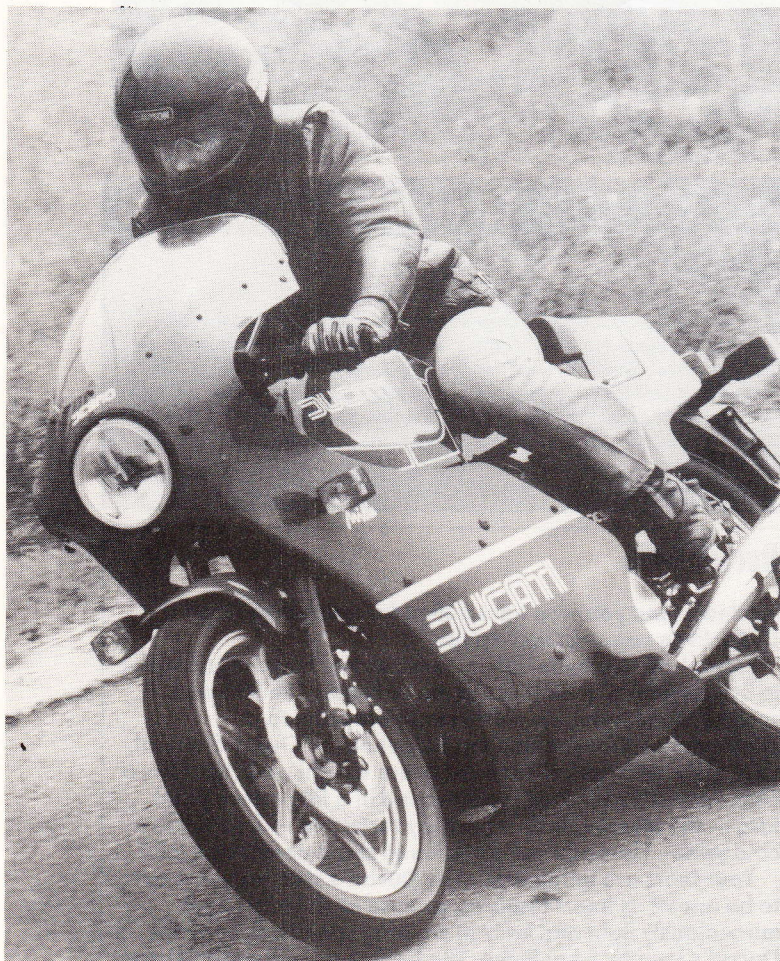
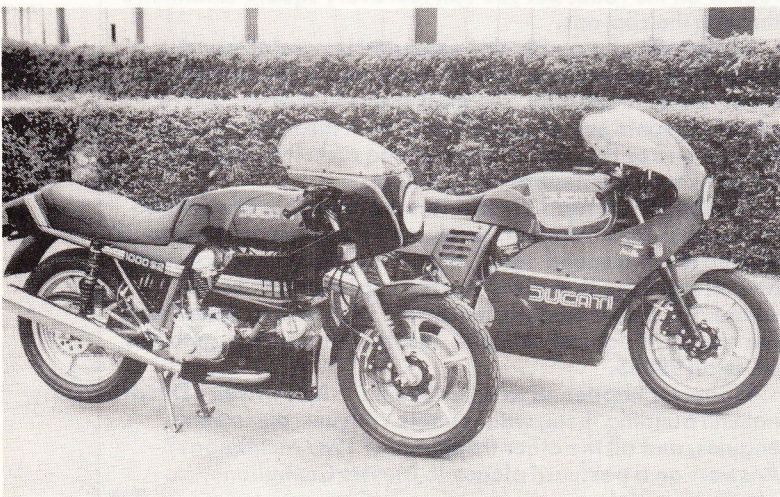


# The Italian Al



*Last of the great Ducatis? Only a half a dozen Milles were brought into the UK, so if you see one, buy it*



*Series 2 had weird bodywork, with bits sticking out everywhere*

**Y**ou may have gathered from this feature that Italian superbikes from the 1970s still have a lot to offer in 1989, and not just as toys to be put away in a coat of preserving grease. So, how much does a classic Ducati or Moto Guzzi cost nowadays? Which are the best ones to go for? And what are the pitfalls?

## Ducati

The absolute classic Ducati is without doubt the 750SS, a thinly disguised racer for the street with silver coachwork over a misty green frame. Examples of this hand-built limited production machine are thin on the ground; hardly surprising considering the fact that just 200 or so were made from '73 until the arrival of the 900SS in 1975. If you see one for sale, hock your soul and buy it: even at upwards of £7000, you can't lose.

That's the thing with Italian bikes of this era. With prices on the way up, you will always get your money back on resale. Ducati 900SS's, have always been more expensive than Le Mans, even when new, and quite rightly so: the Bologna machines may be temperamental, and more of a challenge as an owning *and* riding proposition than the Guzzis, but there is a big gap in breeding, character and sheer motorcycling pleasure.

Early 900SS's fetch a minimum of £3500. The particular one in this feature, a sought-after wire wheeled specimen from 1976, was sold for £3600 by Moto Vecchia just a couple of days after our ride. Even more expensive, approaching 750SS prices in fact, is the '75 model with pukka right-hand gearchange and fibreglass tank. 1978 saw a change to black and gold

livery, cast wheels, and a purpose-built left side gearchange. The Mike Hailwood Replica of 1979 is appreciating fast, and currently sells for a minimum of four grand — if you can find one that hasn't been exported to Japan. Though around 40lb heavier than the standard SS, the MHR's superior aerodynamics endow it with slightly better top end performance.

By 1980, the SS was effectively dead. After '81, much of the bike's raw appeal was diluted by the addition of a slightly noncey dualseat and the fitment of strangulated Silentium silencers. Things went downhill from then on, until the increasingly soft-edged S2 and S3 models with their electric starts finally buried the SS legend for good. Ironically, the very last big aircooled Duke, the *Mille*, is highly regarded by Ducatisti. Only five Milles made it into the UK, so it goes without saying that this is one to look for.

The main point to bear in mind with Ducati SS's is that with the best will in the world they're not workaday machines. There are several areas of weakness — gearboxes, clutches, top ends, electrics, control cables — any one of which could let you down without warning. These bikes *demand* lots of careful attention and maintenance.

Good lubrication helps to extend the periods between SS rebuilds. Moto Vecchia recommend the use of straight 40 weight oil, preferably changed every 1000 miles. At over a gallon a time, that might seem like an expensive luxury, but it's cheaper and less frustrating than waiting for an elusive spare part to be made up when you've just missed a batch production run.

See p58 for inside gen on the spares scene.



# Alternative

Caveat emptor — Latin for 'let the buyer beware' . . .

## Moto Guzzi

If the Ducati SS is a thoroughbred Derby horse, then the Guzzi Le Mans could be described as a spunky steeplechaser — a touch agricultural, but a good stayer. 130mph would be tops for a nice example of the breed: more importantly perhaps, there are few serious design weaknesses. Six-figure mileages are by no means unusual. In fact, the Le Mans' longevity works against it, in that the problems on early models tend to be wear-related, underlining the hard use to which many bikes are being put.

The Le Mans story started in '76 with the round tail-lamped **Mk I**, available in blue or red. Mint examples of this first version are becoming rare now, a fact reflected in the secondhand values which range between £1500 and £3000. Guzzi's equivalent of the 750SS was the Mk I 'PR' (Production Racer), which featured 40mm tickler carbs many years before the 40mm Dellorto accelerator pump jobbies found their way onto the Mk IV. The PR also featured a close ratio gearbox and a few lightened bits, the type of tackle that bumps prices up if folk can be persuaded of the 'exclusivity' and/or desirability of same.

Three grand is about top whack for a Le Mans right up to the dreadful **Mk IV**, victim of a crazy decision by the factory to stick a 16-inch wheel on, purely for fashion's sake it would seem. 18-inch conversions are not only possible but highly desirable. The **Mark III**, last of the 850s, was the first Le Mans to sport squared engine finning and the olde worlde dash panel with white-faced Veglia tacho. Before that there was the black and gold **Mk II**, a handsome

machine with the Spada instrument panel and legshields that interfered with your knees. Most sensible types would agree, however, that the Mk I was, and still is, the smartest looking Le Mans of all.

Mechanically the Le Mans is a considerably better bet than the Duke. As with all big Guzzis, only the clutch and the universal joints need to be watched especially closely. The speedo failures and other electrical foibles can't be watched; they just happen, and there's buggery all you can do except fix 'em when they do. The major engine bits last for yonks, and are easily obtainable and/or rebuildable.

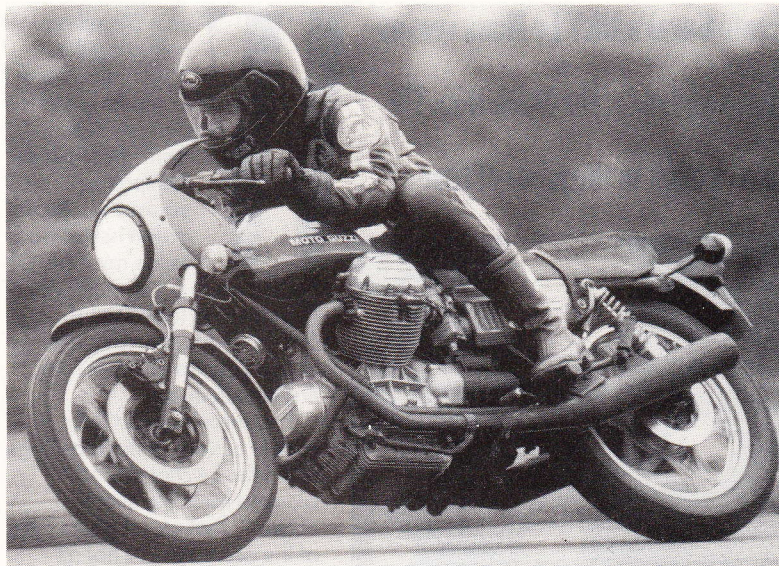
The only thing you shouldn't try to do is tune your Le Mans; what small improvements you gain are more than offset by the hassles that will result, and when it comes to resale time, no Guzzi man worth his salt will be impressed by your expensive mods. As on the Duke, there's no harm in fitting a Lucas Rita electronic ignition system on your early Le Mans. It's quite a good idea in fact.

## Conclusion

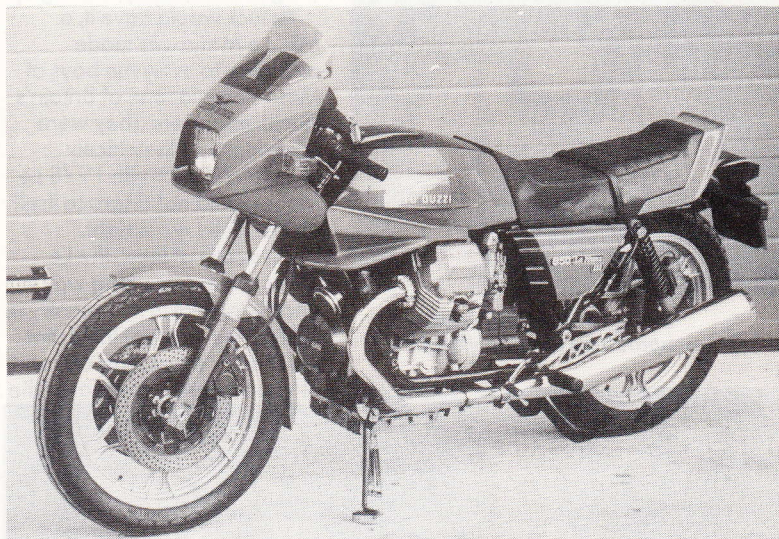
Which should you go for then, a Mk I Le Mans or a Ducati 900SS?

A quick story: Steve and Stuart work at Moto Vecchia. Both men know their Guzzis and Dukes inside out (in the case of the Dukes, more inside than out, ha ha). Stuart has a Mk II Le Mans which he uses on a daily basis as his transport to work. Steve has a 900SS in bits. Need we say more?

There's no doubt really that the Ducati is the superior motorcycle. As a sunny Sunday special, when the ride is at least as important as the pose, it ranks right alongside Honda's RC30. But there's also no doubt in my mind that the Ducati is nearly the last bike I'd



*This Mk I Le Mans is the square tail-light model; originally they were round*



*Mk III Le Mans was the last 850, and the first with squared-off cylinders. Chrome exhaust not known for its durability*

choose as my sole means of transport. It's great to go for a blast on a nicely prepared example, when you're not worried about where the next gearbox is coming from or how many miles you've got before the big ends go. But that's all.

Look up your history books for examples of 'character' cars being supplanted by more sensible, high technology

successors. In every case, the value of the phased-out motor eventually goes through the roof. The same is bound to happen with early 900SS's. Speculators, buy now before it's too late. The rest of you ordinary motorcyclists, check out the small ads for a Mk I Le Mans. You might not make such a fortune, but you'll be able to ride *and* get your money back.

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