

Sophisticated Twister

Benelli Tornado Tre » An Erudite Superbike.

By Michael Schulte » In 1911, the widow "Mama" Theresa Benelli gambled the family assets on the Benelli Garage, a modest Pesaro workshop that she hoped would marshal the talents of her six sons repairing automobiles, motorcycles and quaintly enough, firearms. Through the 1920s, the Bros. Benelli were famous for building and racing motorcycles. By the 30s, Benelli had ascended to the Italian Pentarchia (the big five of the bike industry) along with Garelli, Moto Guzzi, Gilera and Bianchi. The Benelli name remained in the forefront of the industry until the deluge of cheap and reliable Japanese motorcycles eviscerated the market for much of the European manufacturing base in the '60s. This shift in the trade winds finally forced a production halt and many thought Benelli had shuffled off its mortal single coil.

Enter Andrea Merloni, who, having roused the company from its ashes when he purchased the once mighty marque in 1995, launched the audacious Tornado Tre 900 project in 2002. The Tornado continues Benelli's tradition of idiosyncratic design. From the pointed taper of the nose, through the under-saddle-mounted radiator, to the signature cooling ducts in the tail, this is a bike that will not get lost in a thicket of Ducatis. Ninety-five years after her maternal encouragement had launched the family factory, there is little doubt that Mama Benelli would flush with pride seeing the family name emblazoned on the fairing of the latest incarnation of the Tornado Tre line.

You'll want to take your time getting into the saddle to appreciate the

Tornado's jaw-loosening aesthetics and lacquer-smooth paintwork. Approaching the bike, the Tornado scores a direct hit on the hypothalamus. The striking bodywork that is sculpted around the mixed-design frame brings to mind a purposeful sprinter, loaded into the starting blocks. Weighing in at 436 lb, the Tornado feels surprisingly light and compact, and owing to its lanky profile feels more like being atop a tall 600. Flick the switchblade ignition key and the clocks and lights run through their check cycle and zero out. All warning and information lights are thoughtfully placed above the instrument cluster and well within the rider's peripheral vision.

Lean forward into riding position and you'll find it surprisingly comfortable over a lengthy haul, with a single exception: The rear edge of the gas tank protrudes slightly into your abdomen. It's a small matter, and perhaps a triumph of style over function. Truth is, you'd sooner sign up for a Pilates class than alter that sensuous sweep of the tank's design.

Out on the road, the marriage of power and sophistication become instantly apparent. The throaty note of the 898cc, 3-cylinder parallel engine will grab ears and turn heads. A lightweight flywheel gives engine revs an expressively quick rise and fall. With an 11:1 compression ratio, the Tornado is more than inclined toward racing. Wind it up, run through the gears and you will immediately notice two things: A silky gear change that selects beautifully and a slipper clutch that limits back-torque on downshifts. The slip-

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RIDING STYLE

Helmet: AGV TiTech
Suit: MotoGP Compression
Gloves: Joe Rocket
Boots: Sidi Vertigo Corsa

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per clutch is a nice touch that allows the rear wheel time to catch up to the engine revs and eliminates rear-wheel chatter. The feel takes some getting used to, but once you overcome the instinct to gradually release the clutch, and just shift gears and dump the lever, you'll be downshifting through corners like Peter Goddard. Well, almost like Peter Goddard. You may notice other riders creeping up on you, hypnotized by the spinning dual extractor fans that make the Tornado look as though it's about to leap into hyperspace. Twist the throttle and confirm their suspicions.



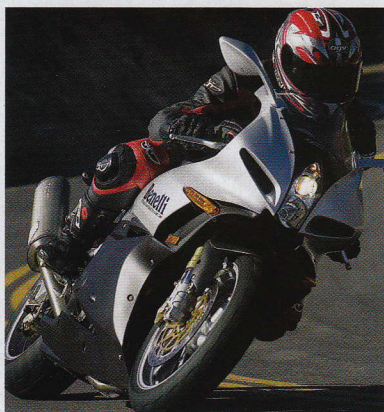
The Benelli's engine management system contributes to the notion of the Tornado as elegant beast. There is virtually no hesitancy or surging from the fuel injector, just a smooth and seamless flow. The Tornado produces plenty

of low end torque and the revs climb relatively slowly and purposefully to make 136 hp at the 11,500 rpm red-line. Probably because of its three-cylinder throatiness and lower rev-ceiling the machine actually appears to be more like a very fast 600, but in actuality the motor's power is deceiving and a quick glance at the speedometer will testify to the fact that you're traveling very much faster than you thought. When it's time to return to earth, four-piston Brembos (while not the vogue radial mount) display considerable feel and their usual excellent stopping power.



KEVIN WING

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Unleash the Tornado on the track and you'll notice that the firm 43mm Paioli forks, Extreme Tech shock and steering damper require only minor

stiffening to squeeze optimal speed in the corners. Handling is pleasantly neutral with no "falling" into corners: pick a line and hold it. Hard acceleration out of the corners reveals slight understeer, but this could be adjusted out and is a quibble.

Overall handling is superb. Riding at speed on a particularly windy day showed the bike to be precise and reassuringly stable. What's a little headwind when you're riding a Tornado? The only real caveat is that the machine displays some sluggishness transitioning through the chicane and requires some elbow grease to muscle through. This is primarily due to the Tornado's height rather than any issue with weight.

While the beautifully finished and threateningly exotic Tornado Tre will extract plenty of curb envy, the bike more than lives up to its looks on the road. Exclusive componentry and superb engineering from a team led by the renowned Ricardo Rosa are responsible for the sinewy musculature that has seen the bike through three tours of duty in World Superbike competition.

The Benelli Tornado Tre is a machine that is designed to win on the track. For the dedicated and casual rider alike, every corner taken will feel like a victory lap. 

www.benelli.com



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