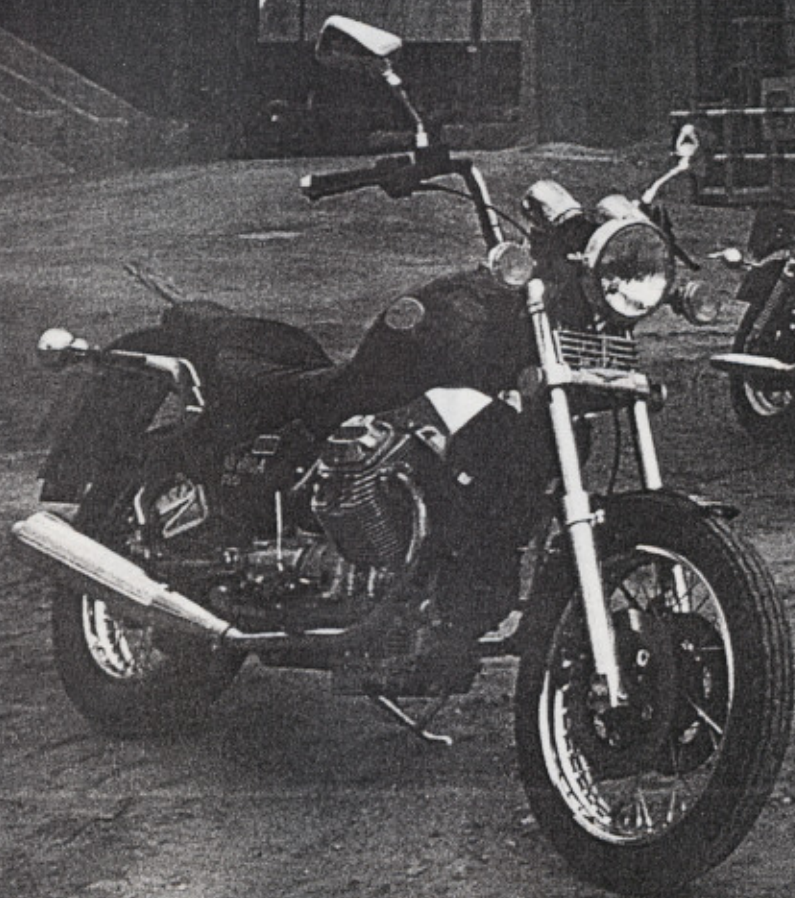


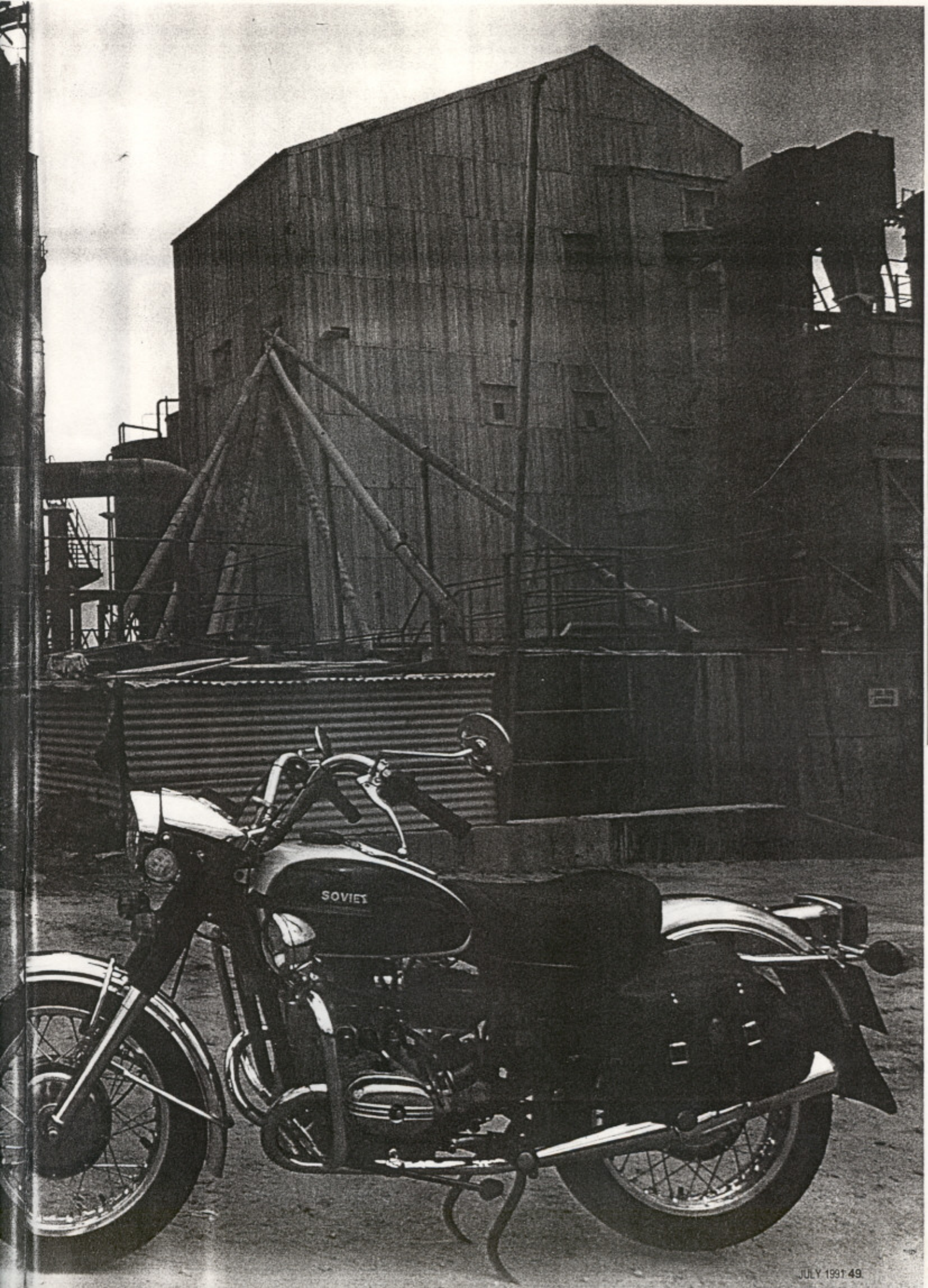
MONEY FOR NOTHING

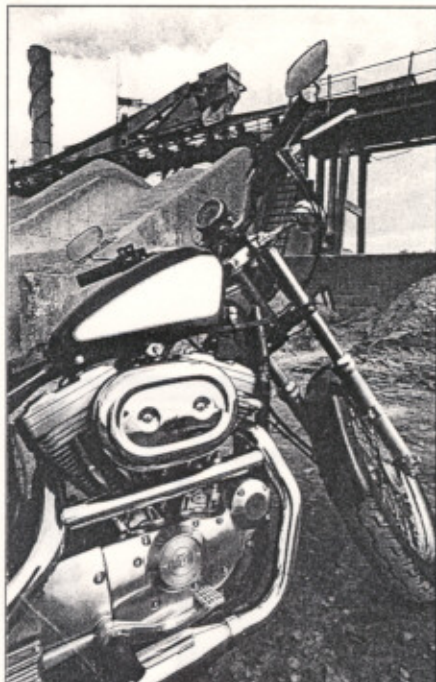
Want cheap, but stylish biking? The Harley 883, Moto Guzzi Nevada and Soviet Knight offer both . . . but not necessarily at the same time/David Lancaster

Not all Harley-Davidson bikes are equal, nor are all Harley-Davidson bikes. Think of one that was made in a family organ shop, so No. 1 Mental Budget Cruisers term is accurate though. The three

here are all Harley-Davidson, all near the top of their marque's price scales. They pretend to little in the way of performance, but much in looks. They are meant to be relaxed, cool, and a step apart from the speeding herd. In short they are that bit different. But how different are they? Is their style meant to join the mainstream or







The Harley is a legend alright, but a pretty slow one. In stock form the 883 is pushed to reach 80mph... about as near to a Sportster as the Guzzi is to Nevada

more than a cover for poor brakes, dodgy roadholding and gross underperformance?

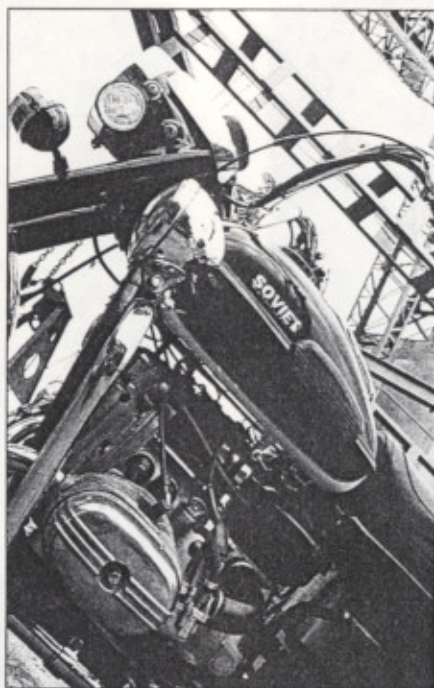
As tempting as it is to give the yes key a deft dab in answer to this, it's far from the whole story. Motorcycling is not always a rational pursuit, and motorcycles are not always rational vehicles. Ergo, motorcyclists are, thankfully, not always rational beings and the objective questions that can be asked of a bike do not always furnish the buyer with the whole story. He or she may want something different. So it is with these three beasts. They may, indeed, be slow, underbraked and underperform in terms of just about everything, but they have charm, kudos and not a little style... honestly.

But if performance isn't God, then what is? Is there a God? Ontology aside, it's clear that the three bikes we've assembled here – the budget price Soviet Knight, Guzzi's weird Nevada and Harley's base-model cycle, the 883 Sportster – are not going to sell on performance alone. Or at all. They seek to impress old ladies, small children and non-bikers. They do this very well. Cruise around on one of these and most bikers will barely acknowledge your existence. Now, this may be a virtue in itself, but beyond it most other folk look at you; curious about how a bike can look so much like a bike again. The engine is visible, the wheels big and spoked; the styling goes unashamedly back to basics, and so does the engineering. Details are evident, not hidden – from the plethora of cables, to having a name on the tank, rather than a number. Basically, we have three motorised bicycles and they look sufficiently different in the '90s to stand out for that reason.

To many perhaps, the Soviet will be the least familiar, so we'll start off with that one. The Soviet handle is a badging exercise carried out by Neval Motorcycles of Hornsea, Humberside. The Soviet is, therefore, not available in the Soviet Union. A basic Ural 650 boxer twin is adorned with various goodies – bars, seat, lamps etc – either to bring it up to the plain Soviet spec, or the higher Soviet Knight decoration. The

engine itself is a BMW design, the rights of which were purchased from the German firm in 1941. A strange commercial exchange in the light of later local difficulties between the two states, but the agreement actually stems from the Non-aggression Pact signed by Stalin and Hitler before the war. The engine wasn't put into production until 1945 though by which time the Germans had other things on their minds, and the Soviet Union was beginning to exploit the captive markets of its satellite states won – or given to it – in the war. Over the years minor changes have been made, but very minor ones, with really only the bore and stroke – now 78 x 68mm – figures moving with the times. The OHV air-cooled opposed twin is therefore a proven design, in every sense of the word. Drive is by a dry, twin-disc clutch, four-speed gearbox, thence a shaft to a 19 inch rear wheel of modest 3.75in rim proportions. Funnily enough, that's exactly the same size as the front. Twin, flat-slide individually choked 28mm flat-bodied carbs supply the mixture.

Cycle parts carry the same back-to-



Switchgear on the Soviet is heavy, industrial almost. It stayed together however and running lights provide excellent night vision.

basics theme further. A tubular cradle frame carries the engine and connects with telescopic forks fore, and adjustable – yes adjustable – twin shocks at the back. Stopping power is provided by a twin leading-shoe drum brake – at the front and rear. The standard Knight comes with either a single or dual seat, although pillion pegs are left on, both side and mainstands, a 34-piece tool kit (with spares too) as well as crashbars and legshields. The Knight version we have here boasts leather saddle bags, driving lights and pullback bars on top. Options include a rear carrier, a full fairing and metallic paint.

At the other end of the spectrum, politically and geographically at least, is the Harley 883 Sportster. Like the Soviet, it has been in production for longer than many have been on this earth, starting in 1956 as an attempt to fend off the threat from the fast, lightweight British twins which were wooing buyers away from the Harley marque in its homeland. This time it's a V-



Guzzi's venerable engine goes a long way to making up for such bad styling. The unit pulls strongly with only a rough idle marring its copy book

twin, and displaces its eight hundred and eighty three cubes through a narrow bore of 76.2mm and stroke of 98.8mm. Like the others it has only two valves per cylinder, pushrod operated, and drives through an improved five-speed box, dry clutch and then a toothed belt. It's interesting to note that all three bikes here eschew the normal method of final drive in favour of something less efficient perhaps, but easier to live with and service. The Harley has some nice touches. The belt drive is, indeed, quiet and smooth the new box a vast improvement over previous offerings, and the tappets are hydraulic and self-adjusting

Cycle parts are basic, but not as basic as the Soviet's. A single 292mm disc graces the front with a single-piston caliper to do the work. As with the Ruskie bike, the same set-up graces the back – so saving on both manufacture and assembly. Wheels are a 19-inch job at the front and a 16-incher at the back. A duplex steel cradle frame wraps around the massive engine without any form of vibration isolation and a 1.8gal peanut tank, single seat and laced wheels finish off the neat, understated look which Harley still seem able to do better than anyone else.

The Moto Guzzi Nevada came in the country earlier this year. It attempts to be the lower-spec cruiser in Guzzi's range, sitting below the now expensive Californians in price and performance. The 743.9cc engine utilises the familiar Guzzi transverse V-twin layout, two-valve heads and a bore and stroke of 80 x 74mm. Twin Dell'Orto PHBH30 carbs supply the mixture, a shaft drive, and a revised steel affair the frame. All standard stuff really, although the engine – the same as the Targa's – is free revving and a step forward for the Italian name. Like the Harley it plays the custom game by having a bigger front than back wheel, this time an 18-incher fore and a 16 aft. Forks are long *Forcella* items, air adjustable with 140mm of travel and 38mm stanchions: at the rear twin shocks are still the order of the day, here preload adjustable units with a generous 130mm of travel and competence in all but the most demanding

circumstances. Brakes are twin 270mm discs with twin-piston calipers at the front, and a single 260mm disc at the rear. The bike uses Guzzi's excellent linked system whereby the brake pedal works the back and one of the front discs; the bar lever works the other front disc. Of the three here, the Guzzi wins hands down in braking and handling.

Firing each bike up, you're immediately aware of their different engine configurations. The Guzzi stirs into life lazily with the traditional shaking, rising and falling of the transverse V-twin, shaft drive layout. Tickover is a long time coming, and even when warm the Nevada we had never really idled as it should. It is rough low down, below 2500rpm, but above that the Dell'Ortos start to work properly and the Guzzi takes off. I suspect what they've done is move, rather than eradicate, the flat-spot that has afflicted Guzzis since noise emissions started to make life difficult for air-cooled twins; if it has to be anywhere, and without the four-valve head seen on the Lario or the Dr John it would seem it has, then the bottom of the rev-range is the best place for it. It's worth bearing in mind too that with less than 2000 miles on the bike, the engine was a long way from run-in.

SECOND OPINION

Faster than a speeding mollusc (just), more high-tech than a mangle (barely), more stylish than Liberace's underclothing (marginally) – these bikes are 'different'. Given their very low-tech nature, they must be judged by different criteria than other motorcycles. Being cruisers, they have to be judged as much by their style and flair as by their mechanical capabilities.

That's probably a good thing for the Soviet Knight because it has almost no mechanical capabilities. It does, however, have a lot of class. It has class in the same way as a Trabant has class while a Skoda does not. The Harley also has class, in its own way, but the Guzzi does not. The Guzzi may be the best in terms of all-round ability, but it has absolutely no style. It is as ugly as a hatful of monkeys' unmentionables and has all the panache of an EN500. It comes down to the Soviet Knight or the Harley – cheap and cheerful or chic and expensive. While there is something very appealing about the Soviet Knight, I think the Harley has it by a whisker. **Tom Isitt**

Mid-range power however is excellent for the class. From three-grand to six, the Nevada's pull is strong and consistent; it has the punch Guzzi's are rightly famed for and is unaffected, like its bigger, normally aspirated brothers, by a heavy throttle. It's a real gem in town where, with more than 2000rpm dialled in, it pulls in any gear. The box is okay, if you're patient. The throw is long and the box has more than its fair share of neutrals, but match it with engine speed and the box is efficient. The slow, deliberate policy it demands suits the bike's lazy countenance. The shaft is evident throughout though. Shut off-mid corner and it understeers and drops on the suspension, as you'd expect. Keep the power steady and take advantage of the brilliant mid-range and the Nevada will corner fine. Wobbles are few, the only criticism being a yaw on the long travel suspension inspired by undulating bumps; the smaller stuff it takes care of well. Steering is surprisingly light. The over-wide bars – only the Harley escapes this styling abortion – are a main factor in this, and with a more sensible configuration the Guzzi could be sure-footed and positive. As it is the bars provide just a little too much leverage for the forks

and frame to cope with. The former, although effectively damped in most instances, get confused by too rapid a direction change mid-corner.

Over in the wastelands of the Ural mountains things are little better, in fact they're worse. Much worse. Whereas Guzzi have had a reputation to live up to, one which they realistically can't be expected to in the light of the lack of investment the factory and bikes live with, Russian motorcycles have always been plodders of the highest order, but cheap. The Soviet Knight is no exception.

Starting reminds you of its relative crudity from the first. Flip each choke (one on each carb, see) and turn the ignition key one stop in the headlamp nacelle. A charging light and neutral light come alive and you're ready to stab at the kickstarter. It's on the left. It swings away from the bike, rather than parallel to it. Just like on old BMWs. The best way to effect a start is to stand to the left of the bike, lean it slightly into you, grab the wide bars firmly . . . and stab away. In general it's a good starter, thankfully juddering into life after a couple of strokes. It needs a little throttle until warm, even with the chokes, but given a minute or two you can knock the choke levers off and

and gradual with plenty of torque at hand. It lopes along, it's slow all right, but you always feel there's enough power for what you'd want of the bike. The top ratio of the four gears can be kept to for most roads out of town; it'll pull gingerly from 35mph up to a realistic maximum of 85mph. Nothing startling, nothing sudden – the Soviet is a plodder's delight with torque, lazy power delivery and little to surprise the rider.

Until a corner comes up. The high bars you'll have gotten used to by now, perhaps even the behaviour of the shaft, but knock it slowly down a gear for a bend and you'll be in for few surprises. The steering is very heavy, despite the ape-hangers. Twin 19-inch rims and what one must assume are very conservative geometry figures mean that the Soviet does nothing quickly. This you would expect. Set it up for a bend though, and the surprise is that, unlike other shaft driven mobiles, it doesn't like the power fed on round a bend. Where a Guzzi or BeeEmm will corner without complaint if the power is fed in steadily, the Soviet squirms uncomfortably, the back kicking out and the front juddering under the stress. Shutting off, strangely, helps things. In short, the Soviet goes against all experience of shaft drive bikes and likes to



The Nevada maybe every right thinking motorcyclist's nightmare in the styling, but the hardware is good. Very good in fact. The Guzzi's linked braking set-up is first class.

make ready to leave. The gearchange pedal is a rocker type, saving nasty stains on your Russian Army issue boots, and first goes in with a pronounced clunk. The clutch is late in biting, and pretty wooden in feel. The usual rising and falling of a shaftie is, of course, there in all its glory on the Soviet – it boasts no flashy rear end to straighten things out.

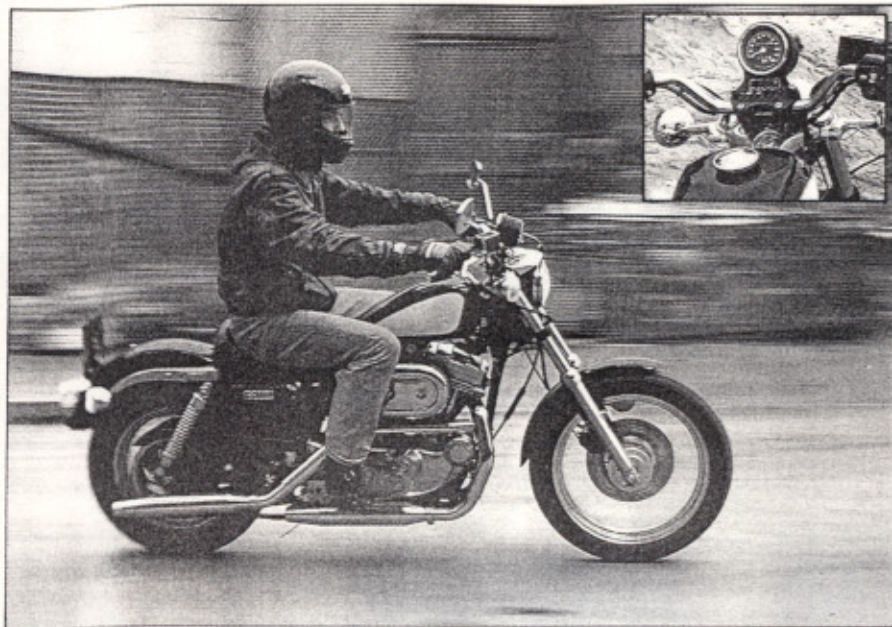
Underway the engine pulls nicely through, much like a small – say R65 – BeeEmm. The flywheels seem lighter and the throttle quicker in its action than the German version of the engine, and no worse for it. Going up the box is, however, distinctly un-German. The latter may never have had the slickest of shifts, but the Russian demands spot on timing to avoid embarrassing graunches at every change. The higher the ratio, the better it is, but the rocker mechanism needs getting used to as it gives you far more leverage when shifting up than the drive train can cope with.

The power is just as modest. It is, however, 'pleasant'; a strange word, perhaps, to describe such an old-fashioned lump of engineering, but the delivery is soft

be shut off in a corner and go round on momentum. Once past the apex, it's fine. The power can be picked up again and the tyres thankfully ignored once you're vertical.

For the tyres are, indeed, among the worst. Feedback is minimal, grip in the wet equally so and the tracking seems to veer everywhere on a rough surface. The bike picks up any undulation in the road surface and, not content with just sitting in it, tries to fight its way out – but never succeeds. As you may gather, the Soviet needs sorting on the tyre front. We would have liked to fit something else, but time forbade this. The truth is though that the slow, ponderous steering – strongly reminiscent of an early '60s Harley – can be driven round. The tyres, however, are just poor quality but thankfully are easier to change. As an option the importers will fit a set of Avon Roadrunners.

The Soviet is suspended conventionally. And its faults in this department are lack of damping, short travel and poor quality components which rust at the slightest provocation. Thus, the forks remind you strongly of early '60s Triumph items –



The Harley is the most secure and easiest at slow speed. The low down pull of the engine is the best in the class and it is saved from the ape-hanging bars of the Guzzi and Soviet enough travel, little damping and much stiction while the rear shocks tell a similar tale of cost cutting. The latter are, of course, cheaply replaced and the front end perhaps might improve with time (our test bike, again, had around two grand on it) and playing with oil grades. In short, although the Soviet is a styling and badging exercise carried out on these shores, there's much that could still be done – but at a modest outlay one component you could safely leave alone though is the brakes. You thought twin-leading-shoe drum brakes were a thing of the past? Well, they are, but on the Soviet they perform perfectly adequately. They stop the bike as effectively as Harley's poor disc set-up and with more feel at the lever. One last surprise is the high-quality Akront rims which grace the bike. Some things need changing, sure, but others are worth keeping.

To dismiss this bike because of its glaring faults and it stands to ride roughshod over its not inconsiderable charms and virtues. It is, by a long way, the most popular bike we have ever parked outside the office. Nearly everyone looks at it, most closely. People stop and take pictures and peer curiously at the strange cocktail of Communist

ruggedness and American styling. Chugging along the highway is the same. Traffic lights are a set piece for bewildered looks from motorists; it simply doesn't conform to what people expect of a bike. It looks, and indeed behaves, like the old-fashioned tractor it is, but bears a modern number plate and the air of a new bike. You soon swing into the style of the thing; slow in, slow out of bends; brake gradually so's not to stress the forks or tyres and roll the power on gradually – all of this will furnish the Soviet pilot with enjoyable riding, and posing . . . and £3000 sitting in the bank to spend on something else.

A secondhand Harley-Davidson 883 perhaps? At £5040 tested here (base model, bereft of belt drive or fifth ratio is £4649, is the same in looks but rougher in performance) the Harley carries the usual H-D kudos. It undoubtedly is the archetype which other street customs looks toward for inspiration. Its bare, naked aspect marks it out from a crowd, but the impact is lessening. Harleys are everywhere now, from the bad-ass bros determinedly clinging onto the outlaw image in the face of shrewd, derivative marketing by the factory, to the RUB element posing up and down the

Kings Road. But as a motorbike, not an icon, how good is it?

The power unit is the rightful focus of the bike. Push the starter button and it churns into life beneath you, the steel frame doing little to shelter you from the vibes. The five-speed box comes as a surprise, with a slicker and quieter shift into first; drop the heavy clutch and you're away, riding a legend. The legend, however, is pretty damn slow. It'll huff and puff its way to about 80mph, but that's about it. Getting there, it gets left behind by the Guzzi – by some margin – and only leaves the Soviet by dint of its good(ish) low down stomp. Getting near both bikes' mid-ranges the Soviet almost catches the 883. Given the weight of both, you sometimes wonder if they'll keep ahead of the traffic.

But they do. The Harley is very slow however and, like the Soviet, needs work to make it perform on the road. The extra ratio is welcome, as is the smooth belt drive, but the bad old noise emissions laws mean that it's restricted to a frustrating degree. On the chassis side it has a secure, slow turning feel. The bars are more sensible than either of the others' – and the 1200 Sportster's –

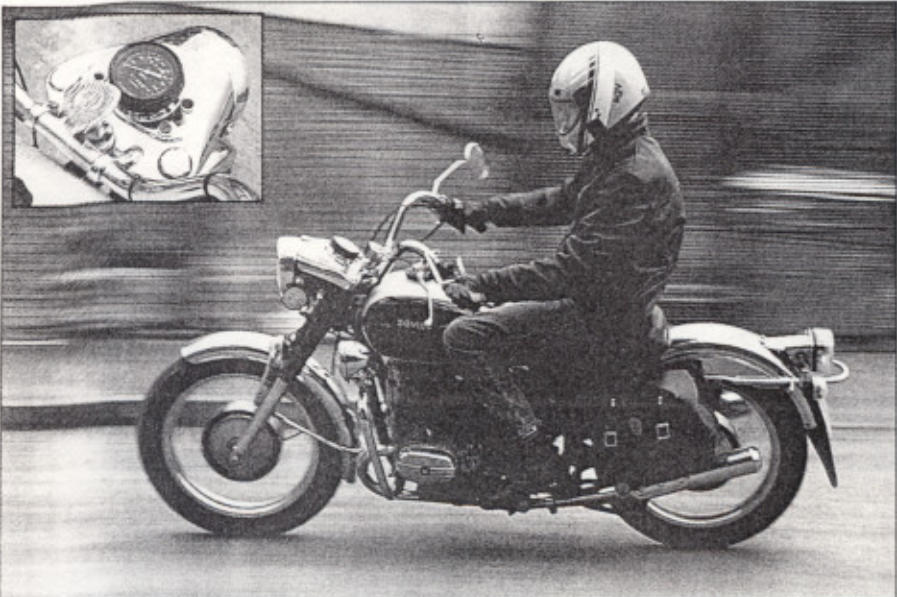
SECOND OPINION

To be honest, no amount of rhetoric or more forcible means of persuasion would tempt me to buy any one of these bikes. Maybe I've been spoilt or corrupted by years of civilised, reliable transport in the shape of the ubiquitous UJM. I mean, I'm not susceptible to bouts of nostalgic yearning whenever I see a 'traditionally' styled bike, I go for practicality, well, most of the time anyway.

My favourite has to be the Harley, which doesn't say a lot for the other two. With barely enough power on tap to outrag a Super Dream the new five-speed box is a little surplus to requirements. The belt drive is a big improvement. The Guzzi is an even more appalling plasti-chrome sham of a Harley clone than even the Japanese are capable of building, though out of the three it was the most civilised to ride. Finally we come to the Soviet Knight, the engine design is 50 years old, the chassis and suspension are 50 years out of date and the tyres feel like they're of similar vintage. In short, a bike for 50-year-olds. So what if it's bloody cheap, so are Ladas, and you wouldn't catch me driving one of those either. Mind you, if you got rid of those panniers, put on some decent shocks and tyres, changed the bars and . . . who are those men in the white coats? Why has this jacket got such long sleeves with straps on the ends? Who let that pink elephant in the office? Quack! **Andy Riley**

so steering is definite, direct, but still light. The large front wheel and frame geometry conform to the class norm of steady input and slow steering, but of the three the H-D is the best handling over a smooth surface. Point it at anything more demanding however, and the 883 shows up its limitations. The rear shocks, with limited travel, are easily disturbed; damping on the rebound is seriously lacking and the 883 hops and jumps all too frequently if pushed. The front is a little better sorted, although the action is slow. Against the Guzzi, the Harley just can't keep up over most roads.

Braking on the Harley is another area where the bike loses points. The Guzzi stops quickly and securely, the Soviet slowly, but with some grace. The Harley does neither and requires a good tug on the lever to come to a halt. More than anything else on the bike – and there's much which leaves you wanting, from the limited power output to a pathetic fuel range – the braking means that some money needs spending. Harley aficionados may counter this by saying that the wheels can be locked up, ▶



The Soviet is really in a class by itself. For the price, however, it is good value with a smooth engine and a most competent chassis. Beware the tyres though

etc, etc, but the point is that it's nice to know when they're likely to do this (a point of traction which can be easily determined on the other two) and still have some energy left in your right hand.

However, the chassis is sturdy and while the Harley won't cut it with sharper tackle the ground clearance is excellent and worth exploring if the surface remains smooth. The new Dunlop Elite tyres help – a vast improvement on the old rubber with improved feedback and wet weather grip. But the 883 is really an unreformed urban animal, at its best pottering about town; the vibes which afflict it at high revs won't bother you, nor will the 60-odd mile fuel range. It is a poseur's delight and few do it better than Harley-Davidson when it comes to posing.

But when it comes to motorcycling, the choice between these three is easy. The Guzzi is the best to ride. Aboard the bike, of course, you're in privileged position – you can't see it. The Nevada may have a sweet engine, excellent brakes and passable handling, but it has the unmistakable look of a bike trying too hard. The point of these bikes is that they don't try too hard; they are relaxed, staid and understated. The Guzzi looks busy, over-done and uncomfortable. While neither the Soviet nor the 883 are particularly high on the comfort stakes, they have that relaxed air which cruisers should have about them. The Nevada's lines, over-exaggerated around the tank and seat area, make it stark and tacky. A pity, for its virtues as a mode of transport are many.

The Harley is improved greatly by the



For the man or woman who wants a cruiser, these three are all good fun. As a motorbike the Guzzi wins out. As a pose-mobile, it's the Harley. As a purchase the Soviet.

transmission mods heaped on it this year. But the price is still high, and the cheaper model is still the agricultural mount it always was. Like the Soviet it demands after-market money from A Punter to make it a half-decent motorbike. But it does look a million dollars from the crate – neither of the others do. It is the epitome of the bare street bike and, although the shine of its name

might be starting to wear a little thin, it still says all it needs to through its simple, restrained styling.

And so we come to the Soviet. The newcomer in this country, but by far the most antiquated of the three. Where the others boast the odd engine mod to make them easier to live with – the Guzzi's accessibility, the Harley's self-adjusting tappets – the Soviet is just plain old. It is the bare bones of a motorbike and it needs some fleshing out to make it half-decent on today's roads. But . . . it is very, very cheap. Just £2100 buys you the kit, and you mix and match from there on. In many ways it's a prospect one shouldn't balk at. Where most Harley owners these days throw the thing at a dealer and order a Squawking Chicken carb and new pipes, some will like to fix and improve their steed at home. The Soviet is ideal for this. It might need rechroming after a couple of winters, and the quality of some of the components betrays its country of origin and price. But do you buy one of these bikes to perform as a motorbike? Competence in this area may be a bonus, but it's not high on the list. They are for the short trip; pub or wine bar transport par excellence. The Soviet draws the most stares, isn't that much worse than the Harley as a motorbike, looks like a true original next to Moto Guzzi's pale copy, and saves you lots and lots of money. Loathe though I am to suggest such a bad bike should be the winner of anything, in terms of charm, pose quotient for pounds and sheer individuality the Soviet Knight is the best of the Non-Oriental Budget Cruisers.

	HARLEY-DAVIDSON XLH883	SOVIET KNIGHT (URAL)	MOTO GUZZI NEVADA
Price	£4649	£2100	£4700
Motor	Air-cooled OHV 45° V-twin	Air-cooled OHV opposed twin	Air-cooled OHV 90° twin
Displacement	883cc	649cc	743.9cc
Bore & Stroke	76.2 x 98.8mm	78 x 68mm	80 x 74mm
Compression ratio	9:1	8.5:1	9.6:1
Maximum power @ rpm	40hp @ 5000 (claimed)	32hp @ 5200 (claimed)	45hp @ 6500 (claimed)
Maximum torque @ rpm	63ftlb @ 3000(claimed)	30ftlb @ 4500 (claimed)	33.8ftlb @ 4500 (claimed)
Carburettors	34mm Keihin	Twin 28mm K62	Twin 30mm Dellorto PHBH
Frame	Steel duplex cradle	Steel duplex cradle	Steel cradle
Transmission	Chain primary, 5-speed, Kevlar belt final	Dry clutch, 4-speed, shaft	Dry clutch, 5-speed shaft
Rake	29.7°	N/A	28°
Trail	114mm	N/A	100mm
Wheelbase	60in (1520mm)	59.4in (1510mm)	N/A
Suspension			
front	40mm Showa forks	Telescopic forks	Forcella Italia preload adjustable forks
rear	Twin Showas with adjustable prelaod	Twin preload adjustable shocks	Twin preload and rebound adjustable shocks
Tyres	Dunlop Elite	Soviet/Ural	Pirelli Phantoms
front	90/90 x 19	3.75 x 19	100/90 x 18
rear	120/90 x 16	3.75 x 19	130/90 x 16
Brakes			
front	Two 292mm discs with single piston calipers	Twin-leading-shoe drum	Twin 270mm discs with twin-piston calipers
rear	Single 292mm disc with single piston caliper	Single leading shoe drum	Single 260mm disc with twin piston caliper
Weight	463lb (210kg)	462lb (210kg)	396lb (76kg)
Seat height	29in (745mm)	30in (762mm)	31in (780mm)
Fuel capacity	1.8 gallons (8.5 litres)	3.9 gallons (18 litres)	3.6 gallons (16.5 litres)
Fuel consumption	50mpg	55mpg	49mpg
Range	90 miles	214.5 miles	178 miles
Top speed	85mph	85mph	105mph