

MORINI'S 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ CLASSIC OF THE '70s

THE SUPERBIKE syndrome has had a profound effect on motorcycling in the seventies. That superannuated superlative, dearly loved by the weeklies, is so liberally applied to any new model with supernumerary cylinders and superfluous weight that the gullible bike freak could be forgiven for believing that any desirable bike has to be bigger/faster/more complex than the machinery that was around last year.

And in the way that newspapers have neatly packaging the world into well ordered single sentence paragraphs, anything that deviates from the norm and defies easy labelling just gets left out in the cold. I doubt whether you'll ever see the Morini 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ described as a "superbike". It's a mere 350 cc twin and 350 twins don't warrant the "super" tag.

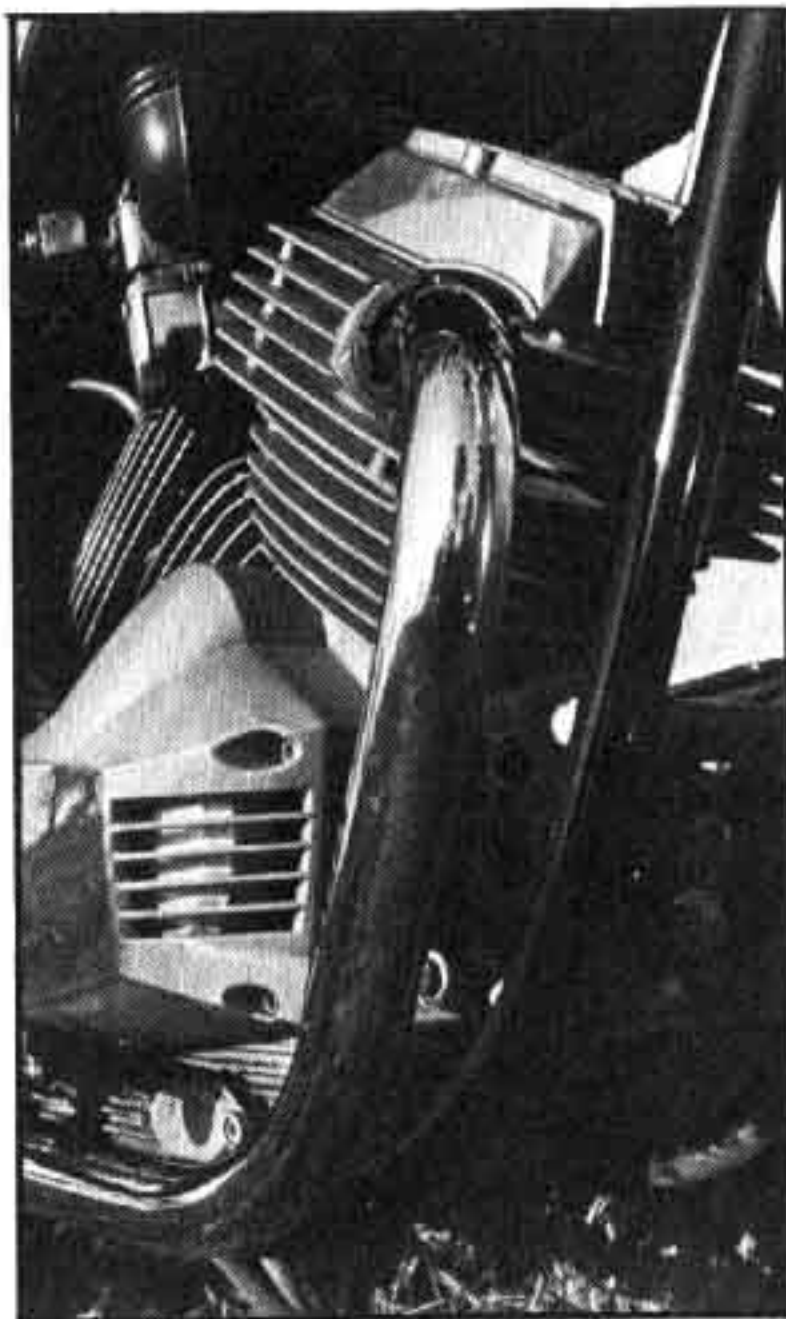
Yet when, in about twenty years' time, we're more able to make a detached, objective judgement about which contemporary bikes were just the creations of fashion, and which were the true classics of the era, I believe the Morini will be recognised as one of the most inspired designs of the 70s. Not because of a mind-boggling complexity of cylinders, overhead cams, futuristic technology, or sheer brute bulk and power, either. The Morini will be acknowledged precisely because it demonstrates that a bike does *not* have to have any of those qualities to be an exciting, highly desirable and outstanding machine.

The Italians have always had the courage of their convictions to apply original and unconventional thought in both engineering and styling, but Moto Morini of Bologna were particularly adventurous in producing a 350 so remarkably different from anything else in its class. Admittedly, the Italian biker seems less disturbed by such wanton displays of individuality than his British or American counterpart. When the bike was first introduced over here, the general reaction was a cynical disbelief that anyone in his right mind would pay £800 for a mere 350 cc.

That attitude still persists, and Morini owners are a rare breed among British bikers. They do have a small but thriving club, however, thanks to which you are now reading this road test. Morini importers Harglo don't have a Strada for road testing — ours belongs to club organiser Simon Pancheri.

After covering the best part of a thousand miles on his bike, I can understand why Morini riders protest that they are certainly *not* out of their minds, paying £800 for a 350. I reckon that's a bargain price for a unique bike that gives you more than many 750s.

Just forget that the Morini Strada is 'only' a 350. It gives you more than many 750s. Tester Bill Haylock.



The capacity rating of a bike has never been any indication of its quality, and these days it doesn't mean much in terms of performance. Although the Strada has a softly tuned version of the amazing Morini V-twin engine, with a compression ratio of 10:1 as against the more expensive Morini Sport's 11:1, it still has enough urge to convince you that it's more than just a 350.

The Morini's most startling facet is undoubtedly that unique overhead valve motor. Yes, OHV — there's no fancy overhead cams, just plain ole pushrods inside that strikingly handsome little mill. The fact that Morini choose to ignore fashionable OHC technology and go their own sweet way with a design of such originality and simplicity is surprising in itself. The fact that such a design performs as well as any comparable OHC motor — as well as the best two-stroke motors, even — seems almost incredible.

That performance is achieved by the application of engine technology new to motorcycle design. And, what's more, it's not just an exercise in clever engineering — the simplicity of the design is also intended to keep production costs low.

The heads are flat and carry two perpendicular, parallel valves. The combustion chamber is in a bowl machined in the crown of the piston, rather than in the head. Short pushrods run up through the barrels, from the high mounted camshaft nestling in the bottom of the Vee between the pots. These operate the valves through rockers mounted simply and rigidly on two blocks bolted to the head.

The camshaft, which also carries the magnetic trigger for the electronic ignition, is driven by a toothed belt running up from behind the alternator mounted on the right hand end of the crankshaft. Since there's no oil in the right hand engine casing (the belt needs no lubrication), it has been provided with air vents to keep the alternator cool. The crankshaft is a one-piece forging and the con rods run side by side, necessitating a 50 mm stagger between the pots.

The motor seems to owe more to car, rather than bike, engineering practice, but it makes sense economically. An obvious example of sensible production engineering is the use of identical components for front and rear pots and heads, the rear cylinder merely being the front one turned back-to-front. It's all so beautifully simple and practical, you begin to wonder why no-one has done it before.

The construction of the engine is as neat and thoughtful as the concept of its design. Alloy castings of the highest quality are used throughout, some left matt and others

polished to a mirror shine. Integral bridging between the thick barrel fins reduces resonance, and squared-off rocker covers complete the tidy, compact appearance.

Add to this gem of a motor one of the best chassis/suspension packages you'll get from any manufacturer — even those operating in the £2,000 luxury bike bracket — and you might begin to realise why I reckon the Morini is such a bargain. I can't think of any other bike of similar price that offers such quality engineering of intelligent simplicity, superb handling and relaxing comfort.

Versatility is a great virtue. Anyone who's been put off uncomfortable, uncivilised, uncompromising Italian sportsters might well find the Morini easier to live with. It manages to compromise the excitement, character and roadholding that distinguishes Italian bikes, with a civilised disposition and comfort equal to almost any Japanese tourer. Whether you want a bike for a quick, exhilarating blast around the block, or a few hundred miles of two-up touring, the Strada has what you need.

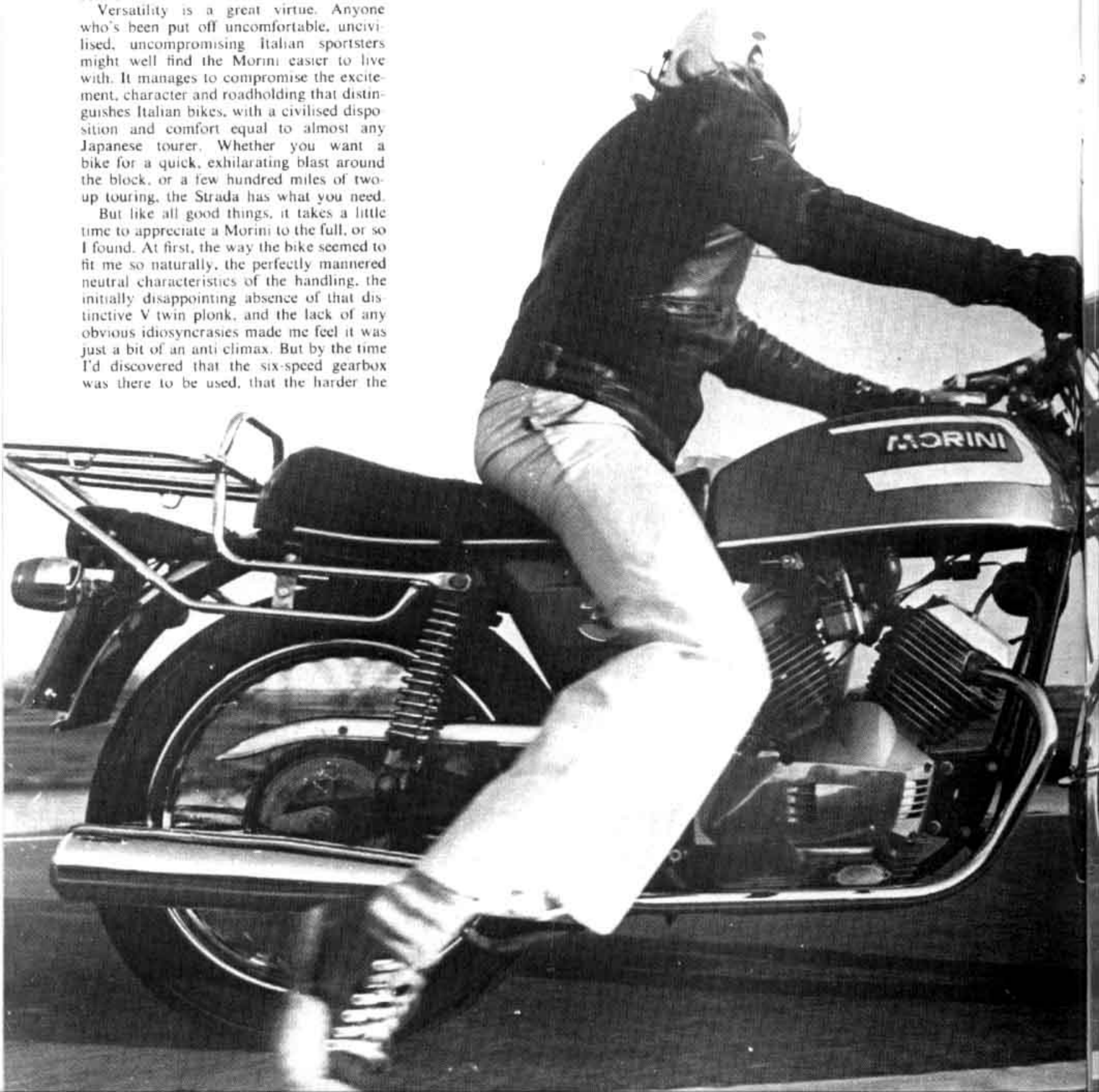
But like all good things, it takes a little time to appreciate a Morini to the full, or so I found. At first, the way the bike seemed to fit me so naturally, the perfectly mannered neutral characteristics of the handling, the initially disappointing absence of that distinctive V twin plonk, and the lack of any obvious idiosyncrasies made me feel it was just a bit of an anti climax. But by the time I'd discovered that the six-speed gearbox was there to be used, that the harder the

motor is buzzed the better it likes it, that the footrests were rapidly getting chamfered ends, the Strada had begun to grow on me.

The Morini may well attract traditional V twin buffs (Simon Pancheri also owns a Vincent), but really it has little in common with Harleys, Vincents, or even the big Dukes. You can forget all about slogging, stump-pulling power at nil revs as far as this little Vee is concerned. Low down, the motor is docile — not gutless, but undramatic. The excitement doesn't begin to happen until the tacho needle nudges six thou.

From then on until way into the red, the power comes on strong and the soft exhaust note hardens into a soulful wail. The red line is eight grand, but revs can be allowed to stray briefly up to the max safe revs of 9,200 without reaching a point where power drops off noticeably.

In deference to our test bike's dotting owner I only took it that far once and rarely revved right up to the red zone. But on the rare occasions I really gave the Morini the gun, its speed drew some incredulous expletives from the riders of much bigger bikes.



Off the line, with the aid of its slick, well spaced six gears and light weight (350 lb on the road), the Strada's initial acceleration can be embarrassing to 750s.

As for cruising speed, that seems to be governed mainly by the rider's sensitivity rather than any mechanical limitation. At 6,000 rpm, an indicated speed of 75 mph, the motor felt happy, but over that it seemed to be working hard. Talking to Simon Pancheri after returning his bike, he told me that you just have to ignore the feeling that you're abusing the motor. It thrives on revs and has stood up to everything he's given it over eighteen months and 7,000 miles without a complaint. Maintaining speed when going up hill or against a strong headwind calls for plenty of gearbox use though, like a high performance two-stroke.

Vibration is detectable throughout the rev range, as the 72-degree configuration of the cylinders doesn't give the same smoothness as the 90-degree V of the Ducati twins, but it's never obtrusive and gets smoother as you go faster.

With the eager performance of the motor goes one of the best frames and suspension combinations there is. While the steering doesn't have the really tough feeling that typifies Italian sports bikes, it's positive and precise.

Marzocchi suspension front and rear gives firmly damped, but supple springing that is so secure, and yet comfortable. It's a

revelation that a lightweight bike doesn't have to have harsh, spine-jarring suspension to handle well. It's inevitable though, that the handling of such a light bike is worse affected by the weight of a passenger or luggage than heavier machines. But adjusting the spring preload helps a little.

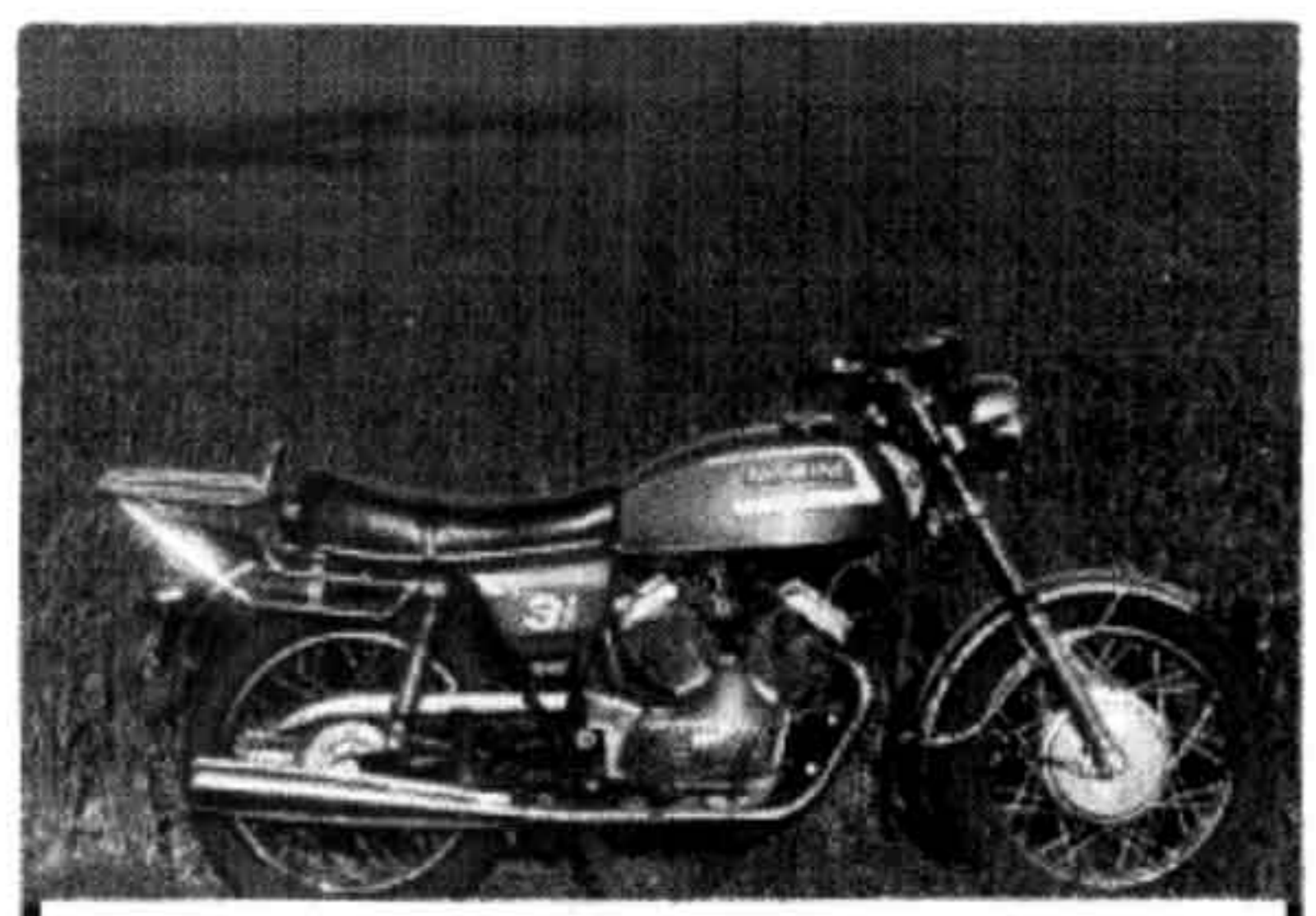
The footrest rubbers ground before anything else, which is the way it ought to be, and before long both footrests had neatly chamfered ends, such is the pure exhilaration that bend swinging on the Morini gives.

Morini still use an unfashionable twin leading shoe drum brake at the front. There's nothing wrong with a good drum brake, but this is a rather vicious one. Now that almost every modern bike has a disc on at least the front wheel, the servo effect of a TLS drum is an unfamiliar feeling. On the Morini the servo effect is particularly fierce. A careless grab at the brake lever gets the front tyre squealing, and even a cautious squeeze tends to stand the bike on its nose as the shoes suddenly grab. You have to develop a special technique to slow safely in the wet, feathering the lever as the brake bites. It's something Morini owners seem to develop with experience, and at least the brake does work in the wet and never lacks power in any conditions.

In case you still misguidedly think I'm billing the Morini as the Perfect Motorcycle, I've got further criticism, although mainly of a subjective nature. I don't like the styling. The motor looks great — compact, angular and aggressive — but the rest of the bike seems to have been styled as a sort of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game with a miscellany of ill-matching pieces. It just doesn't have that graceful voluptuous line that Italian designers have such a unique flair for.

But on the credit side, the finish — both paint and chrome — is better than the generally mediocre Italian standard. Switches are a standard Italian failing too — and on this score the Strada's are expectedly crummy. Still, it does have twelve volt lights that work as well as any Japanese electrics.

It's just a pity the Morini doesn't capture the imagination of the biking public, but it's really no fault of the bike. So long as the Biggest is Best superbike syndrome persists, the Morini isn't going to get the recognition it deserves. And a lot of bikers will be missing out on a good thing. ●



Checkout

Engine	72 degree OHV V-twin
Bore x Stroke	62 x 57 mm
Capacity	344 cc
Compression ratio	10 : 1
Carburation	2 x 25 mm Dell'Orto
BHP at RPM	39 at 8,200
Max torque	3.28 Kg/M at 5,900 rpm
Primary drive	helical gear
Clutch	multiplate, wet
Gearbox	six speed
Final drive	5/8 x 3/8 in chain
Electrical system	12V, 100 watt alternator electronic ignition
Lighting	35/35W headlight 5/21 stop/tail light

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	54 3/4 ins
Seat height	30 1/2 ins
Ground clearance	6 1/2 ins
Kerb weight	350 lbs (inc 1 gal fuel)

Fuel capacity	
(total)	3 gal
(reserve)	1/2 gal
Oil capacity	5 1/4 pints

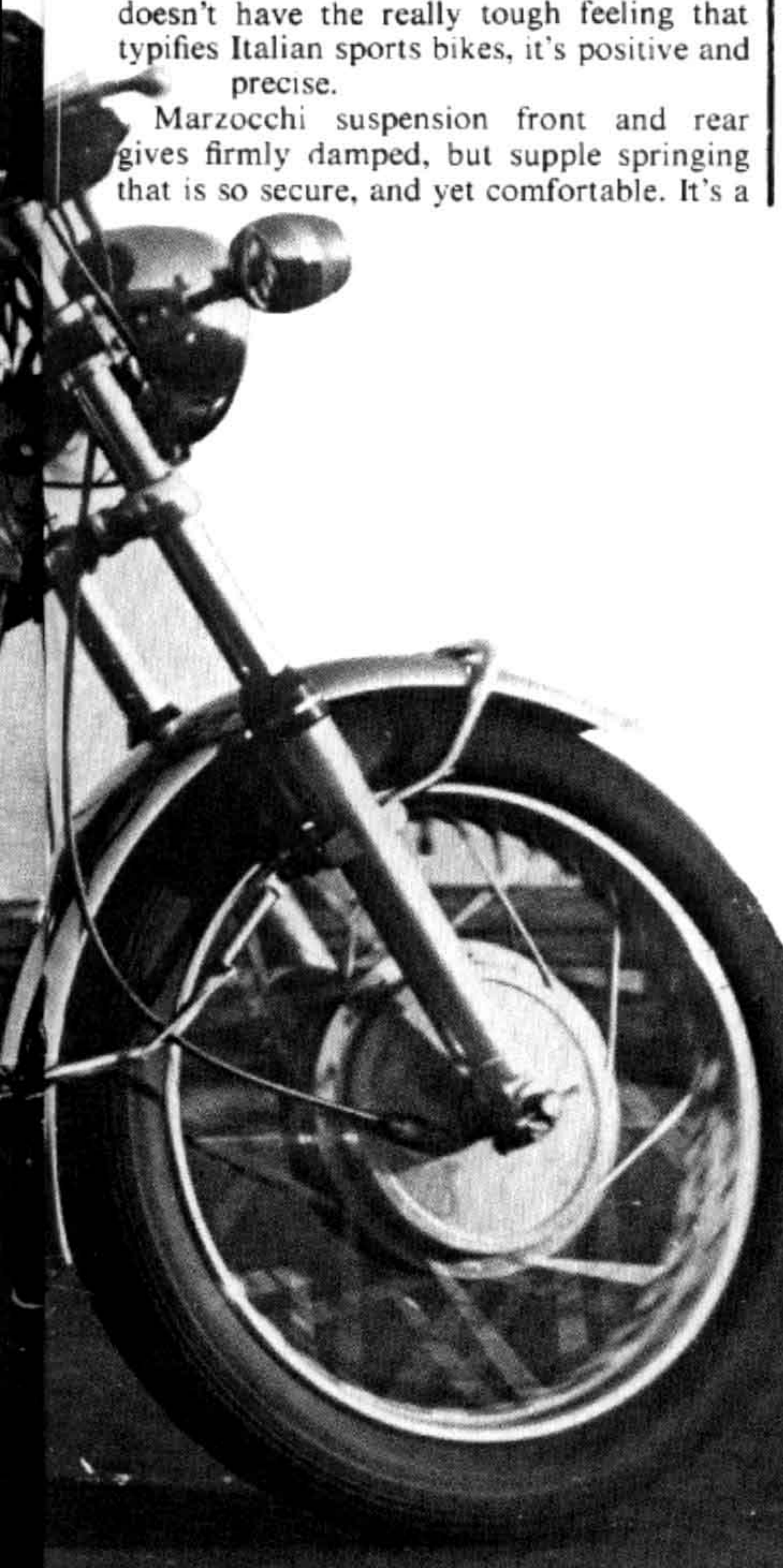
EQUIPMENT

Trafficators	Yes
Electric starter	No
Trip mileometer	No
Steering lock	Yes
Helmet lock	No
Headlight flasher	No
Kill button	No
Mirrors	No
Toolkit	Yes
Others	Fiamm Windtone horn

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres (front)	3.25 x 18 Pirelli
(rear)	4.10 x 18 Pirelli
Brakes (front)	8 in TLS drum
(rear)	6.3 in SLS drum

Fuel consumption	
(Overall)	61.2 mpg
(driven hard)	58 mpg
Price	£795 inc VAT
Guarantee	6 months parts and labour



Photography Mike English