

# MOTORCYCLE

INTERNATIONAL

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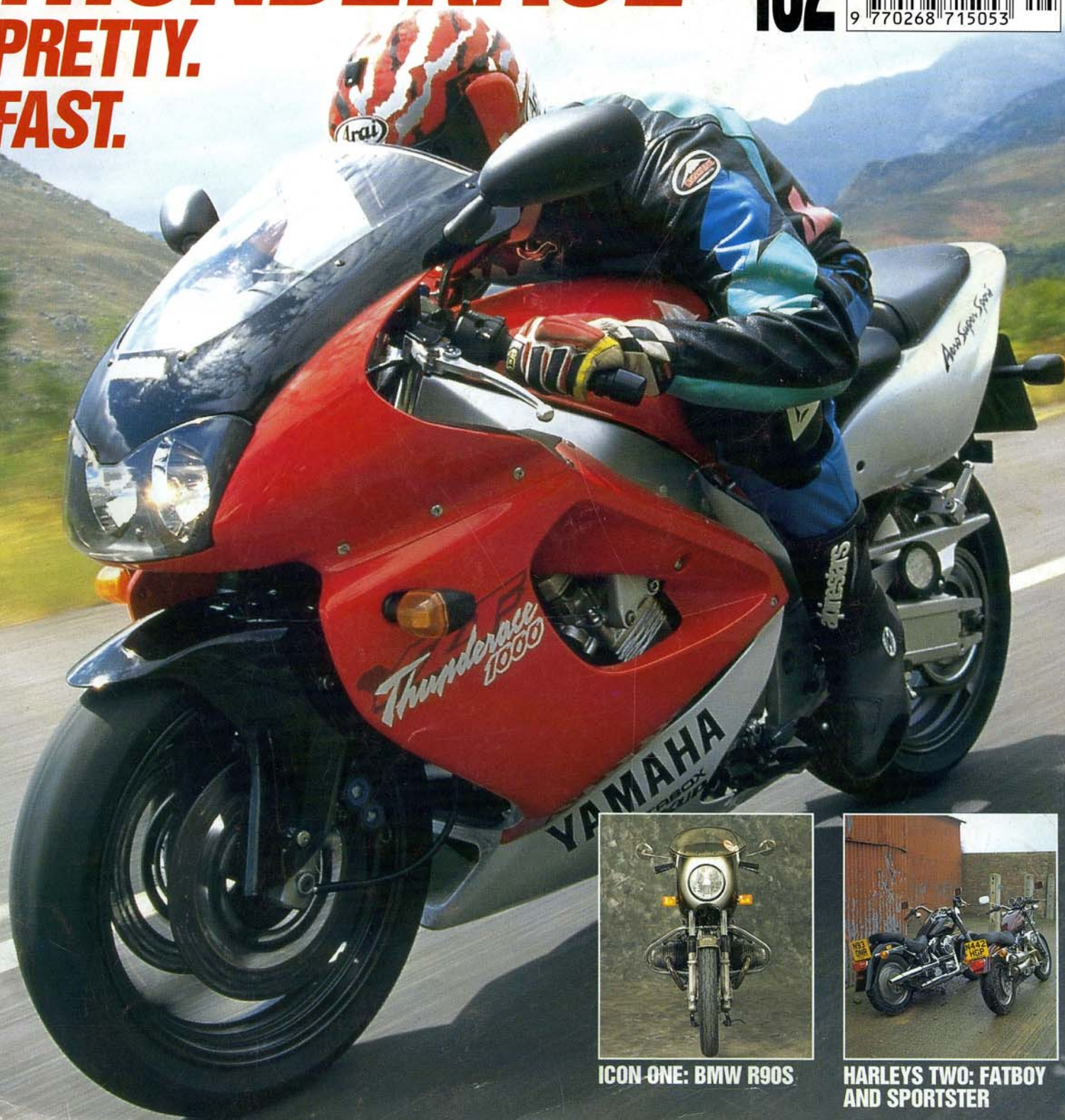
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ICON ONE: BMW R90S



HARLEYS TWO: FATBOY AND SPORTSTER

**XV535**

# VIRAGO

**YAMAHA**

# TART ABOUT TOWN



Words by **ROWENA ROSEASON**  
Photos by **FRANK WESTWORTH**



**F**irst impressions count. They go a long way toward confirming or rubbishing what were previously unfounded opinions, and once an opinion is established it can be hard to shake – like a particularly unpleasant viral infection. This is why dental surgeries should have friendly reception areas decorated in pastels, why sharks should try smiling occasionally and why the XV535 Virago should have its ignition in a sensible place. No relationship between man and motorcycle is going to progress smoothly if the first fifteen minutes of it are spent grovelling around playing hunt the keyhole.

If the next hour and a half is spent shivering on a motorway, the bike had better be an utter gem in every respect in order to establish itself favourably in the mind of its rider. The Virago did its best without any doubt, but its best was no match for the A3 and the foulest January storms since the last lot. A frisky, gusting wind played havoc with the bike's ability to maintain a steady cruising speed while the exposed riding position gave little protection from the consequent buffeting. And none at all from the rest of the weather (sleet, snow, hail, frogs, small children); probably because they don't have weather as such in California. Indeed, following the initial ride and a grossly extended defrost process, it seemed that the West Coast was the only place for this particular model. Mid-winter motorway Britain had the upper hand and had already spent half the prize money.

Yet the 535 Virago is hugely

popular in this country and has been since its introduction seven years ago. Lots of people buy them. Even stranger, lots of people ride them. Given that mass-hysteria is unlikely on this grand a scale, there has to be A Reason, idiosyncratic looks aside, for its success.

The Reason started to make itself apparent the following morning, while negotiating the Yamaha into an overcrowded parking bay. On most bikes this process normally involves a fair amount of forward and backwarding, an occasional side shuffle and, on truly bad days, a bent indicator and a severely dented temper. The 535 fairly flowed into the designated space, leaving room for at least a couple of fag papers between it and the other residents. The ease with which the Virago can be bounced around at walking speed should not be dismissed as a mere nicety. The ultimately stumpy seat height (at 720mm its lower than most bikes of half its capacity) and sensible weight distribution make it simple to manoeuvre not only while parking, but also while

weaving through crowded city streets and, even better, while sculling any single carriageway route.

Which, it transpired, is where the Virago belongs. Any relaxed journey of less than fifty miles on A- or B-roads entirely suits the performance of this shaft-driven V-twin, without inflicting lasting physical damage on the rider. At low and mid-range revs the engine pulls in a cute and cheery fashion, producing a contented (if utterly muffled by the truly magnificent, er, muffler) warble as it does. The five speed gearbox saw some work between the 95 and 96 models which proved successful; clutchless gear-changes (initially provoked by an inability to move the frozen fingers responsible for clutch operation) are satisfyingly smooth, so that even changing

**Right: Nice. Shiny. Engine. The Virago really is a polisher's dream. Or a bit of a nightmare after the seasonally salty situation. Below: Tart's transport around town, or super-sensible shafty for the alternative rider? You choose...**

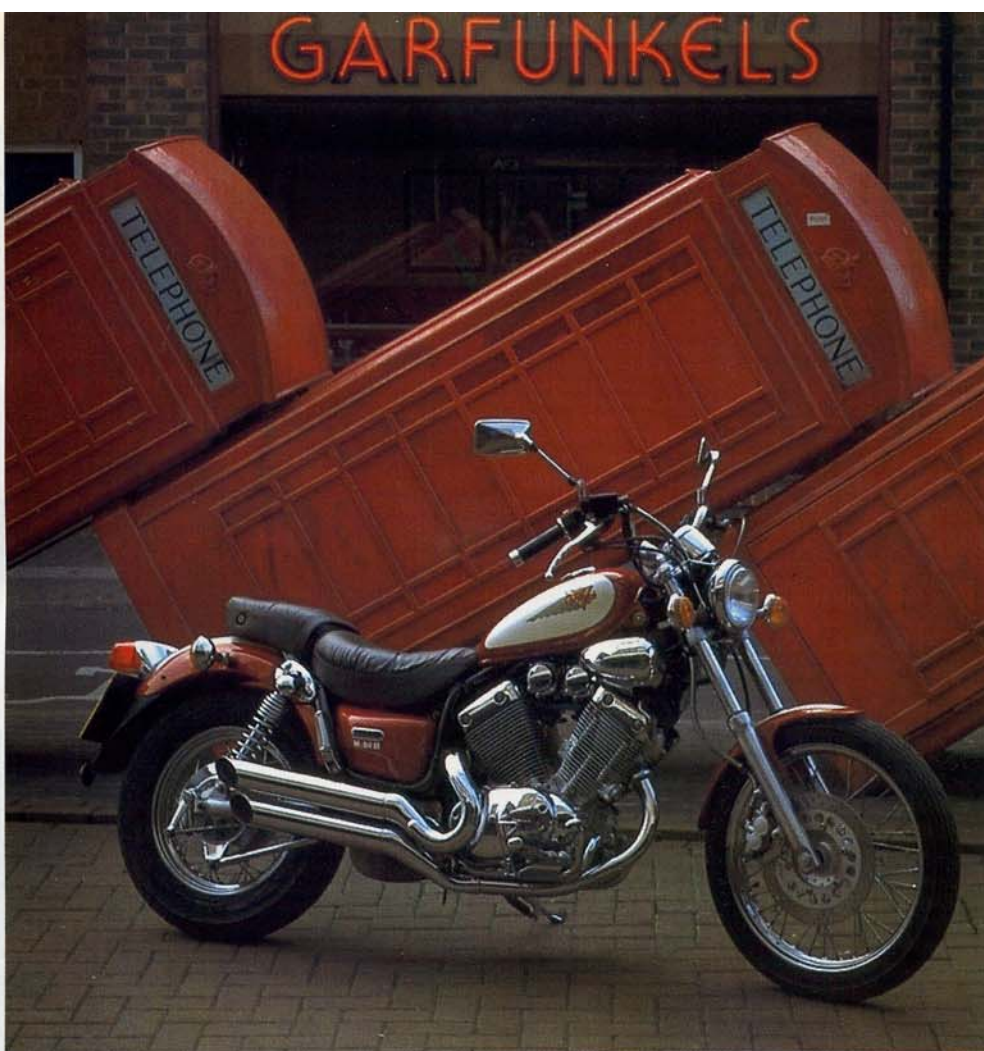


down in a hurry feels good for the soul. And while the handling will never astonish the rider, its greatest asset is that it will also never surprise the rider, and from its pleasant predictability comes confidence and (eventual) enjoyment, even amid the January snow.

Continue the journey another fifty miles without a stop and the story changes, however. The riding position may look comfortable, but over a long period the enforced slump starts to tell on the lower back. Its hard to transfer any weight through the legs with feet positioned forward *thus*, and thigh muscles soon join in a chorus of aching body parts. Shoulders and neck start to bitch just for the hell of it and, unexpectedly, right wrist pipes up too – suffering from throttle use at the slightly strange angle dictated by the styling demands of the handlebars. If this bike was an office chair it would never pass Health and Safety regs ... and the manufacturer would be busily avoiding a dozen lawsuits claiming compensation for repetitive strain injury.

Nor can it be recommended for more than one person. There's precious little room for a pillion; a skinny saddle that looks in danger of disappearing between the cheeks of even the most slender seat, no back support and as standard, no grab rail (although a sissy bar, along with just about every other accessory known to man can be fitted to the Virago to customise what the factory didn't). Given the discomfort of the rider it would be a close thing on a long journey as to who gave in first and called for a coffee stop.

Plenty of town miles aren't a problem tho'. The Virago just loves scooting from one suburb to the next and it's here that the power and handling are ideally matched. The engines forty-odd horses provide ample torque to make quick get-aways and traffic-filled roundabouts an absolute breeze, and never too much for the suspension to manage. While other factory customs suffer from bizarre handling traits the Virago is surprisingly consistent and makes little fuss about threading through traffic or



needed, it's also true that Pandora's box can't be closed and ignorance isn't always bliss. Given how hard the 535 needs to work to achieve motorway acceleration, it might be nice to be able to observe when max power has been reached.

Another weirdity is that sneaky ignition switch. It seems a triumph of fashion over functionality to hide the thing away, especially when this means that the steering lock and ignition switch are separate, effectively discouraging easy use of the only inbuilt security device. There was a good reason for combining these items somewhere accessible and in full view of the rider ... wasn't there?

Sadly, the overall effect of such style-oriented design could be to dress an otherwise capable motorcycle in the equivalent of six inch heels, rendering it all but useless except as posturing totty. Happily, the Virago is a better bike than that, and in the right environment proves to be both fun and functional and ideally suited for low-down lightweight riders. **STOP**

scouting round one-way systems. In heavy congestion its manoeuvrability is only restricted by, of all things, the prominence of its oversize mirrors. While reflecting a sliver of the world in a letterbox of wide-screen vision, they appear to be waiting for the bike to grow into them – like a young cat with whiskers three sizes too big for its body.

Frequent stops at traffic lights for a quick wriggle not only cure all the posture problems, but provide a couple of minutes to warm fingers on a conveniently placed cylinder and to introduce yourself to the gathering crowd. It seems folk do like to stop and stare at the Virago, and if you like the look of the bike yourself you'll probably enjoy the adoration effect it has on the spectating masses. You're likely to need a set of sunglasses though – not to add to your laid-back, ultra-cool image, but to prevent retinal damage when checking your reflection in bright sunlight. If it didn't move, they chromed it; and then some. Chromed 'butterknife style' sidestand, indeed.

**Like most Harley-inspired, erm, bolides ... the Virago only has one good side, and this is it. Where are the phone boxes then? Right: The single clock and neat light layout contrast a little with the fussy tank badge...**

It's also handy to be within pushing distance of a petrol station; the 535 holds just under three gallons so at 45mpg you don't get a tank range so much as a tank trap. Someone at Yamaha noticed this as well, 'cos they thought it a neat bit of elec-trickery to put a reserve switch on the handlebars. While its useful on the one occasion each month when over-optimism (or over-enthusiasm) results in that embarrassingly familiar splutter, it seems an odd priority considering that the choke switch, which is used almost every start, is relegated to the side of the carb.

Also prominent among the list of odd attributes the Virago demonstrates in the name of style is the distinct lack of user information. There's no rev counter and no oil warning light. While a strong argument exists that neither are strictly

