

TAKING ON HONDA



In 1973, if you wanted a Honda CB500 you'd hardly go for an Italian copy. But is Benelli's 500 a better classic?

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Copying has always been rife in the motorcycle industry. BSA's first production machine imitated Triumph; AMC lifted BMW's telescopic front fork; and every major Japanese maker, in its formative years, studiously cribbed European designs. So in 1971 when Alejandro de Tomaso took over

60-year-old Italian manufacturer Benelli and ordered a new range, who could blame his engineers for blatantly copying Honda?

Benelli's chosen short-cut to soundness was to copy the Honda CB500 Four, much admired since its unveiling in 1971. The Honda's sohc in-line four-cylinder power unit was



The paint scheme, green with gold and black pin stripes, has a classy look, befitting Benelli's long history.

The seat may not look inviting, but it's more yielding and comfy than the Honda's. In general, though, the Italian machine's ancillaries are inferior. The hinged seat's lock is visibly cruder and the oil filler cap is plastic, while the CB500's is metal.

The quality gap between the CB500 and the Quattro is most obvious when you look at the switchgear and instrumentation. In the Seventies, this was an area in which Benelli and Guzzi were trying hard to catch up with Japan. Feeble indicator repeaters are sited on the outer top corners of the box-shaped instrument binnacles. For some reason they appear to be disguised as barely-visible socket-head screws. The light switch on the left bar has a thumb-latch mechanism to stop



Ray Meggett chose the Benelli to go with his British and Italian fleet of classics

you accidentally hitting 'off' between high beam and dip – a nice idea but it's renowned for giving trouble to all-weather riders.

In fairness to the Benelli, its ignition switch, just ahead of the handlebar, is in a better position than Honda's under-tank one. A memory I have from the Seventies was that a handlebar switch gremlin was the sole cause of a breakdown on a friend's otherwise reliable CB500E.

So who buys a Benelli Quattro and why, when there are so many CB500s out there? Owner Ray Meggett, a 57-year-old building surveyor who has owned BSA twins, Gold Stars, a Triumph Trident and presently a Ducati V-twin, has never owned a Japanese bike. He bought the Quattro from Italian Vintage Co in 1999, soon after it was imported to the UK.

"I was attracted by its originality," he explains. "All the paint is undisturbed except for the swinging arm and chainguard. I replaced the rusty chrome rims with non-standard alloy Borrani's." Since our photographs were taken, he has wisely added a rear view mirror.

Fast becoming a Benelli enthusiast, Ray also acquired a later 504 Sport and is presently creating a Quattro-based, road-legal, Renzo Pasolini GP replica. ▶



About 20 Quattros came to the UK. The first had Grimeca drums – these Brembo discs came later



Square dials, eh? Funky instruments from the house of Veglia



Yes, well. At least it is the period switchgear. And you can still read it, although time hasn't enhanced the appeal



Ribs 'n' fins all over. It's the Italian way

Benelli 500 Quattro

◀ With its aggressive, lunging stance, the Quattro is visually more imposing than the CB500 and feels different on the road. Its steering is much less neutral and the chassis pitches more assertively into corners – presumably the effect of its different fork geometry and fatter front tyre.

There is a reason why this 500 feels big: Benelli used 750 Sei cycle parts to hurriedly create a mid-ranger after axing its obsolete 650cc Tornado twin.

Once acclimatised, I find the roadholding is sound. I can crank round bends with increasing verve. The Italian four has a more involving feel than the CB500 and has stronger front braking from the Brembo system, which has an iron disc in place of Honda's appearance-conscious stainless rotor. Also, the exhaust sound is slightly coarser in the lower and middle rpm range.

Engine behaviour and performance is very like the Honda's. It's not surprising. The two engines share bore and stroke dimensions and have the same basic architecture: plain-bearing crankshafts; central chain-drive single overhead camshafts; inverted-tooth primary chains; and wet sump lubrication. Some service items, like the oil filter cartridge, are actually interchangeable.

The Benelli engine – made by Moto Guzzi, which had also been acquired by de Tomaso (1972) – has cylinder finning more angular than the

The use of black in the paint scheme is typical Seventies. Car manufacturers including Lancia and Ford were especially fond of this treatment. De Tomaso too. And he owned Benelli and Moto Guzzi

Honda's. The Benelli also has distinctive, finned cambox end-caps, and ribbing both on its clutch cover and its rear brake backplate. Interestingly, the Benelli's clutch cable enters the crankcase horizontally – it enters vertically on the CB500.

In place of the Honda's Keihin round-slide carburettors, the Benelli has four square-bodied Dell'Ortos of the same size (22mm), while its starter motor and alternator are by Bosch.

The frames are of similar layout, though the Benelli doesn't have the hefty bracing below the steering head that the CB500 shares with the CB750. The rear units are by Sebac, with five preload settings, as on the Honda. De Tomaso's car industry background is evident in the trendy Seventies razor-edge cosmetics. The unusual fuel tank and massive side panels are shared with the CB750.



Although the riding posture is comfortable, with highish bars and footrests sited directly in a vertical plane with the seat nose, there is always a sensation of being on top of the seat's firm padding, rather than settling into it. After a fair mileage the handgrips are hard on your palms. But otherwise the Honda is well-appointed and user friendly with useful mirrors, straightforward switchgear, reliable indicators and a handily-placed grab rail which helps you overcome the bike's weight when you're using the main stand.

Some way into the day's riding it occurred to me that gearchanges were crisp and clean, without the notchiness evident with some Honda gearboxes. But clutch slip increasingly became apparent if the power was turned on



Richard Waltham with the Honda he has owned for a quarter century

hard. The bike's owner Richard Waltham was clearly distressed and apologetic about this, but he needn't bear himself up: it's a known weakness of the CB500, which is otherwise a byword for reliability. A new clutch operating mechanism on the 1975 CB550 models effected a cure.

The overall styling is subdued – more rounded and traditional than the four's CB450 predecessor and less

ostentatious than the CB750. The CB500's trumpet-style silencers were inspired by an aftermarket US type, and these were inspired, in turn, by BSA's Gold Star.

Richard acknowledges that the pin-striping on his tank may not be dead-on original, but even so he has scooped VJMC concours awards with this nicely restored Honda. He bought it in the late Seventies. After 18 months it was off the road and stayed that way for 23 years, awaiting the new four-pipe exhaust system that Richard never had spare cash for. In the Nineties, a redundancy payment spurred him on.

"I'm glad I did it then, because some parts are really drying up now," says Richard, a Honda in-line four fan who recently owned a CBR1000F. ▶



When launched in 1971 the sohc Honda 500-4 was a revelation



Stylistically stimulating – fanfare exhausts for four pot music



Symmetry and simplicity: Honda's instruments are classic



A mudguard for the disc – unnecessary but it shows they were trying hard in Japan

Honda CB500 Four

◀ Honda's four-cylinder CB750 of 1969 may have been of huge significance for the company, but many discerning riders of the Seventies thought the later CB500 was a superior motorcycle.

Why? The smaller four-piper offers a more favourable power-to-weight ratio, is much less bulky and has noticeably better handling. Yet it still has some advanced features of the 750, such as electric starting, a disc front brake and, of course, a smooth and reliable engine. Also, despite the capacity deficit – which made it less popular in the capacity-conscious US – the CB500 has a respectable ton-plus maximum speed, and sufficient guts for brisk two-up riding.

Push-button starting sees us make a clean getaway from the ciff with no fuss or fiddling. The Honda is small. It's a hefty 450lb or so with fuel, but weight is not an issue on the move. The engine is uncannily smooth, especially by Ducati 450 or Triumph T100T Daytona standards, although some mild tingle occasionally transmits through the footrests.

A surprisingly heavy twistgrip makes you work at keeping the revs stoked up. If you do, the Honda hums along effortlessly. It's mild and compliant with the pointer around 4000-5000rpm, but develops a fiercer

Extensive finning on Honda wet sump is clearly shown in this picture. Note ignition switch under tank

edge as it nears the 9000rpm redline and really takes off. In a world now overcrowded with multi-cylinder motorcycles it's easy to forget what a thrill it was for road riders of the early Seventies to ride in-line fours previously only sampled by a few grand prix stars.

Just like Honda's Sixties GP bikes, the CB500F's frame is unremarkable, and its suspension technology not especially ground-breaking. But it all works. On the sweeps, swoops and twists of rural Lincolnshire roads, handling is neutral and predictable at legal speeds, with a mere hint of uncertainty at the rear when you're bowling through bumpy hends. I call on the front disc and rear drum frequently and they give me firm steady and stopping power.



the pattern for engines in Benelli's two dramatic 1973 launches: the attention-grabbing six-cylinder 750cc Sei and the 500cc Quattro, which was very much overshadowed by the flamboyant six at the time.

The half-litre Benelli engine is a near clone of the Honda, though the Benelli has more tilt to its cylinders.

The Italian marque showed original thinking in its fresh Seventies' styling and had no need to seek Oriental inspiration when it came to cycle parts.

There's only one good way to see how the Honda and Benelli relate to each other, and which still cuts the mustard 30 years on – ride them against each other.

Latin charger chasing Japanese technology. What an irony that the Japanese should find themselves being copied

The two 500cc fours look markedly different when you see them parked side by side outside a Little Chef in rural Lincolnshire, which is where we set out on a sunny morning for a day's riding. But looks can be deceptive.

How different will these opposing motorcycles from Italy and Japan be on the road? ▶

Which would you choose?
Once hardly anyone
would look at the Benelli.
Now it's appreciated
more. The Honda has a
nostalgia-based following



Conclusion

◀ Both of these fours are historically interesting. Honda's CB500 exhibits successful scaling-down of the milestone CB750 to make a versatile mount for seasoned riders more impressed by sure-footedness and sophistication than bulk and power. It had equally attractive derivatives like the Euro-style CB400 Four. The Honda also enjoyed considerable TT racing success in tuned form.

The Benelli typifies the Italian industry's Seventies' push (aided by government import tax policies) to radically update its products and compete with Japan. With its bigger, flashier, six-cylinder brother, the 500 was first of a new line. It was followed by an improved and more compact four, culminating in the admired 654 Sport of 1980. Benelli faded away again, but recently revived with its rarely seen 900cc triple.

In the Seventies, UK importer Agrati shipped few Quattros to the UK and could not match Honda on price. Today, Benelli spares are reasonably readily available, but parts can cost 50 per cent more than Honda's.

Some Japanese parts are less expensive than you might expect.

£90 per pipe, for a genuine Honda exhaust system, is not outrageous (Benelli pipes cost around £100). However, cycle parts are inevitably getting scarce in both cases.

Which of these classic smoothies is best? It depends whether you are buying with your heart or your head.

Except for the clutch slip tendency, the CB500 is a reliable motorcycle from the biggest maker on the planet and it's extremely useful, whether you're cruising two-up or burning up backroads at 8000rpm.

Despite its more gangling build and a certain level of quirkiness, the Benelli handles as well or better and is equally suited to brisk riding, albeit with more rider input. Love or hate the styling, it looks distinctive and will create more interest than a CB500 at bike nights. Although there's an enthusiastic UK Benelli club, Quattros are scarce and owners must rely on a very few specialists for parts and advice.

The Honda clearly makes more sense, especially for covering high mileage in all weathers, but its efficiency borders on blandness. If you're prepared to take a risk on parts and reliability and simply want fine weather thrashes, the Benelli will reward you with more personality. ■

specification

	1972 Honda CB500	1975 Benelli Quattro
Engine/transmission		
type	air-cooled in-line four	air-cooled in-line four
capacity	498cc	498cc
bore x stroke	56 x 50.6mm	56 x 50.6mm
compression ratio	9:1	10.2:1
lubrication	wet sump	wet sump
carburation	4 x 22mm Keihin	4 x 22mm Dell'Orto VHB
primary/final drive	chain	chain
clutch/gearbox	wet/five speed	wet/five speed
electrics	12v alternator, starter motor	12v alternator, starter motor
ignition	battery/coils/points	battery/coils/points
Chassis		
frame	steel, double cradle	steel, double cradle
front suspension	telescopic fork	telescopic fork
rear suspension	swinging arm, twin shocks	swinging arm, twin shocks
brakes front/rear	10.8in disc/7.5in sh drum	12in disc/8in sh drum
wheels	wire spoke/steel rim	wire spoke/steel rim
tyres front/rear	3.25 x 18in/4 x 18in	3.9 x 18in/4.25 x 18in
Dimensions		
kerb weight	449lb (204kg)	460lb (209kg)
seat height	32.5in (826mm)	31in (787mm)
wheelbase	55.5in (1405mm)	56in (1430mm)
fuel capacity	3.3 gal (15 litres)	5 gal (23 litres)
Performance		
top speed	108mph (est)	108mph (est)
power output	48bhp@9000rpm	47bhp@9500rpm
price new	£619	c£1000
value now	£800-£2000	£1400-2400

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