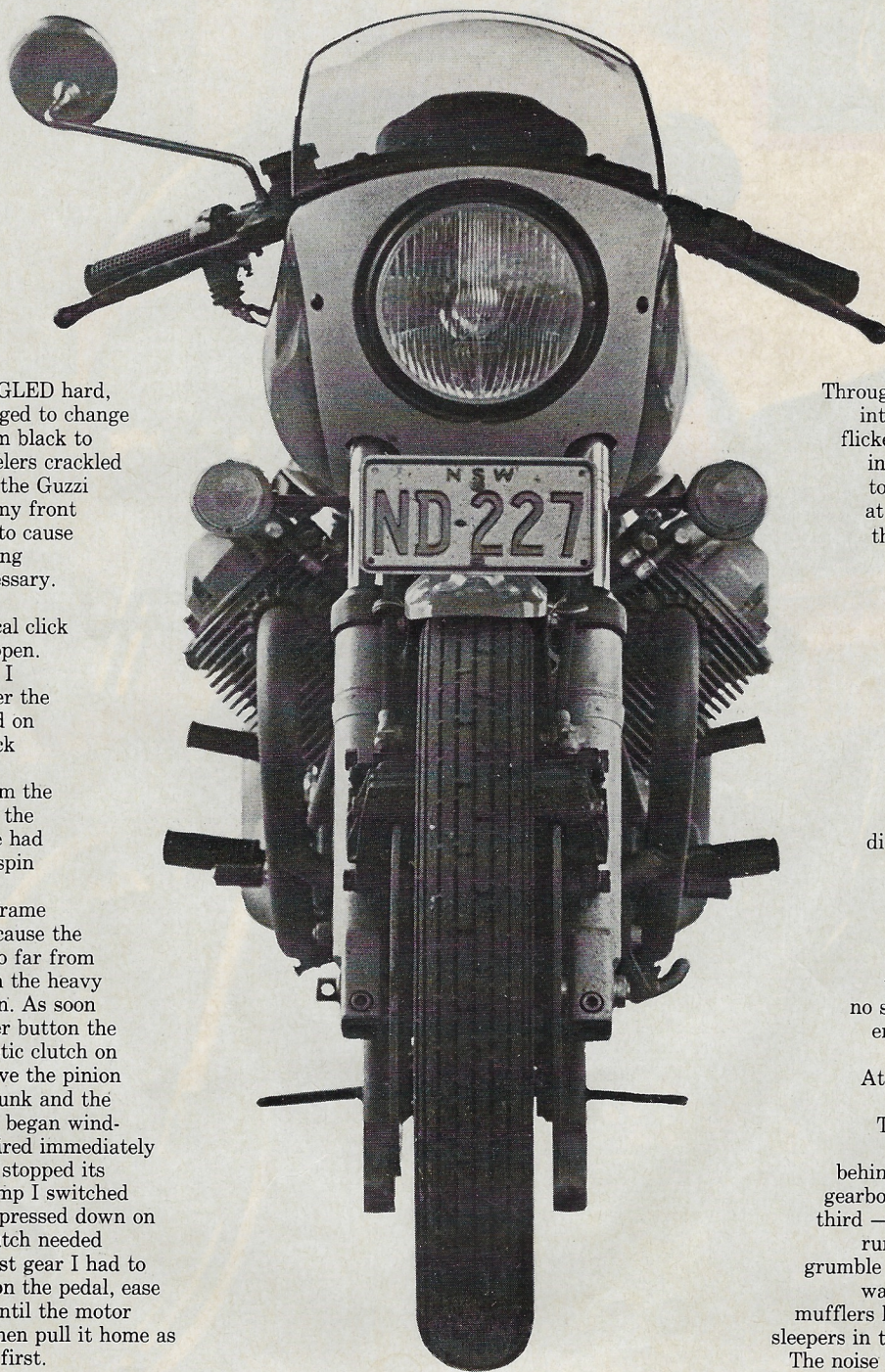


Moto Guzzi's 850 Le Mans is the 1978 ...

V2 ROCKETSHIP

Why would anyone enjoy riding a bike that kicks like a mule, is so uncomfortable it cuts off circulation and has a riding position like a Muslim on a prayer mat? Simple design ideas — comfort and common sense — don't interest Moto Guzzi. It's the biggest bag of balls on the road. It doesn't make sense, but who cares, it gave us a memorable road test.



DAWN STRUGGLED hard, but only managed to change the clouds from black to silver-grey. The Metzlers crackled on the dewy grass as the Guzzi was pushed towards my front gate — I didn't want to cause any more early morning disturbance than necessary. The fuel taps made a pleasantly mechanical click as they were turned open. Then the choke lever. I swung my left leg over the low saddle and flicked on the ignition. Two quick twists of the throttle squirted neat fuel from the 36 mm Dell'Orto into the motor. This technique had given the Guzzi first-spin starting before. I reached across the frame with my left hand because the starter button was too far from my right thumb when the heavy throttle was held upen. As soon as I pushed the starter button the massive electromagnetic clutch on the starter motor drove the pinion home with a heavy clunk and the car-size starter motor began winding the 850 over. It fired immediately and as soon as it had stopped its rump-hiss-stumble-rump I switched on the headlight and pressed down on the gearlever. The clutch needed adjustment, so for first gear I had to feed gentle pressure on the pedal, ease the clutch lever out until the motor started to drag and then pull it home as the box dropped into first.

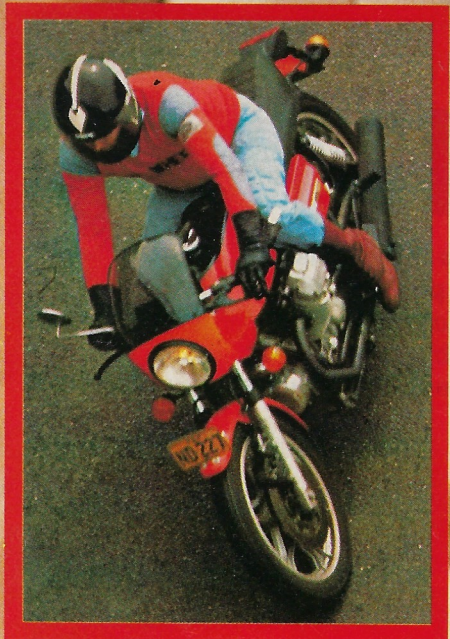
Through my front gate, immediately into second — reached down and flicked off the easiest of all chokes in the motorcycle world — back to first for the hard left-hander at the end of my street, then up the steep one-in-four climb, left again onto the Victoria Road, then to the west.

Motorcycle journalists tend to place bikes in neat little pigeon holes. This bike is a commuter, that bike is a sportster, the other is a cafe racer. Today was going to be different. I was country bound on a bike I'd already ridden around town. The

Moto Guzzi Le Mans is different. It defies pigeon holes. Bikes in the Sportster hole, bikes in the Cafe Racer hole — all waiting for comparison. A person who buys a Guzzi gathers the money together and buys a Guzzi. At no stage does a BMW or a Ducati enter the picture. Certainly not a Japanese machine.

At last beyond the urban sprawl climbing to Kurrajong.

Tight corners with cautious 35 km/h speed signs disappeared behind my 80 km/h elbow with the gearbox singing between second and third — always above 4000 rpm. The rump became a grumble and the grumble became a growl and the noise was all mine as the Guzzi's huge mufflers kept the exhaust from waking sleepers in the few houses along the road. The noise began in the carburetors and



resounded from the pipes before they entered the mufflers, and also from the angled cylinders just under my chin.

Cranking into faster corners as speed signs and fun-killing fines fell behind, the ache in my right wrist gave way to a slow, sustained charge of adrenalin. Speedo ignored. Just keeping an eye on the tachometer to hold the revs between 4000 and 6000 rpm. The Metzgers told me how fast to ride, through the seat of my jeans, and the gentle harmony on throttle, clutch and gear lever wound up and down with the road's magnificent curves.

The township of Bell is really a junction of the Mt Victoria road, and boasts two roadhouses — one for traffic going west, the other for those heading east. Nothing else. Shortly after 0800 I grumbled back through the gears and pulled into the roadhouse and garage.

With the tank again brimful, I took time out for a breather and to think about the Guzzi. The refill showed that the fuel consumption for the city running and the spirited ride to Bell was almost 15 km/l (around 43 mpg).

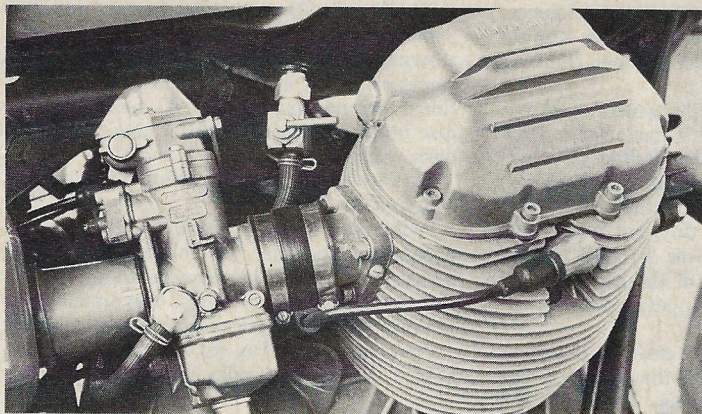
Then there was the feeling that everything I'd experienced since the Guzzi first fired that morning had existed in only a fraction of a second. Like a dream on waking. Complex, exciting, incredibly fast, relaxed, surefooted, precise, memorable but, living in my senses not my memory.

At around \$4500 you'd hardly expect people to queue outside Burling and Simmonds on Sydney's Parramatta road for the Guzzi Le Mans. Yet Norm Burling was chuckling when we collected the test bike. He'd sold enough that month to justify his faith in the Moto Guzzi label. Times were good. Yet it isn't the kind of bike you see parked with a thousand others in a city car park or joining the rat-race from the city in the evening.

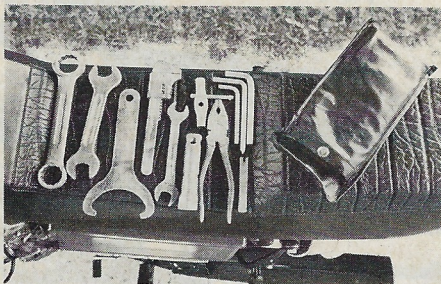
The Guzzi Le Mans 850 is one of the two best looking bikes in the world, I reckon. (The other is the Ducati 750 SS.) The Guzzi is undeniably masculine. Its appearance stops crowds, makes other motorcyclists bleat a short word of praise and it makes people who know and care nothing about motorcycles stop and engage in conversation. It is sublimely beautiful and yet, for all this, it is a fake.

The engine, so they say, was born for a snowmobile or small military personnel carrier or some other nondescript purpose. It is a heavy, rugged almost unburstable engine. There isn't a single stroke of imaginative genius to please the purist or excite the dreamer. The cylinders are spaced 90 degrees apart and pushrods open the valves. Huge 36 mm Dell'Ortos feed the conventional cylinder heads and the exhaust pipes, unencumbered by a front mudguard, swept gracefully down to the lower frame rail where they gently rise into the massive, efficient black painted mufflers. It has conventional coil points ignition and a brilliant, precise headlight. It also has the biggest battery since Mack trucks gave up crank starters.

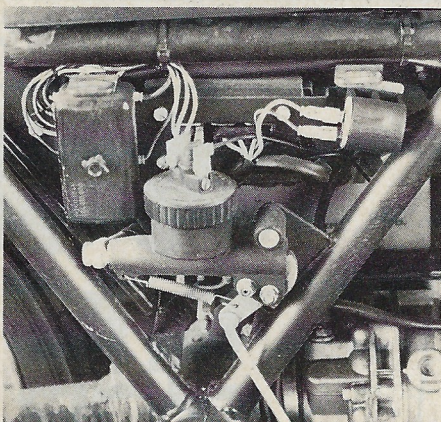
The battery needs to be big because there's no kick starter and the engine can be irritable when it's hot. A smaller battery



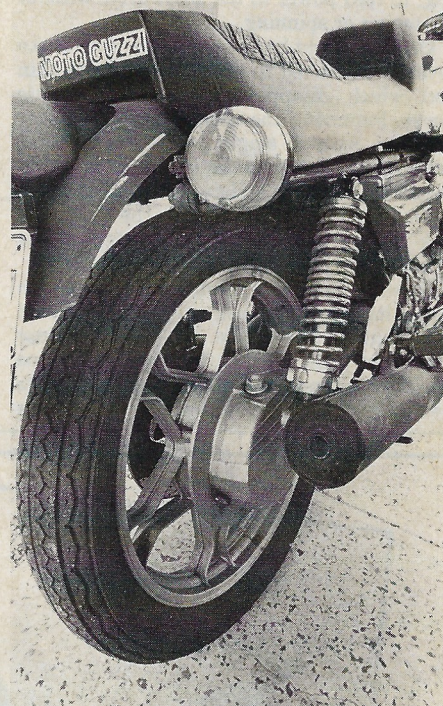
Nothing is left to chance. The castings would look good in an art gallery and the inlet manifold is attached with three cap-screws.



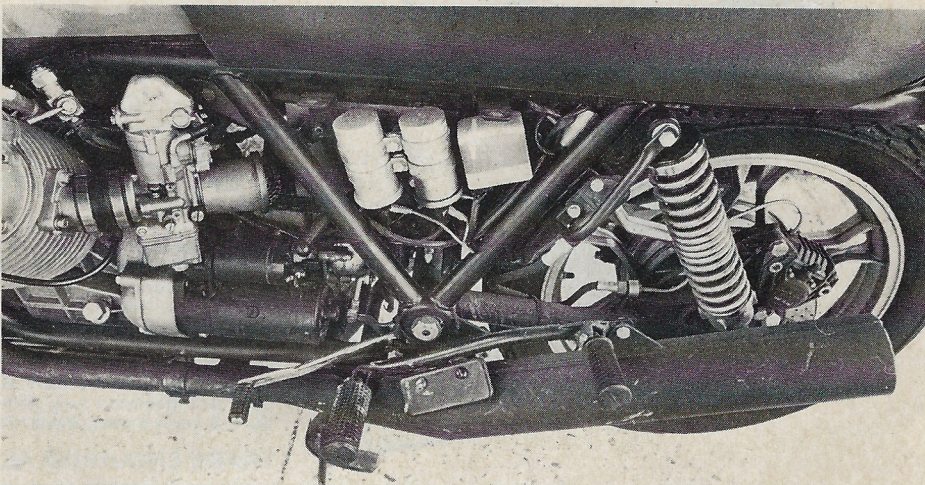
The toolkit is exceptional and heavily plated with either zinc or cadmium so it won't chip and rust.



Right sidecover removed reveals the master cylinder and fusebox. Electrics have improved greatly since Japan started the competition. Coils and other electrics fill the lefthand sidecover space completely. Lift handle is bolted to the hydraulic proportioning valve. Triple rate springs offer the best ride/handling compromise.



Drive housing is lightweight and mufflers amazingly quiet without robbing the Le Mans of a manful roar.



would expire, and so would rider confidence. Bump starting an 850 could prove a problem. In city traffic it doesn't bear thinking about.

A horn nestles above the generator in the Vee looking as though it's made for a 1925 Indian or some such oldie. Bolted to a left-side casting hangs a car-size starter motor, complete with a magnetic clutch engagement on top. Connected by a tiny, but adjustable, rod the gear lever operates a flimsy control emerging from the rear of the gearbox. But it feels very strong. Appearances can be deceiving.

A light lever pulls the car-type dry-plate clutch apart with a smoothness rarely experienced on a motorcycle. It allows the pulsating twin, with its off-beat low-rev feeling, to feed power to the shaft drive without snatching or spinning.

On the right-hand side, the foot-brake lever is connected to another adjustable thin rod which disappears behind the plastic cover. Removing the cover reveals a master cylinder with a single high pressure line crossing the frame to the left shock-absorber diagonal member. Here a proportioning valve distributes the fluid to the front left disc and the rear disc. The front right disc is operated only by the handlebar lever.

However odd this system may seem on paper its true worth can only be appreciated after time in the saddle. It's possible to use the brake pedal hard in the wet on dubious surfaces without the back wheel taking its own line or the front falling away. Normally

the balance is 70 percent to the rear and 30 percent to the front. Apart from a slight steering reaction at low speed, the system works so well it makes a mockery of conventional arrangements. Like all non-cosmetic disc brake systems, the Guzzi uses cast iron discs which rust.

Who gives a twopenny damn! They work. Wet and dry.

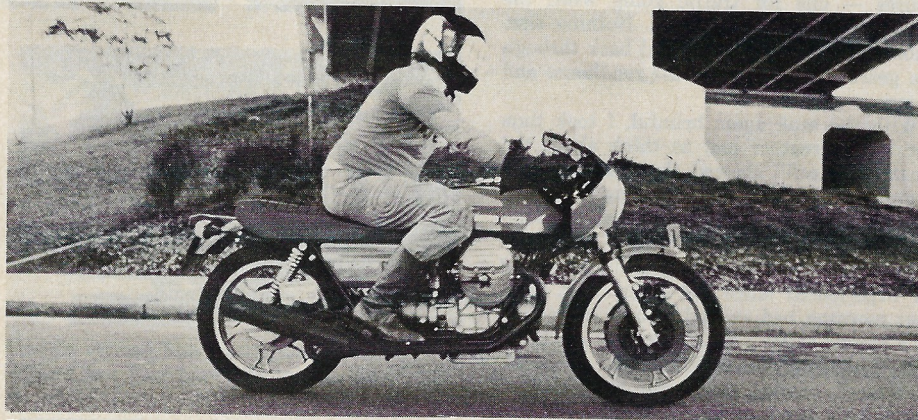
Pedal and lever pressure is high by Japanese standards, but this increases the pressure difference between gentle stopping and eyeballs-out panic stops. The amount of braking control is very reassuring.

First gear will run to almost 80 km/h before the tacho needle leaves the yellow

and starts into the red. Second runs to more than 110 km/h and third to almost 150. In fourth the red line comes into view at about 190 km/h and fifth is anyone's guess.

The gearbox shows the non-motorcycle background on the Guzzi powerplant and refuses to flat change without the clutch unless gear-crunching is ignored. The gearbox hates changing below 4000 rpm and second to third shift is often lumpy. At first, this appeared to be a peculiarity of the test bike, but other Guzzi owners have confirmed the same behavior. However, treated well, with patience and precision, the gearbox is a delight.

Ten years ago TWO WHEELS predicted



Travelling much harder than the pic shows. At 90 km/h through a broad U-turn corner with plenty to spare. Not recommended, but good for the heart.

disc brakes and we were right. Today, we predict shaft drive. The benefits far outweigh the few minor disadvantages like rear-end rise under hard acceleration and power induced wobbles for those foolish enough to change gear mid-corner.

As a complete engine/transmission unit, the Guzzi has nothing new to offer. It is well built and dull. But where the Guzzi shines is in the features which can't be measured. Sounds and vibrations ignored or exorcised as undesirable in Japanese bikes thrive on the Guzzi.

The Guzzi is delightfully free from balance shafts and contra-rotating components

designed to make the engine as smooth as a Marketing Manager's handshake. The Guzzi shakes and rumbles and reacts violently to throttle changes with hisses and gurgles. Sure, the engine reacts strongly when the throttle is blipped and it will tilt the bike if the engine is accelerated hard mid-corner. In fact, the only time the engine reaction intrudes on day-to-day life is trickling to a halt at traffic lights after a hard run. The 1500 rpm idle is so slow (when you're accustomed to four pre-smoothed cylinders) that a few quick twists of the throttle are added to keep the fires alight.

Not only is this unnecessary, but also it

causes side-to-side reaction and the bike can weave a little off-line. It may only be a few centimetres, but it can be enough to destroy the super-cool image of a Guzzi in traffic.

There's vibration and there's vibration. Some bikes vibrate and the feeling is harsh and progressive. From 4000 rpm the Guzzi becomes so smooth you'd swear it was a Four. This may be psychological (because it is rough at idle) but the amounts of engine feel and vibes which filter through the five contact points (hands, feet and bum) is a positive delight. Vibration on the Moto

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SPECIFICATIONS

Engine	.90 degree V-twin 844 cm ³ four-stroke
	Pushrod overhead valve. 10.2:1 compression ratio
Bore x stroke	.83 x 78 mm
Claimed power	60.5 kW at 7600 rpm
Carburettors	Two 36 mm Dell'Orto pumpers
Ignition	Twin points, coil, battery
Transmission	Five-speed with gear primary and secondary by rear wheel drive unit

Overall ratios:

1st	11.64:1
2nd	8.08:1
3rd	6.09:1
4th	5.06:1
5th	4.37:1
Frame	Duplex cradle
Wheels	Alloy
Tyres	350H18 Metzeler front, 410V18 Metzeler rear
Brakes	Twin front discs, single rear disc. Foot pedal operates front

left disc and rear disc. Handlebar lever operates front right disc.	
Wheelbase	1470 mm
Saddle height	775 mm
Weight, dry	198 kg
Claimed performance:	
Top speed	210 km/h plus
Standing 400 metres	12.9 seconds
Fuel consumption — average	14.88 km/l
Speed in the gears at 7500 rpm:	
1st	75 km/h
2nd	110 km/h
3rd	145 km/h
4th	185 km/h
Fifth not tested. Uncorrected speedo.	
Km/h per 1000 rpm in top gear	27 km/h

Test bike made available by Burling and Simmonds, Parramatta Rd, Auburn, NSW.

GUZZI V2 ROCKETSHIP

(Continued from page 69)

Guzzi is like rediscovering the delights of a childhood sweetheart on the same patch of grass behind the old barn. It's slightly naughty, contributes to the passionate noise and isn't very scientific, but it's something of the soul of the bike.

The suspension is a part of the frame is part of the balance is part of the suspension. It all goes in circles. Though the suspension isn't faultless it's aided by a very heavy engine mounted low to keep the C of G down near the axles. The frame is tight and free of flex and this allows the suspension to get on with the business of suspending. The dampers absorb harsh road irregularities well and the variable rate rear springs progressively load up on poor surfaces. No road surface (or pothole) could cause the Guzzi suspension to smash a karate chop from the rear. Only once did the suspension answer back to me.

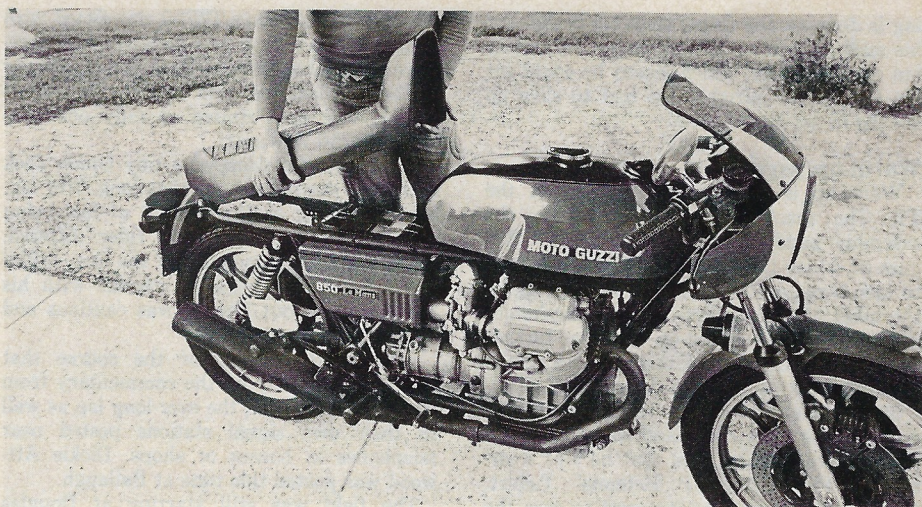
On that occasion a 35 km/h corner was approached in second gear. The signpost was horribly conservative and we hammered through at almost 100 km/h with the engine sounding decidedly busy. For the sake of a peaceful motor, I changed to third gear just while bringing the bike up from the lean-in part of the turn. Revs dropped and torque reaction sent the machine snaking across the full width of the lane. The reaction, however violent, wasn't terminal and the bike had no intention of dealing out punishment — just a firm warning. It had been the wrong thing to do at that time and place, and the Guzzi thought so too.

Italian style says the overall symmetry of the Guzzi couldn't be upset by a rounded saddle, so it gets a self-skinned foam seat that is about as comfortable as a fakir's bed of nails. Looks great, sits awful. As a concession to large families, the Guzzi will carry a pillion passenger. This doesn't upset the suspension, but it will certainly upset the passenger — perched above the earth while sitting on a few sponge rubber Kleenex. It is impossible to have attractively raked mufflers without pushing the pillion pegs too high and it isn't possible to have a saddle that is a work of art without reducing comfort to a minimum. Short distances are okay, but a pillion should be carried only when it is absolutely essential.

Like when the buses and trains have stopped running.

Italian switches won't bother a Guzzi rider. The turning indicator switch is amazingly light and a gloved thumb can spend all day correcting mistakes. Switch the indicators off and you're almost certain to send them blinking in the opposite direction. The heavy twist grip causes wrist ache and as the throttle has to be cracked for hot or cold starts, the correct procedure is to use the left hand on the starter button. Switch-gear isn't up to Japanese standard, but it is lightweight and unobtrusive.

The relative density of the machine (it is



light, but very compact), the superbly predictable suspension and handling, the safe and reassuring brakes and the relaxed and very fast gait of the engine add up to danger for a road tester. It takes time to become accustomed to the Moto Guzzi. And it then takes even more time to become unaccustomed to it. Stepping off the Guzzi and on to an ordinary machine can lead to some horrendous near-misses.

Imagine a freshly wet city road, a red traffic light, 60 km/h and stamping on the foot brake pedal. Y'see what I mean? On the Guzzi, that's the way it's done. On anything else, that would be a short-cut to disaster.

Owner servicing and maintenance don't present any problems because the Guzzi isn't exotic. There's no rare alloys or a multitude of cams and shims and rows of pernicky carburetors. The toolkit has everything needed for the owner servicing and it is outlined in the well-written handbook. We checked through the procedure and didn't have to run off and find another spanner or Allen key. The toolkit also has a large C-spanner for adjusting the pre-load on the rear shock absorbers. There isn't room for anything else under the saddle except perhaps a pack of chewing gum.

Under-saddle space is limited by the tiny plastic tool holder and the fact that the saddle, rear guard and light are made in one piece and swing back together. This means the saddle can be lifted only a short way before the guard touches the tyre. Removing the huge battery wouldn't be easy.

Removing the engine isn't hard as the frame dismantles at the front and rear. The bottom two rails can be lifted with the engine when it is dropped out. This method doesn't seem to affect frame rigidity at all.

Guzzi's maker, Alessandro de Tomaso, is a delightful visionary. Obviously he isn't surrounded by marketing experts, popular stylists and accountants. With the arrogance of all truly great vehicle makers, he's gone his own way for years. If the public likes what he makes, he succeeds, if it doesn't he fails. The Guzzi Le Mans feels like one man's ideal. If you don't share his dreams and aspirations, you won't understand the bike, let alone appreciate it.

But, if you read the same books and drink the same wine and believe in the same gods, then the Guzzi will liberate your soul.

Saddle is integral with the rear guard and light unit. Aids lightweight design, but this is the limit to opening.

If all this sounds like so much rabid hogwash, take a look at a Guzzi Le Mans brochure sometime. It is a four-page fold-apart. The front page has a full-frontal shot of the Le Mans with the words "Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans". Open the brochure and you see a double-page color pic of the machine with the words "Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans integral brake (patented)". Hiding on the back page is another five color detail pictures with a few poorly chosen words. Phrases like "Safety was the chief design factor..." and "... could only be produced by Master Craftsmen" and "We hope you will enjoy the unlimited sporting machine from Moto Guzzi". There isn't much information on the brochure because a Le Mans owner isn't going to be drawn into conversation about acceleration and overhead cams and the number of carburetors. Perhaps the slight grammatical inconsistency in the last line quoted is correct — "We hope you will enjoy" — not "Buy the Guzzi and you will enjoy" or, "Consider a Guzzi and we're sure you will enjoy". It is almost as though Moto Guzzi assumes, if you've picked up a brochure, you've already decided to buy.

The eccentric genius of Guzzi can be best seen by the new 250 cm³ Four recently announced. Alessandro de Tomaso doesn't really care if the 254 doesn't sell in millions. He had the bike built because it was what he always wanted.

If you have read this far and noticed a trace of enthusiasm, don't let it affect your judgement. The Le Mans is a machine you want, or you don't want. There's no middle course. If someone convinces you to buy an 850 Le Mans, or if you've compared the others (and there aren't many), you're bound to be disappointed.

I'll probably never own a Le Mans. I don't know that I could. Instead I'll sit and dream of that early morning ride to Bathurst. Dream of the faces on tourists leaning off an overloaded 450 twin Honda. of the unutterably snobbish feeling that came over me when I parked the Guzzi next to a Triumph chopper at Mount Lamble roadhouse. Of another Le Mans rider travelling fast in the opposite direction, and of his knowing smile.*