

APRILIA SL1000 FALCO:

Hunting for Honda

Aprilia's first-ever V-twin sports bike - the RSV Mille - has done well. So what of this semi-sports Falco, complete with new frame? Alan Cathcart investigates

Photo credit: Kel Edge



Aprilia's already impressive growth rate as a real bike manufacturer got stepped up another couple of notches at the Milan Show in September, with the debut of the latest member of the Italian company's V-twin four-stroke family, the half-faired SL1000 - as in 'Sport Leggera', or light-sports.

Clearly targeted as the RSV Mille range's volume-production answer to the VTR1000, TL1000S, R1100S and probably Triumph's new Sprint RS triple, the new half-faired Aprilia not only breaks new ground by having an all-new chassis and quite different styling than the rest of the RSV Mille family, it's also the first to carry a name as well as a number. Known as the SL1000 Falco (as in 'kestrel') Aprilia will be hoping the new model flies as high commercially as the Moto Guzzi Falcone did half a century ago, when the 500cc single with its distinctive bacon-slicer outside flywheel became the machine of choice for long-distance sports bike mileage in post-WW2 Italy - as well as for use by the carabinieri! Aprilia

hasn't yet owned up to plans to produce a police version of the Falco, but the civilian version has been fast off the mark into production, with 100 bikes a day rolling off the assembly lines, and demo bikes already in the showroom in many European countries. First deliveries are expected before the end of the year of what is a well-priced bike, selling in Italy for Lit.20,900,000, or only a fraction more than its Honda and Suzuki rivals. Aprilia boss Ivano Begotto and his management team clearly expect the bike to be leading their drive into new markets like the USA and Japan, as well as building on their successful first year of Euro-sales with the RSV Mille, production of which had to be increased by more than 45% over initial forecasts, in order to meet demand.

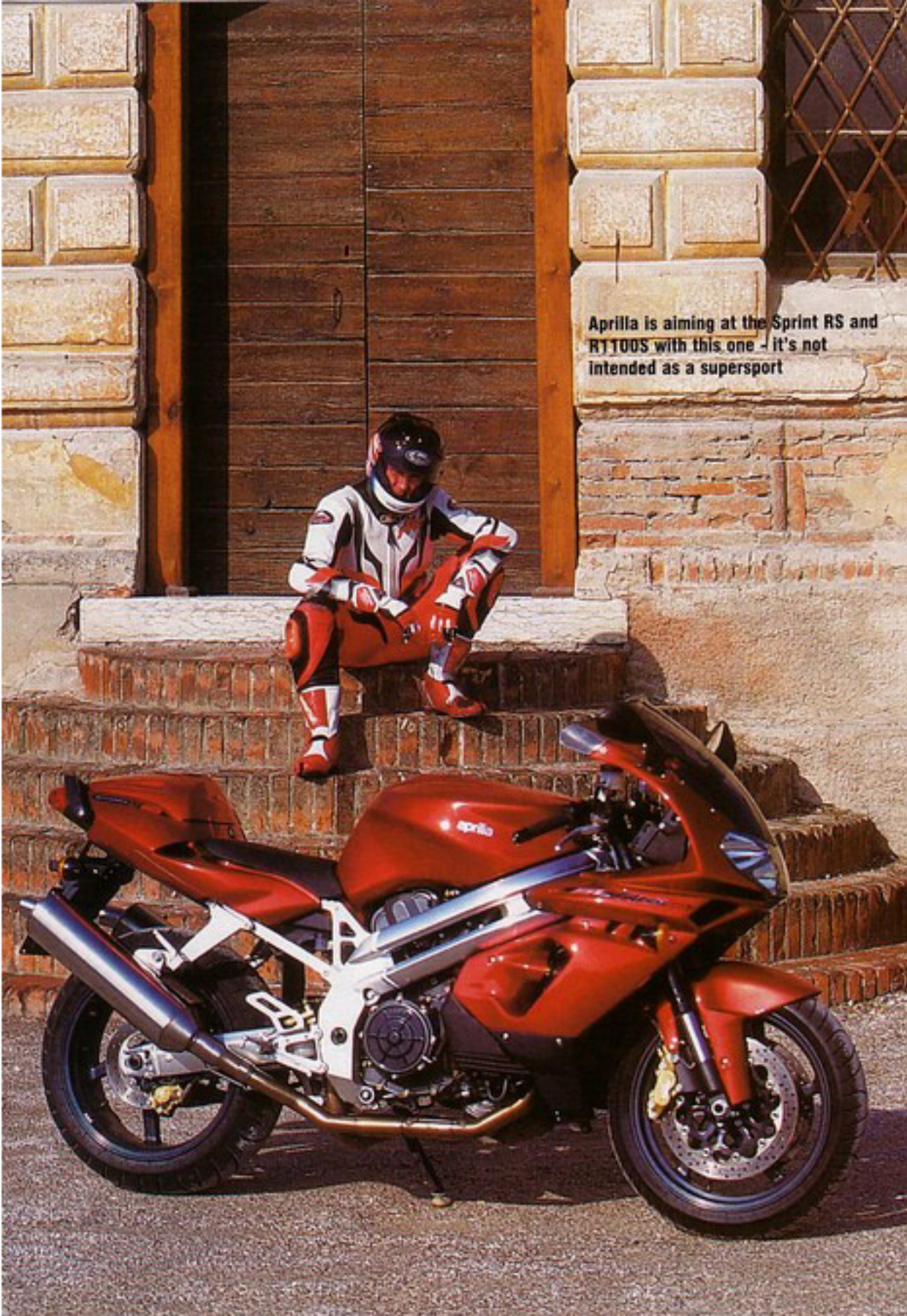
New Twin Beam

So Aprilia is on a roll - a fact underlined when I went to the company's Noale HQ north of Venice to ride one of the first SL1000s hot off the production line, just a couple of days before Valentino Rossi clinched the firm's fifth 250cc

GP World Championship in the past six years. Like the bird of prey its name is derived from, the Falco is hunting for Honda. And to underline the importance of the new model in Aprilia's overall scheme of things, the SL1000 has been under development for the past three years, not as a spin-off from the RSV Mille project, but in its own right, with a separate R&D team headed by 32-year-old German-born engineer Klaus Nennwitz. He and his men have worked hard and fast to create a bike that, while retaining the family feel of the Mille range, is a quite different product from anything else Aprilia has yet built to date.

So while still based around the long-stroke version of Aprilia's 998cc Rotax-built fuel-injected V-twin (rather than the 100mm-bore short-stroke Mille SP homologation special, developed for SBK), the SL employs a revised version of the very same engine which has effectively been detuned to reflect the less radical demands in terms of performance from this market. Fast, but not frenetic: that's the result, with the lower 10.8:1 compression





Aprilia is aiming at the Sprint RS and R1100S with this one - it's not intended as a supersport

twin to view in a way the fully-faired Mille doesn't do, as well as offering improved engine cooling and nominally better access. Chassis geometry is almost identical to the Mille, though, with the same 24.5 degree head angle, 1,415mm wheelbase and just slightly more trail at 100mm vs. the sportbike's 97mm.


Leaner & Lower

You wouldn't guess the two were so similar when sitting aboard the SL1000, though - for just slinging a leg over what seems like a much lower bike conveys a very different impression compared to the RSV. A common complaint amongst, er, more vertically challenged riders from day one has been that the RSV Mille is too tall and has too long a stretch to the bars: ie it's built for Aprilia's Northern European target customer, and that includes the all-enveloping (voluminous even) fairing, which gives better protection for taller riders than any other sports bike on the market. Even if the SL's revised styling, with its well-shaped, tall (and thus protective) screen doesn't make the Aprilia seem quite as lean as the side-radiator VTR1000, it's much less porky than the TL1000S, and slimmer also than the RSV Mille. Moreover, the Falco also seems quite a bit lower than its Aprilia V-twin sister from the moment you sit astride it - I could put both my feet flat on the ground at a traffic light, whereas with the Mille I'm in tiptoe mode. Yet while the seat height is supposedly only fractionally lower than the RSV, at 815mm vs. 825mm, the result is also a feeling of greater comfort - footrests are lower and further forward than on the Mille - and much more control, of feeling a part of what seems a leaner, less bulbous bike to sit on.

This in turn makes the SL seem more agile and easier-steering along winding country roads such as the ones in the foothills of the Dolomites on which I spent my day flying aboard the Falco. Basically, the SL1000 lives up to its tag: it's 'lighter' to ride. The riding position's not quite ideal, however, because while what appear to be the same clip-on handlebars as on the RSV Mille are mounted some 38mm higher than on the sports bike, and are widely spaced to give good leverage in tighter turns, when coupled with the SL's lower seat height and the same long reach across the top of what is a different-shape 21-litre fuel tank (which gives an excellent range of at least

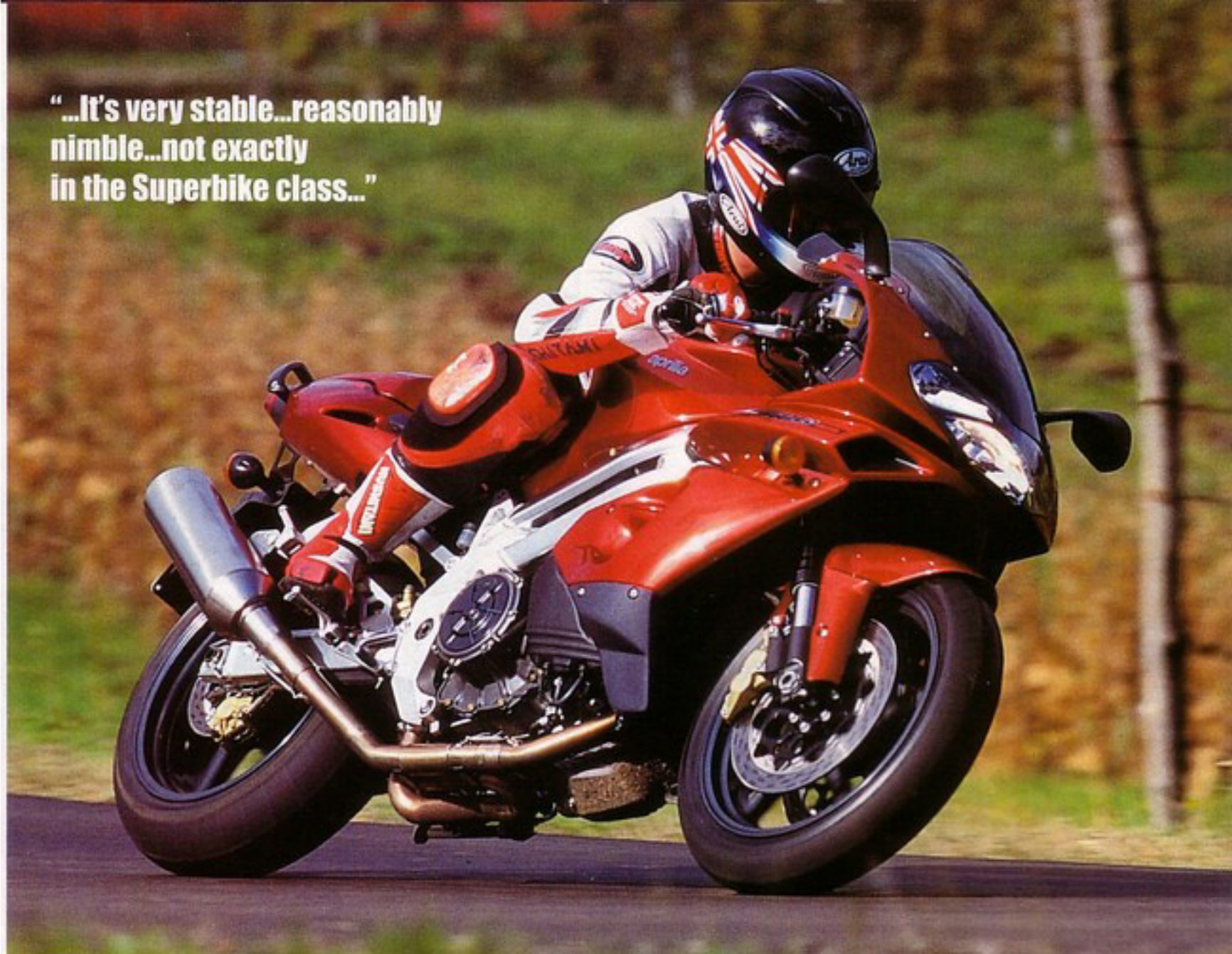
(compared to 11.4:1 in the Mille) combining with a different dual-silencer stainless steel exhaust system and remapped Nippondenso multi-point EFI (though with the same 51mm throttle bodies and a single injector per cylinder as on the RSV) to produce a claimed 118bhp at 9,250rpm at the crankshaft - compared to the stock Mille's 128bhp at the same revs, or the VTR1000's 110bhp at 10,000rpm. Torque is also down compared to the RSV, with the Falco's 70.5lb ft contrasting with the Mille's 76lb ft - or the Honda's 71lb ft, all at the same 7,000rpm mark.

But it's the SL1000's so-called Double Twin Beam chassis that most stands out, with a completely new and quite innovative twin-spar design, each side of which is composed of twin triangular-section tubular alloy extrusions butted and welded to aluminium and magnesium castings comprising the steering head and rear engine mount-cum-swinging arm pivot. The result not only looks both elegant and distinctive, it also exposes the undeniably handsome-looking 60-degree V-



SL1000 inherits the Mille's digital/analogue instrument pack

"...It's very stable...reasonably nimble...not exactly in the Superbike class..."



180 miles between fill-ups, thanks in part to the more frugal revised EFI mapping), they seem to be angled a little too steeply for this kind of semi-sports tourer. This delivered aching wrists over a full day's ride, without going into racetrack mode under braking so as to shove excessive weight transfer on to your arms.

Well, not apart from the time Luigi the White Van Man looked straight into my eyes from a side turning, then pulled out right in front of me with carpet rolls threatening to spill out the back of his vehicle's tied-open doors. Guess his honourable society has branches worldwide - but it did underline that in Falco mode the 320mm twin-disc Brembo front brake package, transplanted from the Mille delivers excellent stopping power on a bike weighing just 1kg more than the fully-faired Mille, at a claimed 190kg dry. Even if in racetrack use the Brembos have aroused some criticism, here on the SL they're perfect for the job, with just enough initial bite (thanks partly to the patented Freudenberg brake lines which are justly claimed to give the same performance and feedback as braided steel hoses), but also lots of feel and a progressive response that made slowing down for turns littered with damp fallen leaves in the Italian autumn less of a risk. Here's where the Aprilia's patented PPC pneumatic slipper clutch came into its own, though, helping you take full advantage of the meaty engine braking from the V-twin engine, without the dreaded rear wheel bounce that, ahem, so many of us have suffered on the racetrack when trying to slow down for a turn aboard a big V-twin (usually of the desmo persuasion) by using lots of revs on the

overrun, without the benefit of a slipper clutch. The PPC is an idea which really works well, and Aprilia is to be complimented on providing a real-world riding advantage, delivering extra safety by adopting it.

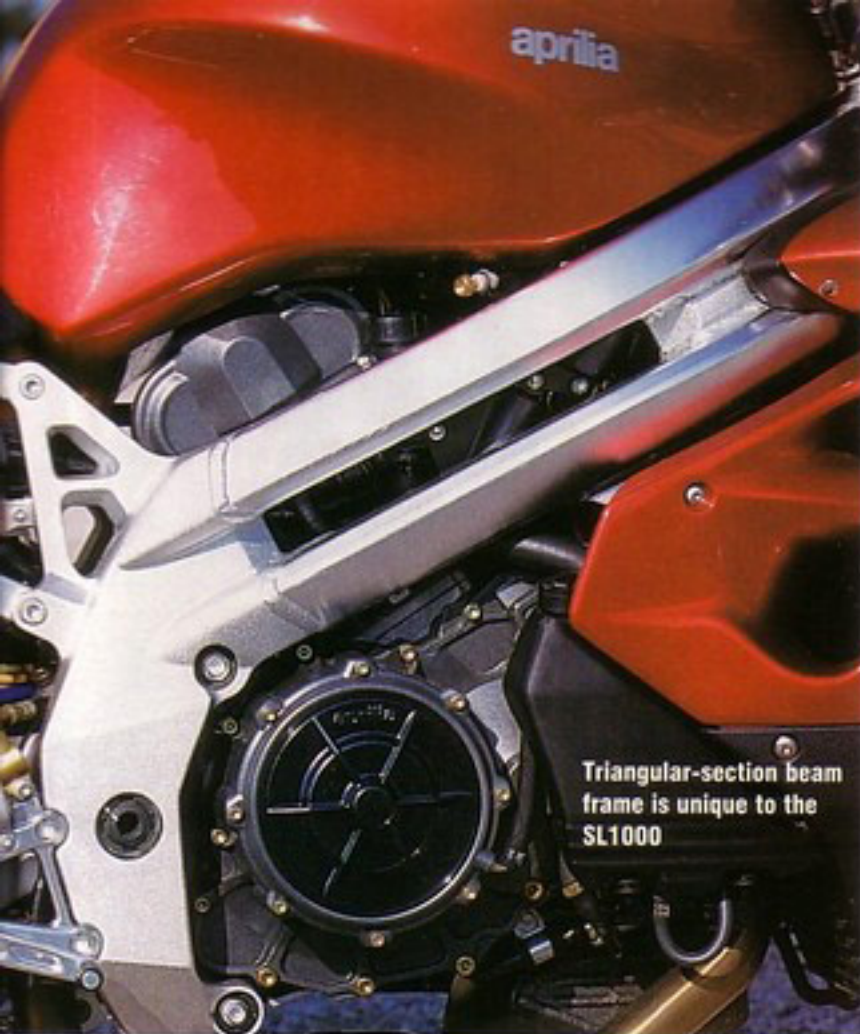
Equally noteworthy is the extremely good turning circle, which makes easy work of city riding, or backing the Falco in and out of parking spaces. So too is the fine ride quality from the SL's suspension package, with those fully adjustable Showa forks (transplanted from the RSV) presumably revalved and almost certainly more softly sprung compared to the sports bike, and the Boge-Sachs rear shock delivering excellent compliance over rougher surfaces up in the mountains, yet good grip thanks to the progressive linkage when getting it or out of turns. The Metzeler MEZ3 tyres are an ideal choice, with the zero-degree bias design helping deliver good stability, as well as decent grip, but I reckon the 180/55-17 rear could have been better fitted to a narrower 5.75 in rim rather than the 6.00in used here, to help the Aprilia change direction from side to side a little better through a series of twisting turns. If anything, the tyres help the Falco hold a line too well: it's very stable, especially over bumps which the excellent suspension package simply shrugs off nonchalantly, but while reasonably nimble, the SL does ask you to work fairly hard to flick it first one way, then another, on a winding stretch of road. The Falco chassis package steers OK, but rather lazily: while overall the handling is very capable, it's not exactly in the Superbike class - but then the likely customer for this kind of bike isn't likely to want a nervous, quick-handling package, only a dependable, relaxing, sporting ride.

Detachable hump reveals useable seat



Captain Peaky

However, he's also not going to want to use the gearbox or the engine revs as much as a Mille rider, either, and here I think Aprilia needs to rethink the low-rpm behaviour of the SL's V-twin engine package a little. Though remapped to reflect the lower power output, the engine management system combined with the internal mechanical spec still produces a rather peaky power curve, with a notable surge of extra punch at the 6,000rpm mark when the engine catches alight and really starts to motor, delivering a strong, constant pull all the way to the 9,250rpm power peak. That's fine if you



Triangular-section beam frame is unique to the SL1000

want to lift the front wheel out of a turn or away from a traffic light, and indeed all the way to the engine's 10,800rpm revlimiter there's a smooth, progressive power delivery that's undeniably muscular and appealing, putting the Falco on a par with the TL1000S, harder and stronger than the VTR1000.

But considering that even on the slightly lower overall gearing on the Falco (16/41 gearbox/rear wheel sprockets, compared to 17/42 on the RSV Mille) there's still only 3,800rpm in top at an indicated 100km/h on the digital speedo (the SL's entire instrument console is the same all-dancing package transplanted from the Mille, complete with 40-lap memory timer, top speed telltale and all the other gizmos). I have to say the SL1000 is still basically over-g geared for the kind of riding style its likely use will dictate. OK - so use a lower gear, just like the RSV Mille customer would. Well, apart from the fact that the gearbox ratios are identical on both bikes, with an evenly spaced-out lower three ratios and the upper three much closer together, so that notching down one or even two gears from top doesn't help you much, I have to say that's not the way that most of my mates who own VTR1000s (and there are an awful lot of them in the bike park at any World Superbike race) choose to ride. They don't want to trail along winding country roads in the British sunshine (don't laugh) in third or fourth gear - but unless you do that, the Aprilia won't run cleanly until the central analogue tachometer reads 4,000rpm, below which it's quite lumpy and there's quite a bit of transmission snatch if you try to accelerate any harder.

The Falco's gearchange is quite crisp, even on the relatively low-mileage bike I was riding, though neutral was consistently elusive in best Italian fashion, even on the

move approaching a stop light. Equally Latin is the clutch, which while not as stiff as a Ducati comes a surprisingly close second - a fact you especially notice in town, though take-up is much smoother and more progressive, as well as more silent, than any desmo V-twin. There is however more engine vibration down low than I expected on the Falco, in spite of the same dual counterbalancer system as on the Mille - one in the crankcase, the other in the rear cylinder head. The balance weights in the clip-ons eliminate the vibes from your hands, but you do feel tingles in your toes coming at you through the footrests from low down until the 5,000rpm mark, when the engine starts to smooth out. The distinctive exhaust note and higher-pitched 60-degree V-twin rumble gives a clue as to why this might

be: none of the Italo-Japanese 90-degree Vees has the same problem, and you don't notice it on the RSV Mille nearly so much, for the simple reason you're invariably revving it harder. Answer: gear the Falco down even more - till that happens, Renthals can expect a strong Aprilia aftermarket for 43T or even 44T rear sprockets...!

It's not as if Luigi Van Man couldn't have seen me coming, either - for although the SL's scarlet paintwork is a muted version of the Ferrari red that's become an Italian bike cliché (black is the only other option, at present), he couldn't have missed the bright triple-reflector headlamp I had switched on, even in dipped mode when only the single bottom section of the triangular lens layout is lit, with the twin upper parts illuminated under full beam. Their beam can be adjusted via a knob in the cockpit - itself a

reflection of Aprilia's perceived customer use for the Falco, with both luggage and/or a passenger foreseen to be on board what increasingly appears conceived to be as much a polyvalent sports tourer as an all-out sports-bike. There's a range of soft luggage available via Aprilia's aftermarket catalogue, and the reasonably comfortable, if rather high-set, passenger seat is obtained by unlocking the single-seat squab and swapping it for the seat pad supplied with the bike. The meaty, well-positioned passenger grips are detachable, as well, and with the pillion footrests not excessively high, the Falco is a true sporting two-seater. Well, that's what camera-clicker Kel Edge says after riding on the back, anyway...

Verdict

Like any manufacturer, Aprilia needs to find out what its customers want, and no number of rider clinics or pre-launch questionnaires can take the place of getting the hardware in the showroom and the feedback from hands-on use. The SL1000 is a well conceived product targeting what sales charts confirm to be a bigger overall customer clan than the harder-edged Mille's habitues of Racer Road, and the Falco, arguably represents the first serious European response to the sales success of the VTR and TL/S - one that moreover doesn't carry the quirky historical baggage of a desmodue, Boxer twin or in-line triple engine format.

Even without remembering that it was conceived and developed by a company which until the past 12 months had zero experience in the large-capacity four-stroke sector, the SL1000 must be considered a praiseworthy entry into the enthusiast sport market. Only a few relatively minor rough edges still remain which need to be smoothed out before the Falco can claim to be the leader of the flock - but Aprilia's latest V-twin does have the potential to be just that. **AC**

SPECIFICATIONS - Aprilia Falco SL1000

Engine Type	Liquid-cooled 60-degree V-twin, DOHC
Bore x stroke	97x67.5mm
Capacity	998cc
Compression ratio	10.8:1
Fuelling	Electronic multi-point injection
Power	118bhp @ 9,250rpm
Torque	71lb ft @ 7,000rpm
Clutch	Wet, multi-plate
Gearbox	Six-speed
Frame Type	Aluminium/magnesium alloy twin-beam
Rake/trail	24.5 degrees/100mm
Suspension	F: USD 43mm forks, adj, travel 120mm R: Monoshock, adj, travel 130mm
Brakes	F: Twin discs, 320mm, 4-pot calipers R: Single disc, 220mm, 2-pot caliper
Tyres	F: 120/70 ZR17 R: 180/55 ZR17
Wheelbase	1,415mm
Seat height	815mm
Fuel capacity	21 litres
Weight (dry)	190kg

