

LAVERDA'S LIFELINE?

A new 650 twin was launched by Laverda last year as the bike that is to revive the fortunes of the great Italian marque. Neil Webster discovers that the new bike has all the classic attributes of the factory's great sporting models.

WITHOUT going into the 'what makes a classic?' debate, in my book any Laverda is a 'classic' as soon as it rolls off the production line. And the new generation Laverda 650 is no different.

The struggling Italian factory faced something of a dilemma when they had to decide what machine they were going to pin their hopes of revival on. Should they follow the path of a company like Aprilia and go for an all-new performance profile, or was the Ducati route the best way home - combining modern ideas with yesterday's concepts?

They chose the Ducati way and it looks like being a winner. The engine department can trace its lines clearly back to the definitely classic Montjuic 500cc road bikes and endurance racers, while the chassis and ancillary designers rummaged through the parts bin and came up with some of the best bolt-on bits currently available.

The majority of those parts are sourced in Europe, allowing Laverda to boast that the 650 uses

more European bits than any other sports bike currently under production.

It's a list that reads like an index to a European industry directory. White

Power suspension front and rear, Webber Marelli fuel injection system, Marchionni wheels, Brembo brakes... But at the heart of the bike is an engine that is pure Laverda.

LAVERDA 650 FORMULA



The Laverda can hold its own in the cornering stakes. Stunning looks in bright yellow. Very sexy - but not for the pillion.

Two big parallel cylinders give a capacity of 668cc and use oil cooling rather than the ubiquitous liquid cooling favoured by the four-cylinder Japanese competition. The layout preserves an element of unavoidable vibration, but it's nothing like the Laverdas of old.

I hate the idea that a design flaw should be fobbed off as 'character', but the vibes come in enough to give a reminder that you are not riding just another 600cc sports bike while never becoming uncomfortable enough to be a worry.

And you do have to keep reminding yourself that this isn't

really a CBR, FZR or ZZR competitor. The twin cylinder engine can't compete with such sporting Japanese offerings and riders used to them, or trying to keep up with mates mounted on them, will find the Laverda lacking a bit of extra top end speed.

Don't get me wrong. It's not slow - far from it for a 650 twin - but modern 600 fours will easily outpace it. Laverda quote a top speed of 225 kph from the 70 bhp output (about 138 mph), but I'd be sceptical about seeing that on any normal road.

I'd look for around 125 hard earned mph, but that's still quite respectable when you bear in mind the engine type.

In fact, given the engine vibes and the rorty sound and free-voicing character of the motor, the bike seems to be going much faster than it actually is and that means more fun for less trouble.

The gearbox also lets it down in comparison with the Japanese competition. These days it's hard

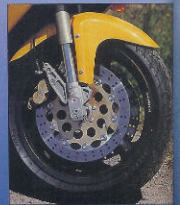


to make a mess with a Japanese box, but the six-speed Laverda unit demands a firm touch. Hurry a down change when diving into a bend and you will find yourself in a false neutral drifting to exactly where you don't want to be.

This happened to me when I tried one of the first demonstrators into the country last year and again when I rode this bike. It's something you only do once before taking more care in future.

Chassis and handling wise the 650 can more than hold its own. Unlike their older bikes, the new Laverda's controls are light and smooth - no need to get down to the gym for a few arm curls before pulling in the clutch - and the chassis technology offers a superb package.

The aluminium twin spar frame with the fuel tank located under the seat offers a low centre of gravity and begs for the bike to





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SPECIFICATION

ENGINE: Twin cylinder, dual four stroke with oil cooling. Bore and stroke 78.5 x 69mm. Capacity 688cc. Compression ratio 9:1. Carburation, Weber-Marelli fuel injection. Maximum power 70bhp at 8900rpm. Maximum torque 60ft lbs at 7300rpm.

TRANSMISSION: Six speed gearbox, wet multi-plate clutch, final drive chain.

CHASSIS: Aluminium twin spar frame with rising rate rear linkage. 40mm WP upside down telescopic forks with adjustable compression and rebound damping. Single WP rear shock with adjustable pre load, compression and rebound damping. Brembo brakes, twin fully floating 320mm front discs with four piston calipers, single 245mm rear disc with two-piston caliper. Tyres Pirelli Bridgestone GT, 120/70 x 17 front, 170/60 x 17 rear.

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES: Fuel capacity 16 litres (3.5 Imp). Dry weight 177kg (390lbs). Overall height 1375mm (54.1ins). Seat height 803mm (31.7ins).

PRICE: £7900 plus £250 on road charge.

WARRANTY: 12 months unlimited mileage.



The wooden fence is next door to 'The Fox' in Harrowden. Last Summer seems a long time ago...

be heeled over deep into bends.

The WP upside down front forks and rear suspension unit have adjustable compression and rebound (although I didn't really have time to play with them) and are just as firm and predictable as you would expect. The four-piston Brembo brakes with twin 320mm discs up front and single rear 245mm disc are also more than up to the job.

The only major drawback was that it was awful to ride with a pillion on board. The rear seat pad is so high that even a small passenger totally upsets the balance and I don't feel happy at all when riding two-up. That feeling was quickly transmitted to the passenger's port bottle, who hated life on a Laverda.

That niggle aside, this really is a great bike. Big fun. I loved it.



Summer's day in Rutland on a superb bike - pure bliss.

