

# TwoWheels



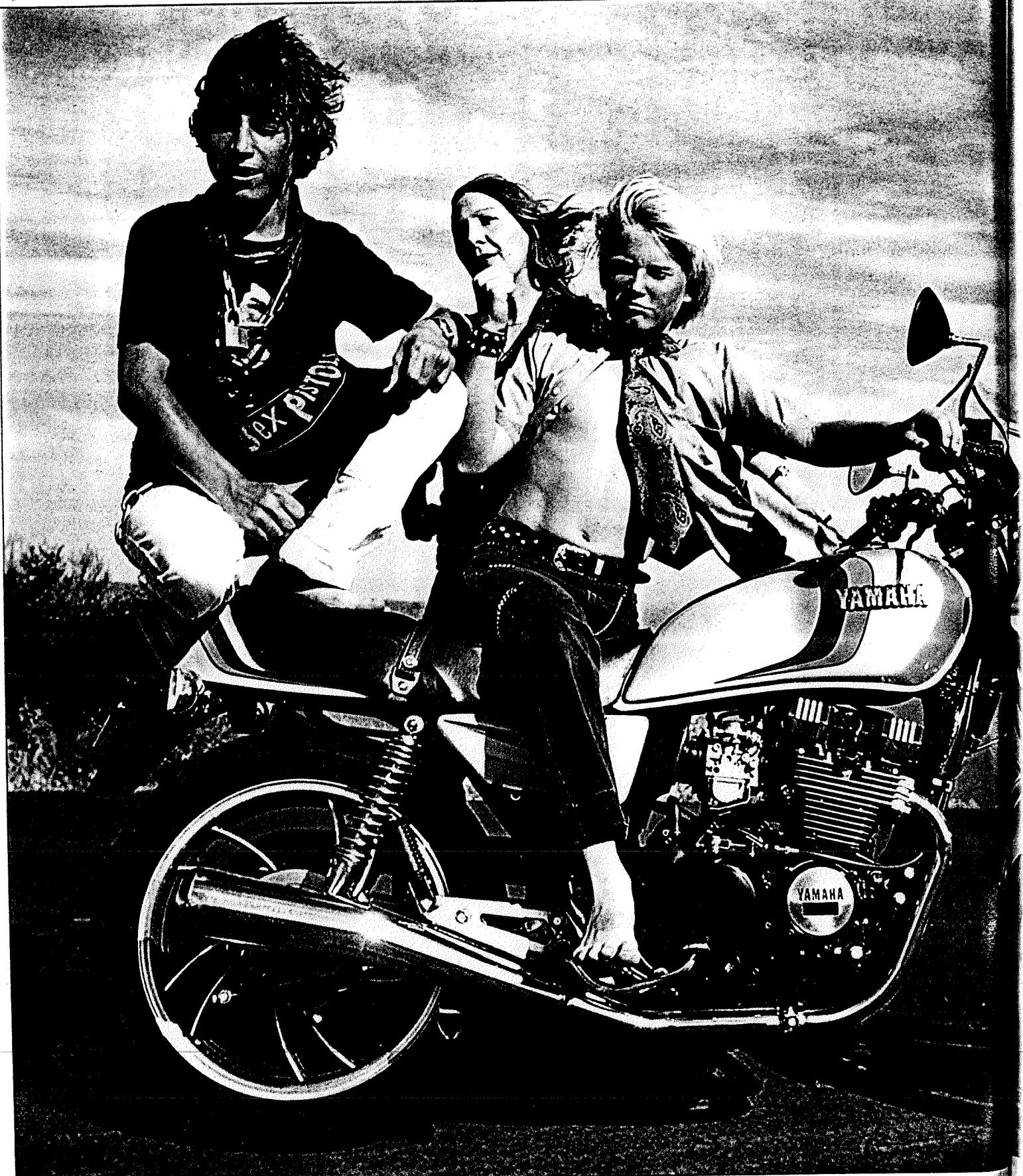
**SUZUKI  
DR 250**

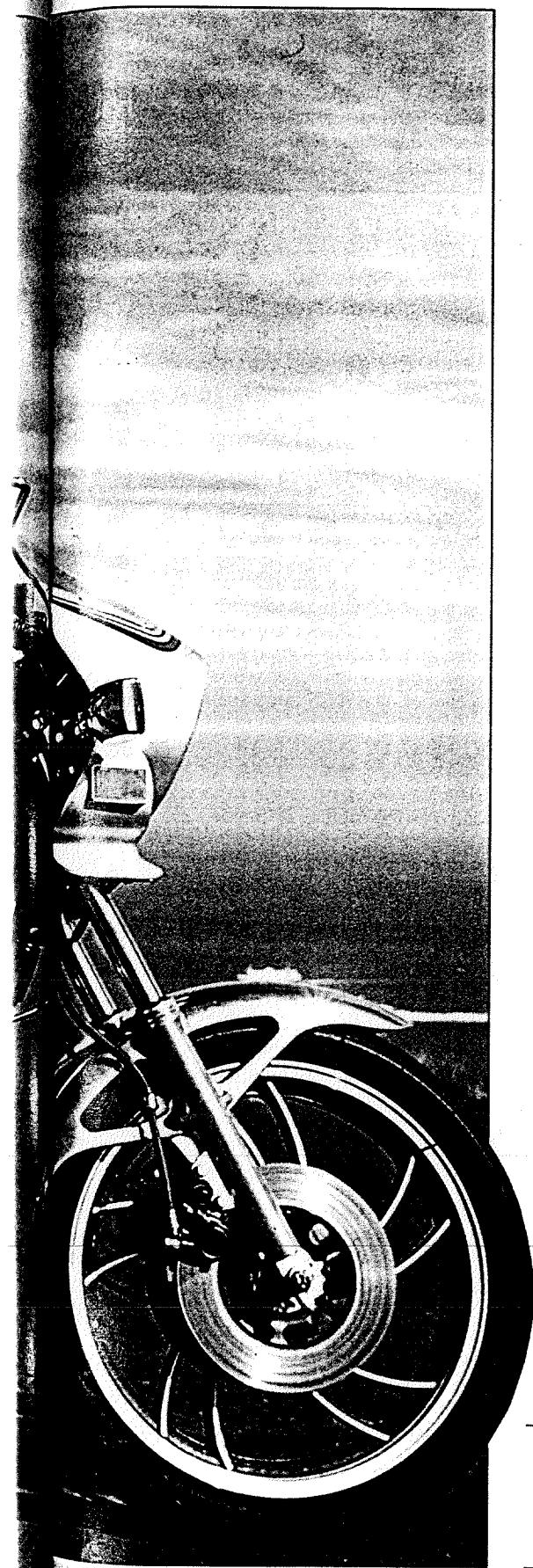
*The New Kid In  
The XL's Playground*

**RICKMAN MEETS KATANA:**  
High noon on the street

**XJ550H ON TEST:**  
Hardhitting middleweight

**THE TOP TOURERS:**  
How do they rate?





HERE'S no need to save up the story of the turning point of modern motorcycling for the grandchildren sitting on your knee. The event is much more recent than that — just the summer of '76 — and the effects are in full swing today.

It was just six years ago that the creators of that *Munch Mammoth* of mass production, the Kawasaki Super4, decided bigger was *not* always best — particularly when a bike is bloody big to start with and then simply bloats with progressive models.

Riders of Italian and British twins, triples and what have you are not going to find the turning point all that easy to recognise — European manufacturers had understood the essence of keeping sportsters slim since the balls froze off brass monkeys (that was back in the Crimea — check out the shocking truth on page 72).

Kawasaki understood it in 1976 with a bike called the Z650. It rolled off the production line weighing just 211 kg, and was fast as well as light and many a rider found this combination both delightful and sensible. Since then the "Heavy" has continued to diminish from Kawasaki Industries.

Sadly, Honda and Suzuki have shown scant regard for serious weight reduction. Possibly the only examples in the Honda range where mass hasn't taken the lowest priority are the CB250RS and the XL range. Suzuki once looked like it was getting serious with the GS750 and the GS1000; since then its bikes have grown fatter, not slimmer.

Yamaha plays a different drum. Its XJ650 and XJ750 have been trimmed to

a very agreeable girth, and the most recent addition (we're finally to the point of all this), the XJ550, tips the scales at a mere 188 kg. The Ducati Pantah we tested recently (TW January) is only five kilos lighter than the new 550 Yamaha.

That's not bad is it? A four-cylinder motorcycle that is only slightly heavier than an Italian twin of similar capacity.

But that's only half the story. While it's easy to appreciate the virtues of a light motorcycle that isn't quite enough. Numerous riders have an insatiable lust for cobwebs-clearing power. The XJ550 has both, and as a bonus handles and stops as well as it goes.

#### All-purpose with ease

When we first rode the XJ we were impressed, but when it came to objectively commenting on the reasons for this particular bike's excellence, the *umms* and *ahs* filled the air in great profusion. Check it off; suspension compliant, the motor very sporty, the bike feels (and is) light, stops well and handles immaculately. But there was some other, less tangible, attribute which sets the XJ apart from the crowd. It's called *balance*! The 550 feels just right and inspires confidence because of that. It's not often a rider can hop on a strange motorcycle and go tearing into the first corner knowing very well that he'll come howling out again without any underduds-staining incidents (barring oil slicks, piles of gravel, cold tyres or blind pedestrians of course!). But it's that kind of motorcycle. So little adjustment is required before the XJ can be ridden hard with safety.

Make no mistake, the bike is a real talent. The XJ tackles the role of tourer,

# YAMAHA XJ550RH

## The New Standard

Lacking fancy frills, multi-variable suspension and too much of tomorrow, Yamaha's middleweight is outstanding as the best-balanced sportster package we've ridden!

commuter or weekend blaster with consummate ease. A tourer will appreciate the comfort, the economy, and the engine's capacity to buzz along at constant 140 km/h plus speeds without falling back at the merest hint of a hill. A commuter will like the comfort, the smoothness, the ease of manoeuvrability and won't be put off too much by a slight deficiency in low and mid-range power, while the mild-mannered accountant who grows hairs on his palms at the weekend and then plays boyracer will find the brakes, the strong top end power output, the neutral steering and the precise handling very appealing.

In short, an excellent all-rounder.

The riding position is also suited to a multi-purpose role. While it's not laid-forward-feet-back sportster style, it's not sit-up-feet-forward cruiser style. In between these extremes Yamaha has found a very comfortable compromise.

As a styling exercise the XJ won't set the world on fire. In contrast to the mean sportster image conveyed by the Kawasaki GPz550, the Yamaha looks very conservative. The most prominent feature, the "Buck Rogers" fairing, won't please everybody, but that's a matter of taste. We found it to be quite inoffensive in looks and function. Bikinis do help to reduce fatigue during long, high speed runs if the airstream isn't directed to the rider's head. Thankfully the XJ item doesn't buffet the helmet at visor level and set up a deafening roar.

### Mechanical maestro

This little firebreather is pushed along by a very sporty four-cylinder powerplant. The motor is similar to the larger XJs in some ways — the chain-driven double overhead

*"It tackles the role of tourer, commuter or weekend blaster with ease. Although a four-cylinder, it tips the scales only slightly heavier than Ducati's Pantah and, as a bonus, handles and stops as well as it goes."*

camshafts, the two valves per cylinder, the one-piece forged plain bearing crankshaft, the alternator sited behind the cylinder block and the YICS are all typical XJ features.

But there are major differences. Unlike the 650 and the 750, the bike has a Hy-vo chain primary drive and smaller carburettors (28 mm CV Mikunis rather than 32 mm CV Hitachis). Essentially, the 528 cm<sup>3</sup> mill is a bored and stroked

XJ400 (a model we're not destined to see in Australia) rather than a sleeved-down 650, and with a bore and stroke of 57 x 51.8 mm it's the least oversquare of the three XJs available.

Undoubtedly the 550 upholds the XJ tradition — it's a real screamer. A 10,000 rpm redline and a claimed maximum power of 39.5 kW (53 hp) promise performance plus — and it's no idle boast. A veritable wolf in sheep's clothing. The motor spins very freely to redline and beyond — and does all this quietly too.

As well as this, the motor is smooth. Rubber mounting successfully isolates most of the buzzing and the only vaguely uncomfortable vibration creeps in between 4000 and 4800 rpm.

According to the factory one of the major effects of the Yamaha Induction Control System (YICS) is improved fuel economy through more efficient combustion. A small chamber machined into the cylinder head supplies some of the fuel/air mixture to a cylinder on the induction stroke. Flammable material enters through a small venturi just above the valve seat, and since the diameter of this sub intake port is about one quarter that of the main inlet, the mixture blasts through at about four times the normal rate. The faster stream is directed around the walls of the cylinder which creates a swirl to effectively mix the main charge. On the YICS-equipped XJ750 tested TW October, we found that this system promoted greater responsiveness and good fuel economy. With the 550 the YICS is probably responsible for the bike's mid-range flexibility and most certainly contributes greatly to the bike's good fuel economy. With very careful cruising we could squeeze 25.6 km/l (72.9 mpg) out of the little XJ. Brisker riding was still economical though, returning around 23.2 km/l (66 mpg) on highway runs and 19.5 km/l (55.5 mpg) through the city. Harder pushed, the consumption dropped to 16 km/l (45.5 mpg). Whichever way you look at it, the XJ flies with economy.

The only mildly annoying feature of the motor was its slightly cold-blooded nature. A good warmup is required in cool (longer in cold) weather, and the engine often refused to keep ticking over after the first fire-up, despite experimentation with various amounts of choke. All things considered this is a very minor blot on a great little motor.

### So how does it spin?

Our session at the strip was very interesting, to say the least. An early attempt to push the XJ to finish line as quickly as possible involved clutch

dropping at 8000 rpm, and the bike responded by pulling a near-vertical wheelstand. Ah well, shuffle forward a bit more and try a few more revs. That cured the problem.

With 10,000 rpm dialled in the bike moved off the line smartly and left a smear of Japanese Dunlops on the track about 15 metres long, and if the throttle

*"The 550 motor upholds the XJ tradition — it is a real screamer and rubber-mounted for superb smoothness. It spins freely to redline (10,000 rpm) and beyond and does it all quietly. Despite its tune, the benefits of the YICS system ensure mid-range flexibility."*

was feathered until the tyres regained their traction very rapid times could be accomplished over the 400 metres. At best the bike flashed through the "quarter" in 13.2 secs at a terminal speed of 156 km/h — no mean feat for a motorcycle displacing only 528 cm<sup>3</sup>. For the record, that's 0.7 secs quicker than the RD350 waterbottle, as rapid as the XV1000 and 0.55 secs slower than the XJ750.

The Yamaha's performance aptly illustrates the rapidity in engine development over the last decade. While the ubiquitous "Honda Four", the CB750K2, could manage a standing start 400 metres in 13.6 secs, a bike built eight years later with the same number of cylinders but about 200 cm<sup>3</sup> less capacity can cross the line 0.4 secs sooner. Taking into consideration the lower weight of the XJ, both the early Honda and the new Yamaha were probably about equivalent in rear wheel horsepower output. Maybe around 1990 we'll be reporting that a new 300 cm<sup>3</sup> normally aspirated four-cylinder rocketship is capable of a 12.8 sec 400 metres streak — not at all impossible!

But how does the XJ behave in the real world of motorcycling? In a nutshell, very well indeed. The dyno curve illustrates the bike's briskness at high engine speeds. Maximum rear wheel power is 32.7 kW at a screaming 10,000 rpm (it's pretty close to that at 9000 rpm), and this is a healthy output for a 650 let alone a 550. Maximum torque is also quite substantial; 36 Nm at 8500 rpm.

But the good news doesn't end there. Despite the substantial high-rev punch the XJ is flexible at lower engine speeds. A rider can contentedly putt along at a leisurely pace through suburbia in sixth

gear, and as long as the tacho needle is to the positive side of 4000 rpm the responsiveness is excellent. Below 4000 rpm it's not too bad either, at an indicated 60 km/h the bike will pull strongly enough in top to avoid entanglements with the more adventurous tin-tops.

On the other side of the coin, if one wants to gain maximum performance a good fistful is the absolute requirement. To maintain a good driving pace out of bends engine speeds must be kept above 6000 rpm (the further the better) otherwise the motor will bog down quite badly on a handful of throttle. The dyno curve shows this too. Power increases dramatically after 6000 rpm, and in fact at 8000 rpm output has almost doubled. It's not surprising that rapid throttle openings produce a very brisk response as long as the engine is spinning freely in the upper regions of the rev range.

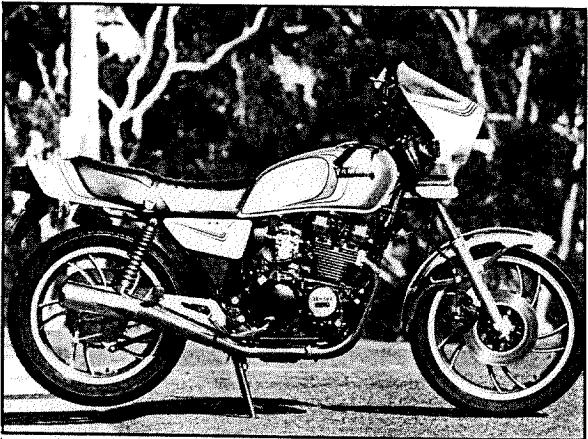
A two-faced motorcycle really. The XJ can be ridden successfully in a sedate manner but certainly produces the goods when the screws are on. A 185 km/h top speed is commendable too. Performance plus from this little multi!

#### Ace-ordinary

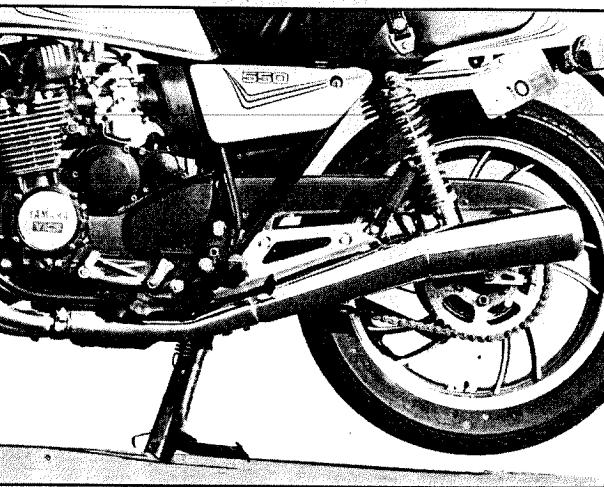
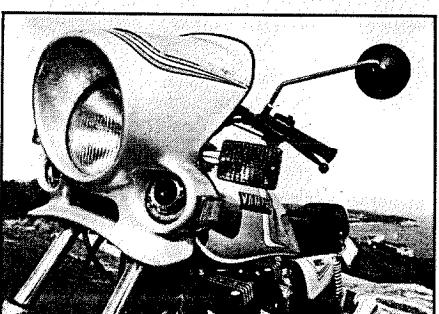
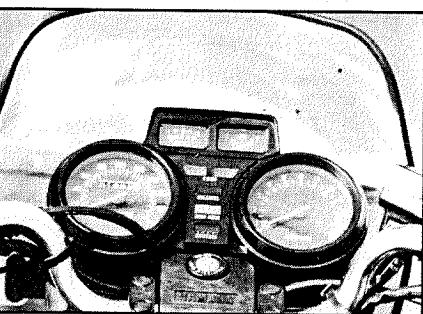
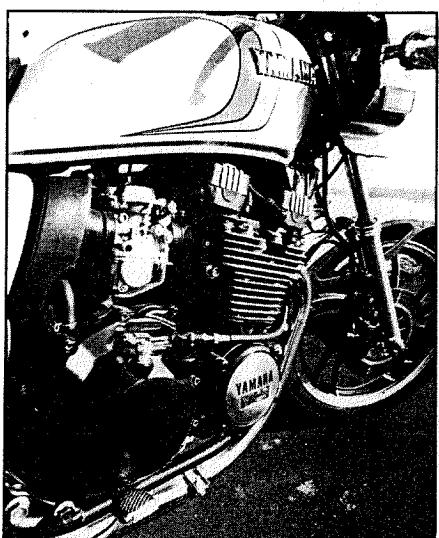
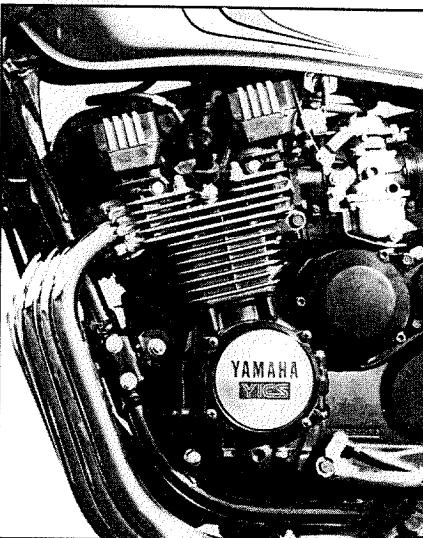
A cursory glance at the Yamaha's frame and suspension components reveals nothing startling at all. On the surface it looks like a very ordinary

*"Whichever way you look at it the XJ flies with economy. Cruising returned a best of 25.6 km/l (73 mpg) and the worst consumption we achieved with very hard riding was 16 km/l (45.5 mpg). It is another benefit of the YICS system which similarly endows the XJ750."*

system. A traditional double downtube cradle frame, ball rollers in the steering head, phosphor-bronze bushes in the swingarm, forks without air caps and rear shocks with spring preload adjustment only. Ordinary as the specifications might be, they don't translate to common-as-dirt gung-ho handling. In fact the opposite is the case; Yamaha has come up with a real winner. Suspension is excellent. The front forks sport dual rate springs which soak up small undulations extremely well but don't bottom out when the forks near the limits of travel. The plushness of the initial rate is well demonstrated by the fact that out of the 130 mm of possible travel, 40 mm is used under the weight of the bike itself. Soft, certainly, but not

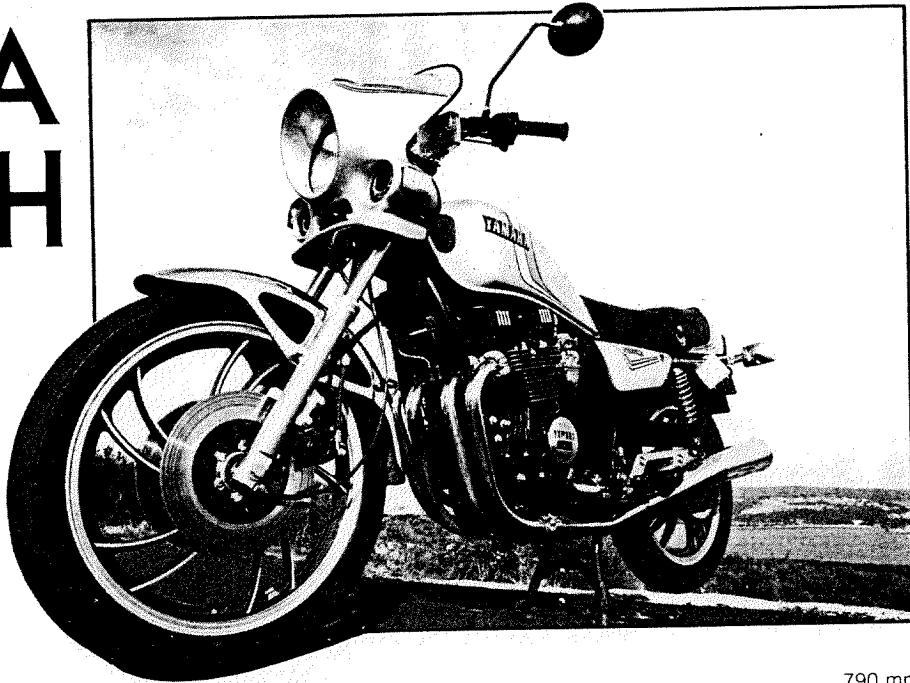


The XJ550 matches lightness with versatility with excellent motor technology courtesy of YICS. In fact, this development and Suzuki's TSCC are leaving the rest far behind. Both offer high-rev punch and excellent flexibility.



*"Buck Rogers" fairing proved surprisingly practical. Instruments are reasonable. Yamaha's excellent self-cancelling blinkers remain the best in the business and fuel gauge is welcome. Every new bike should have one. Suspension is also a cut above the crowd — it's not multi-variable and doesn't have to be!"*

# YAMAHA XJ550RH



## ENGINE

Air-cooled, transverse, double overhead camshaft, four cylinder four-stroke with two valves per cylinder, roller chain-driven cams and plain bearing crankshaft. Wet sump lubrication with oil cooler.

Maximum rear wheel power ..... 32.7 kW at 10,000 rpm  
 Maximum torque ..... 36 Nm at 8600 rpm  
 Bore x stroke ..... 57 x 51.8 mm  
 Displacement ..... 528 cm<sup>3</sup>  
 Compression ratio ..... 9.5:1  
 Maximum engine speed ..... 10,000 rpm  
 Carburetion ..... 4 x 28 mm constant vacuum Mikunis  
 Air filtration ..... Pleated paper element  
 Starter system ..... Electric only  
 Ignition ..... Magnetically triggered battery/coil

## TRANSMISSION

Hy-Vo chain primary drive through wet multiplate clutch to six-speed constant mesh gearbox with one down five up pattern. Final drive by roller chain.

Ratios (overall:1)  
 First ..... 18.70  
 Second ..... 13.32  
 Third ..... 10.57  
 Fourth ..... 8.48  
 Fifth ..... 7.09  
 Sixth ..... 6.16  
 Primary reduction: ..... 2.432  
 Secondary reduction: ..... 2.813

## FRAME AND BRAKES

Double downtube cradle frame with ball roller steering head bearings and bushed swingarm. Oil-damped, dual-rate coil spring forks and hydraulic rear units with five spring preload settings. Hydraulic double disc front and rod-operated single leading shoe drum rear brake.

Front suspension travel ..... 130 mm  
 Rear suspension travel ..... 80 mm  
 Fork rake ..... 27 degrees  
 Fork trail ..... 109 mm  
 Front brake diameter ..... 270 mm  
 Rear brake diameter ..... 200 mm  
 Front tyre ..... Dunlop F1.4 3.00 H19  
 Rear tyre ..... Dunlop K130 110/90 H18

## DIMENSIONS

Dry weight ..... 188 kg

Seat height	790 mm
Wheelbase	1415 mm
Ground clearance	155 mm
Fuel capacity (inc reserve)	16 litres
Fuel reserve	3.5 litres
Engine oil capacity	3 litres

## CALCULATED DATA

Weight to power ratio (90 kg load)	8.50 kg/kW
Specific power output	61.9 kW/l
Mean piston speed at redline revs	19 m/sec

## PERFORMANCE

<b>Acceleration</b>	
Standing 400 m	13.2 secs at 156 km/h
Average of last 3 runs	13.3 secs
Zero to 100 km/h	4.9 secs
Maximum speed	185 km/h
<b>Braking</b>	
From 100 km/h to zero	34.8 metres
Average of last three stops	35.2 metres
From 60 km/h to zero	12 metres
Average of last three stops	12.1 metres
<b>Fuel consumption</b>	
Touring	23.2 km/l (65 mpg)
City	19.5 km/l (55.5 mpg)
Hard riding	16 km/l (45.5 mpg)
Average on test	20 km/l (56.9 mpg)

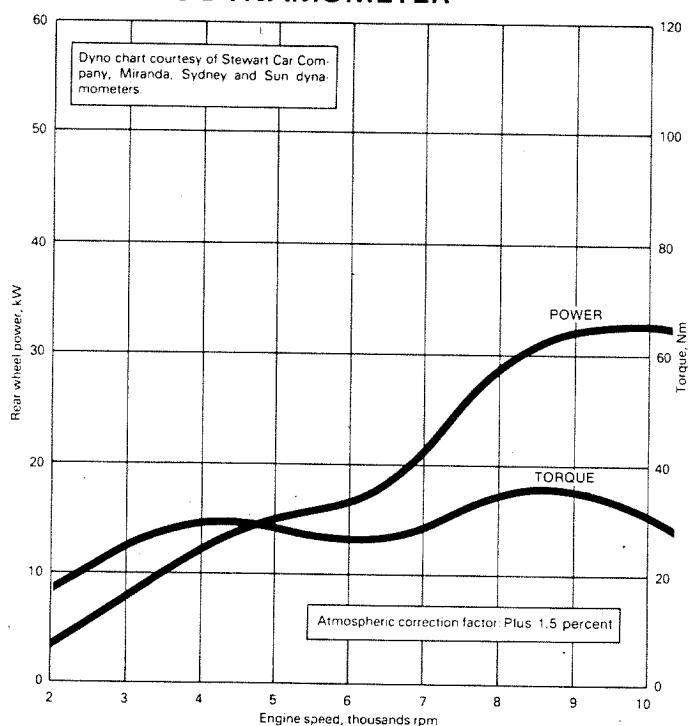
## TEST MACHINE

Manufacturer ..... Yamaha Motor Co., Iwata, Japan  
 Test machine ..... McCulloch of Australia, Seven Hills, Sydney  
 Price ..... \$2699

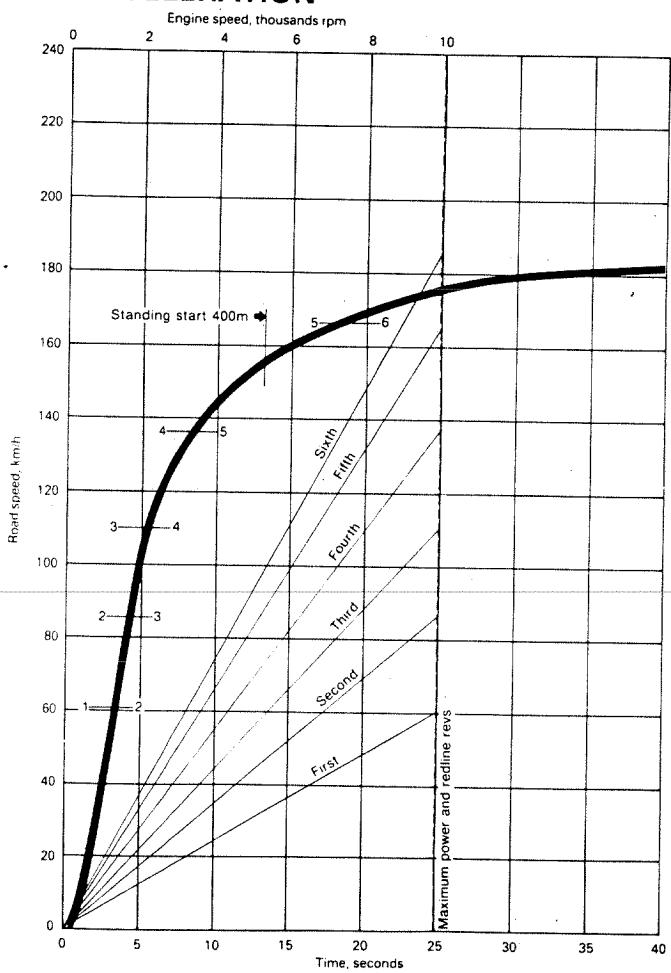
**Best points:** A smooth motor with a punchy top end complements the excellent handling, good brakes and compliant suspension to produce a beautifully-balanced sportster that's light, very forgiving and a delight to throw around. Comfort is a high point, headlight is bright with a good spread, controls are sensibly located and stands are well designed. Bike behaves nearly as well touring or commuting as it does in the sportster sphere — a great all rounder.

**Worst points:** The motor could do with a little more low and mid-range power, gear change action was a trifle vague and brakes need more feel, particularly the rear drum which is too sensitive.

## CHASSIS DYNAMOMETER



## ACCELERATION



## SUMMARY

### RATINGS

#### ENGINE

Responsiveness

Smoothness

Bottom end power

Mid range power

Top end power

Fuel economy

Starting

Ease of maintenance

Quietness

Engine braking

#### TRANSMISSION

Clutch operation

Gearbox operation

Ratio suitability

Drivetrain freeplay

#### HANDLING

Steering

Cornering clearance

Ability to forgive rider error

High speed cornering

Medium speed cornering

Bumpy bends

Tossing side to side

Changing line in corners

Braking in corners

Manoeuvring

Top speed stability

#### SUSPENSION

Front

Rear

Front/rear match

#### BRAKES

Resistance to fading

Stopping power

Braking stability

Feel at controls

#### CONTROLS

Location of major controls

Switches

Instruments

#### TWO-UP SUITABILITY

Passenger comfort

Stability with pillion

Cornering clearance two-up

#### GENERAL

Quality of finish

Engine appearance

Overall styling

Seat comfort

Riding position

Touring range

Headlight

Other lights

Stands

Rearview mirrors

Horn

Toolkit

#### VALUE FOR MONEY

	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
Responsiveness				●	
Smoothness			●	●	
Bottom end power		●		●	
Mid range power				●	
Top end power		●	●		
Fuel economy			●	●	
Starting	●				
Ease of maintenance		●	●		
Quietness			●		
Engine braking		●	●		
Clutch operation			●		
Gearbox operation		●	●		
Ratio suitability		●	●		
Drivetrain freeplay		●			
Steering				●	
Cornering clearance			●	●	
Ability to forgive rider error			●	●	
High speed cornering			●	●	
Medium speed cornering			●	●	
Bumpy bends		●		●	
Tossing side to side			●	●	
Changing line in corners			●	●	
Braking in corners			●	●	
Manoeuvring			●	●	
Top speed stability			●		
Front				●	
Rear			●	●	
Front/rear match			●	●	
Resistance to fading			●		
Stopping power		●			
Braking stability			●		
Feel at controls		●			
Location of major controls				●	
Switches			●	●	
Instruments			●		
Passenger comfort			●		
Stability with pillion			●	●	
Cornering clearance two-up			●	●	
Quality of finish			●		
Engine appearance			●	●	
Overall styling		●			
Seat comfort		●	●		
Riding position			●	●	
Touring range			●		
Headlight			●		
Other lights		●			
Stands			●		
Rearview mirrors			●		
Horn			●	●	
Toolkit	●				
Value for Money				●	

overly so. These totally stiction-free units are among the best we've seen for some time. Rear shocks are progressively wound, quite soft initially, similarly compliant and in combination with the front forks offer a very comfortable ride.

We view the XJ550's suspension as very much a step in the right direction. Although in the main multi-adjustable systems work extremely well if they're set up correctly, who wants to spend time tuning up the suspension every time road condition or load changes? One rarely gets the most out of a set-up with around 60 possible combinations unless one is prepared to do just that. It's refreshing to come across a

*"Despite the substantial high-rev punch a rider can contentedly putt along at a leisurely pace through suburbia in sixth gear as long as the tacho is better than 6000. In fact, between 6-8000 rpm on the dyno power almost doubles — the goods are there when the screws are on!"*

comparatively crude system with only spring preload adjustment that works so well over a variety of road conditions — and it performs admirably in both handling and comfort departments.

Of course perfection is very elusive, there are a few minor bitches. A weighty pillion will overwork the rear shocks and bottoming out may pose a problem over the nastier road surfaces, but a rider travelling solo with a mass of camping gear won't find the rear suspension lacking. The shocks don't seem to fade under really arduous riding conditions either. All in all, good stuff!

Other commendable sportster

features of the bike are the low weight and excellent cornering clearance. It blasts through sweepers and tight stuff extremely well, can handle the rough with the smooth, doesn't complain too much about gross rider error and it is so much FUN to throw around.

Only ultra-fast work — above 170 km/h — highlights the slight deficiencies in the bike's makeup. Steering becomes a little vague and handling generally deteriorates, not to an alarming extent, but the XJ is generally happier kept to a more sensible speed.

### **Stops and changes**

The XJ's brakes are more than sufficient to keep the little screamer well under control. Again, there's nothing flashy about the construction but it works well. A double disc with single piston floating calipers up front and a single leading shoe rear drum make up the bike's braking equipment. Overall, the 550 fared a little better during braking tests than the 650, pulling up in 34.8 metres from 100 km/h and 12 metres from 60 km/h.

The front discs do require a little more lever pressure than most other Japanese systems, they also feel a bit spongy, and don't provide optimum feedback to the rider. The RD350 front stoppers were far superior in all these aspects. Both brakes are lockable but the rear drum suffers this malady to a far greater extent. Care has to be taken not to be too heavy-footed during rapid speed wash-offs on the entry to corners if you're dropping back a cog or two.

Control positioning is excellent though, both front and rear brake levers fall easily to hand and foot. The XJ reacts safely under harsh braking conditions and although the front end does dip substantially this doesn't lead to any major stability problems.

As the only chain-drive model in the

XJ range, the 550 is quite different in other transmission components. The major alteration is the Hy-vo chain primary drive which is kept taut by a slipper tensioner/plunger device which responds to changes in oil pressure. Another obvious difference is the gearbox. Both the 750 and 650 run five-speed boxes with identical internal ratios, but the six-speeder is completely different. The 550 has both a low first and a lower top gear than the bigger XJs, and gear ratios are very well matched to the bike's power output characteristics. The close-ratio gearbox never lets the rider run out of steam. Top gear is by no means an overdrive and although the motor wouldn't quite push the bike to maximum power revs (10,000 rpm) in top, sixth wasn't so tall that a rider would be continually forced to change down while traversing undulating terrain. Top gear remains useful both on the highway and in suburbia.

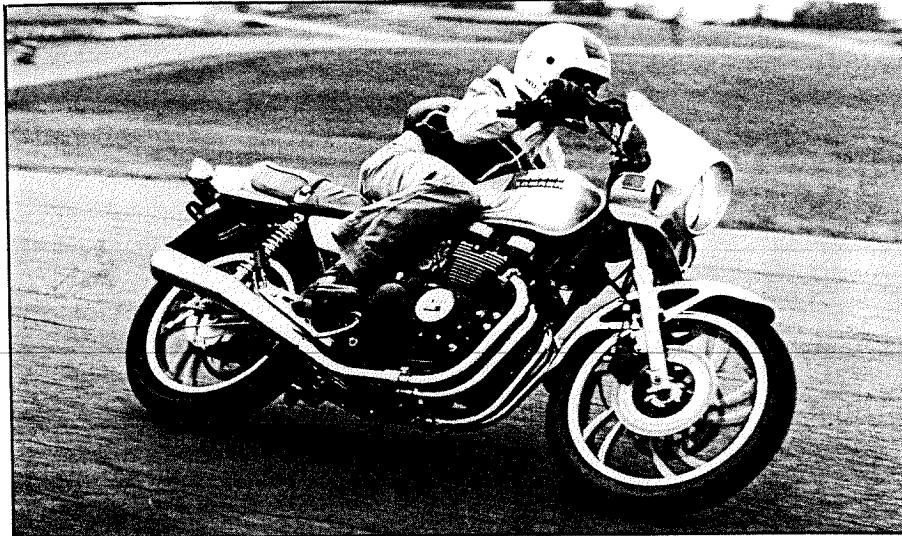
Gearbox action was heavy and not as positive as we've found on most other current Yamahas. The vagueness in shift action could probably be traced to an overly strong return spring in the shift mechanism, but apart from that feature the gearbox operated superbly. The clutch was beyond criticism.

### **How we saw it**

In every aspect the XJ's appearance belies its chosen role. The bike looks too nice to be the mean, aggressive sportster that it is. The very subdued silver paintwork would make the bike totally unobtrusive if it wasn't for the unusually-styled fairing. Overall finish was excellent, although the rubber edging on the fairing had come adrift at a few points.

As we've come to expect from Yamaha, the headlight is beautifully bright with good spread and a sharp cut-off, especially on low beam. A handlebar-mounted choke control is a very sensible idea and thankfully Yamaha has seen fit not to place a bulky horn/flasher switch just above the choke lever (ala XJ750). With the bigger XJ we found a gloved mitt would invariably give the horn a quick blast when attempting to ease on a little choke. The excellent self-cancelling blinkers are fitted and the only real complaint about the switchgear is the slight inaccessibility of the flasher control. Horns and mirrors rate average only.

Instrumentation is flashy but effective enough — just. Both tachometer and speedo are easy to decipher, although the latter device proved to be about nine percent too optimistic at 60 and 100 km/h. A small fuel gauge and voltmeter



are sited at the top of the console but both didn't work that accurately. The needle in the fuel gauge would drift down to the red zone long before the reserve supply was needed and the voltmeter eventually developed a severe case of Parkinson's Disease in its pointer (no, it didn't try to interview famous passers-by — wrong Parkinson!).

A minimum number of idiot lights are there to remind the rider which way he's going (if he's forgotten since pressing the indicator switch), whether there's enough oil, whether the high beam or low beam is activated or whether the bike's in neutral. Makes us motorcyclists sound like a mighty dim lot doesn't it? Often wondered why they were called idiot lights.

The hinged seat is fairly narrow at the front but is supportive enough and gets wider and more sparsely padded towards the rear. It isn't super plush, but both rider and pillion are pampered by the compliant suspension so there were only a few complaints about lack of comfort from pillions.

Maintenance won't be too much of a hassle. For the most difficult procedures of valve clearance adjustment and carburettor synchronisation you'll require part number 90890-01245 for shim replacement and YICS shut-off tool 90890-04068 for the carbies, apart from the usual tools. Other than that, it's child's play. There's fully transistorised ignition and readily accessible oil filter, battery, air cleaner and fuses.

Basically, the model is a well-engineered motorcycle where particular care has been taken with ergonomics. All controls and most switches fall easily to hand, the riding position will suit most statures and the shorties won't have any trouble reaching the ground. The centre stand is a snack to use.

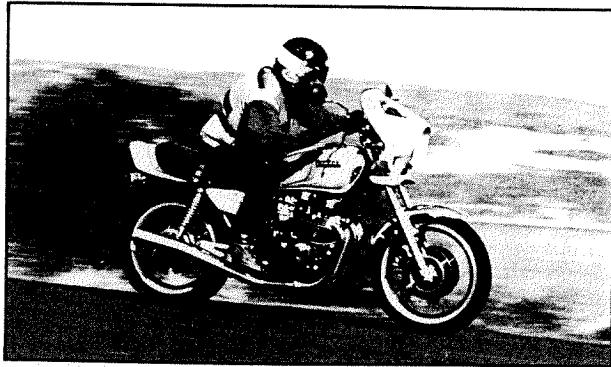
## Conclusions

What more can we say? The XJ sets a new standard for middleweight motorcycles. A light, comfortable bike, a fine handler and a bullet performer which is tourable, raceable and commutable. A real rider's bike which will provide a thrill a minute and manages to infuse a great element of fun into all this — it's definitely one of the best-balanced sportster packages we've encountered.

The only unfortunate factor is the price. It is dearer than the other Japanese 500s and most likely you'll be able to buy the shaft drive 650 at a slightly lower price.

For our money we'd take the 550 — it's well worth the little extra.

— D.B.



## Second Opinion — by Julia Cullen —

Please, please Yamaha, I want the 550 back. I'll even do your good corporate personages a straight swap on my un-dingled XJ650 for your pre-dingled 550. Love is like the corners between Khancoban and Kiandra in the Snowy Mountains of NSW — blind.

Am I kidding? Not really. The XJ550 is a great bike because it is one of those rare machines about which all you can say when you get off it is: "Wow, wasn't that a lot of fun?" It does most things right, to make the ride sheer enjoyment. It's nimble as all hell, it feels light as a 250, it stops dead when you need it to, and the engine is really spirited (ask a 600 cm<sup>3</sup> class road racer who's campaigned one). Without the YICS head, I have my personal doubts that it would be as much fun — it would probably classify as "exhausting" and would need to have a spare left foot in the tool-kit. Still, if you like working gearboxes hard (and being an ex-two-stroker I still can't help myself) then that's not a whinge. However, YICS gives the bike more ability to pull from lower revs than a conventionally breathing/mixing bike. It also means you have to put tigers in the tank less often.

As a lady's bike, the 550 scores well. Everything is well located, the seat is amenable to stunted 155 cm bods, the seat is not too wide to hinder ground-gripping and it's light and well-balanced to manoeuvre. On the move at any speed, the bike feels far lighter than it really is and has that nice, taut racey feel; in short, it tends to inspire you to greater things (hopefully not greater than your capabilities). Stepping off most 250s, you'll be subject to the "whole new world" syndrome if you get it on with the 550.

As the littlest of the XJ family (at least of those marketed in Australia: Japan has the XJ400 — and in three versions!) the 550 is the most endearing. If you don't like the fairing, you can do one of two things: You can put it down the road and destroy it, but that has certain personal drawbacks and is not the

course we'd recommend. Or you can take it off. Apparently there are quite a few naked 550s running round at present.

Some more of the good things about the 550 (besides the engine, gearbox — which is a bit on the stiffish side but does loosen up to some extent — and fine handling) are the excellent headlight, dual horns that make your presence well heard, the tried 'n' true Yam self-cancelling blinkers, lock-up chain (but don't stake your wallet on it — it's not exactly hefty), comfortable seating position, sensible side-stand and centre-stand action. And it looks good too!

A few words of caution though. If the 550 is anything like the 650 (and it is), the rear shocks will be lucky to see out 10,000 km (depending on the weight you carry and the punishment you deal out to them) but that's more or less par for the course for Jap OE shocks. Also, make sure that you always use a really top-quality oil and change it at least as often as recommended in the manual. What suited your Honda/Kwak/whatever does not necessarily suit this four-stroke. The 650 (in my experience with that model) rarely uses any oil; it just destroys it. Take care. When your gearbox starts getting grately, clunkily, grindey, you should have changed the oil already. Look after your XJ and you'll have yourself a great bike for some years to come.

I'm still trying to find out what that long, funny, oily thing that runs round two toothed wheels at the back is. Someone told me very quietly on the way to the sanatorium that "it doesn't have shaftdrive like yours, dear" but it's far too awful for me to think about right now.

PS. We didn't crash the 550 — McCulloch Yamaha took care of that for us. Spoil-sports. (That one was only used for photography. The test bike was a perfect newly-hatched-from-its-crate number.) \*