



MOTORCYCLE DIARIES

The term 'café racer' came into existence during British motorcycling's 'golden period'—a time when post-war prosperity created the extra income among the working classes to buy motorcycles. Café racers were handcrafted and customised by motorcycling enthusiasts to look and ride like the racing motorcycles of their time. And then they were raced from café to café. Among them were the hardcore 'ton-up boys', who could hit 100 miles per hour even on those rudimentary machines. However, the post-war boom in the British motorcycling industry went bust in the face of Japanese competition. It was during this

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARSH MAN RAI



difficult period that Royal Enfield realised that its standard motorcycles were actually popular candidates for modification in the café racer culture. So, in 1965, Royal Enfield released a 250cc factory-made café racer model—the Continental GT (the reason behind the name is a mystery, because GT stands for Grand Tourer, and this was anything but a touring motorcycle). Two years later, however, the Enfield factory at Redditch closed down.

Royal Enfield's young CEO Siddharth Lal believes that the present-day conditions in India bear some similarity to England in the '50s and '60s. And he's put his money where his mouth (and his body) is! He's zipping around with 70-odd journalists on the Continental GT—the latest, lightest and fastest offering from the RE stable—in Goa, the perfect location for the two-day 'Burn-Up' to commemorate the launch.

The new GT has been designed to look very much like its ancestor. It has come at a time when Royal Enfield is turning profitable (after finally finally settling on one successful base engine) on the strength of its retro-styled Classic, and is increasingly targeting the international market.

The best part about the engineering of the Continental GT is its chassis, designed by Harris Performance Products from the UK. The result is a double down tube cradle frame, built for rigidity. The engine too is lightened and empowered. You can feel the road, and the GT is so responsive, it seems telekinetically linked to the rider's thoughts. The single-cylinder, 535cc engine makes the speed rush hit you much before the rev-counter and the speedometer begin to peak.

The riding position is ideal for short, exciting bursts of speed. And yet it is a forgiving

motorcycle, built more for riding experience than precision racing performance. Which means it handles city commutes fairly well, even if it cannot go as fast as the superbikes now available in the Indian market.

The GT does not feel out of place in Goa, which has made a business out of leisure. Hoping from one party to another and one pub to the next becomes a joy in itself. It is as much at home in front of a club on a Saturday night as it is outside a church the next morning. It is an object of desire; it turns heads. If you buy one, do not complain of on-road attention.

A factory-made café racer, though, is a contradiction in terms. But if there is one company entitled to an attempt at this motorcycling contradiction, it is Royal Enfield. As it says in its promo film: "Find your café. We've built a racer."

■ SOPAN JOSHI