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Lawrence Hacking samples a few delicacies from the European smorgasbord.

SMALL MANUFACTURERS OF SPECIALIZED off-road bikes are staffed by passionate enthusiasts and dedicated craftsmen. These builders can frequently show less regard for the bean counters and shop for the best from outside suppliers. Changes can be made in the middle of a production run and sometimes options can be ordered based on a customer's preference. Off-road exotics tend to cost more, but they can also deliver something special, which is what we wanted to determine by rounding up a TM 125 E, Gas Gas EC 250 and Husqvarna

CR/WR 250 for an impression test. You don't see them often in Canada, but they are available.

These are purpose-built race bikes designed for European enduros, with handling characteristics not typical of off-road bikes that attempt to cover more bases. European enduros are long, rugged events held in a wide variety of conditions. Each day includes a series of timed special tests, often grass track or cross country and lasting not much more than five minutes, and usually these races determine who wins.



The special tests demand speed and precision, but also a transformation back into a tractable trail bike at the exit.

TM 125 E

TM is a small Italian company based in Pesaro, in the shadow of the Dolomites, right in the heart of Italian enduro country. Originally a kart-engine manufacturer, TM has been building some of the most powerful two-stroke engines available since 1978. The TM motorcycle division crafts exotic



enduro bikes, and TM has earned nine ISDE 125 class wins. With new environmental standards looming, they have recently

branched out to include four-strokes.

The trick components of the TM 125 catch your eye immediately: blue-anodized Excel rims, a gold-anodized Ohlins inverted fork, sand-cast finish on the engine cases, intricate welds, machined alloy brake pedal, massive box-section aluminum swingarm, unpainted hydroformed exhaust—the TM is close to being an off-road art form. Myriad small details have been thought of, right down to a time-card pocket on the seat.

First impressions are very positive; this is a serious off-road contender with good man-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HENRIK WILKINSON



ners. The TM seems a breeze to ride, with a light airy feeling deriving from its 102 kg (225 lb) dry weight. For a 125 it has a surprisingly wide spread of power and the jetting provides crisp throttle response. The TM requires very little time before you feel confident and aggressive with the power and speed. As you'd expect from a 125 cc engine, the TM motor is peaky. It rips up top and needs some active clutch, gear lever and throttle manipulation to make it go fast, but fast it goes.



Italian manufacturer TM began building two-stroke engines for karts, but has since expanded into motorcycle production. Components on the TM are top-drawer, including Ohlins suspension.

The suspension is Ohlins front and rear, arguably the best available to the general public, and the chassis offers a nice combination of sharp-steering precision and high-speed stability, a sign of intensive development and testing. To get better off-road suspension than this you'll probably need a factory contract and a personal suspension technician. Under braking, the plush action allows the already steep fork angle to tighten up more and transfer weight onto the front tire. You can almost feel each knob sink into the dirt, as the front-end weight bias instills confidence. The long and massive swingarm permits the engine to be placed well forward and the perimeter-style frame lowers the centre of gravity and corresponding feel.

The brakes on the TM have an interesting combination of components, with the Brembo front caliper squeezing a floating 260 mm TM front disc via a Nissin master cylinder. The rear brake is a Nissin with a TM 220 mm disc, while the clutch is hydraulic actuated via a Grimeca master cylinder.

The compact TM provides an almost invincible feel, as if anything were possible over rough terrain. Split-second corrections in line are easy with such a light motorcycle, as a rider can ride closer to his limit and still retain a reasonable margin for error. That is the key to quick special test times, which is what this bike is built for.

For \$8,330, including the Ohlins front fork

(or \$7,580 with a Marzocchi fork) the TM 125 isn't cheap—unless you consider it to be the next thing to a factory race bike, in which case it could be viewed as a bargain.

Barker Cycles distributes TM through 16 Canadian dealers. Call 604-526-0569 or view the website at www.mototm.com or www.tnmotorcycles.com

Gas Gas EC 250

The Spanish company Gas Gas was formed in 1974 and is perhaps better known for its trials motorcycles, but the first enduro bike was turned out in 1993. Since then Gas Gas has won three world enduro titles in the hands of Paul Edmondson and Petteri Silvan. A new factory in Catalunya that opened in May of 2002 employs 150 people who build 14,000 motorcycles per year, 7,000 of them enduro bikes developed by a design team of six engineers.

The Gas Gas EC 250 seems about 15/16ths the size of most comparable off-road bikes, which makes it easy to feel at home on right away. The Gas Gas is unusually light and quick steering. Obvious effort has been made to keep the weight close to the steering head and as low as possible. The frame design is similar to a KX Kawasaki's, realized in square-tube chrome-moly, but Gas Gas calls it a delta-box perimeter-style frame. The gas tank is moulded to fit closely above and behind the compact mass