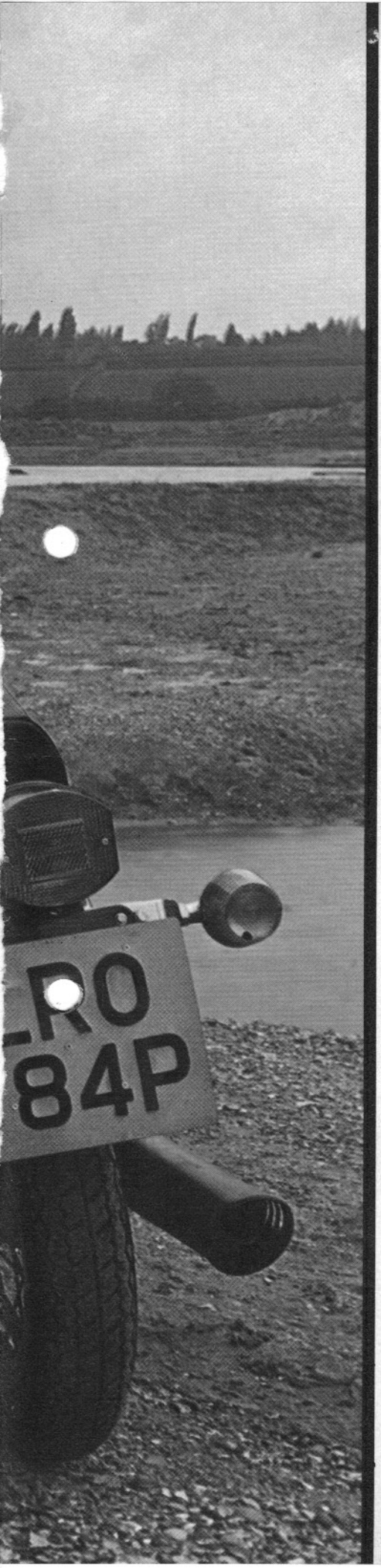


Photography: Mike English

Giant Test
In Search Of Ultimates
BMW R90S v Moto Guzzi S3



Testers: Bill Haylock, Mike Nicks.

IF AN ENTERPRISING dealer assembled a random selection of 73 motorcycles in capacity classes from 50 to 1,200 cc and prices from £195 to £2,500, his showroom would surely have enough variety to satisfy every nit-picking whim. Or would it? That figure of 73 happens to be the number of bikes that has passed through our hands for road test or impression in the 15 issues up to this one that we've compiled since *Bike* moved to monthly publishing schedules last summer.

Yet still there was something missing. We had yet to find the ultimate long distance motorcycle; a machine that could hold a level 100 mph without mechanical hysterics, that could carry enough fuel to keep its motor beating for at least 200 miles without break, that would give the rider full tilt highway pleasure for hours at a time without racking his limbs with muscle fatigue.

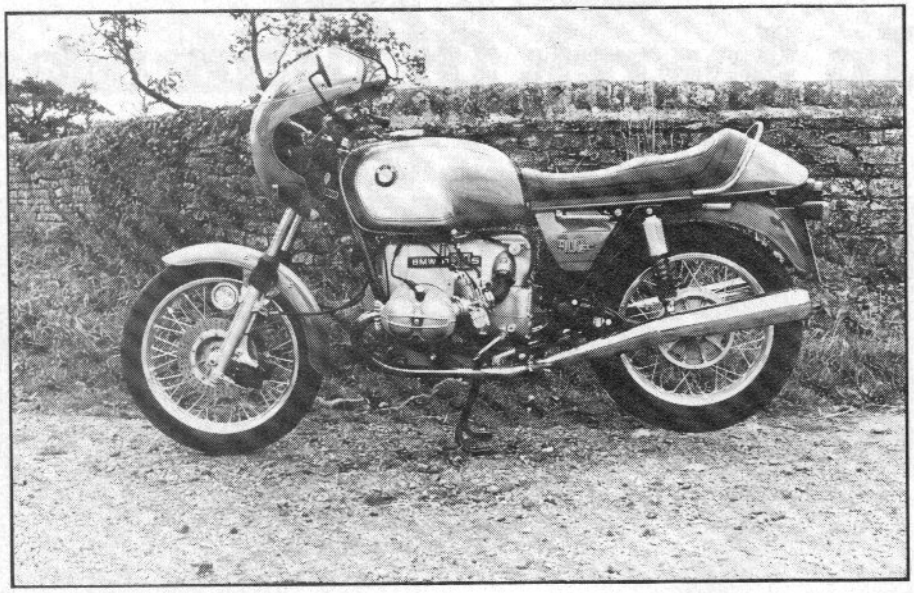
Many of what are optimistically called superbikes ought to have these features but don't. Maybe the handling or the high speed stability is suspect, the engine a shaker, the fuel consumption too much for a puny tank — or maybe the thing's just too uncomfortable to ride fast for very long, which is the most frequent complaint with modern bikes.

In fact when we got down to compiling a list of runners for this particular Giant Test we came up with just two serious contenders: BMW's R90S and Moto Guzzi's 750 cc S3. Now if your eyebrows are raised and your mouth agape because your own favourite Supadupabike didn't make it in our estimation, we'll ask you to ponder awhile on whether your ideal steed really would meet the criteria we'd laid down. By 100 mph cruising, for instance, we mean the real thing and not a flash reading taken off a grossly optimistic speedo while nuts and bolts vibrate merrily off the bike in protest at the madness of it all.

Anyway, the 90S was an obvious choice, a known and trusted design of impeccable heritage. But a few hoary old myths were still waiting to be laid: would the torque reaction from the in-line crank hurl us off if we hit so much as a cat's eye at 90 mph? Had the once notorious BMW gear change really been smoothed out?

The Guzzi was more of a gamble. Barnaby Williams had written glowingly about it earlier in the year, but now there was a revised model with at least one radically new feature, more of which later. The Guzzi is also a mere 750, whereas we'd already left off the list a certain widely respected 900 (sorry Mr K, the performance is fine but for the unusual demands of this test high speed rider comfort was doubtful). However, the importers showed no qualms when they knew we were going to match the S3 against the BMW flagship, so we pressed on regardless.

BMW R90S





EVERY time I commit my feelings about a certain bike to paper, I find myself tempering my opinions. It's a question of compromising between my unfettered opinion on the intrinsic good or bad points of the bike on one hand, and what the limitations imposed by my finances and needs would allow me to think if I was in the position of the Average Customer nervously approaching the dealer's showroom.

Inevitably having thus tempered my judgement, Annoyed of Neasden *still* writes an irate letter to the effect that "You idle buggers swanning around on MVs and Benelli Sixes all day haven't the faintest idea what us ordinary working class bikers want to know". Such vitriolic attacks wouldn't sting so much if they were true, but sadly most of our miles are covered on much more mundane transport — I mean, *you* don't have to ride sports mopeds if you don't want to, do you?

So it's a mighty relief when at last I come across a bike that makes me feel like saying "Sod everyone — this is a bike I've not got to make any excuses for" . . . A bike that stands on its own merits without having to look at it through the eyes of the middleaged, penny pinching commuter, or the sixteener-banned mopedist, or the posturing cafe racer.

The fact that such a bike should be a very expensive quality product, is inevitable, I suppose. And that doesn't help to placate Annoyed of Neasden at all, when he was wondering if he could afford the meagre roubles required to become the proud(?) owner of a certain antiquated, but extremely cheap Iron Curtain bolide.

BMW's flagship, the R90S, may not be the ultimate, but it's probably the nearest anyone's got to it yet. And Mr Annoyed, it's pointless you bleating: "But can a motorcycle be worth 2,000 quid?" If you've got the bread you too can have all the discerning motorcyclist needs to ride as safely and fast and comfortably as possible — well as much as money can buy off the showroom floor. No matter if you've got to beg, borrow, rob or put yourself in hock to get the loot, it's worth it.

When the R90S was first introduced LJK Setright described it as ". . . possibly the best production motorcycle in the world . . ." Two years further on we've become more blasé about bikes costing two grand now quite a handful of manufacturers have prestige machinery in that league. But I believe the BMW is still the best.

Now I'm in danger of sounding like any other impressionable road tester, about to get stuck up to my neck in a swamp of sickly superlatives. Before I disappear from sight I'll attempt to justify such a sweeping statement.

The R90S handles and stops almost as well as the best Italian sportster; is almost as fast as the fastest Japanese roadburner; it is almost as uncomplicated as the good ole British Twin; it is almost as smooth as the best multi; and when it comes to comfort and capability for travelling at maximum speed with minimum fatigue, the R90S is second to none.

Razor sharp as you all are, you will no doubt have noticed that in most respects I only claim it to be second best. The truth is that many bikes do one thing superbly, but the BMW is the only bike I know that does *everything* very well.

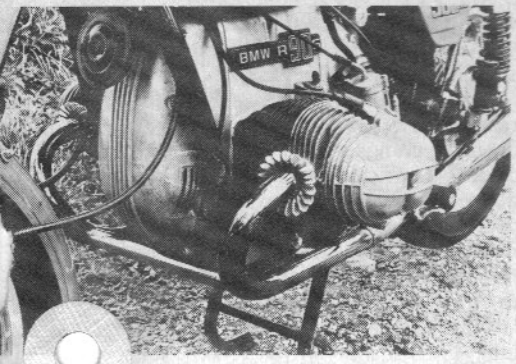
The reason for that is the Bayerishe Motoren Werke's uncompromising approach to the design of a motorcycle. They obviously sat back and thought very hard about the fundamental functions of a motorcycle before they put pencil to paper and, what's more, you get the impression they approached it from a biker's point of view, rather than an engineer's. They thought first of all it should have a light,

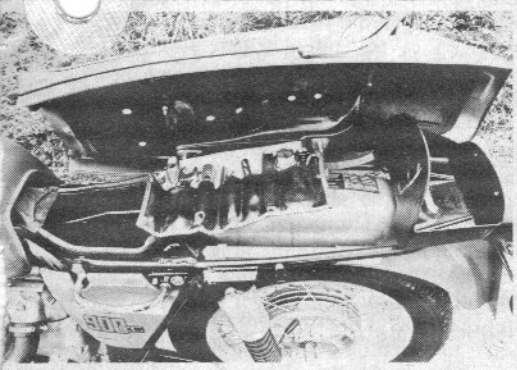


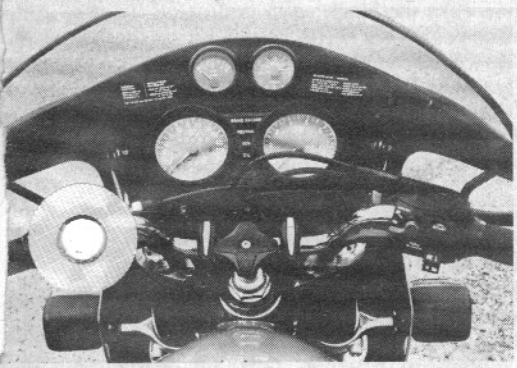
simple, powerful, low maintenance power/transmission unit. They already had that in the transverse flat twin layout they'd been refining since the twenties, so they refined it a little further and made it more powerful.

They decided it should be manageable in city traffic, and yet be steady as a rock at its maximum speed and capable of cornering to the limit of tyre adhesion. So they designed one of the best balanced chassis/suspension layouts yet produced.

They thought the rider ought to be able to cover 200 miles of fast travelling without having to stop. So they made the controls as easy to operate as possible, the riding position as unfatiguing as possible, and the petrol tank large enough to carry ample fuel for that distance.







Top: Ugly it may be, but the BMW's pushrod flat twin motor is smooth and sweet.

Centre: Hinged locking seat conceals a roomy tool compartment with high class toolkit, tyre pump and a small luggage locker underneath the alloy tail section.

Bottom: Comprehensive instruments and idiot lights tell you everything you need to know without any gimmickry. Switches are most functional.

Checkout

	MOTO GUZZI 750 S3	BMW R90S
Engine	ohv 90-degree V-twin	ohv flat twin
Bore and stroke	82.5 x 70 mm	90 x 70.6 mm
Capacity	748 cc	898 cc
Compression ratio	9.8:1	9.5:1
Carburation	2 x 30 mm Dell 'Orto	2 x 38 mm Dell 'Orto
BHP @ RPM	72 @ 7,000	67 @ 7,000
Primary drive	Direct	Direct
Clutch	Twin-plate, dry	Single-plate, dry
Gear ratios		
(1)	10.806:1	13.2:1
(2)	7.499:1	8.58:1
(3)	5.657:1	6.21:1
(4)	4.695:1	5.0:1
(5)	4.052:1	4.5:1
Electrical system	12v generator, battery and coil ignition	12v 280 watt generator, battery and coil ignition.
Lighting	45/40w headlight, 2/20w tail/stoplight	60/65w headlight, 5/21w tail/stoplight
DIMENSIONS		
Wheelbase	58.75 ins	57.7 ins
Seat height	28.75 ins	32 ins
Ground clearance	6.75 ins	7.0 ins
Handlebar height	32 ins	—
Kerb weight (with 1 gal fuel)	500 lbs	466 lbs
Fuel capacity	4·8 gals	5.25 gals
Oil capacity	6 pints	4 pints
EQUIPMENT		
Trafficators	Yes	Yes
Electric starter	Yes	Yes
Trip mileometer	No	Yes
Steering lock	Yes	Yes
Helmet lock	No	Yes
Headlight flasher	Yes	Yes
Kill button	Yes	Yes
Toolkit	Yes	Yes
Spare parts	No	No
Others	Shaft drive, alloy rims, coupled braking system, steering damper.	Shaft drive, alloy rims, steering damper, clock, voltmeter, tyre pump, mirrors, fairing.
CYCLE PARTS		
Tyres (front)	3.25 x 18 Michelin	3.25 x 19 Continental
(rear)	3.50 x 18 Michelin	4.00 x 18 Continental
Brakes (front)	Twin 11.8 in discs	Twin 10.24 in discs
(rear)	Single 11.8 in disc	7.9 in sls drum
PERFORMANCE		
Top speed	123.45 mph	126.06 mph
Standing ¼ mile	14.60 secs	13.23 secs
0-60 mph	6.38 secs	5.19 secs
Speedometer error		
at indicated 30 mph	23.75 mph	27.7 mph
at indicated 60 mph	50.43 mph	57.14 mph
Braking distance		
from 30 mph	26 ft 6 ins	32 ft
from 60 mph	137 ft 6 ins	156 ft
Fuel consumption		
overall	45 mpg	43.7 mpg
ridden hard	41 mpg	38 mpg
PRICE	£1,749 inc VAT	£1,997 inc VAT
GUARANTEE	4,000 miles/6 months parts and labour	12 months unlimited mileage, parts and labour
Supplied by	Moto Guzzi Concessionaires, Crawley Road, Luton, Beds.	BMW Concessionaires, 991 Great West Road, Brentford, Middlesex.

BMW R90S

That set of prerequisites happily coincides with my idea of what motorcycles are all about, and produces what I believe is the fastest, safest and most comfortable means of travelling on two wheels.

What is missing perhaps is the element of extrovert style that the Italians and Japanese are so good at presenting. The R90S is no bike for the techno-freaks, its essence is that of quietly understated quality. Maybe it's a sign I'm getting old when I start appreciating things like that — or should I say more mature, sounds better. Obviously the BMW is aimed at older riders 'cos they're the ones with the bread and there aren't enough 19-year-old rock stars around to keep BMW going.

Certain touches remind you of the rising young exec BMW's marketing men seem to have in mind as the Average Customer (or should it be Client?) The clock for example, no doubt indispensible to the said young exec dashing between appointments in the City. Actually it's no mere gimmick — it's nice to know how the time is going on a long trip and it's a bloody nuisance to have to stop to check your wrist watch. Typical of the BMW's Teutonic efficiency, the clock seems more accurate than most watches too.

To see the BMW and Guzzi side by side is revealing about the national characteristics of the two countries that produced these bikes. The BMW looks awkward and stolid beside the Guzzi's sleek beauty which is the ultimate in the sort of tasteful, sensuous styling only Italians can produce. But in close-up things can be seen in a different light. The Guzzi unfortunately suffers some of the failings characteristic of all Italian bikes, with its poorer finish and lack of thought to details. With that unnerving Teutonic thoroughness, BMW's designers seem to have thought of everything the Italians forgot.

It is very apparent that the whole of the R90S was designed as an entity, down to every last control lever and switch, and that's where the German factory scores over the Italians with their propensity for spoiling very fine ships for a halfpennyworth of tar, or cheap mass produced accessories.

Ergonomics is a word that most bike designers don't seem to understand, but typical of the thought that BMW have put into the ease of operating their bike is the unusual design of the switchgear. Redesigned since the bike's introduction, this now provides on each side of the bars, a rocker switch operating in the vertical plane, a push button above that, and a toggle switch away from the handle bar grips. On the left side of the bars the toggle switch operates the lights — off, pilot light and headlight — the rocker switch operates main and dip beams, and headlight flasher. The push button works the horn. On the right bar the toggle switch is a three position engine kill switch, the rocker switch operates the flashers and the push button is the start switch.

The vertical operation of the flasher switch felt unfamiliar at first, but then I realised that all the switches you need on the move — indicators, horn, headlight flasher and dipswitch, can be reached by merely rotating the thumb of either hand through an arc of 90 degrees, without changing the hand's grip on the bars.

BMW's designers seem to have struck a magical compromise in producing a riding position that suits people of quite diverse shapes and sizes. My gangling six foot frame tucks in neatly behind the narrow bars and sleek handlebar fairing. Yet, funnily enough, the shortarses in this office who usually complain about the riding position on bikes that fit me perfectly well, were for once in agreement with me that the 90S is the most comfortable bike around when it comes to enduring long hours of hard travelling.

Flat, narrow bars contribute a lot to the tidy, tucked in feel of the riding position, and the footpegs are set well enough back to provide that well balanced, slightly forward leaning stance which produces no aches or fatigue after two hundred miles or more. The seat is wide and well padded, and the narrow tank helps keep your knees tucked in.

The small fairing which is part of the stock specification on the 90S is not just cosmetic. Despite its meagre proportions, the superb quality glasswork keeps a surprising amount of wind off your chest and head, making 100 mph cruising perfectly practical, apart from the sinister proliferation of those spoilsports in white Rovers and Volvos on any decent stretch of tarmac.

The fairing also provides a mounting for the volt meter (indicates the battery's state of charge) and electric clock, presenting the rider with a neat and functional cockpit. As you'd expect, the instrumentation is excellent and unfussy, with night-time illumination bright enough to read the well-placed clocks at a glance, but not bright enough to distract or dazzle.

Control layout and riding position is greatly responsible for making the 90S such a fun bike. It's one of those machines you take a pleasure in handling really well, so responsive is it to the owner's control, the big BMW inspires a confident and precise riding style.

You'll always find people trying to tell you horrific tales of cylinder heads ploughing the tarmac through bends, and the fearful effects of torque reaction (due to the crankshaft spinning in the same plane as the direction of travel) on handling. It's crap, probably inspired by envy. The truth is the 90S is one of the best handling big bikes around.

Part of the reason for this is its creditable *avoir dupois*, being a mere lightweight at 466 lbs compared with the gross behemoths the Japs have taken to creating. Another reason is, that like everything else, the suspension is perfectly tuned to the rest of the machine so that the ride is both supremely stable and comfortable.

Stability is often achieved at the cost of comfort, but BMW have not sacrificed the bump absorbing qualities of the long travel suspension. They have also managed to produce a chassis geometry to give steering which is light and positive at low speed and yet combines hairline accuracy and total stability at maximum speed.

The only time handling can get less than reassuring is if you make clumsy gear changes going round corners. Any shaft drive bike is the same, because the shaft does not absorb transmission shocks like a chain does, and if you don't match revs and road speed you can momentarily lock the rear wheel when changing down. You've got to be pretty lead footed to do it though.

This is turning into an embarrassingly long list of superlatives which no doubt smacks of payola (well BMW, anytime you wanna give me a free R90S, just call me . . .) But there's still more to come before the moans.

Electrics are the best, especially that brilliant Bosch quartz halogen headlight which is a match for most car candle power. The toolkit is of the same sort of quality as the bike itself and comprehensive. You get a tyre pump underneath the hinged seat too.

So to the grumbles, and a niggardly list of minor nit-pickings most of them seem, but the general high quality of the bike does seem to accentuate anything not quite up to par. Like the black paint peeling off the top fork yoke — a surprising blight on the Bee Em's otherwise high quality finish.

Try as I might, I couldn't get the steering lock to work. Could have been my clumsy fingers or numb brain, but you shouldn't need an engineering degree just to make the bike thief-proof.

Perhaps the worst point is the gear-change. BMW's have always been infamous for the jarring harshness of their shift, and they've done a lot to rectify it, in fact the gearbox is one of the few items to be modified since the bike's introduction. But by comparison to most Japanese boxes, it's still far from slick, especially between the lower gears.

The position of the oil orifice in the sump means you'll be lucky to get less than half your lubricant over the garage forecourt or the garden path, unless you have a specially shaped funnel handy.

Given my predeliction for Italian bikes which I admit quite unashamedly, I was surprised to find I enjoyed riding the BMW more than the Guzzi. I find the BMW's appearance unexciting, and I'm infatuated by the Guzzi's looks — if I had that kind of money I'd buy the Guzzi on its styling alone. It would take a lot of soul searching though, to decide whether I need the Guzzi's beauty or the BMW's perfection.

Bill Haylock