

MOTO GUZZI LE MANS

According to all the original road tests, a Moto Guzzi Le Mans was the best thing since sliced bread. Admittedly this was in 1976 when there were few megabike contenders, but how could any motorcycle with an old pushrod twin engine be that good? Norton and Triumph were still producing something not very different (on paper) and they already had one Derriboot in the grave.

At that time I was naive enough to believe that every word written in M/c mags was the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It's shocking, I know, that this ain't necessarily so; this story, for instance, is completely untrue. Anyway, I decided on the strength of these paens of praise that One Day I'll Have a Le Mans, by hook or by Motorcycle Dealer. Of one thing I could be certain, it would be much better than the Honda 125 that I was currently riding/pushing.

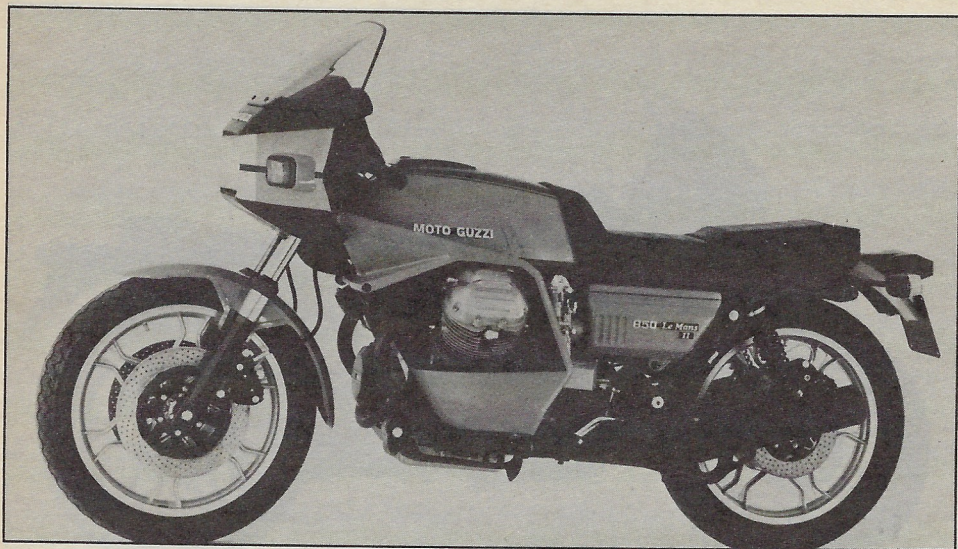
Five years passed before a suitably large pile of untraceable bank notes was in my possession. In the meantime Moto Guzzi had brought out the Mk II version with fairing and knee-capping accoutrements. To make matters worse most of them came sprayed a horrible blue colour...No thanks, Giuseppe. To

me the Mk I guise looked much more purposeful, or poseful; although the fairing did seem a bit pointless.

A secondhand one was located just round the corner 200 miles away. At first sight it looked like a motorcycle that had been standing in the open for a year or so after being crashed. After only a few minutes torture (we made him pull in the clutch) the vendor confessed that this was exactly what had happend. Collapse of temporarily moneyed party...But, apart from some damage to one cylinder, (fins are 'nt what they used to be) it really wasn't too bad. The main problem as far as actually riding it was concerned was that most of the moving parts didn't, and several fixed parts weren't; if you follow.

This made the ride home a bit interesting, because the gearchange, which isn't exactly a Guzzi strength anyway, wasn't self-centreing (modesty?), so I just left it in top whenever possible. I left another bike for dead on one of the twisty bits, mainly because I didn't want to drop out of the powerband or use the brakes in case they stuck on!

Back at the UndesRes I began to wonder if had all been a Big Mistake. I'd ridden the similarly laid out



BMW's and new how Massey-Fergusonesque they could be, so maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that the Guzzi wasn't instantly likable.

Many hours were spent checking, servicing and cleaning the Le Mans. Those intricately cast wheels were the biggest challenge. Lots of emery paper and fingers were worn out in a spectacularly unsuccessful attempt to restore a decent finish - bead blasting would have been the answer.

The massive 36mm Dell Orto carbs (which are sans air-filters) were absolutely full of what looked like, and probably was, since the bike lived by the sea, sand. One of the chock plungers was jammed partly open by it, which couldn't have been helping the economy much. Large quantities of WD 40 and elbow grease freed off the cables and gear linkage. An oil change (what a stupid place to put a filter!) and a can of black paint on merrily rusting exhausts complete and transformation. I hoped.

The open road beckoned: it was time to get down to some serious throttle-bending!

Swing a leg over the low seat, flip up the choke lever and thumb the M.Mouse starter button. CLANK goes the car type bendix, wheeze go the pistons as 844 cc gets compressed to 10.2 times. With a dugaduga from the silencers and a loud hiss from the intakes the whole bike shudders and shakes as the engine fires. Yep; this is a MOTORCYCLE, not a motorcycle. The clutch was heavy by any standards, but worked well enough. Not so the gearbox; part-

ly because of a poorly-engineered linkage, the change is slow and notchy - especially between second and third where I was frequently ambushed by a false neutral. As you trundle off there's a minimal amount of BMW style acking up at the back. Within a few yards you realise why - the suspension is virtually solid! in short; if you weigh less than 11 stone it effectively hasn't got any springs at all. Until those clever Japanese gentlemen started putting real suspension on bikes about ten years ago it was widely believed that the only way to make a bike handle was to make the ride so hard that you could feel every bump and surface irregularity. Motor Guzzi went one stage further: not only could you tell how many ants you were running over, you could tell what they had for breakfast. On the Le Mans the problem was compounded by a riding position that was obviously designed by an under-employed Osteopath. Whether you're an endomorph, ectomorph or deformed gorilla, it's sure to be uncomfortable in some way. After a day in the saddle I was walking around like Quasimodo's Grandfather for weeks.

I doubt that the main speed-limiting factor on a typically bumpy rolling English road was the blurred vision that resulted from all the jolting and bouncing - the wheels probably spent more time in the air than on the ground. Possibly the high unsprung weight of the massive Brembo disc and drive shaft was partly responsible. The steering was generally good, especially on long sweeping corners, and unaffected

by the torque reaction waywardness that has sometimes scared me to death on boxer BMWs. After a few thousand miles I came to the conclusion that the bike was best at going very fast on very smooth roads. At these speeds the engine worked well without the need to use the clunky gearbox, the riding position started to make sense; and my eyeballs stayed in their sockets! Surprisingly, it was also good at going very slowly. Sometimes I'd take my helmet off and trickle along the lanes at pushbike speeds, soaking up the sunshine, smells and fliews. There was no noise, no snatch and I wasn't hitting the bumps hard enough to feel them...Somehow, though, I can't see Moto Guzzi advertising the Le Mans as an ideal 20 mph cruiser! One has to think of one's image!

The engine, despite its humble origin (a military vehicle) manages well. A claimed 80 bhp at about 8000 rpm is going some for a two-valve twin with push-rods like Aunt Mabel's knitting needles, although it often seems that a typical Italian cavallo is rather weaker than the British variety. Mine pinked quite handsly with the ignition timing set to standard, but this was the only sign of its high state of tune. Apart from low rev power pulses, it was as smooth as a V twin should be, especially at about 4000 rpm (a handy 70 mph in top). With a careful throttle hand the engine pulled from tickover steadily until 5000, when it started breathing properly and came on the mega just like the Manx Norton I road back in '38. The powerband effect was increased when I accidentally drilled six half-inch holes in the baffles at the back of each silencer...Everybody else was doing it and they couldn't all be wrong...Could they? This modification didn't make it excessively noisy, as the exhaust was completely drowned out by intake roar most of the time. Ernest Thrasher and his colleagues achieved top speeds of 130 plus and standing quarters in about 13 seconds, which is either amazing or unbelievable when you remember how slow the gearchange was. E.T. also said that the Veglia speedo over-read by 30%, but I timed mine over measured distances and found it to be more accurate than most (BMW ones often are about 10 mph optimistic at 60).

At first I was wary of the linked brakes which split pedal pressure 70/30 in favour of one front disc, but, after a navigational error had forced me to do some trail riding half way up a Welsh mountain one day, I never gave them a second thought. Indeed, with all anchors applied the stop was as quick as hitting a brick wall, but a lot less messy. This was the only time the rock-hard suspension was an advantage - there was virtually no dive. The brakes were so control-

lable that I could squeal the tyres at will, which was great for scattering the pedestrians in town!

With a generous tank size and a 60 mpg capability without going at soporific speeds, the Le Mans made a reasonable long-haul cruiser. At the other extreme, large handfuls of throttle and lots of revs sent consumption plunging into the low thirties. The performance on paper was far below that of the latest multi-everything race replicas, but in the real world it's certainly sufficient to keep the adrenalin flowing. I used to regularly travel a 160 mile route which included flat-out straights, unclassified mountain tracks surfaced with gravel and dead sheep (OK, so maybe they weren't dead before I got there!), farmers with shotguns, hairpin bends, and darkness - everything from boring old motorways, in fact. The Guzzi completed this journey faster than anything else, before or since. Why? Because it had a tank that could last the distance and the sort of handling on slippery roads that only a low *c* of *g* can give. Some real suspension and a better headlamp would have stretched its lead. For the record, the 'E' model Bonneville I had later (with a can of petrol strapped on for a halfway refuel) almost equalled the Guzzi record. It had great low speed balance and grunt, but faded higher up the range, just as the Le Mans was getting into its stride. Another Triumph, a 350 cc Tiger 90, used to take most of a day because of frequent 'minor problems'.

Although Italian bikes aren't known for their reliability I had very little trouble. The (German!) alternator developed an intermittent charging fault but this was traced to a loose joint and a few minutes work with a soldering iron cured it. With the exception of the fiddly indicator switch, the rest of the electrics worked better than they looked. Not difficult.

After I'd learned to live with the bike's idiosyncrasies - that's when they become known as character - I began to like it more with every ride. Of all the motorcycles I've owned the Le Mans is the only one I missed from almost the moment I sold it. So why did I sell it?

For two reasons: firstly because my spine was beginning to crumble under the pounding, and spare vertebrae weren't available from the local Moto Guzzi dealer at any price: secondly because I had the change to buy an immaculate Ducati Drama. If there were any justice a Ducati would be the perfect motorcucle. Unfortunately, the World is a wicked place. My Darmah failed to live up to the promise of its exotic engineering and turned out to be the Big Mistake that the Le Mans never was.

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