

If you want something simple, fast, characterful and fun, look no further than a Moto Guzzi Le Mans. They're cheaper than most British twins, faster and easier to work on than Japanese multis. Damn near bulletproof too. That's a lot of reasons to own one but does the reality match the theory? To find out, we headed to Worksop, Notts, to run the CBG rule over Patrick Wall's MkII.

We've picked a good day. One of the hottest days of the summer. Owner Patrick Wall lives in a built-up area of Worksop – not the best place to appreciate the long-legged qualities of a big Moto Guzzi – but he's more than happy for us to head out of town to see if his affection for the Le Mans rubs off on us.

Even in town, I warm to the big twin instantly. There's plenty of steering lock – at least compared to other Italian sportsters like Ducati's 900SS – and the low seat height and centre of gravity let me nudge the Guzzi around the narrow streets without feeling like I'm going to topple over. What's more, at 6ft, I find the riding position spot-on, with a comfortable stretch to the bars. I can be lazy with braking too, relying on the front/rear combination provided by the foot pedal without resorting to the right hand lever to bring in the other front disc.

However, as we leave town along the dual carriageway bypass, the Le Mans comes into its own. I'm following Patrick's mate Phil on his little Imola and, as usual, I have absolutely no idea where I'm going, but as Phil gives me the slip easing onto a busy roundabout, I note which exit he's taken and bide my time. With the coast clear, I let the Guzzi have its head and the back end of the Imola looms up with just a twist of the wrist. Once we get out onto quieter, single carriageway roads, the Le Mans just gets better – and better. There's not a huge amount of go below 4000rpm, but, after that, there's very little need to

use the gearbox, and once I hit 5000rpm, the Guzzi picks up its skirts and goes. Want to nip past a bus? Just open the (slightly heavy) throttle and you're there in less time than it takes to tell. That's what 56lb-ft of torque can do for you.

Swinging round fast sweepers at a decent lick is what the Le Mans is all about – it's certainly putting a smile on my face. What impresses me almost as much though is the sheer practicality of the bike. Without the fairing lowers – on which I remember battering my knees when I rode a MkII in 1981 – the riding position is very comfortable. Whatever those lowers provide in weather protection or wind resistance, I'd gladly sacrifice for the sake of unmolested patellae.

This is a machine I could ride all day. Or for a quick blast somewhere out of the way on a Sunday morning, I'd be equally pleased to wheel a well-sorted Le Mans out of the fantasy garage. It's a surprisingly quick bike and when I use both brake levers in tandem, the Guzzi pulls up in pretty short order too. Fun with practicality – it doesn't get much better.

Main: Handsome and more besides the MKII Le Mans.

A GUZZI for all reasons...

These days Moto Guzzis live in the shadow of Ducatis and Laverdas – perceived by many as more glamorous marques. In reality, the Mandello twins can hold their heads high – as the brutally effective Le Mans twins prove. **Words:** Gerard Kane **Photography:** Chris Pearson





Moto Guzzi do evolution, not revolution and the Le Mans was no exception. In the 60s, their range of 750 (and, later, 850) big twins had proved robust and reliable so, when time came to design a sports bike to battle Ducati and Laverda's twins, it made practical, as well as economic, sense to start with what they already had.

The heart of the affair is that lump of an engine that started life as the winner of a contest to design a more powerful bike for Italy's police and military. Popular myth has it that the new (in the 60s) V-twin engine was developed from an earlier V-twin engine used in a three-wheeled military vehicle, but the Giulio Carcano/Umberto Todero designed motorcycle engine owes nothing to that earlier device.

The Guzzi engineers won the government-sponsored competition and the winning engine powered the V7, a successful machine in its own right but by 1969, Moto Guzzi management wanted a more sporty machine, with 200kph performance, a five-speed gearbox and an all-up weight of less than 200kg. The new machine was to be the genesis of all subsequent V-twins from Mandello.

Lino Tonti – a former race engineer who'd built his own Linto racers and worked for both Bianchi and

Aermacchi – was the man entrusted with the project. Tonti had no doubts that the engine could stand a power hike to deliver the performance his bosses wanted, but the frame was too high, too heavy and it lacked the precision handling the racer in him demanded. In order to get the frame lower, Tonti relocated the alternator to the end of the crankshaft from its position high up between the cylinders of the transverse V-twin engine. That meant he could run the frame top tube between the cylinder heads, allowing the new frame to be significantly lower. Using large diameter tubing triangulated in straight runs, the result was a masterpiece. Rigid, low and light, it provided the basis for the V7 Sport – the spiritual forebear of the Le Mans.

Certainly the 844cc development of the Tonti-modified V-twin engine gives the Le Mans its character and, like many of the best things in life, it's remarkably simple. The crank is a massive, one-piece forging running on two plain bearings. It will stand a re-grind or two with ease and is at the centre of the famed longevity of Guzzi's big twins.

The crankcase is similarly sturdy, being a single casting with six bolts holding the alloy barrels and heads on. Con-rods are two-piece with white metal

big end bushes and a plain phosphor-bronze bush small end. Lubrication is by a geared pump driven off the four-lobe camshaft that runs between the cylinders. The Le Mans MkII further benefits from the canister type oil filter that supplemented the gauze strainer in the sump from the mid-70s. With a duplex timing chain and slow, but sturdy gearbox, the Le Mans delivers impressive performance from an extremely durable package.

That's one of the attractions of running a Le Mans, or any of the big Guzzi's. Routine servicing is a snap. The Guzzi V-twin must be one of the easiest engines ever for tappet adjustment – an important point when you realise that Guzzi valve clearances tend to tighten up with use. There's decent oil filtration and the points ignition can be replaced with a modern digital set-up to need even less servicing.

There's a low centre of gravity, coupled with acceptable overall weight and fine – if slightly slow handling – and Guzzi's famous linked brake system really does work. It was way ahead of its time in the 70s and remains impressive even now and to cap it all, you get 120mph performance potential with around 50mpg economy. Who says you can't have the best of both worlds – what are you waiting for?

 GUZZI CONVERT...

Patrick Wall, a self employed haulier from Worksop, and the owner of this MkII Le Mans has become quite a fan of Mandello's big bore sports twin – but it wasn't always like that. In fact, it was pure luck – and a bit of friendly banter that turned his head the Guzzi way in the end.

"I'd had Japanese stuff mainly," Pat explains. "Still have actually, but my mate Phil Cooper (who's since invested in a Moto Guzzi 350 Imola for himself) phoned me up out of the blue one night and said: 'you've got to come and have a look at this bike for sale. If you don't buy it, I will.' Well, of course, I had to go and take a look – just to save him from himself."

When Patrick went to have a look, what he saw was this, slightly non-standard Le Mans. "I wasn't sure about it to start with," he admits. "Until I had a ride on it. That was it. I loved it. It's had new rings, the carbs and alternator overhauled and a pair of new rear shocks fitted. The tank's been sprayed, it's missing the under-seat toolbox, it had no mirrors on it and the fairing lowers are missing, but I bought it to ride, not fuss about. Apart from the few bits I need, I'll leave it as it is. When I first got it (a couple of years), it spewed oil out of the oil filler neck – the bike has the optional extended dipstick tube fitted to make access easier – but a new O-ring cured that. It's been no bother other than that – it hasn't missed a beat. That's the sort of bike I like."



Main: A man who has seen the light – Patrick Wall loves his Guzzi.

Above: Accessibility to engine is excellent.

Right: Oil checks are dead easy.

MANDELLO'S THREE MUSKETEERS

After the MkIII Le Mans was replaced, Moto Guzzi upgraded their flagship sports model to a full (well 949 actually) 1000cc, fitted 40mm carbs and trendy 16in front wheel, but for many Guzzi fans, the only 'real' Le Mans models are the 850s that ran between 1976 and 1985 as the MkI – officially designated the Le Mans 850 – the MkII and the MkIII. Here are the principal differences between the three versions.

1976-1978 LE MANS 850/MKI LEMANS

Shown for the first time at the 1975 Milan Show, Le Mans 850/MkI production is split into Series one and Series two bikes. The Le Mans is essentially an updated S3 with a modified cylinder head with oversized valves, domed pistons to raise compression and racing-style open 36mm Dell'Orto pumper carbs. High tech? No. Effective? Yes.

Despite this modest tuning, where the Le Mans stood out was in the styling – stripped-down, minimalist café racer chic. A tiny bikini fairing and low clip-on bars deflect a little of the wind, while rear-set footrests and a narrow seat with 'bum-stopper' hump make up the back.

Series one machines have a rounded CEV stop/tail lamp and frame numbers run up to VE13040. Only around 2000 of the series one Le Mans were manufactured and they are the most collectable, so beware of buying a fake. Check the frame number. Series two bikes have squarer, de Tomaso tail-light, black fork sliders, a larger seat and a trip meter.

1978-1981 LE MANS MKII

Three-piece full fairing borrowed from the Spada, with clocks to suit – including voltmeter and clock. Updated, 32 amp/hour battery introduced soon after the launch of the MkII. Brake calipers moved to the rear of the fork legs. In late 1980, the chrome cylinder bores of the original Le Mans are replaced by Nikasil bores and the forks get air assistance.



1981-1985 LE MANS MKIII

An all-new model with the engine getting new, square-finned cylinder heads and barrels, a drop in compression ratio from 10.2:1 to 8:1, new exhaust and wind tunnel-designed fairing. The engine actually makes 3bhp more than the MkII thanks to tighter manufacturing tolerances and a new air filtration and exhaust system. It's the last of the 850s.



Main: Long legged and beefy – the Guzzi's not bad either!

1980 MOTO GUZZI LE MANS MkII

ENGINE (THIS ONE)

Engine type:	ohv, V-twin
Bore x stroke:	83 x 78mm
Capacity:	844cc
Compression ratio:	10.2:1
Carburettor:	2x 36mm Dell'Orto
Lubrication:	Wet sump, gear pump
Claimed power:	71bhp @ 7300rpm
Transmission:	Five-speed gearbox, dry, double plate clutch
Ignition:	Battery and coil with points
Electrical system:	12 volt alternator
Wheelbase:	59.5in
Front tyre:	3.50/80 x 18
Rear tyre:	4.00 x 18in
Front brake:	Twin 300mm Brembo discs
Rear brake:	Single 242mm Brembo disc
Dry weight:	196kg/431lb
Fuel capacity:	22.5 litres/5gallons
Top speed:	126.89mph (Motorcycling test 1979)