

The Dirt

THE LOW DOWN ON
BUYING, SELLING &
IMPROVING
YOUR CLASSIC

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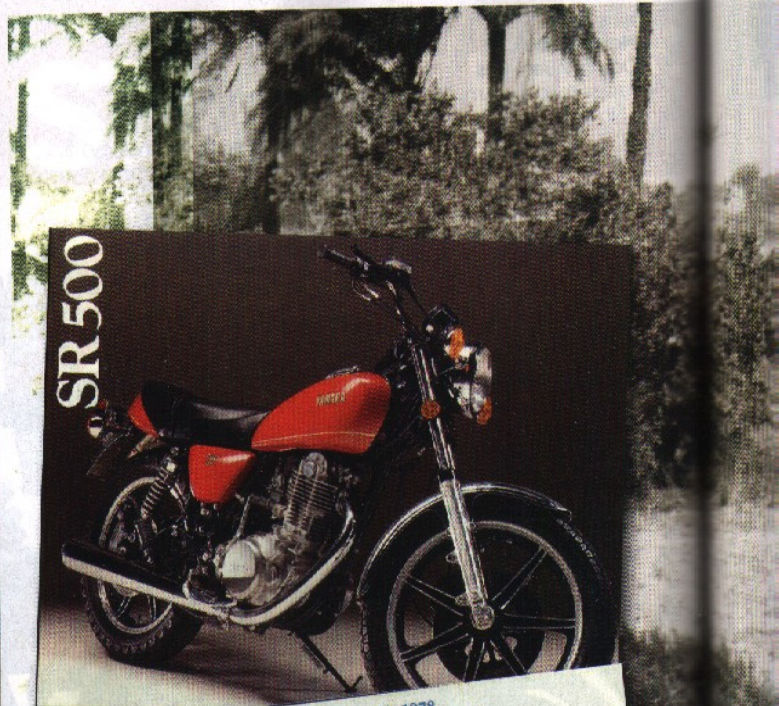
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La SR500 de Yamaha, modèle 1978.
La "Thumper" fait un retour, sur la route.



BUYER'S GUIDE: YAMAHA SR

NO, IT'S

The Yamaha SR500 was inspired by British single-cylinder machines. Its combination of British looks and Japanese know-how was a winner. And it still is today...

Words **Danny DeFazio**
Photography **Classic Bike archive**



An SR500 gets a taste of paradise. Brochure (inset) introduces the French to the return of 'La Thumper'

SR500 1978-1981 (UK)

JAPANESE

British in spirit and Japanese in design, the globally popular Yamaha SR500 almost never was. In the mid-1970s, when the idea for the SR was first mooted, Yamaha's management considered it a retrograde step. Yes, the off-road XT – antecedent of the SR – was selling well. But that was built for the ever growing trail and enduro market. The street oriented 500cc days were thought to be over but Shunji Tanaka, the machine's development engineer, was convinced of the commercial potential of his project and undeterred by the relatively recent demise of British-built half-litre machines. His arguments prevailed and the SR500 was launched in 1978.

Although the SR (Single Roadster) was classic inspired it had a modern specification including electronic ignition, five speeds, compact all-alloy unit-construction engine, overhead camshaft and front disc brake.

Lack of weight, a superslim profile and ease of handling made the SR500 as handy as a 250. The promise of sensible fuel consumption added to its appeal, even if the reality was good rather than outstanding.

There is no electric starter on this model but to help kick it into life a start mark appears in a camshaft window when the piston is in the ideal position. To bring the mark into view a valve lifter eases the 9:1 compression so that you can slowly turn the engine via the kickstart lever. The kickstart ratchet disengages at the bottom of the stroke to spare you from kickback.

Simple to ride and a doddle to maintain, from the moment you swing a leg over the seat this bike feels just right. The controls are light. The balance is good. The performance is perfectly adequate for town and country but it's on the back roads that this machine is really in its element.

Claimed power is 33bhp. Actual power,

as measured on the *Motorcycle Mechanics* dyno in 1979, was a less impressive 25bhp. But it's still enough to get you there with reasonable dispatch. In fact, dispatch was something the bike specialised in – its narrowness meant it could filter through gaps other machines would balk at, making it a popular choice with parcel-laden couriers.

With 55in wheelbase, 6.5in ground clearance and just 359lbs to haul around, the SR is the kind of bike you'll never have to struggle with, except perhaps at speed, in strong winds. The steering becomes less precise the faster you go.

The last UK market models were sold in 1982, but they were available throughout the Eighties in other markets, including mainland Europe. And a smaller 400cc version is still being produced in Japan.

The SR500 is quite simply a neat, compact, manageable piece of everyday biking fun. Prices for these machines are still low. So low, in fact, that you can bag a useable example for around £750. And after 30 years the SR500 has achieved minor cult status. You can be confident of getting a quick sale if you ever wanted to move on from this good looking 90mph/60mpg machine.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

■ TOP END:

Check for a noisy top end. Rocker gear and cam and camchain wear is a problem due to poor top end oiling, particularly on the exhaust side. An aftermarket exterior oil branch line to the exhaust rocker can be provided by specialist Dave Newitt (see Contacts p88) to cure this. If the engine continues to smoke after warm-up the valve guides may be worn.

■ CYLINDER HEAD:

Check that the head gasket is not blowing. At every service the head should be checked for tightness. Torque down progressively to avoid it warping. Check that the engine is oiltight when warmed up.

■ CARBURETTOR:

Check that the engine starts readily. If not, one cause can be the carburettor pump diaphragm in poor condition. An overhaul should result in easier starting, better performance and fuel economy.

■ OIL FILTERS:

Ask when these were last changed. The SR has three filters, one for the frame and two for the engine. Use 20w50 mineral oil in summer and 10w30 in winter.

■ TINWARE:

Check the mudguards, seat pan and fuel tank for rust. Original parts are not easy to get hold of now and non-original replacements will lower the re-sale value.

Simple elegance (and an oil-bearing frame)

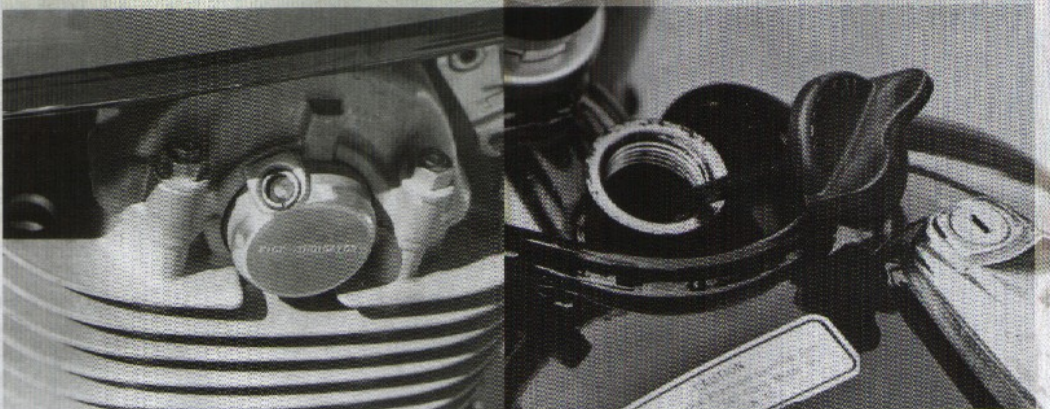


■ SMALL END:

Listen for engine knock. It may sound like big end trouble but it is more likely to be small end. The small end wears prematurely, especially if oil change intervals and quantities have been neglected. The piston can break up after 12,000-15,000 miles. A Wiseco piston is a good upgrade.

■ FRONT DISC BRAKE:

Check that the caliper is not partially seized. If an overhaul is necessary you can fit soft or competition pads to suit your riding style. Replace hose with braided line. The right fork leg will take an XS caliper giving the potential for a double disc set-up.



■ REAR BRAKE:

Check that it is not partially seized at the fulcrum and that it is returning fully. If adjusted up too much the brake can be overly fierce.

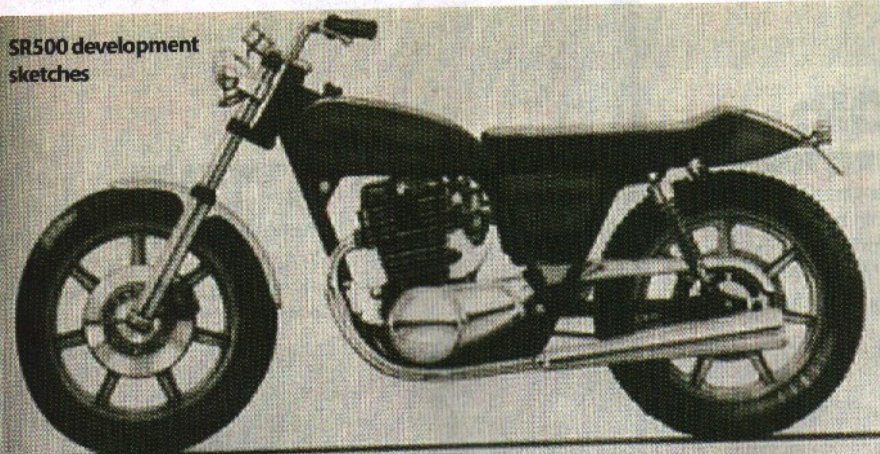
■ SWINGARM NEEDLE BEARINGS:

Check for play. They can rust if neglected. Some owners convert to nylon bushes which don't need grease.

■ KICKSTART RATCHET:

If the kickstart lever hits the footrest, it means that the kickstart ratchet mechanism has failed.

SR500 development sketches



YAMAHA SR500 HISTORY 1976-99

1976: Shiro Nakamura's successful XT500 off-roader is made available in Europe (1975 USA).

1978: The SR500, developed from the XT500 by Shunji Tanaka, is launched with larger inlet valve (47mm, XT 45mm), reshaped inlet and exhaust tracts, electronic ignition, revised carburation, gearbox drum on needle roller bearings, 12-volt electrics, self-cancelling indicators. Many parts are XS650 based. Exhaust downpipe double skinned. Engine is four-point mounted (XT three). Frame has bigger diameter tube compared to XT.

1979: Optional cast wheels. Colours red/black.

1980: Colour changes only.

1981: Colour changes only. Cast wheels as standard. UK imports cease.

1982: Remaining SR500s sold from UK dealer showrooms, but still available in some Euro markets including Germany.

1984: Narrow handlebar replace wide types, 18in front wheel replaces 19in.

1988: SR500 Classic with drum brakes.

1999: Last SR500 produced. Shorter stroke SR400 (introduced 1978) remains in production, 30th anniversary model launched 2008.

KEEPING ONE ON THE ROAD

■ "Mine's a 1982 model. I've covered about 8000 miles on it. Aside from the carburettor pump diaphragm breaking up, nothing has gone wrong. It's great on back lanes and good for just over 90mph."

Paul Ainge, SR500 owner, Northants

■ "The top ends rattle a little and camshaft and rocker arms wear prematurely but they can be fixed with an extra oil feed. The valve stem oil seals can go, but they're easy to fix. Wiseco pistons are a good upgrade, but they're 0.5mm oversize, (two rebore sizes over stock). Gearboxes and clutches are never a problem. Check the charging - a new Yamaha alternator costs around £500."

Dave Newitt, SR/XT500 specialist

■ "The SR motor is derived from the XT500 - a proven engine in the motocross world."

Steve Goodyear, ex-Yamaha UK and GP motocross mechanic

CONTACTS

■ **Dave Newitt SR/XT500 specialist**, Hinckley. 01455 246 368.

www.yamaha-XT500.com

■ **Sondel Yamaha** Blackfen, Kent. 0208 303 1811

■ **Worlds End Motorcycles** 01273 597072 www.wemoto.com

■ www.bbbikeshop.co.uk alternator exchange

■ www.vd-classic.com spares/custom parts

■ **Burton Bike Bits** alloy fuel tanks 01530 564 362 www.burtonbikebits.net

PRICE GUIDE

MINT	£1500-£1750
GOOD	£1000-£1500
RATTY	£500-£1000
BASKETCASE	£200-£500

ENGINE/FRAME NUMBERS

Engine and frame numbers should match. The engine number is on a crankcase boss under the carburettor. The frame number is on the right side of the headstock. The following prefixes apply -

1978:	2J4-000101 -
1979:	3H0
1980:	4E6
1982:	2J4-0252594

PARTS PRICES

Prices inc VAT from Sondel Yamaha

Cam chain:	£45.45
Oil filter:	£7.49
Piston:	£102.25
Silencer (NOS):	£451.95
Clutch friction plates (8):	£89.24
Headlight assembly:	£125.91
Front brake pads:	£19.68
Head gasket:	£26.38
Front mudguard:	£73.85
Fuel tank (NOS):	£495.12
Seat:	£328.67

SPECIFICATION

1978 YAMAHA SR500

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

Typeair-cooled sohc four-stroke single

Capacity.....499cc

Bore x stroke.....87 x 84mm

Compression ratio.....9.0:1

Carburation.....single Mikuni VM34SS

Clutch/Gearbox.....multiplate/5-speed

CHASSIS

Frame.....oil-bearing tubular steel cradle

Front suspension.....telescopic fork

Rear suspension.....twin shocks

Brakes front/rear.....single disc/sls drum

Wheels front/rear.....19in/18in wire

Tyres.....3.50S19/4.00S18

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight.....359lb (163kg)

Wheelbase.....55.1 in (1400mm)

Seat height.....33in (785mm)

Fuel capacity.....2.6 gallons (12 litre)

PERFORMANCE

Top speed.....87mph/139kph*

Max power.....33bhp claimed (25bhp @ 5000rpm on MM dyno*)

Fuel consumption.....63mpg*

Price new.....£933

* Figures from *Motorcycle Mechanics* February 1979

NEXT MONTH:

HONDA CB450