

FIRST RIDES

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BENELLI CAFE RACER

A triple shot of espresso

WORLD FIRST RIDE

Benelli's new Cafe Racer is the ultimate Sunday morning eye-opener

BY MICHAEL NEEVES PICTURES BY HOWARD BOYLAN



THE three-cylinder 1130cc Cafe Racer is proof that Benelli is finally making brilliant motorcycles.

In the flesh it's simply stunning. Shimmering in the warm morning Italian sunshine the strange colour

combination of metallic mustard yellow bodywork and burgundy frame (the only colour option available) looks a thousand times better than it sounds. Look closer and you'll see exposed swathes of carbon-fibre; the sculpted tail unit, the front mudguard and the

new covers, which finally seal off the electrics (they were horribly exposed on the Cafe Racer's sister, the TNT). The quality continues with fully-adjustable Marzocchi forks, Brembo four-piston brake calipers, aluminium wheels and funky side-mounted radiators.

Thanks to a cash injection from Benelli's new Chinese owners, quality control has been tightened, so hopefully the Cafe Racer won't be as fickle to live with as Benellis of the past. Engine assembly has been moved in-house and is screwed together with finer tolerances; add to this a newly developed fuel injection map and you've got a motor which is smooth and docile at low revs but has a decent top-end shove and glorious inline triple wail.

On board, the first thing you notice are those cafe racer-style mirrors poking from the ends of bars. You think they're going to get in your way but they don't. In fact the mirrors are brilliant, they don't vibrate and you can actually see clearly behind without an elbow in sight. The riding position is a mild version of a sports bike, pegs are swept back and bars angled down, but not uncomfortably so; the Cafe Racer is very roomy so you won't get cramped on long journeys.

For normal riding the Cafe Racer is smooth and easy to get along with. At 199kg it's heavier

'At 4000rpm it pulls like a Milanese playboy in a trendy nightclub'

than it looks but it does carry its bulk well. Steering is light at low speeds – and when you're flowing through twisty roads – and the only time you really notice the bulk is when braking hard into a tight downhill corner, where a dab of rear brake to keep the bike level helps keep the pressure of hard braking off wrists.

The throttle action is light and the fuel-injection is just about spot-on, with no lurching back and forth when you get on and off the gas like on earlier Benellis. There's loads of grunt from the big triple to potter around in sixth gear if the mood takes you, and always smooth, swift power on tap when you pull on the throttle wires even at low revs in top.

There's even a 'Power Control' button on the dash, which cuts off top-end grunt, to both make it

more docile for wet-weather riding and, apparently, improve mpg. The button doesn't seem to do much, though, and is hardly in the right spirit. I doubt the cafe racer riders of old would see how little five-star they could burn before the 45 on the jukebox finished.

But best of all, this Benelli is a proper blast. Power is smooth from zero revs but it really gets into its stride at 4000rpm, where it pulls like a Milanese playboy in a trendy nightclub, all the way past 6500rpm where peak torque lays, though to 8500rpm where the 135bhp engine is at its angriest. On a twisty road third gear is all you need to fire you out of anything from hairpins to flowing corners down the next straight.

Handling is exceptional. Squeeze the excellent Brembo brakes, pick your turning point and the Cafe Racer rolls neutrally into turns with poise and stability, with the chassis giving a good feel for what the Dunlop D208RR tyres are doing. Then, lift it up, apply a big handful and the rear tyre digs in and you're away in a frenzy of super-caffeine injected madness.

At just over £9000 the Cafe Racer is a lot of style, speed and noise for the money. It's a fantastic antidote to a sports bike and even one of the many 'super naked' machines that are popping up all over the place.

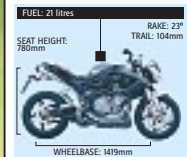


CRACK the handle and the Benelli pulls like mad – all the way through the rev range

BENELLI CAFE RACER

★★★★★
COST: £9349
POWER (claimed): 135bhp
TORQUE (claimed): 91.6ftlb
WEIGHT (est): 199kg

Availability: End June 2006
Colours: Yellow
New for 2006: New model
Insurance group: 17 (of 17)
Info: 01257-485330



TECHNICAL SPEC

Engine: Liquid-cooled 1130cc (88 x 62mm) 12v dohc inline triple. Fuel injection. Six gears.
Chassis: Tubular steel trellis/cast aluminium frame. 43mm Marzocchi upside-down forks, fully adjustable. Single rear. Extreme Technology shock, fully adjustable. Brakes: Brembo: 2 x 320mm front discs with four-piston radially-mounted calipers. 240mm rear disc with four-piston caliper. Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 180/55 x 17 rear.

IN DETAIL



COMPREHENSIVE dash; tiny screen



SCULPTED carbon-fibre tail unit



FUNKY side-mounted radiators