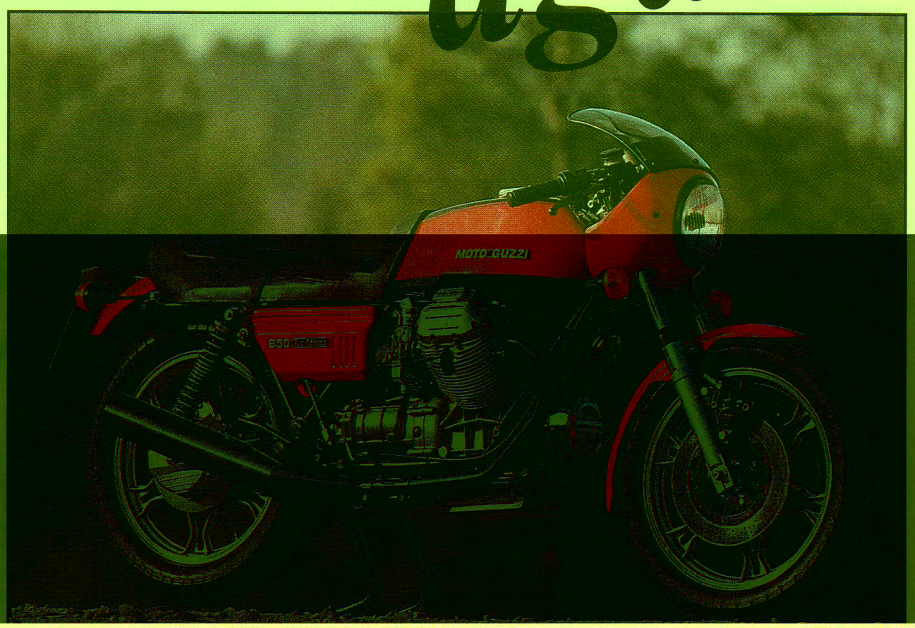
Falling in Love again

That was the headline in 1976 and Roland Brown feels compelled to repeat it 17 years later about the Moto Guzzi Le Mans. Did you lust after one? Was there ever such a beautiful bike?

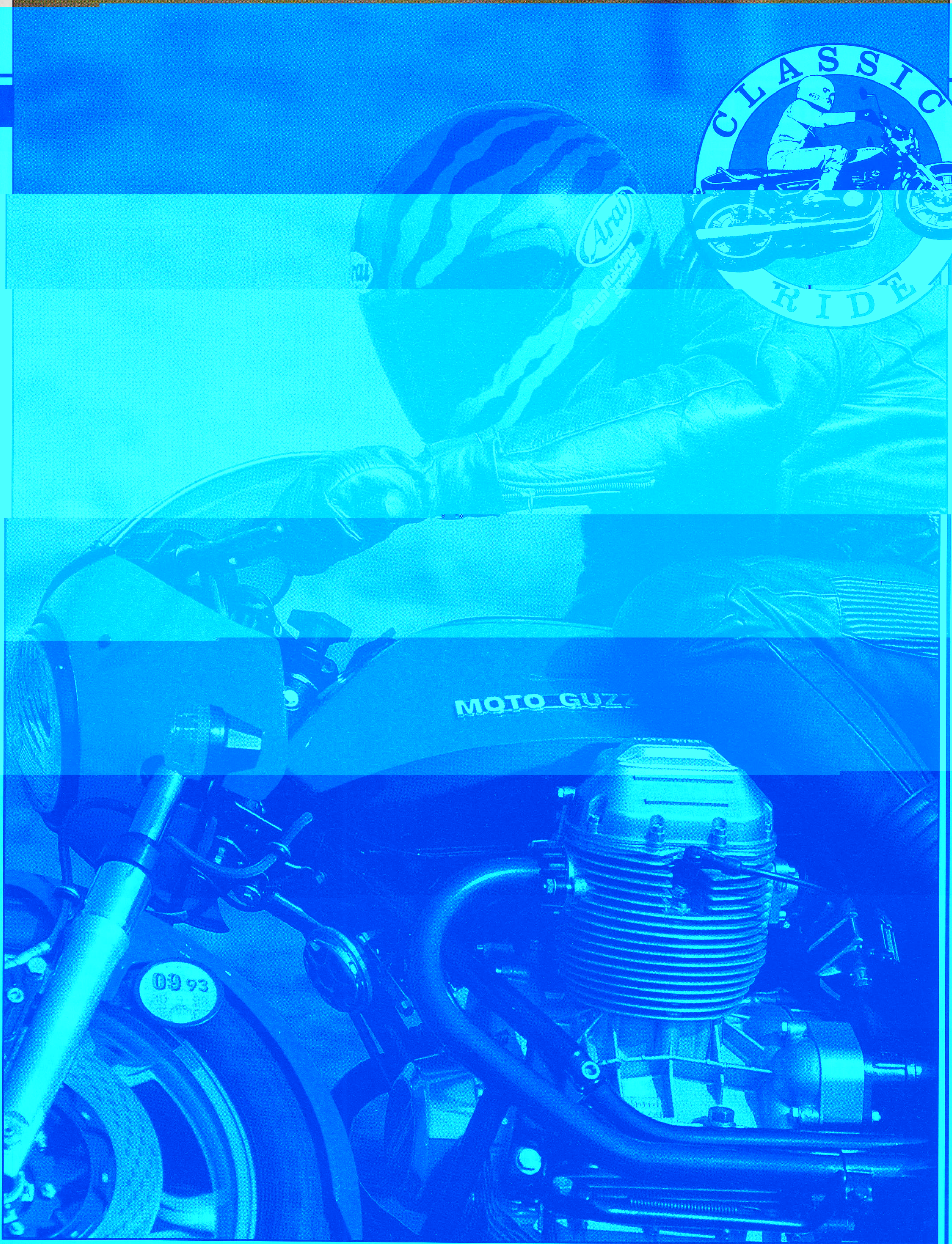


THE speedo is indicating about 90mph as you roll back the throttle, select top gear with a deliberate prod of the left boot and then tug the big Dell'Ortos open again to send the big V-twin forward with renewed urge.

With your head tucked as far as possible behind the tiny flyscreen, the sound is a delicious blend of sucking bellmouths, clattering valve gear and rumbling exhausts as Moto Guzzi's 850 Le Mans accelerates with the lazy, long-legged feel that made it famous.

Seventeen years have passed since the Le Mans was released, but time has barely diminished the thrill of unleashing this uniquely charismatic machine. Perhaps the only sensation missing now is the heady excitement, uppermost in a Le Mans rider's mind in 1976, of being aboard one of the very fastest bikes on the road.

The first Le Mans was indisputably one of the great Seventies superbikes. Along with its Italian contemporaries, Ducati's 900SS and Laverda's Jota, the Guzzi took on the Japanese multis with its own brand of speed and style. Of the trio, the Jota was the most powerful and the SS the most single minded -



High footrests tuck even Brown's long legs above the protruding pots. Handling has always been one of the Le Mans' trump cards.

nal surfaces renovated by a process that involves immersing them in a solution, along with thousands of tiny, vibrating ceramic balls.

The frame was powder-coated; other parts painted, chromed or zinc-plated; mechanical components such as the forks and brakes overhauled; and a new wiring loom specially made.

Some parts, including the exhaust system and Sebac rear shocks, were replaced, with most bits coming from Motomecca of Three Legged Cross in Dorset. Everything is

downpipes, which Steve preferred in black chrome instead of the original Le Mans' matt black. The only part he's not totally happy with is the seat, which (if you look very closely) shows just a few signs of wear.

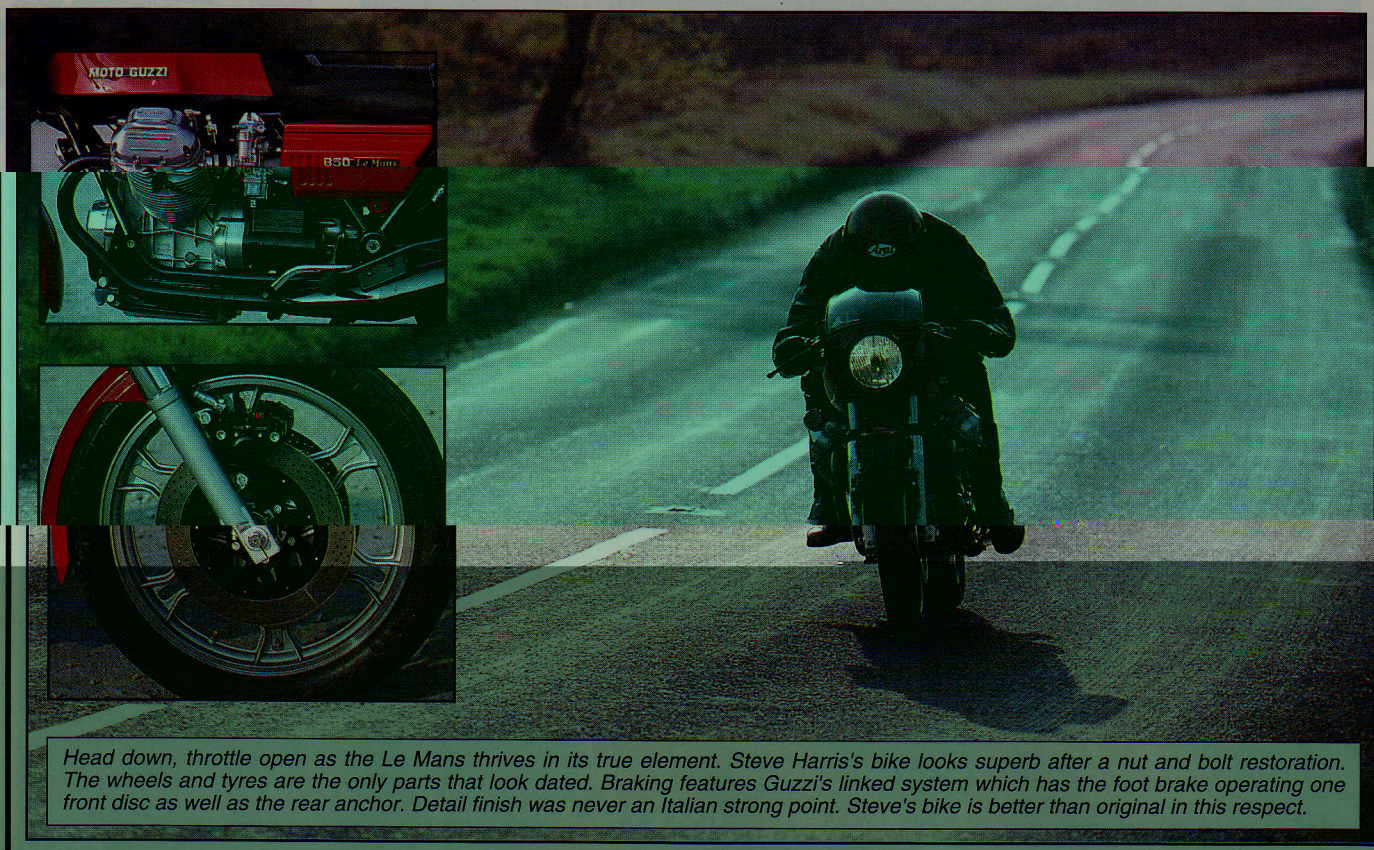
My first impression of the seat was simply of how low it is, at just 743mm. Although the bike is long, with a rangy 1511mm wheelbase, from the rider's perch it feels tiny. The clip-ons are fairly flat and within easy reach, angling back from a cockpit whose pair of

you're tall, by the swept-back screen.

Footrests are set well forward by sportster standards and are high enough to place your knees comfortably up above the sticking-out pots.

WHEN you hit the starter button there's a brief pause, then 'whoomph' the motor fires up, sending the bike lurching from side to side as the revs rise and fall, then settling to a steady tick-

Moto Guzzi Le Mans



Head down, throttle open as the Le Mans thrives in its true element. Steve Harris's bike looks superb after a nut and bolt restoration. The wheels and tyres are the only parts that look dated. Braking features Guzzi's linked system which has the foot brake operating one front disc as well as the rear anchor. Detail finish was never an Italian strong point. Steve's bike is better than original in this respect.

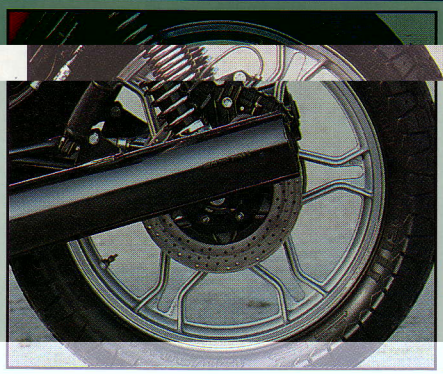
dance madly across the dial.

In the Seventies few tests of Italian bikes were free of the phrase 'Italian idiosyncrasies', and the Guzzi's clutch is another, its grabbiness as you pull away a hint that the twin-plate unit was not the engine's strong point.

The gearchange was never too hot either, especially in the lower ratios, and even if you shift the long-travel lever carefully it's all too easy to find a false neutral. But as the Le Mans lopes away it's impossible not to be captivated by the gentle throbbing (it's too pleasant to be called vibration) of the big v-twin, or by the sounds coming from its pipes and from those gaping bellmouths down by your shins.

With a claimed 80bhp pushing a bike that weighs a hefty 476lb with a gallon of fuel, even a slick-shifting Le Mans does not accelerate hard by modern standards, particularly from low speeds. Even in the Seventies bikes like Kawasaki's Z900 left the tall-geared Le Mans for dead away from the lights, and its standing quarter-mile time of around 13 seconds is far slower than a current Japanese 600's.

But the big v-twin motor is pleasantly tractable, requiring a minimum of cog-swapping to keep it pulling pleasantly hard out of bends. It comes into its own at higher speeds, where simply rolling open the heavy throttle results in brisk action as the power pulses quicken, the various sounds intensify and the wind whips harder over the screen as the



Guzzi charges forward towards a top speed of a little over 130mph.

That sort of speed was within the capability of several other machines, but where the Le Mans always scored was in the ability of its chassis to handle all the engine could deliver.

With the motor acting as a stressed member, frame rigidity is absolute. And the Guzzi's conservative steering geometry helps ensure that where many old rivals, especially the Japanese, would be getting distinctly uneasy, the Le Mans powers through with no need for the steering damper at its headstock.

Admittedly, part of the secret is in the stiffness of its suspension, which in true Seventies Italian tradition is well hard at both ends. The forks in particular punish your wrists on a rough road, especially under heavy braking. The rear Sebacs also pass plenty of bumps through to the thin seat, though at least their lack of travel minimises the unsettling effect of the drive-shaft torque reaction when you open or close the throttle in a bend.

In its day the Le Mans was fairly agile in

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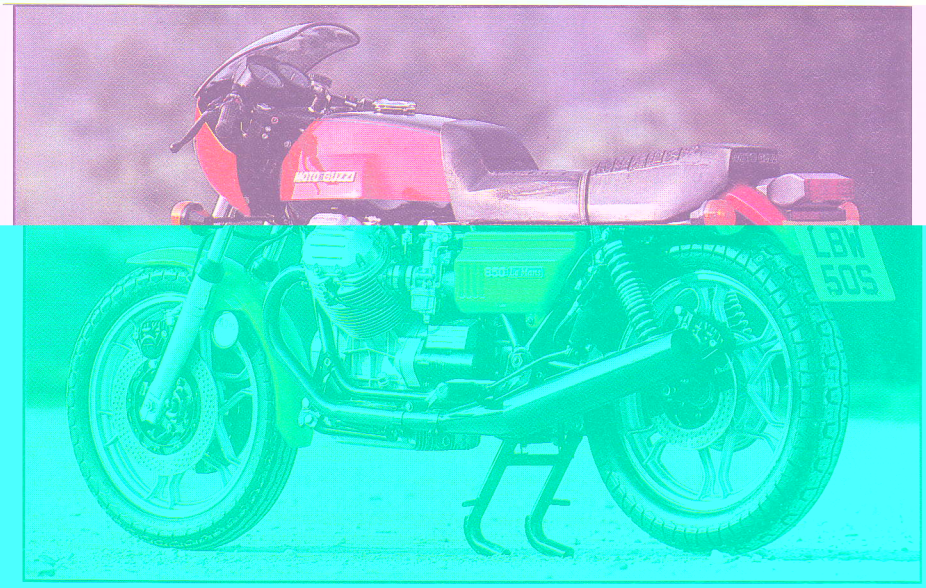

Long, low, sleek and sensual. The Mark 1 Le Mans was a hard act to follow.

CLASSIC

RIDE

True love in action. Style and performance make the Le Mans a seductive package that, if anything, has improved with age.

tight turns, too, although by the standards of modern sportsters its slow geometry, narrow tyres and none-too-generous ground clearance leave it well off the pace. The old warrior still corners with precision, though, and felt compact and manageable as it cranked through a couple of tight A-road roundabouts before barrelling off at a very respectable rate.

Opinion on Guzzi's linked brake system was mixed even in the Le Mans' heyday, with many riders swearing by it but just as many unconvinced. The hand-operated disc is feeble on its own, and the need to use the foot-pedal for all but the gentlest braking means modifying your riding style to suit. But the trio of big 11.8in Brembo discs certainly give plenty of stopping power when they're all called on in anger.

Several of the Le Mans' other idiosyncrasies were equally typical of Guzzis and of Seventies Italians in general. At 45/40W the original bike's headlight was hopelessly dim, and I soon rediscovered the hard-to-cancel indicator switch that made many a rider disappear down the road flashing left-right-left.

This restored bike's lustrous paint and chrome were superior to the factory's mediocre finish; its fiddly centrestand more typical of the original.

Such faults were all part of the Guzzi experience, even on a bike costing a heady £2000 in 1976, but it's easy to forgive the Le Mans when you ride it, or simply stand and stare.

Certainly the Mandello factory wasn't content to tidy those few detail faults all those years ago. In many ways the Le Mans Mk1's place in history is reinforced by the fact that rather than improve this model, Guzzi released a string of successors that failed to match its appeal.

The Mk2 version of 1979 was slower and less attractive, though it at least gave its rider the benefit of an angular full fairing. The 1982-model Mk3 regained some power, but by then the opposition had moved on. Guzzi's increasingly desperate development hit rock-bottom three years later with the 949cc Mk4, blighted by clumsy styling and a 16-inch front wheel that ruined its handling.

Last year's Daytona 1000 finally restored some pride and performance to the famous old firm. But it's debatable whether Guzzi or anyone else will ever build a motorcycle more stylish and soulful than the original 850 Le Mans.

Moto Guzzi Le Mans Mk1 (1976)

Engine type	Aircooled pushrod, 2-valve transverse v-twin
Displacement	844cc
Bore x stroke	83 x 78mm
Compression ratio	10.2:1
Carburation	2 x 36mm Dell'Ortos
Claimed power	80bhp @ 7300rpm
Transmission	5-speed
Electrics	12V battery; 45/40W headlamp
Frame	Tubular steel cradle
Front suspension	Telescopic, no adjustment
Rear suspension	Twin Sebac shock absorbers, adjustable preload
Front brake	Twin 11.8in Brembo discs
Rear brake	11.8in Brembo disc (linked system)
Front tyre	3.50 x 18in (Pirelli Phantom)
Rear tyre	4.00 x 18in (Pirelli Phantom)
Wheelbase	1511mm
Seat height	743mm
Fuel capacity	5 gallons (23 litres)
Weight	476lb (216kg) wet

What they [illegible]

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ing velocity stakes.

Pounding up the A1 under 90 degree sun, [illegible] the road signs read Cannes instead of Doncaster. That's what the Le Mans is all about: pure hedonistic escapism. Motorway miles roll under the wheels with incredible speed.

By no stretch of the imagination is the Le Mans a long distance tourer, with its crouched stance and thinly padded seat, but the concentration and exhilaration of riding fast keep discomfort at bay until you have to slow down for traffic or towns.

A top speed of 132.15mph, and a standing quarter time of 12.09 seconds make it the fastest production bike we've ever put through our electronic speed trap. Admittedly, we've never speed trapped a 900 Kawasaki, but although the two bikes are pretty evenly matched for performance, [illegible] the Guzzi wins on handling.

High speed stability is so good that I left the hydraulic steering damper in the off position all the time, and yet the bike was rock steady — even at 130mph when bumps on our test track were bucking the rear wheel into the air.

Couple this stability with the effortless way the big-hearted V-twin pounds out power, and you have the supreme motorway cruiser. At a true ton the throttle is hardly open and the pace feels almost leisurely.

The compactness, the low centre of gravity and the riding position give you the confidence to throw the bike through bends with an enthusiasm few other machines of the same size and power would inspire... The old bogey of torque reaction from the in-line crank only rears its head as a slight twitch if you roll the power off or on sharply while cranked over.

The Guzzi is not a bike to inspire indifference. You either look at it as just another form of two-wheeled transportation and think, "My God, that's never worth 2,000 quid", or you fall for its looks, excitement, the way it makes you feel and just wonder where the hell you're going to get £2,000.