

"IS IT TRUE WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THE . . ."

# DUCATI DESMO

And I bet you thought the Italians invented spaghetti too, didn't you?

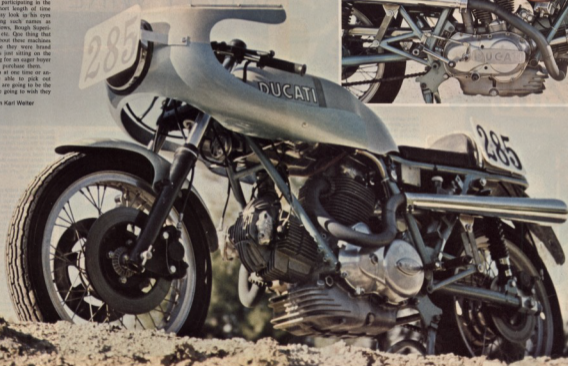
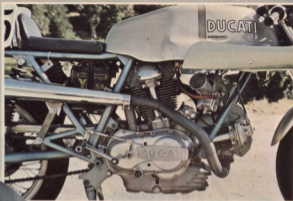
Written by Jeff Peck

Photos by Larry Gaynor

Legendary motorcycles are easy to find. All you have to do is ask any rider who has been participating in the sport for even a short length of time and he'll get a glassy look to his eyes and start mentioning such names as Vincent Black Shadows, Brough Superior, Norton Manx, etc. One thing that is hard to realize about these machines is that at one time they were brand new shiny machines just sitting on the dealer's floor waiting for an eager buyer to come along and purchase them.

Don't we all wish at one time or another that we were able to pick out which bike or bikes are going to be the ones that people are going to wish they

Bike borrowed from Karl Welter



had their hot little hands on in a few years? Well don't say I didn't tell you so about this particular bike.

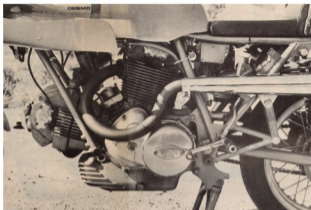
A motorcycle like the Ducati Desmo seems to be destined for the collectors garage from the time they roll off the assembly line. One of the most determining factors in this particular case is the fact that there aren't many of these bikes floating around. Another determining factor in this world of riders who are sold on motorcycles that are basically appliances is that you just don't own a Desmo, you live with it.

You have to treat it nicely, smile at it, wipe it off, make sure that nothing soths the appearance of your lovely mistress.

Being your mistress is just about what it comes down to. From an investment standpoint it's costing you a lot of money. You have to feed it the right kinds of oils or she'll run badly and if you continue to ignore it, boom. You can only take it to certain places to have it worked on. After all you don't take your mistress out for a quick hot dog and some cheap beer, do you? It's the same with the Desmo.



Narrow frontal appearance lets you know that there is nothing hanging out in the wind that shouldn't be there.



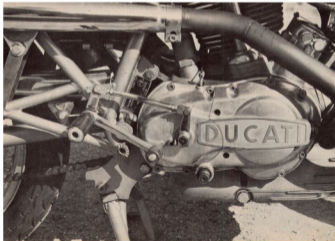
Long narrow motor is packed into the double down tube frame. If you have to take the motor out all you do is unbolt it and drop it to the floor.

Underneath this innocent looking little cover lurks the famed desmodromic valve train. Two camshafts on each cylinder both open and close the valves.



One pump on the huge Del'Orto carbs and the engine fires over easily and settles into a lumpy idle. Carburetion was very efficient and you never had the feeling that the bike was on the verge of loading up.

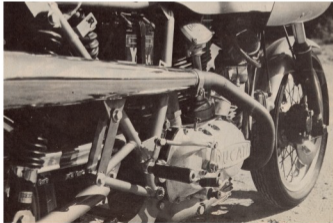
Shifting was a little backwards from most motorcycles that we have ridden, you had to shift down to go up and up to go down. Other than that the transmission had absolutely no faults at all. All shifts were buttery smooth and clunk free.





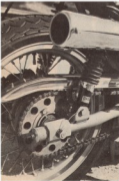
Rear brake had the same feeling that the front did, you had to push the lever for what seemed like a long way before they felt like they were working.

The only problem with these upswep pipes is that they had a tendency to burn your legs if you weren't careful. This could be a very uncomfortable experience in a race.



Mazrocchi front shocks gave excellent road feel and made sure that your commoads to the front of the bike were transmitted to the road. Scarab front brakes didn't feel that strong. You didn't have to apply a lot of pressure to stop, but they didn't have a very positive feel.

Biggs shocks handled the job of suspending the rear end and there can be no complaints about the way they work. Notice the huge chain adjusters at the swingarm, very heavy duty.



Every once in awhile you have to buy your beauty something expensive. In one case it's jewelry, in the other it's pistons or gears or tires, whatever. It all comes down to the fact that you have to steal time out of your world to sink into your mistress' arms and rub her hard. Down some fast straights, around a few tricky corners and suddenly you forget all of the time and money that you have spent on this beauty. The only thought that's passing through your head is that soaring joy that a smooth powerful motorcycle gives.

Ducati's venture into building desmo-dromic valved racers did not begin with the 750 Super Sport. They have been fielding this type of racing engine since the 600s when they had raced a single cylinder 125 that had three cams and a desmo type valve system on it. One of the cams operated the intake, the other the exhaust and the third closed both of the valves.

After this Ducati brought out a few 250 and 350 model desmos in the late sixties and then shortly thereafter produced a 500cc desmo by grafting two 250 desmo engines together. The world first saw the 750 desmo at the 1972 Isola race. Riders Paolo Smart and Bruno Spaggiari rode them to a one-two finish in the maiden race. That's not a bad beginning for a bike like this one.

Since that time the Super Sport has become a more common sight in a field of production racers and when they get out on the track they will usually make a very good showing for themselves.

But, what is a Ducati Desmo anyway?

Starting with the most basic difference it's what many writers like to refer to as the Desmosmosis disease of Dr. Fabio Tagliani, that rather bizarre looking "V" shaped master sling low

in the frame of the Ducati. What sets this motor apart from any of the others that happen to be sitting on the starting line of a production road race is the fact that the valves are not only mechanically opened, but they are also closed by a rocker arm of sorts.

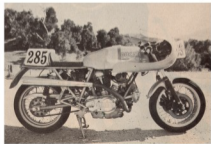
This particular arm slips under a keeper on the top of the valve and driven by its own cam slits the valve in a most positive fashion. Like all good things this system has its good and bad points. Valve adjustment is basically a pain in the ass.

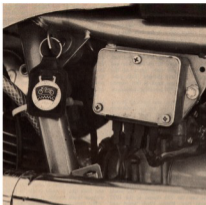
Since you aren't working with the loose tolerances of a regular valve spring actuated system, your valves require constant attention. This wouldn't be so bad, but you have to take the top end off the motor to adjust the closing clearances.

Considering the hassles that you have to go through just to adjust the valves, you then realize that the Desmo was a motor designed for one purpose in mind, and that's going very fast. When I first got on the bike I was amazed at the amount of low end and mid range power the bike had. It idles very easily and feels like it could cruise in traffic without really trouble at all.

But then you start getting the feeling that the bike is really not that happy just plodding along. The first time that you really start to let the bike stretch its legs you realize what you're being snatched.

The power surge is not like the feeling you get from a strong running two stroke, it's more like coasting down a moderately steep hill and then all of a sudden find yourself going a hell of a lot faster than you thought you were. One of the contributing factors in this rush of speed is that engine noise is almost nonexistent. You have a very throaty exhaust note, which the upswep pipes seem to have more of, but you





Since this is theoretically a street bike, the ignition switch is hidden underneath the seat on the left side. If you are wearing a pair of gloves the key is just a bit of a hassle to get off.

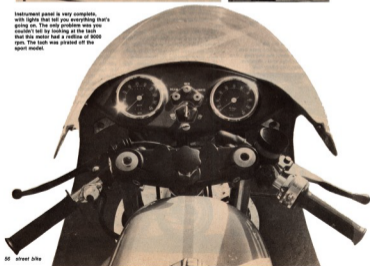


Small Japanese battery slips into the tight hole underneath the seat rather neatly. It provides enough juice to start the bike with the kicker and get it going.

Reservoir for the rear disc brake is mounted high up on the frame on the left side. It's a neat, compact unit.



Instrument panel is very complete, with lights that tell you everything that's going on. The only problem was you couldn't tell by looking at the tach that this motor had a redline of 8000 rpm. The tach was geared off the sport model.



don't have to suffer with a lot of thrashing sounds from the valve train. This can be attributed to the .002 clearance which the valves are set to.

Naturally handling is one of the strongest points that the Italians build into their motorcycles. The Ducati feels very secure and just wants to go around the corners a little faster than you might think is safe. But if you really trust the motorcycle then you'll find out what it's like to fly around a bend in the road. Lean the big bike over and roll on the throttle, the engine just keeps on throbbing faster and faster. The more you lean it over the better it feels. The Desmo responds to your every move, the steering is so precise that you find yourself looking for those fast turns in the road so you can once again give yourself that special thrill that ceases from tracking smoothly and swiftly through a fast corner.

One thing that nobody could ever accuse the Italians of is spending too much time on the fiberglass that they put on their motorcycles. I found this was true on my Laverda SF-C and I see that it's no different on the Ducati. What it comes down to is that the chopper gun glass that the Italians use on the bikes is too rigid for this type of use. All owners of Desmos can be assured that after a short period of time wherever the glass is attached to the bike they are going to find stress cracks spreading out.

About the only way to solve a dilemma like this is to get better fiberglass, or forget about running a fairing. There are a few good glass companies around that make high quality products and you'll find that most of these use a hand lay-up method. It takes a little more time, but you get a lighter product that is actually stronger.

You could go over the entire bike with a fine tooth comb and find many things that would make you start to wonder about the attention that is paid to details by the manufacturers of such an expensive motorcycle, but for some reason the Ducati still would come out smelling like a rose, though a somewhat tattered rose.

Why it comes out smelling like a rose is because it's a race bike, pure and simple. On a machine that you have to depend on for consistent high speeds and fast cornering, appearances naturally have to take a back seat to the all important mechanicals. As the old saying goes, "Function before form".