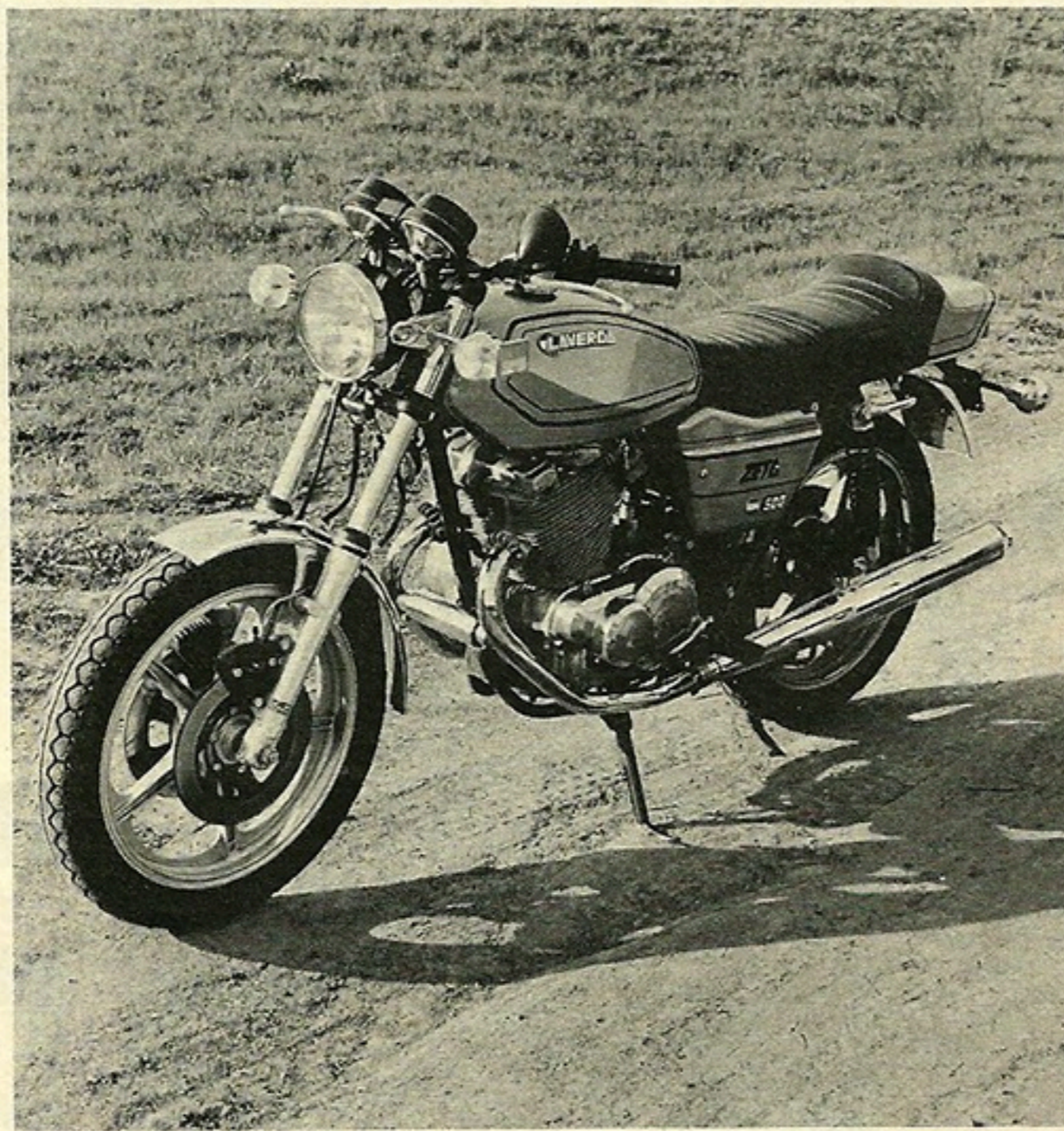


Remember yesteryear's Italian road rockets? How impractical they were to own? How they used parts that no one could find? How they made a hungry tiger seem even-tempered? Today not all Ital-O-Bikes are like that. A few of them even make sense to own. Then there's the Laverda Zeta. It lies somewhere between yesterday and today.

LAVERDA 500 ZETA

● BY DEFINITION, AN ITALIAN sports motorcycle should be handsome, costly, light, spirited, quirky and rare. The Europeans have long approached motorcycle manufacturing differently than Japanese companies; operating from smaller industrial and financial bases, the Euro-builders can't produce motorcycles with the same cost-effectiveness as the Japanese. Nor are the trans-Atlantic bikes as well detailed as the trans-Pacific scooters. If gas caps go on crooked, well, who cares? The Europeans concentrate on basics. Should the manufacturing economics—or lack of them—mean the motorcycles will cost \$6,000, then so be it. In the European view, he who wants one will pay.

European motorcycles are generally lighter than comparative Japanese mounts. They place less emphasis on rider comfort and more on roadholding. Less attention to faddish styles, more on function. They aren't as nimble in stop-and-go city traffic as Japanese motorcycles, but the trans-Atlantic machines are surer on fast stretches of ground. The Euro-bikes are not usually built as machines for all things to all riders; they tend to be aimed in single directions. Nevertheless, the Europeans have not stood flat-footed and blind in the face of Japanese progress and the march of DOT regulations. Through the past decade, the Europeans have seen some of their market disappear into the waiting bank accounts of the Other Side. Noise and pollution requirements have shuttled them into a



tighter range than before, and the Continental bikes are now reflecting more what the buyer wants—and noting what he won't stand for.

The Laverda 500 Zeta reflects a growing awareness of this fact. Introduced last year, the bike is a performance, sports motorcycle; it also carries many of the same accoutrements as more luxury-oriented motorcycles—an electric starter, dual saddle, full instrumentation and a glove-box tail section. The cycle has a certain "finished" quality that traditionally has escaped 500cc Italian roadsters.

Sitting astride the Zeta, you feel it's not an ordinary 500 street bike. The handlebar is relatively low, and the footpegs are high. This combination is good for

cornering posture and cornering clearance. The low handlebar allows the wind to buoy your head and torso, so it is just right for high-speed straight line comfort. The 31.5-inch-high saddle is long enough for two full-sized people, but it's pretty narrow, supporting only the center of your hindquarters.

Choose one of three keys (different ones are included for the ignition, fork and seat locks) and put it in the console-mounted ignition switch. Don't bother reaching for a kickstart lever; there isn't one. And in the case of our Zeta test bike, this proved unfortunate. If (and when) the battery discharges, the electric starter is useless and you must push-start the bike. This chore confronted us frequently, although the battery and 150-watt alternator

appeared to be in good condition.

Once started and rocked off its centerstand or tilted upright off its spring-loaded sidestand, the 500 is ready to go. The clutch and brake levers have sharp edges—thick gloves are best for avoiding some discomfort while working them.

The clutch action is typically European: smooth and predictable. But it's stiff, too; a stronger-than-normal grip is necessary. The transmission requires light, although somewhat long, nudges at its lever to change gears. Like any other ratchet shift motorcycle, the Laverda has neutrals: but unlike most others, unless you're careful about shifting, you'll snag one of them. Don't be forceful, just firm: then the Laverda shifts fine. If you don't bother