

Peter Feistl's Italian Love



Several of my friends have owned Ducatis and whilst absolutely impressed with the sound of the L-Twin, I have been left un-inspired by that rattling clutch, the trellis frame and the fact Ducati's need more costly servicing than seemed necessary – compared to a Japanese bike.

About 18 months ago, I worked with a bloke called Michael who had crashed his 1098 Ducati at Turn 1 at Phillip Island. Michael was very fortunate as the bike only skidded along the bitumen and grass, not doing multiple flips and thus not totally destroying his Ducati. Michael set about rebuilding the bike, with all sorts of bling, from red titanium screws to exotic sprocket covers and tons of carbon fibre. When the bike was finished, Michael rode it to work. It looked sensational but was loud and rattled like crazy – an especially noisy clutch and exhaust system. “Michael, it's a cop magnet and when you get your licence back in a couple of months, you'll be attracting attention from all the wrong places!” (Michael's licence was suspended for 12 months for speeding and doing mono's – that's why he was doing track days.)

I suggested he come and ride with MSR when he gets his licence back, given we were hard riders and he could enjoy the thrill of fast corners, rather than café scene and the need to show off!

With his 1098 finished, Michael saw the first photos of the Panigale and was keen to show me anything that you could download from the Internet. This was going to be Michael's next bike! He was supposed to be working for me - I didn't mind bike talk during lunchtime but it often carried on for the rest of the afternoon. But we were well informed about the new Ducati Panigale!

Michael, knowing all the reasons why I wouldn't buy a Ducati, pointed out all the improvements in this new model as follows;

- Wet clutch (no more rattles while in neutral)
- Monocoque frame (no more messy plumbing)
- Chain driven overhead cams (no more frequent costly services to replace belts)
- Gorgeous dash

So Michael asked the question – “What’s stopping you from buying the Panigale?” Good question! All I had to do was wait for Ducati to officially release the bike into Australia and find out how much! Ducati took their time to release the bike during which time the inevitable happened to Michael. His “Cop Magnet” bike was doing a mono and PC Plod was not amused, especially as Michael still had a few weeks to go to get his licence back! Michael chucked in the towel and offered to sell me his 1098 for a bargain price of \$29000, despite having spent more than \$35000 for bike and bling. Was this too good an opportunity to get onto a red Ducati at a cheap price? Hmm... A few weeks later Michael had sold the bike for a desperate \$24,000, but the Panigale seed had been planted!

I opened up a Panigale bank account and squirrelled away a set amount each pay day. The account already had a starting \$14,550 contribution, compliments of eBike insurance and the GSXR750 that was written off. Given the new price of the Panigale - \$28,999, I was more than half-way there. (Special mention to Kurn for giving me a simple piece of advice when dealing with insurance companies – write everything down! The claim I submitted was carefully scribed and immediately stored in my phone, email and laptop and anything I might be in front of, in case the insurance assessor called. Needless to say, the insurance company called on several occasions to ‘verify my story’. In short, I was riding through a corner and a magpie flew up in front of the bike, nearly colliding with my screen, causing me to run slightly wide of the corner and onto the gravel. Next thing I know I am on the ground wondering what happened!)

About the same time I decided to change my personal situation and shift back into the family home, with the ex being voted off the island. That all came about because my son had moved back home and evicted my 17yo daughter from her big bedroom. (A natural pecking order does exist). Not long after that my daughter was distraught as she didn't have enough closet space for all her shoes and clothes. I suggested that if Mum moved out, she could have the master bedroom and en-suite, and I could move back into one of the smaller bedrooms. The ex was gone the next week!

Perhaps that was a spanner in the works for the Panigale Saving Scheme, as now I had to pay more bills, more bills and more bills. Still, I stuck to the plan and eventually as my Birthday rolled around in June, my mind had been made up!

Next, speak to Dave Ward to ask who was the best person to sell me a Ducati. Dave gave me a few names and tips and so I set forth to see a Panigale in the flesh!

My first impression was WOW! This is one sexy Italian motorbike and really looks like the Japanese built it! The build quality was superb. I even got to listen to the engine as Ducati City had one in the showroom. (Seems that us folk in Australia – the ones with the money – are at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to availability of new motorcycles.) Unfortunately, that's where the wow factor would need to be parked for many, many, many months.

Having researched the bike rather comprehensively, the only real choice was the base model, which still came with ABS, traction control, quick shift and a few other electronic features. Ducati got the base model close to perfection with the red front guard and none of the dangly wires on the

suspension components of the other models. I didn't think I would need the ultra-light Marchesini forged wheels, Ohlin's suspension on the S-Model which was about \$5000 more.

'Close to perfection' meant that a few things NEEDED to be improved, so a few extra accessories such as carbon fibre parts, a tail bag and a softer seat were on the shopping list! These were the haggle points between the two Ducati dealers wrestling for the sale! In the end, neither was prepared to offer a bargain, so I based my decision on Rick being the service manager at Ringwood Ducati/Honda. Rick had looked after me for years with tyres and repair/service of the Blackbird but ended up leaving before the Panigale arrived! Now Naomi is the service manager and she is much better looking and clever too!

With the deal for the Panigale finally struck, I was in for an agonising wait. The Panigale will be here by the end of September (deposit on June 5), easily in time for the Melbourne Cup weekend. Jonni Salesman who did the deal, had gone into hiding every time I called for an update, so all I could do was wait. I joined the Panigale forum to see what everyone else was doing and the fun they were having. Forums are a great place to get information and misinformation alike, but there were several key threads and issues that kept cropping up; exhaust heat from the rear cylinder; clutch issues and suspension set-up.

Exhaust: Fortunately my son and I are also rebuilding a 2002 V8 Commodore and part of that project was to minimise the heat in the engine compartment. (High performance engines like to be kept cool!) The trick here was to ceramic-coat the exhaust system and the satin black finish looked superb, so HPC were in line to do the Panigale's exhaust system – if it ever arrived!

Clutch: Hard to imagine that a Brembo system could get air bubbles into the master cylinder, but it does on a Panigale. (Ducati still haven't quite worked out how to fix this.)

Suspension: The suspension issue takes me back to when Dave Ward and I swapped our GSXR750/600 bikes for a blast somewhere in Tassie in 2007. Dave had the suspension fully reworked and given the bikes were nearly identical, other than cc's and about 2.5kg of weight, I was astounded at how good Dave's GSXR600 felt. The steering was so precise and yet soft and comfortable, so getting the Panigale done by an expert was a no brainer. Come in Steve Mudford! (Later – much later, as the bike still hasn't even been manufactured yet!)

Speaking of the GSXR750, I really liked the under-slung exhaust system and the black appearance of the bike. OK, the bike was black in colour, but Suzuki did have presence of mind to make the foot pegs black, the suspension parts black and a few other parts black. Ducati, well known for sensational styling opted for aluminium, brushed aluminium and more aluminium where BLACK should have been the colour. When I get my bike, (waiting waiting, waiting) I will get the foot pegs, suspension and other bits painted black.

Having surfed the net for all things Ducati and Panigale related, "Pure Ducati" in America had an on-line sale with 20% off everything in the on-line store. Time to visit Jonni, try on some leathers and ask, "Where is my Panigale?"

Fortunately the only size of Ducati Jacket in the store was MY SIZE! I tried it on for a perfect fit, throw in the back protector and I'm in business! "Would you like to buy that now?" "No thanks, I will wait for my Ducati to arrive first". Then I went home and ordered it on-line, with a saving of around \$450!

Then Dennis Lindemann sends an email regarding a German on-line store for boots and all other motorbike gear. Thanks Dennis! Purchased a top pair of Alpinestars boots for \$200 less than the best price in Australia.

With September done and dusted – still no bike – October rolls on, the Melbourne Cup weekend is an event missed and I'm thinking I haven't even test ridden this bike and here I am spending all this money on Ducati stuff. Maybe I should cancel the order, get my deposit back and go and buy a Honda VFR1200. Not a bad bike by all accounts, given it has a shaft drive, compact V4, dual clutch and arguably one of the best all-round performers with Honda reputation. Really the bike is an exquisite upgrade of the CBR1100XX blackbird and VFR800 models, both of which are notable Hondas, but that's my opinion and not shared by many others. I still commute on an old Blackbird and it eats up freeway traffic but maybe now is a good time for a refresh?! After all I do have the cash. Better call Jonni and see when that Panigale is due to arrive. (No Answer or call-back.)

In the meantime I had arranged a weekend of golf and fishing with my brother which would give me some time to think and make a decision on which bike to purchase. Half way to Port Fairy, it's Friday afternoon at 4:50pm and I get a call from Jonni. "Your bike is here"... So much for protocol. Jonni promised to let me know when it landed in Sydney, when it was on the truck to Melbourne, when it arrived at the dealership, help arrange insurance and anything else I might need. Jonni didn't break the mould when it comes to salesmen. No wonder I lost all interest in the bike.

The following weekend, I eventually strolled in to pick up the bike. Jonni was too busy having a smoke out the back to really care, so I just hung around waiting for someone to give a damn. (I did speak to the manager in due course to let him know that my Ducati purchasing experience was rather disappointing.) So after being handed the keys, a bag of goodies and specific instructions to not go above 6000rpm or you will void the warranty, I set off for home on the freeway. A short trip of around 10kms which felt absolutely terrible!

What have I done?

Trying to be excited in front of the family is a bit hard when you think you have just blown your money on a lemon and there is no easy/cheap financial way out. I had to take a few deep breaths and call on all my experience, gather my composure and set about working this out, and pretending to be happy.

The first problem was the rock-hard suspension. Obviously the default settings were for a fat Italian who weighs about 280kg. I took the time to read the wad of manuals that Ducati provide but here I must also be scathing, as the manual gives you one short paragraph about setting the suspension, in about 27 languages! (Useless, unless you can find the compression and rebound adjusters.)

I had downloaded a few suspension You-Tube videos a while ago and made some sense of it and set forth reducing preload, compression and rebound based on the sag settings on the Panigale forums. The ride seemed much softer, especially with the rear ride height set lower, taking some weight off my wrists.

My next weekend saw a quiet ride to Mt Hotham and a 990km round trip that would take care of the first service pre-requisite kilometres. This ride was no fun! Consider coming out of a corner, powering on and just as the engine starts to get serious, you have to change gear. By the end of the ride, the engine felt much freer and I was just starting to come to terms with the bike – knowing how to do things without thinking such as resetting the trip computer, changing the traction control settings, adjusting the rear shock and scrolling through the power modes/menu. Quite beneficial.

The ride did confirm one thing – the rear cylinder/exhaust is blisteringly hot! Travel at 100km/h and your legs fry. I had to ride with my legs wide apart to get some air to flow and at times needed to stand on the pegs to cool down.

A few days later and the bike had been serviced, parked back in the kitchen (it's a man's house now), disassembled and parts placed in boxes ready to be ceramic coated and painted black. The carbon fibre parts still await fitment, as do numerous other accessories including a tinted screen.

The carefully devised improvement strategy is now being executed with precision and finally the excitement of owning a Ducati builds. Parts are dispatched with a pre-Christmas delivery promise, bolts are laid out in specific order, ready for quick assembly, photos have been taken to serve as a reminder on how to reassemble a Ducati without a manual!

As part of the meticulous planning, several digital images were edited with Adobe PhotoShop, as a preview to how the bike would look with various combinations of parts in black. I was a little unsure of the final design, given the emphasis on black, but the Ducati red in itself is a stunning and bright colour that catches your eye, so the contrast should be fashionable!

With the last of the work Christmas parties done, a quick run around was needed to gather up all the parts at various companies. The second-last weekend before Christmas is well spent re-assembling the Panigale.

Wow! I'm absolutely wrapt with the result. This bike is sweet and looks perfect! The only thing left to do now is set up the suspension.

Knowing that Steve Mudford has been doing some fine suspension work for other guys in the Club and also having an excellent reputation with the racing community, I called on Steve to set the suspension. With the Dave Ward GSXR600 experience in mind, Steve and I opted for the full 'Ohlins Technology Inside' approach, with new springs to suit my weight (gee my riding gear is heavy) and all the other stuff that Steve knows about! A couple of days later and Steve has just sorted out the SACHS rear shock! Several other Forum members had determined the SACHS shock to be a piece of crap and not worthy of fitment to any Ducati. With the suspension done, even the freeway ride home was enjoyable, irrespective of the gorgeous chick in the WRX driving alongside and enjoying the sound of the Ducati! (Thanks Steve for squeezing me in before Christmas and at short notice. The bike handles brilliantly, with a softer ride and more feel.)

The result? Well, I had to hand the bike over to our tame racing rider, Dave Ward, for a quick blast up Mt Buffalo. Some say that Dave has an uncanny knack of riding another man's ride and that his ability to 'see around corners' is only compromised after drinking alcohol. All we know is that he's fast!

The bike had been set to full-noise as follows;

- 195HP Race Mode with direct throttle response
- Traction control = 1 for minimum intervention
- ABS set to 1 = Front wheel ABS only
- DQS = Ducati Quick Shift ON
- Engine Breaking Control = 3, maintain engine revs to push you through corners

Dave definitely had a grin when he got back and proclaimed "Best sports bike I've ridden". Coming from Dave, that is high praise indeed. (I believe Dave phoned Bronwyn later and asked if he could buy a Panigale, but that is yet to be confirmed.)

So finally...the bike is a Ducati that looks better, feels better, has total power and pretty much everything you could want in a bike! Perfection! Now I am excited and have a Ducati smile on my face! I must call Michael tomorrow!

P.S. Did I mention that it runs out of fuel?