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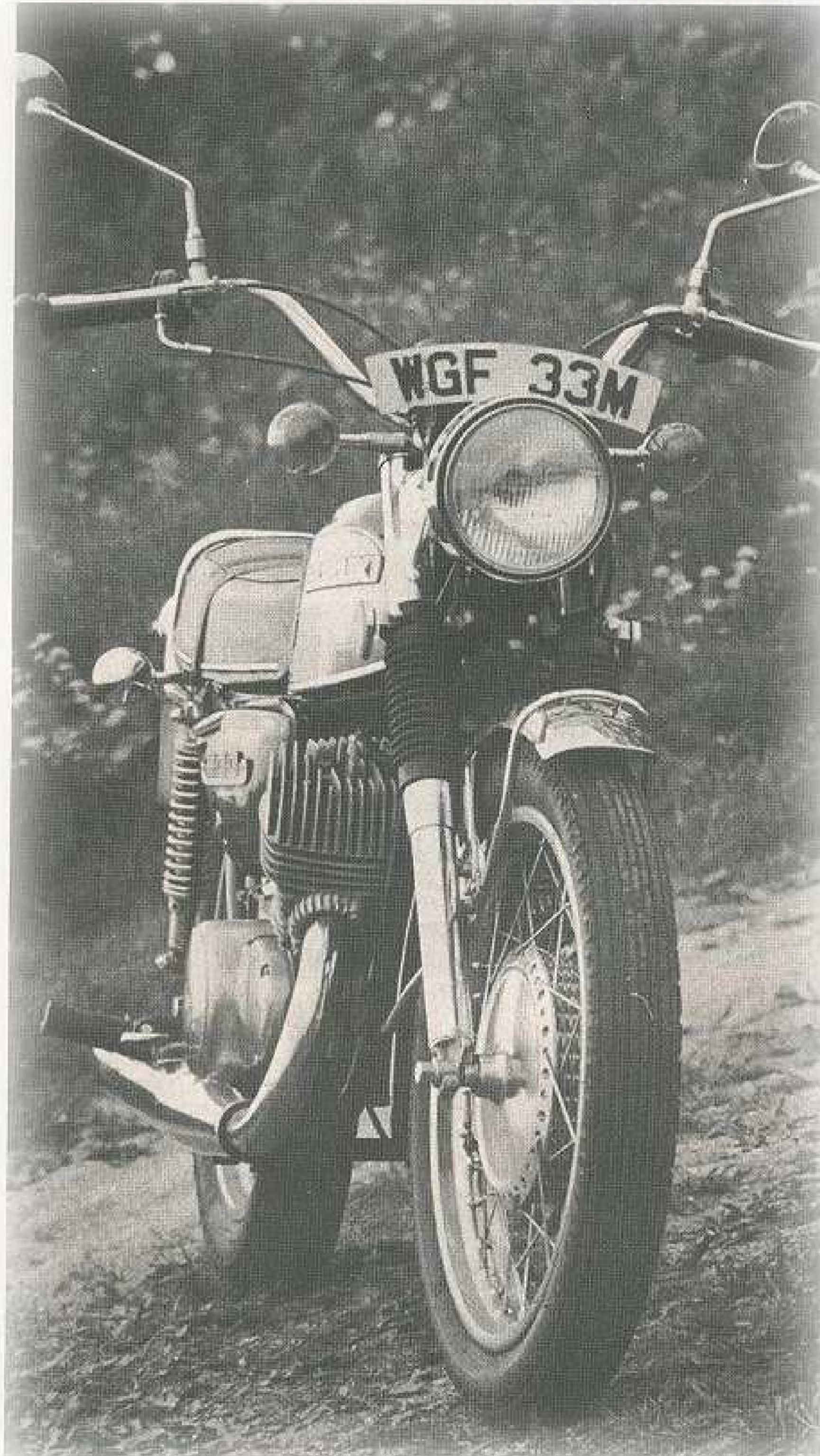
IT WASN'T very long ago that the Suzuki Cobra 500 c.c. two-stroke twin was being brandished by Suzuki as the hottest thing on two wheels. By one of those ironies of fate they are currently running a series of advertisements on the latest version "running cool even in Death Valley" just as we have the latest 1974 model on test as an example of a mild, cool, middleweight machine. It's funny how a few years and a single model can transform a common view: the Honda 750-4 completely changed the face of motorcycling with the coming of the technical masterpiece with civilised appurtenances. Now one looks beyond a Honda 4 and seizes on the latest Italian nine-days wonder: the Four is a part of life and of everyday motorcycling. The Suzuki T500 arrived in a world that regarded a big twin two-stroke with great reserve, almost mirth. Yet, after the horrific fuel consumption of the first Cobras had registered, the reliability moan vanished, and now that the T500 is quiet, economical and very nice to ride, it is almost the standard "it's solid, reliable, good value and big enough to do most jobs well" motorcycle - much to Suzuki's satisfaction, as they keep on wheeling them out in their thousands. But the 500 twin has been completely buried by the tide of big and shiny motorcycles, and somehow takes a back seat to the watercooled 750 or the 550 three with its fancy four pipes. Yet, take a look at the Production racing results: TT wins and 500 Miler victories have left their mark on the sales figures, and after the TT victory the sales gave a mighty bound, thereby directly influencing the decision to form the Suzuki GB racing team. At club and national race meetings up and down the country the Suzuki 500 is a surefire runner in the PR classes, and in the absence of Yoshimura'd Hondas they tend to win, too . . . and in very standard trim indeed.

The people who have bought T500s all seem to be very happy with them, and have certainly kept them far longer than one would have expected. Why is this?

The Suzuki is a big small machine: it does not have the height, the mass, the width or the weight of modern 750s, or even modern "500s" like the 550-3. The handling of the machine about the garage is of a small machine, and the slim seat helps to retain this feel when on board. Once moving, the 500 has a quite remarkable ability to pull high gears at low r.p.m. This is really a big bike feature - and is not adequately present in the R75/5, might I add - and helps immeasurably to give a relaxed and controlled feeling to the machine on the move. The carburation and porting alteration introduced as an almost immediate reaction to the reception of the Cobra have given the Suzuki a delightful spread of torque: 2,000 r.p.m. in top gear is quite acceptable to the motor, and the engine pulls sweetly up to about 3,500 or 4,000 before vibration sets in. When the vibration does start it is severe and becomes quite remarkably uncomfortable above 5,000. To use the 500 to full r.p.m. limits is an unrewarding experience as one's foot can be firmly but steadily shaken off the footrest, as one's hands go to sleep under the shaking.

The front brake is a twin-leading-shoe affair that works adequately, but it is difficult to be enthusiastic about it as it simply works, fading a bit as it used, and always stopping, the machine with a faintly tired air. The tyres front and rear seem to fit the vintage Japanese theme of the T500. They grip well enough in the dry, although the squeals at mild brake pressures discourage one from pressing the front too hard. The rear

Suzuki T500, 1974 style... a mild, cool middleweight



The up-to-the-minute version of the Suzuki compared with its 1969-70 forebear: remarkably little difference externally (but where's the tyre inflator now?) but one or two carburettor modifications



tyre is fine in the dry apart from a distinct tendency to track along lines on the road, but then once the wet weather arrives . . . I had two unnerving slides under very mild braking at low speeds in the wet, and felt very wary from then on. On the racetrack the T500 has proved itself time and again, once given the advantage of a good set of tyres and dampers.

The front mudguard is solid and works well, keeping much of the water from the rider instead of aiding it in its progress onto the rider's knees as is done so successfully by certain other makes. The headlamp might at one time have been regarded as excellent, but the presence of 12 volt electrical equipment on even Italian machines has now deprived the Suzuki of any distinction in this quarter. The main beam was adequate for the job, and the dip suffered from a strange pattern that did not seem to be very sensible. The handlebar controls for the lighting were very neat and easy to use, and the well-lit and well-marked tachometer and speedometer are equally well designed. The handlebars are high wide and ugly. They are rubber mounted in a vain attempt to hold vibration at bay, and to rub in the hopeless attitude of the designers even the handlebar mirrors have rubber isolators in the stem to make the mirrors usable. The depressed Japanese engineer who decided to go to these lengths might take some heart from the fact that both handlebar and mirror isolation work well over a considerable range of r.p.m., and it is hardly possible to carp when the vibration only gets through outside the normal cruising range of r.p.m.

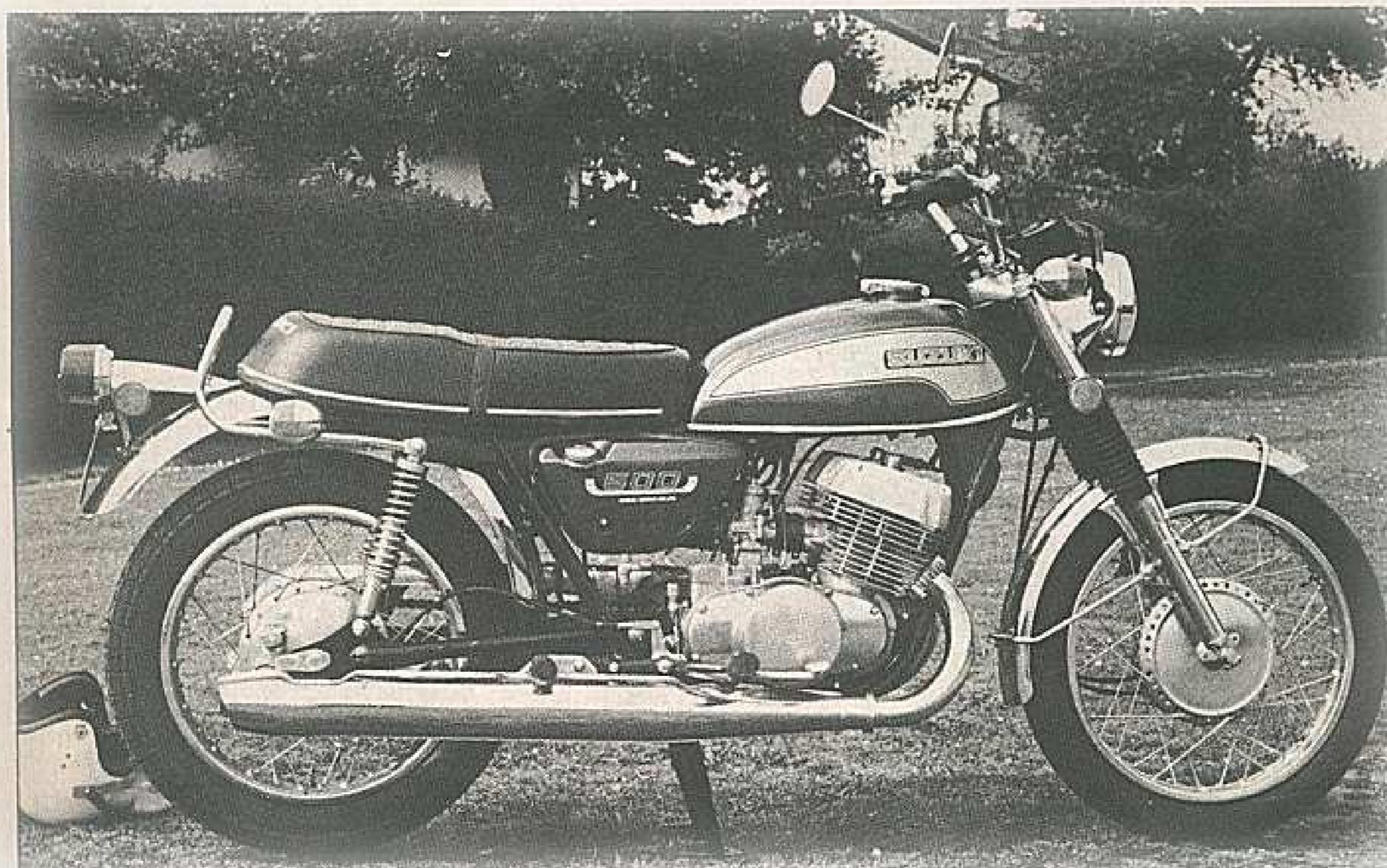
The tank looks a lot bigger than it is and, in spite of the great improvement in fuel consumption over the Cobra tested about six years ago, the 2.8 gallons that went in only produced between 38 and 42 mpg in mixed town

and country use. The cruising speed of an indicated 85 on motorways for 30 miles at a time required full throttle and was in fact the top speed under these conditions on many occasions, although once an indicated 95-100 crept up under favourable conditions. The overall performance was closely similar to the old Yamaha 350 c.c. R5 model up to 80 m.p.h., and rather worse than the 380 Suzuki subsequently. Two up, the T500 would hold an indicated 80 with little if any to come, translating to about 75 real m.p.h. Not too different from any other 500 or good 350, really, and probably a bit more economical than any 350 could manage at that sort of speed. On reflection, 80 two-up sounds so slow: the degree of exaggeration of modern "speedometers" is such that one hears complaints that 350s won't hold 80 two up on wide handlebars . . . which, when converted into straight bars and a solo rider, equates to around 100 mph in general for bikes of a 350 c.c. style of torque.

The Suzuki shows its strength here, and really eats up the distance into wind and two-up. With the wind behind, the Suzuki was flogged up to an indicated 90-93 m.p.h. and the attendant vibrations were so severe that the passenger lost her grip on a sweater that she was carrying when shifting around to try to escape the toothgrinding tingle. Let the Suzuki drop back down to about 60 and it is mild and smooth enough for comfort. The rate of oil consumption is remarkably low; the level barely shifted over several hundred miles. The Suzuki positive feed system is much more efficient in its use of lubricant than the Yamaha or Kawasaki variants. The oil pump assemblage is fitted to the top at the rear of the crankcases, and the feed pipes can be seen twisting their way to the crankshaft bearings.

The gearbox has five speeds and a very nice action. Switching from a BMW to the Suzuki gave it a pretty easy mark to beat, but the comparison with a Yamaha RD250 gearbox placed the Suzuki firmly as a good gearbox by the

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standards of a few years ago. Positive, but heavy, with a long action, it was difficult to miss a gear and engagement was commendably quiet. The wet clutch dragged a little and made neutral selection difficult at a halt. Once on the move the neutral selection was precise and easy to engage. A dated feature was the lack of a primary gear kickstart engagement point: one must find neutral to start the Suzuki, and had it been easier to obtain neutral it would have seemed less of a fault.

The seating position was good, and a 40-mile trip led neither to discomfort nor to fatigue on the part of machine or rider. This was perhaps the best feature of the Suzuki: it could be caned as hard as the rider could stand for as long as the rider could stand it, and not wilt. The Suzuki really gets its own back on anyone who treats it so severely, and the discomfort at 6,500 r.p.m. is equalled only by the 650 c.c. parallel twins that are now nearly defunct.

The Suzuki was very much at home in congested traffic: the immediate response to the throttle, the wide spread of torque, and the crisp gearbox provided just the right set of characteristics for decisive town manoeuvring. The Suzuki is lighter than most medium-sized machines now sold, and weighs about 420 lb or so. This is enough to sustain strong gusting motorway winds with some stability, and yet light enough to throw about with fair abandon when the opportunity arises. The T500 was one of the nicest machines to use to travel 40 miles each way each day to London on, and one of the least fatiguing to drive in the heaviest traffic.

On backroads the Suzuki's suspension showed up rather better than it did on main roads. On smooth motorways the odd bump seemed to produce a painful jar, but once the suspension was working on undulating and bumpy lanes the Suzuki was far more comfortable to ride, and displayed a capacity for soaking up really nasty-looking holes without passing the jolt to the rider.

The 500 Suzuki has remained virtually unchanged for most of its six-year life, and probably owes its present existence solely to the American AMA racing regulations. It has a very fine reputation for reliability and strength, and a

string of major Production race successes. All this well-proven product is worth a second look: the enviable stability of the machine has ensured that all the results of the early "sorting out" have been incorporated for years, and the customer can purchase a really well proven all-round machine without the blandishments of instant redesign every year.

Unfortunately six years is a long time, and the new round of 350 machines have the T500 taxed. Suzuki's own 380 undersells, out accelerates, and out-handles the T500. Yamaha's RD350 will do the same, and the Suzuki 550 three concedes only too much weight to the older twin.

Yet all these comparisons can do little to disguise the fact that the Suzuki T500 twin will do almost everything that one would want from a motorcycle, and has been really well proved and not subjected to yearly replacements like so many others from Japan. The simplicity of a two-stroke twin is a real advantage. Now that the T500 has sat back on its laurels it will shortly be replaced by a far more complicated and more expensive beast that will require far longer to deal with when it goes wrong. The T500 may well be a visitor left over from the 60s, but it fills a real slot in the market. Dated now, but with a friendly rugged character, the T500 is likely to continue to appeal to a sizeable group of motorcyclists for quite a while yet.



Above: "The Suzuki positive feed system is much more efficient in its use of lubricant than the Yamaha or Kawasaki variants." Below: Very neat, practical control cluster on the left side; and the guide for rear brake-lining wear

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