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YAMAHA XJ900

Seek and ye shall find...

Let me tell you about guerilla potholes. You always thought guerillas were foreign people dressed in pyjamas or second-hand army fatigues, carrying AK47s and constantly winning wars we had been told they'd never win, right?

I used to think that too. How little we know about our own country! Before I suspected the existence of an underground organisation in Australia, dedicated to the destruction of motorcyclists, I used to breeze along our country highways, blissful in my ignorance. Not any more. Oh, no.

You know how guerillas always set ambushes? They disguise a trap with branches, or they hide in the trees and suddenly open up with Kalashnikovs; you've seen it on TV.

Well, guerilla potholes do the same thing. They carefully select a flat, straight bit of remote country road — the sort of road where your throttle hand is likely to just creep around that little bit further than usual. Then, they find a tree shadow. With devilish cunning, they then place themselves so that their edge is exactly in line with the edge of the shadow — so you can't see them — and they dig themselves in. For anything up to a foot.

Sorry, a decisquiggle and a bit.

Then they wait for you to bowl along, for your front wheel to drop into them, for your suspension to bottom out and the frame to ground, for the tankslapper — and the spitoff.

If you listen really closely as you cartwheel through the air, you'll just hear their maniac giggle...

The filthy swine!

Why am I telling you this? Well, apart from the few cartwheels it might save you — after all, forewarned is forearmed — I wish to report that I actually survived an encounter with these anti-motorcycle shock troops the other day.

There I was, up near Maryborough on the nice shiny new frame-faired XJ900, happily buzzing along a little-used and to all appearances well surfaced country road, when the front wheel suddenly fell into an enormous guerilla

... the new Yamaha XJ900 is a very nice bike indeed. So the Bear tells us, anyway, and he's just circumnavigated western Victoria on one.



pothole. Honest, it was *this* deep. My bum was propelled upwards until it reached the approximate level of my shoulders (fortunately somewhat behind them) as the bike bucked through the hole, and the mirrors both tipped backwards on their stalks.

Nary a wiggle from the bike. This hole, which would have sent any number of other bikes I can think of into a death dance, didn't even get a slight weave out of Yamaha's big shaftie.

Well done, Yamaha type people, I thought. Well done. This is a characteristic we can use in Australia!

I was already more impressed with the new XJ than with the old. One of the few things I hadn't liked about the old model had been the high-speed weave — you could hardly call it a wobble — that the bike had had. Fitting the fairing to the frame seems to have cured that completely.

The new bike retains the comfortable seat and pleasant riding position of its predecessor, as well; it also has the welcome 22 litre tank. Not that these things are perfect for the tourer. It would be nice to have an even larger tank (this one sees you turning to

reserve at about 300 km) and the seat certainly needs a sheepskin for a day-long run. But the XJ is one of those bikes I'd find it very hard to go past if, like most people, I could only afford one bike.

It's flexible enough to putter through town on your way to work, it's got enough muscle to keep up with anybody but a lunatic on an 1100 on the open road and it's got shaft drive...

True, the XJ900 (which, after all, is really an 850) lacks the brutal punch of an 1100, or of the GPz900. But that power bonus is really more use to the ego than to the actual ride. You don't *need* it, and the XJ may even help you hold onto your licence a little longer.

Back to the actual ride. I left Melbourne somewhat later than I'd intended to, and pushed the bike reasonably hard through Ballarat to Moyston and then to Horsham. It was piccie time just outside Horsham, at Sister Rocks, and after photographing the XJ in front of the livid layers of graffiti that cover the rocks, I was surprised to see that it was still quite early. Instead of returning to Melbourne via the GOR (this was going to be a short Tour Test) I headed instead for Maryborough and then the border.

Apart from the guerilla pothole, the roads were reasonably kind to us — there was no loose gravel, except on the dirt stretches where I was expecting it, and the surface was fairly ripple-free.

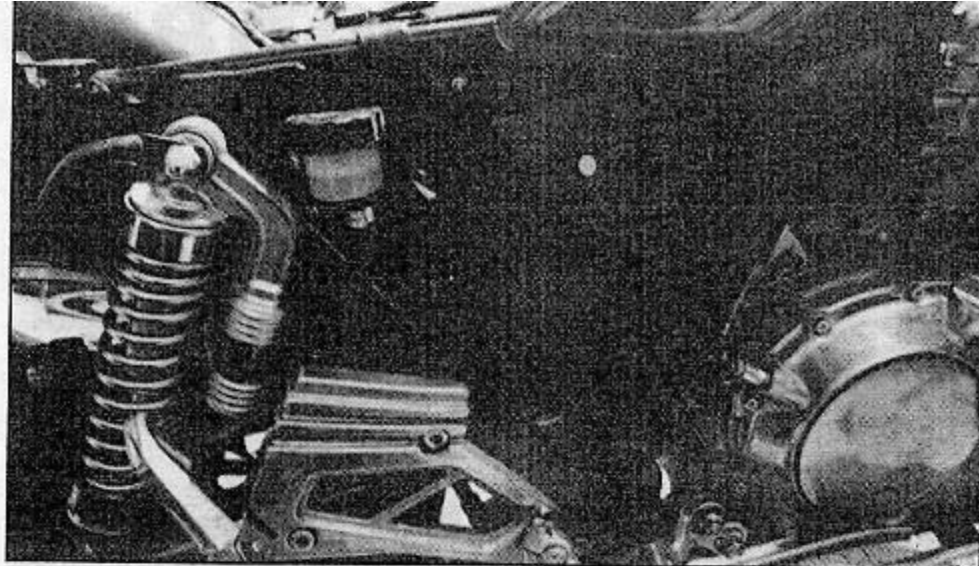
The bike handles well. It feels light and willing in corners; you'd swear you were on a 750 a lot of the time. It also feels secure on gravel, unless you slow down too much.

The false sense of security this instilled in me was probably responsible for the lapse of vigilance that so excited the highway patrolman who waved me over to show me his hairdryer...

Another day, another ticket.

No, road testers are not exempt from the laws of the land. Some of them are so lucky you'd almost think so, though...

A little later, while I was still smarting from the booking, we came to a lengthy



Seek and ye shall find...

stretch of wet roadworks. There was a flagman, and I had to slow right down in the row of traffic he'd collected. This was where the XJ demonstrated a very unfortunate, if not terribly important failing.

You can't trickle an XJ900 at low speed through mud. Not very successfully, anyway. Why? Well, my theory is that the YICS is the culprit. Yamaha's Induction Control System gives very snappy throttle response. That's nice when you're moving at a fair clip, and the throttle is quite open anyway. At very low speeds, a tiny alteration in the setting of the throttle — the sort of alteration that a small corrugation might cause — gives quite a serious response from the motor. Hence, it is very difficult to ride the XJ smoothly on fractional throttle. It's most controllable at high revs, but this problem down low means that the bike would be quite a handful on muddy rally tracks.

Not terribly important, as I say. But don't complain that we don't go to extreme lengths to ferret out the tiniest little thing about our test bikes!

Talking of tiniest little things, the standard of finish on the XJ was very high indeed. We've almost come to accept orange peel paintwork and

rough welds lately — and not only from the Japanese! — but the paint on this bike was good, and everything else was finished appropriately. Yamaha, we knew you could do it.

After a leisurely, if not particularly tasty, dinner the road led home through Shepparton. It was dark by now, and on back roads I'm always conscious of the likelihood of an encounter with one of our Furry Friends. The headlight of the XJ900 is reasonable, if not wonderful — but then I'm paranoid about headlights and am always tempted to fit great big whopping Cibies to my own bikes.

The fairing kept the chill of the night off me quite well, and it was only now in the dark, with fewer things to distract me, that I became conscious of the every-present vibration which had been blurring the large mirrors all day. Not annoying, really, but it would be more pleasant if it weren't there.

A quick summing up of bits and pieces as I roll into Melbourne ... the petrol gauge is paranoid, and insists that you fill up long before it's necessary; the glass over the instruments is too reflective; the passing flash button is very handy, and the choke is the best I've used. You don't need to move your hand from the grip, and you have perfect control. The turn indicator lamps in the instrument panel are hard to see; the location of the horn button means that you tend to blow your choke at people for the first few days; this does you very little good. Still, you learn.

Finally, I guess the only thing to say is — the Yamaha XJ900 is not a perfect tourer, although it is a good one (pillion comfort is rather dubious). It would, nevertheless, make an excellent all-round bike for the tourer who also rides to work and takes the occasional detour ride into the twisties.

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Yamaha XJ900RL

Power	72.3 kW
Torque	8.2 kg-m at 7500 rpm
Top speed	220 km/h
Fuel consumption	16.8 km/l
Weight	218 kg
Wheelbase	1480 mm
Seat height	790 mm
Fuel capacity	22 litres
Price	\$4550 (plus on-road costs)

Test bike supplied by Yamaha
Australia.

BIKE *Tour* TEST

