

Ducati M900 Monster

Number one in the class it invented

WHEN IT WAS LAUNCHED in 1992, Ducati's M900 Monster became not just a much-needed new model for the struggling firm, but it established an entirely new category of bike. Every manufacturer and their dog have had a stab at producing a variation on the Monster theme but the Ducati is the original and, many think, still the best.

The first M900 used the new, six-speed, large crankcase engine (the cases were actually designed for the high-performance 4v Desmoquattro models) employed on the 900SS. By the time the Monster was launched, the 900SS engine already had strengthened crankcases, a revised exhaust, an uprated alternator and beefed-up cylinder-head studs.

But, if the engine was simply the latest version of the 900SS mill, the chassis was effectively all-new. Although visually similar to the 888 frame, the Monster's bronze-painted trellis was specific to the new model. An aluminium, box-section swingarm looks like it was pinched from the 888 parts bin, while the three-spoke Brembo

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wheels and brutally effective 310mm Brembo front discs are pure 900SS. It was a bit of a mongrel – but one with heart and attitude.

Immediately popular, the Monster marched on until 1999. Minor modifications came each year, but it wasn't until 1996 that major change affected the M900, with a switch from non-adjustable Showa forks to fully adjustable Marzocchi upside-down units. For 1997, smaller 750SS-spec valves were fitted and revised camshafts and a modified advance curve provided a touch more torque. The following year, a M900S model – with the original big-valve engine – appeared alongside the M900, and revised cylinders meant the external oil lines were a thing of the past. For 2000 a new totally air-cooled (as opposed to the oil/air-cooling of the original), fuel-injected and re-styled model started a new chapter for what had become Ducati's best-selling model.

We've sourced an early 1993 model from reader Karl Hollings, who has owned this little beauty for the last 15 months. It has the full 73bhp engine (measured at the rear wheel – there's 80bhp at the crank) and Karl has fitted a 14-tooth gearbox sprocket (instead of the

stock 15-tooth) to make town riding less of an ordeal. Otherwise, I could be heading out to sample the new Monster experience in 1993.

Next to the Speed Triple, the Ducati feels anything but a Monster – it seems catwalk model-slim and absurdly light. True, it is over

22kg lighter – but the difference feels greater. The riding position is perfect for hooligan riding, with the sculpted seat and slightly rearset footrests tilting me invitingly forward to the flat 'bars. I'm not so sure that seat would feel quite so good after 100 miles of the best of British road surfaces though.

Steering is quicker than the Triumph as befits the Monster's sportsbike roots. Its steering head angle is more relaxed than the 900SS from which it borrows many of its parts, but that hardly shows on the road. It's nimble, turning in quickly and handling swift changes of direction with the lightest of input.

The brakes are little short of outstanding. On such a lightweight machine, twin 310mm front discs grabbed by Brembo four-piston calipers are formidable on the road. The lightest, two-fingered caress of the lever slams my crotch into the rear of the tank the first time I scrub off a bit of speed. Only the excellent grip of the Michelin Pilot Road 3s on the greasy road prevents an unpleasant lock-up. I have to remember how effective the stoppers are and brace myself against the 'bars to make best use of their power.

The Monster's engine is an impressive bit of kit too. Punching away from slow corners like only a well-sorted V-twin can, the Monster devours short straights before diving eagerly into the next bend. Below 4000rpm, the engine feels rough and sulky, with a harsh, on/off power delivery that makes town riding less pleasant than it should be – despite the lower overall gearing on our test bike. Smooth it ain't. But get it pulling above that and the fun really starts as the lightweight twin fires itself eagerly up to naughty speeds as quickly as the Triumph. It's only when the straights get longer and the revs dafter, that the extra stomp of the triple literally outmuscles the Ducati.

Suspension is typically Italian – slightly harsh and unforgiving. The non-adjustable Showa forks and the stiffly sprung Boge shock send shock waves from every pothole through the 'bars and seat and the bike leaps and weaves over imperfect road surfaces.

If you believe a bike's primary function is to bring a big, daft grin to your face, the M900 is a mighty effective machine. It's stripped back, pared to the bone motorcycling at its best – and it's a great looking bike as well. There's not much wrong with the Monster – and a whole lot that's very, very right. ☺

