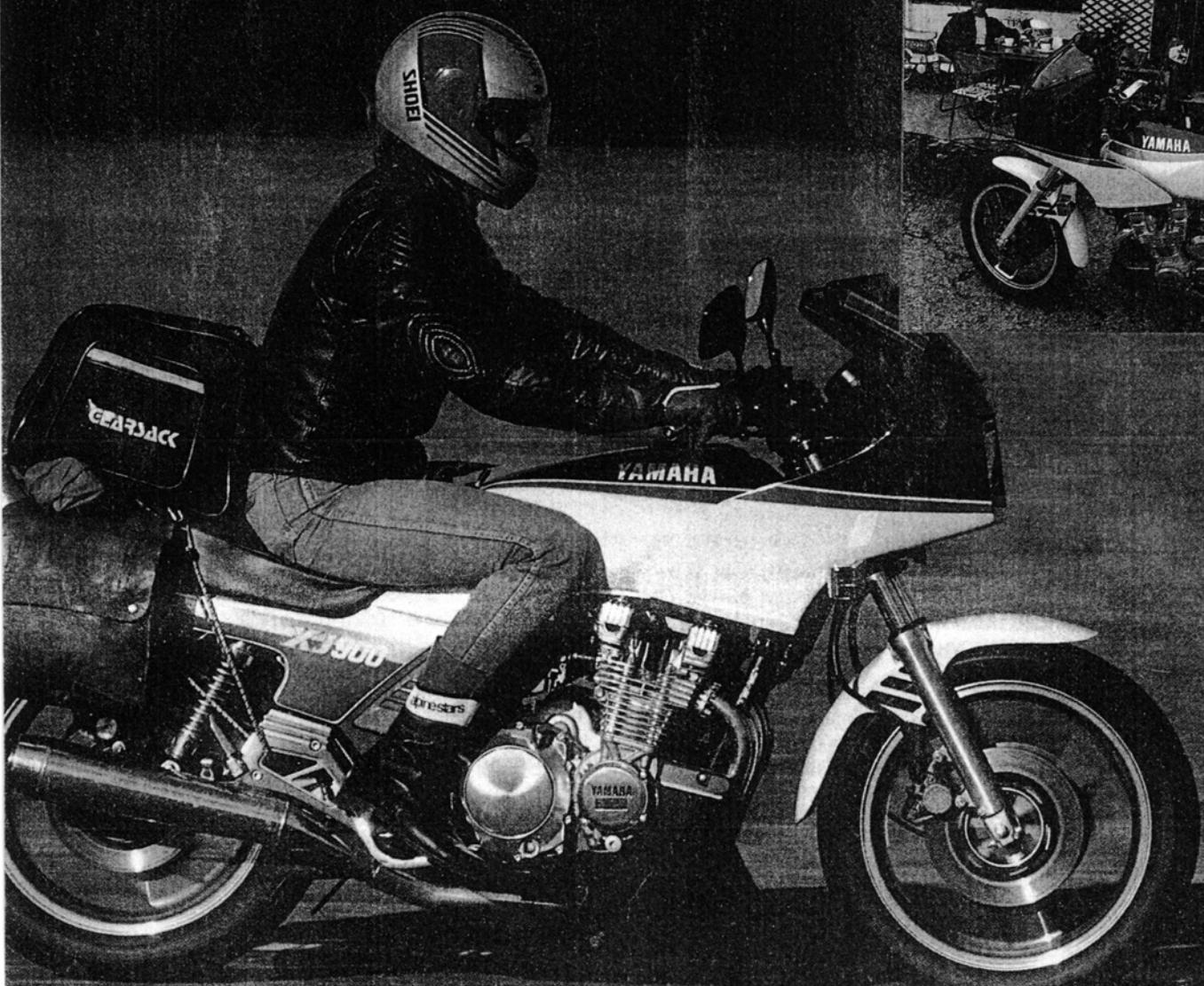
"Hey, it's pissing itself!" said John pointing to two puddles growing from steady drips out of the middle of the mufflers. I was unruffled.

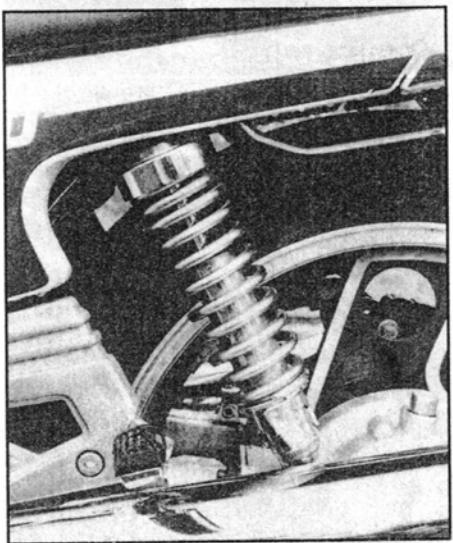
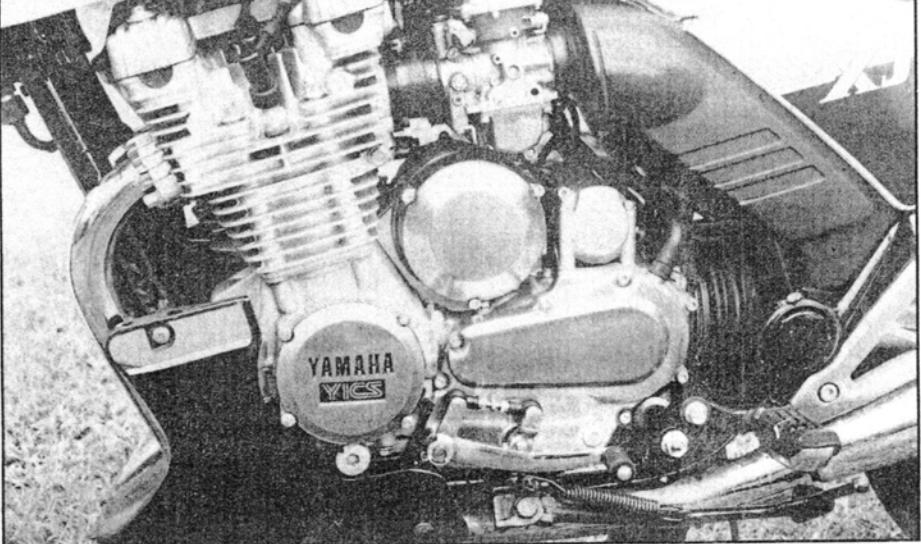
"No mate, that's just the ASAC (Automatic Sulphuric Acid Clearing)

system operating," I replied professionally. "The new unleaded petros produce sulphur dioxide emissions which combine with moisture condensate in the mufflers to produce a weak but potentially corrosive sulphuric acid. Those crafty devils in the land of the rising sun have drilled a couple of little drain holes to get rid of the nasty stuff before it gets a chance to rot out the pipes."

"I see," said John looking unconvinced. "What's it going to do now it's dripped all over your boot?"

A few minutes (and a quick wipe) later we were heading north on the expressway. Boring stuff really, but a





Top: Old faithful: nothing new here, but the XJ motors have always featured piggyback mounted alternators, currently being touted as "innovative" by some manufacturers.

Above: New shocks, same old story; start shopping for aftermarket bargains.

good chance to wind out the XJ through the gears to check out engine smoothness, high speed handling and top speed. The 900 is a grunter. It's not in the class of the FJ1200 or 1100 Suzukis, but this "old fashioned" in-line, air cooled, double overhead cam four cylinder engine will pull willingly from two grand and strongly from 3000 rpm. Overtaking on the open road is effortless. With 100 km/h turning over 4100 rpm in top there's really never any need to dance with the gear lever. In fact stirring the gearbox is really wasted effort on the XJ because the engine is harsh

above 6000 revs by contemporary standards and it doesn't have strong enough top end power to warrant working it up to the 9500 redline. Mind you, the XJ didn't protest when I wound it out to redline in top to achieve a maximum speed of around 220 km/h!

All a blur

High speed stability on the XJ is good. By the time the white lines and the scenery are flashing by as an uninterrupted blur, you're grateful for the secure feeling imparted by the longish 1480 mm wheelbase and 114 mm of trail. Cornering at speeds over 160 km/h produced a mild weave from the rear end. While this was never alarming it didn't encourage taking sweepers at speeds above the ton.

A return to sanity and more moderate touring speeds on the rough 'n ready highways brought out two of the XJ's best and worst handling features. The 37 mm front forks are excellent for a touring bike. They are compliant enough to use nearly all the 140 mm travel when necessary and give a very comfortable ride on any surface, but are not that soft you think you are riding a wet sponge. There is no preload or damping adjustment (other than changing the fork oil) but I didn't consider any adjustment to be necessary. The forks enjoy the benefit of an alloy fork brace fitted on top of the mudguard.

Forks which are set up for comfort usually suffer from an inordinate amount of front-end dive on hard braking, but the XJ fares well in this department. The forks never

the front ends fitted with complex anti-drive systems I have ridden lately.

The rear shocks are still one of the worst features of the XJ. The current F model has replaced the previous remote reservoir units with lighter, old-fashioned twin shocks which are oversprung and under damped. The ride was hard over big and small bumps and even though the spring preload is adjustable the biggest XJ definitely needs more progressive spring rates and effective damping.

Undulating secondary country roads saw the rear end of the XJ floating up and down in a movement akin to the sea-sickness inducing motion of a yacht in a good swell. The spring rate suited the bike loaded two-up much better, resulting in a smoother ride for the pilot, but my pillion still complained about being kicked off the seat by the larger bumps.

It's a shame that of the few running changes made to the F model Yamaha didn't get right the one most needed to make the XJ a really good all-rounder. Oh well, after 20,000 km you'll be fitting a decent set of after market shocks anyway . . .

The sweepers to the north of Buladelah (delightful as always!) tested the XJ's cornering clearance. On left-handers the centrestand scrapes and on right-handers the footpeg will send out a few sparks just after you grind away the edge of the sole of your boot. In both cases you are laid over plenty far enough to get the adrenalin flowing and only die-hard scratchers and boy racers would complain about the lack of clearance.

The XJ series motors have always had piggyback style alternators, a feature being touted as "innovative" on some current model sport bikes, to reduce engine width and therefore improve cornering clearance.

Handling is not compromised by the traditional steel tubed double cradle frame. It is braced enough to deal with the power output without flexing and no doubt helps keep production costs within reasonable limits.

By the time we had loped through the beautiful Bellingen valley I was looking forward to putting the XJ through the twisties up the mountain to Dorrigo. With 218 kg of bike to muscle around and an 18 inch front hoop, steering isn't

lightning fast, but a little effort from the rider sees the XJ flip flopping through the esses quickly enough to have you smiling after the first few corners.

Going hard through rough bends didn't upset the bike. The front end soaked them up and only occasionally gave a bit of wriggle at the 'bars. (The rear end would pogo a bit but did not tend to bounce alarmingly off line.) This is not really a bike for full-on sports riding, but if you insist (and who can resist the odd winding mountain road?) then you may want to consider fitting a steering damper. I'd leave the XJ as is and buy a sports bike.

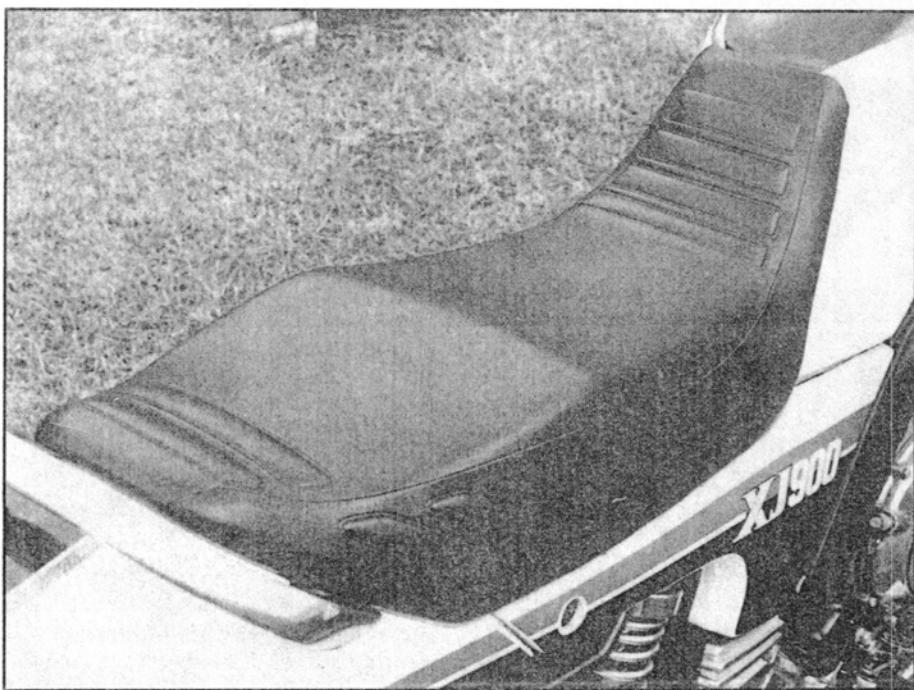
Many riders will be pleased to see Pirelli Phantoms (100/90-V18 front, 120/90-V18 rear) fitted as original equipment, but they are a bit deceptive. Despite wearing the same brand and model name, original equipment tyres fitted in Japan are designed and manufactured to suit particular bikes and are not always the same as the after-market product we buy here.

In this case the Phantoms are a harder compound than the Australian equivalent but still performed creditably. I didn't push the XJ hard enough to break traction anywhere in the dry, but in the wet I found the bike needed very little provocation to start squirming around uncomfortably underneath me. These tyres also look like they will give considerably better wear than what I'm used to from Phantoms. With nearly 4000 km on the test bike the rear tyre was less than half worn.

Full stop

A darting furry mammal with a death wish forced me to check out the effectiveness of the new brake system on the current model. They work, and I'm happy to be here to say so. The ventilated sandwich style twin front discs have been replaced by slotted solid discs but the single ventilated rear disc has been retained. All feature opposed piston calipers and unsprung weight is slightly less than the previous model.

Ventilated discs are very complex (read costly) to produce and while they work well under racing conditions Yamaha found they had a tendency to warp during the cooling off periods so they are moving away from this style on their production models. It might be okay for the top racers with their mega-sponsors to replace their discs after every race, but it's not something the road rider



should have to consider in the normal life of his/her machine.

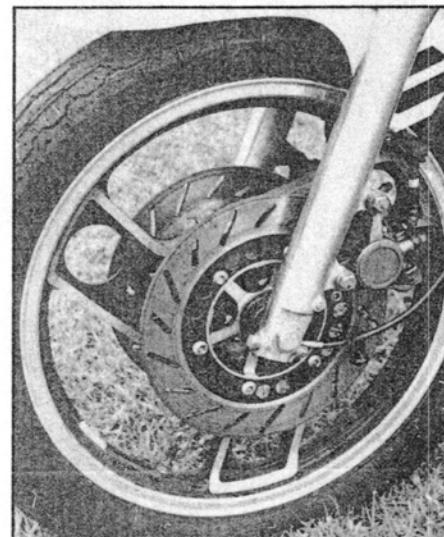
Four consecutive emergency stops from 160 km/h were able to hold the front wheel on the point of lockup without producing any fade. Although the lever pulled back about two-thirds of its travel, feel was quite positive. The rear brake, however, gives much less feedback and is very easy to lockup unless a lot of care is exercised with the right foot.

At the pub

Something was missing. Pulling in to a country pub for lunch after a couple of days on the road I realised I hadn't yet suffered from the dreaded numb bum syndrome. Even though I wasn't using a sheepskin I'd been able to ride more than four hours at a time without giving the tender nether regions a thought. The padding density of the XJ's seat is just right and its tapered contours allow you to fit your knees comfortably into the scalloped tank. Why aren't more seats shaped and built like this?

The overall seating position of the XJ is also excellent for this style of bike. A slight forward crouch puts you in contact with the easy-to-reach 'bars with no wrist pressure. The footpegs are just slightly more rearset than what you would expect from a tourer but still fall comfortably beneath you rather than behind you. It's an ideal setup which allows you to ride long distances comfortably but still attack the odd set of corners aggressively.

One of the best bum rests in the business!



The current model XJ features twin slotted discs, every bit as powerful and fade free as their ventilated predecessors, but cheaper to produce and more durable.

Unfortunately the fairing fitted to the F model doesn't do the ergonomics of the machine justice. It's bigger than many other contemporary bikini fairings but not nearly as efficient. Headlight cowl is probably a better term for it because only your chest receives any protection from the elements. Why Yamaha didn't put a better (not necessarily bigger) fairing on a machine so suited to long distance work is beyond me. Even hand pockets a la FZ750 or TZR250 and a slight lip on the windscreens would



A belly-pan completes the XJ's styling update.

be an immense improvement.

Yamaha decided not to put a full fairing on the F model but it receives a belly pan to complete its styling update. Chin pieces, or "engine undercows", have always struck me as being lonely and vulnerable when mounted on their own, and about as useful as the proverbial spare at a wedding, but I suppose they look good whilst ever they are flavour of the month.

For those of you who would prefer the added protection and contemporary styling of a full fairing, Handcraft Fibreglass of Sydney offer a complete lower fairing and belly pan, supplied colour matched and with all fittings, for \$250. A lipped windscreens is also available for \$49.

Back on the road we decided to make some miles before nightfall, but the best laid plans of mice and men . . . By the time we had stopped to take a few pictures and check out a couple of nice beaches for future camping sites the afternoon had gone and we found ourselves riding into the sunset like a couple of Hollywood heroes. With the usual swarm of evening bugs pasting itself on my visor I flicked on the headlight. Nothing new in the

headlight. It's rated the same 60/55 W capacity as the previous large round unit but it doesn't seem to have quite as good penetration and spread. The available candlepower is, however, still more than adequate for the odd stint of night riding.

We were feeling a little road weary so we decided to pull up at the next pub for the evening. I noticed that although I was tired and a little less than crisp at the controls, I had so far not managed to miss a gear change in the whole trip.

Dinner and a few beers later it was touch down on the pillow for dream time oblivion . . .

BOOM! A thundering explosion rocked the room and shocked us into violent consciousness. Huge flames and thick palls of acrid smoke assaulted us as we rushed out onto the verandah to investigate. A hungry inferno from a container on the back of a semi-trailer parked in front of the pub threatened to engulf the tinder box we were sheltering in.

The fire department arrived screaming and flashing, but to no avail. Ironically, the nearest hydrant was adjacent to the blaze and intense heat prevented the firemen from coupling their hoses to it. Our bikes were parked out the back and John had already rushed back to the room to grab the gear and P.O.Q.

Eventually the fire was brought under control and the threat of an early cremation subsided. Crawling back between the sheets John commented: "Bet that's the biggest bang you've ever had in the middle of the night!" True, John, true.

Lazy

Riders not inclined to spend a lot

camchain self-adjusting. Oil and filter changes are recommended at 6000 km intervals and the shim adjusted valve clearance should be checked every 12,000 km. Other than that there is virtually nothing to do except wash and polish your pride and joy, and even that's not too difficult because the shaft drive keeps the back of the bike clean.

Since its release in 1983 the XJ has enjoyed an excellent track record for reliability. No major design faults have manifested themselves and its not unusual for correctly maintained engines to return 150,000 trouble-free kilometres before requiring a top-end rebuild. A shop assistant in a Yamaha dealership once told me he hadn't sold a single engine part for an XJ900 in the two years he had been working there! How many other bikes could boast that record?

The only trouble I had with the XJ was the knurled nut of the speedo cable coming unscrewed from the front wheel housing and I noticed it before the inner cable had a chance to slip away. Even the standard Japanese tool kit could handle this! It stores in the ducktail leaving enough room for an extra jumper, gloves or a compact set of wet weather gear.

The ride home (along the mandatory Putty Road) gave us an unexpected bonus. A blue "whale tail" Porsche sporting a radar detector pulled out just ahead of us from the last petrol station before the smooth twisties in the gorge at the head of the road. We followed at a discreet distance until the road tightened up then closed the gap for some fun dicing.

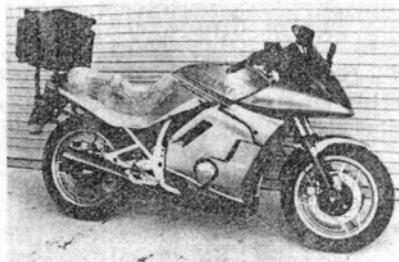
Our mutual pleasure was short-lived though, because "she who must be obeyed" was sitting in the

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passenger seat and obviously had more control than someone in that seat should. It wasn't long before we showed him a clean set of pipes and the driver acknowledged with a grin and a wave as we passed to lap up the rest of the curves. I arrived home in the usual condition; bug splattered, tired and happy.

For the next couple of weeks I rode the XJ to work and although a little large and heavy to be an ideal commuter the bike is relaxed and torquey enough to deal with the daily rat race. Lane splitting at the lights was easy, so long as the traffic didn't get ridiculously tight.

Constant velocity carbs can be a bit

tricky in traffic because they are so responsive the slightest throttle movement can cause the bike to lurch about. A little practice and a smooth right wrist action soon solves this.

Fuel consumption was a reasonable 18.5 km/litre on the open road and slightly less at 17.5 km/litre around town, which gives the 22 litre tank (five litre reserve) a respectable 375 km touring range.

One aspect of the XJ I really like is its mirrors. Their parallelogram shape is one of the best there is to minimise reflections of your shoulder and to give good depth of vision both behind and to side.

Conclusion

The XJ is a low profile bike with a low profile price. It isn't dressed in ultra-flash styling, it doesn't feature all the latest hi-tech acronyms and it won't make you the envy of every other rider on the block.

What it will do is provide you with a durable, reliable all-rounder which is a comfortable, competent commuter-tourer capable of the odd bit of sports riding. With a recommended retail price of \$6299 the XJ is at least \$1500 cheaper than anything else in its class and represents excellent value in today's escalating market.

SPECS

Make Yamaha
Model XJ900F
Price (plus on road charges) ... \$6299

Engine

Type Air-cooled, 4 cyl. DOHC
4 stroke
Bore X Stroke 68.5 x 60.5 mm
Displacement 891cc
Compression ratio 9.6:1
Carburetion 4 x BS36 Mikuni
Ignition Transistorised
Redline 9500 rpm
Starting Electric only
Claimed power 72.1 kW
@ 9000 rpm
Claimed torque 8.3 kg/m
@ 7000 rpm

Transmission

Number of gears 5
Clutch Wet Multiplate
Primary Drive Gear
Final Drive Shaft

Suspension

Front 37 mm Telescopic Forks
Travel 140 mm
Rear Twin Shocks
Travel 100 mm

Brakes

Front Twin slotted discs
Rear Single ventilated discs

General

Electrical Output 268 W
Headlight 60/55
Air filter Paper element
Lubrication Wet sump

Dimensions

Weight	218 kg
Wheelbase	1480 mm
Ground Clearance	145 mm
Seat height	780 mm
Fuel capacity	22 litres
Oil capacity	3.6 litres
Rake/trail	27°/114 mm

Performance

Top speed	220 km/h
RPM @ 100 km/h	4150 rpm

Speed in gears

1	2	3	4	5
83	121	157	195	220

Top gear acceleration

60-80 km/h	2.9 sec
80-100 km/h	2.5 sec
100-120 km/h	2.5 sec

Fuel consumption

Kilometres per litre	17 km/litre
average, 18.4 km/litre touring		
Litres per 100 km	5.8 litres/100 km
Range per tank	330-380 km

Plus:

Good value, competent all-rounder.

Minus

Poor rear shocks.

Test bike supplied by: Yamaha Australia.

These prices are included to give you an idea of what normal replacement or a crash will cost you for this bike. The crash cost indicates replacements necessary after a 60 km/h drop with the bike falling on its right hand side.

Replacement:

Oil Filter	\$3.60
Air Filter	\$33.61
Brake Pads — front	\$63.38
— rear	\$63.38

Headlight Globe	not available
One blinker lens	\$3.43

Crash:

Petrol Tank	\$463.94
Headlight Assembly	\$101.10
Blinker Assemblies	\$28.56
Brake Master Cylinder	\$138.36
Brake Lever	\$11.32
Mirror	\$34.27
Handlebar	\$112.33
Muffler	\$241.64
Engine Cover	\$108.96
Footrest Assembly	\$103.08
Rocker Cover	\$104.71
Fairing	\$684.54

	Terrible	Poor	Average	Good	Brilliant
Cornering					
Cornering clearance					
Steering					
High speed stability					
Front forks					
Rear shocks					
Engine responsiveness					
Smoothness					
Bottom end power					
Medium range power					
Top end power					
Fuel economy					
Clutch operation					
Gearbox operation					
Brake effectiveness					
Fade resistance					
Quality of finish					
Riding position					
Seat comfort					
Pillion comfort					
Touring range					
Headlight					
Value for money					