

MIKE'S BIKES

LE MANS

Number three of Mike Nicks' half-dozen favourite motorcycles, the 850cc V-twin-powered Moto Guzzi Le Mans MkIII

I'm an engine man. I don't build engines — not with my five-thumbed mechanical skills. I just get seriously excited by motorcycles with a big heart. And for me, that usually means big-capacity four-strokes: two-strokes just don't have enough metal in them to be taken seriously, and they make silly noises. I love the myriad ways in which engineers convert crankshaft motion to valve actuation in four-strokes, whereas all that two-stroke esoterica about exhaust resonances leaves me cold and uncomprehending.

I can tolerate a bike with bad handling, feeble brakes and sad styling as long as it has an engine that fires my adrenalin. But if it's got a disappointing engine, no amount of hairline steering or pretty looks will endear that bike to me.

So what's on my list of motorcycles with soul-stirring engines? Try this random selection:

- Ducati V-twins;
- BSA-Triumph triples;
- Honda sixes (the racing variety);
- BMW Rennsport flat twins (you didn't know BMWs could sound like that?);
- All speedway engines;
- Lito motocrossers;
- Hill-climb specials (but only four-strokes);
- 650 Triumphs (but not the 750 twins);
- Gilera fours;
- MV triples and fours;
- Harley-Davidson V-twins;
- Manx Norton/Matchless G50;
- Moto Guzzi's 500cc V8 racer;
- Any Moto Guzzi built by Dr John Wittner (he of Battle of the Twins fame in the USA).

What excites me about engines is not just their power. It's the vibrations put out by the good ones, their power pulses and their noises. Most especially their noises.

It was listening to the throb of a Moto Guzzi Le Mans that cost me £3,300 in 1983. I had ridden the Le Mans' predecessor, the 750cc S3, back in '76, and had tested several touring Guzzis — Californias, T3s, and the semi-automatic Convert — since then. I had enjoyed them, but for some reason I hadn't taken much notice of the Le Mans sports bikes.

Until one evening in that summer of '83. I was walking along a city street when the bike approached me, slowing for a junction. It was a white Le Mans III, ridden by a guy in black leathers.

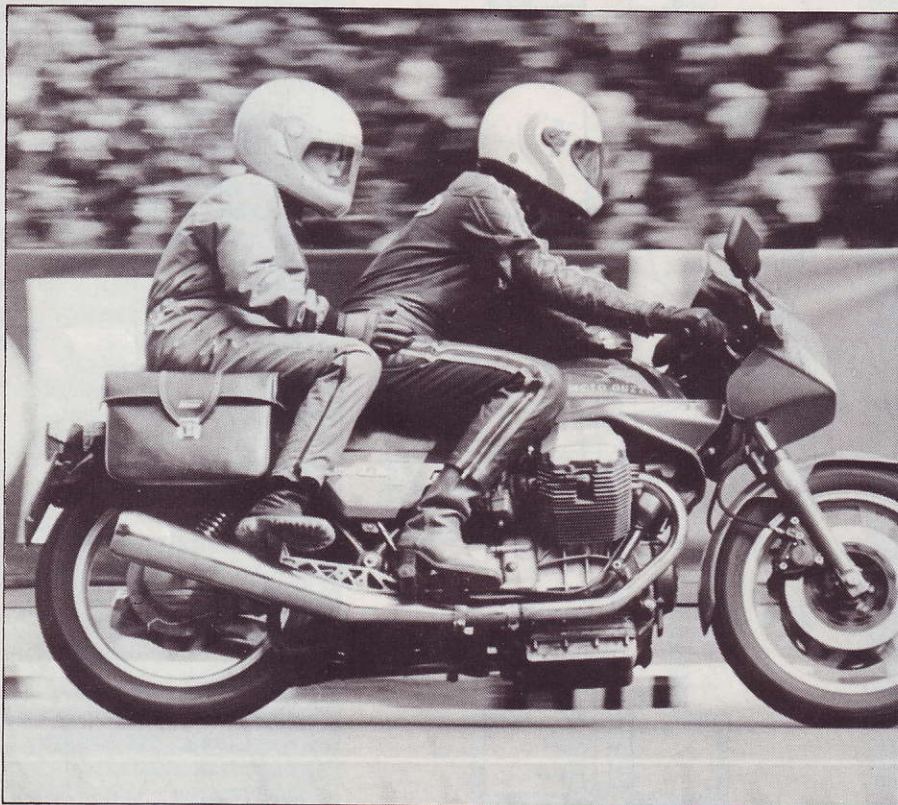
He turned across the junction and accelerated lazily away. Boof, boof, boof, boof: the beat of that big 850cc V-twin just rooted me to the spot; I swivelled round and watched it disappear.

Well, that was it: new-bike lust overwhelmed me and there wasn't much I could do to counter it. I phoned Guzzi dealers Three Cross Motorcycles in Dorset to arrange a test-ride, meanwhile telling myself that I was acting rationally and would decline the bike if I didn't like it. But it was a lost cause: as soon as I straddled that low seat, gripped the clip-on bars and thumbed the button — boof, boof, boof, boof — they had my money.

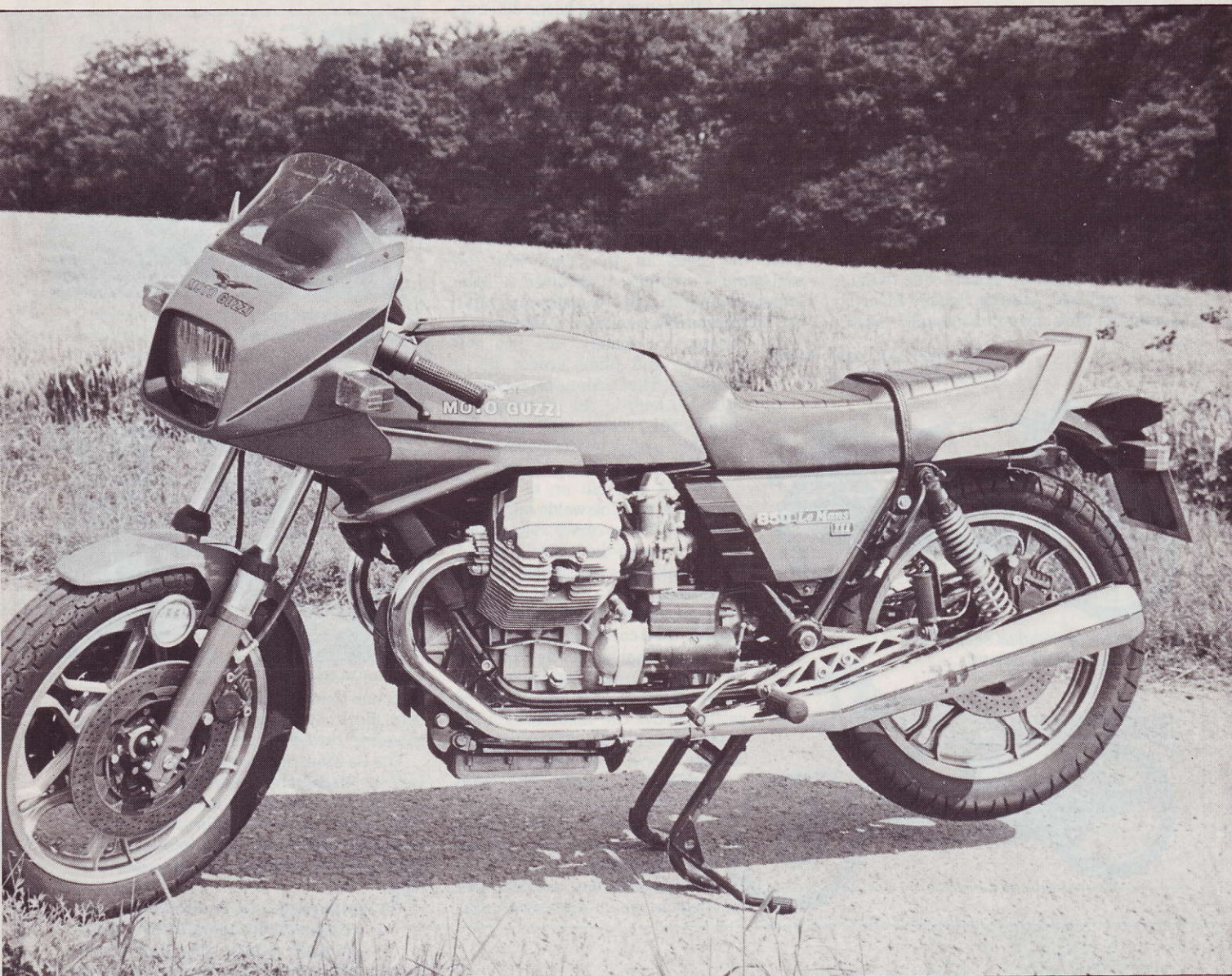
After a token 20-mile ride on a demonstrator with a still-tight engine I returned and said: 'How much will you give me for my BMW R80?' They named a figure, I didn't bother to haggle, and I became the owner of a beautiful red Le Mans III.

I was never disappointed by the Le Mans. The very opposite: I loved the thing. It had the qualities I like in a bike: tall gearing, the ability to deliver sustained high average speeds — and that wonderful exhaust note.

I thought it was a beautiful bike, too: low, narrow, nothing wasted. Most people say the Mk I and II versions of the Le Mans are the real classic models, with their rounded valve covers and smoothly contoured fairings, but



Room for two: with a tank bag and throwover panniers, the Le Mans hustles through the Braddan Bridge bends in the Isle of Man with Mike Nicks and son Gary, then 12, on board



I preferred the harsher, angular lines of the III. But I would certainly agree that after producing the III Guzzi completely lost its way with subsequent versions. They are ugly bikes with swoopy, rising tail sections and grand prix-lookalike belly pans that just do not suit the Le Mans' classic image.

Guzzi handling has some people screaming about the appalling effects of shaft drive and

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the bikes' linked braking system (depressing the foot pedal works one front disc as well as the rear brake; the handlebar lever controls the other front disc). Ignore them: they're talking total bullshit and don't know how to ride motorbikes. Or rather, they don't know how to empathise with a bike and satisfy its needs.

Of course a Le Mans is not as nimble as modern, quick-turn machines. But if you ride

it properly it's one of the most stable and reassuring bikes you can find. Just do it like Surtees, Duke or Hailwood would have told you: finish your braking and gearchanging in a straight line, and match the engine revs to road speed on down-changes. It's surely not that difficult. People get in trouble with shaft-drive bikes when they fail to rev hard enough on the down-changes: then the rear tyre will chirp and the bike will lurch.

Guzzi's linked braking system is a wonderful safety feature that should probably be a standard fitting on all motorcycles. It would save a lot of accidents caused by riders applying too much front brake and losing the wheel on slippery roads. Using just the foot pedal on a Guzzi, it's very difficult to lock the wheels.

Guzzi critics also haven't figured out that linked braking helps you to ride faster and smoother as well as safer. The worst moment when cornering a motorcycle fast is the transition between braking hard and applying power. It usually has to happen just at the point that you pitch into the bend. For a split second the bike is caught in an unbalanced limbo-land.

You can eliminate that bad moment on Guzzis, because your throttle hand isn't also busy coping with a brake lever. What you do

Beauty or beast? Some people love the lines of the Mk III, others think they're too angular and prefer the earlier models

is to apply the throttle gently while your right boot is still pressing the brake lever. Then, as you release the lever, the bike undergoes a smooth, instead of rough and jerky, transition from braking to power. It's fluid, quicker,

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superior. I wouldn't argue that the Guzzi system remains in a primitive state of development, and requires excessively high pedal pressures. But it's inherently the best braking system yet found on road-going motorcycles. And it would probably be even better if it were modified to incorporate that second front disc.

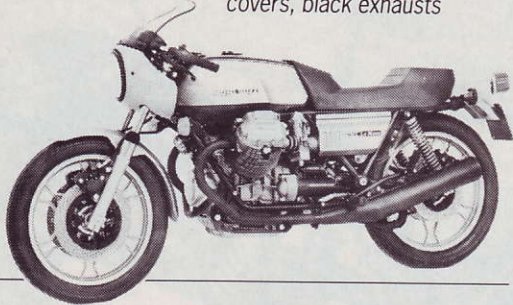
I also enjoyed how simple it is to carry out routine maintenance on a Le Mans: no rear

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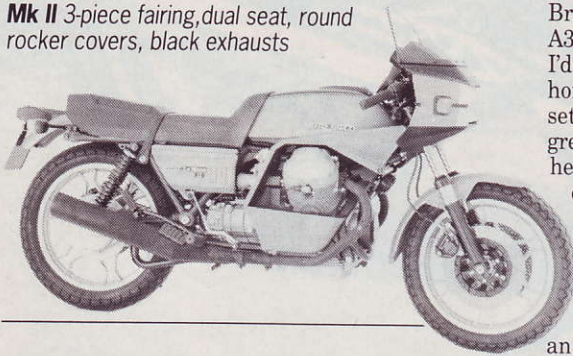
chain to worry about, easy screw-and-locknut valve adjustment beneath the instantly accessible rocker covers. It's true that there are something like 18 screws to remove before you can drop the sump pan, but that's a once-a-year operation. It also has points ignition, which will please the mend-everything-with-a-fag-paper brigade, but I would prefer a set-and-forget electronic system.

When I bought the Guzzi I was living a rather confused lifestyle which involved residing in bliss deep in England's south-

Mk I single seat, round rocker covers, black exhausts



Mk II 3-piece fairing, dual seat, round rocker covers, black exhausts



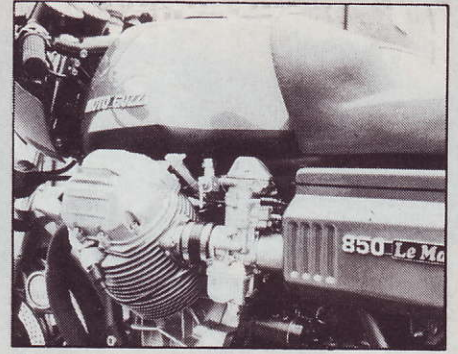
west peninsula and making hectic 500-mile return trips to Classic Bike's offices in the Fen country and various racetracks and rally sites. With a tankbag and a pair of throwover panniers for my gear, the Le Mans was perfect for this job. It would throb along motorways at a steady hundred, swoop through the green-lined Cotswold curves at eighty or ninety, and just boof-boof patiently through towns until it got the chance to unwind again on the open road.

The best journeys were the return runs from the Fens to the south-west on midsummer evenings. It involved a little-known 20-mile stretch of motorcycling bliss, the B4525 from Northampton to Banbury. It twists, it's bumpy, it's got evil cambers and blind brows: it's a challenge. The Le Mans is probably a little too long in the wheelbase to handle this really well, but that probably added to the pleasure of wrestling the bike along there.

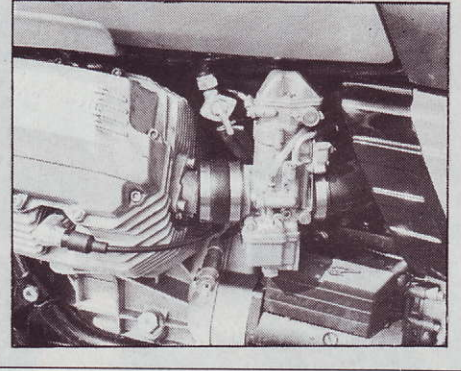
Then it was out on to the big swoops of the Cotswolds and those long, fast TT-like curves. Somewhere around Stow-on-the-Wold I'd stop for fuel, a leak and a can of fizz, and get going again.

I'd use the M4 and M5 to get round Bristol, then cut on to the noble old A38 for the final lap. If I timed it right I'd reach a pub about eight miles from home where the red sun would be setting above the shoulder of a big green Devon hill. I'd stop, release the helmet, buy a pint, and step back outside to watch the sun disappear, while the Le Mans' engine cracked and tinkled as it cooled down after four hours of non-stop running.

No other bike has had quite such an effect on me on that mystic ride



Guzzi purists prefer the 'round' rocker covers and cylinder finning of the Mk I and II models to the 'square' MkIII style



back into the west. It was the Guzzi's engine that did it: 250 high-speed miles of that thudding, throbbing, pulsing V-twin.

The Le Mans was a good touring bike as well as a deeply thrilling roadburner. I took my son, then 12, to the Isle of Man TT in 1984, and it gave us comfortable, reliable transport. Under those more gentle running conditions, fuel consumption approached 60 mpg.

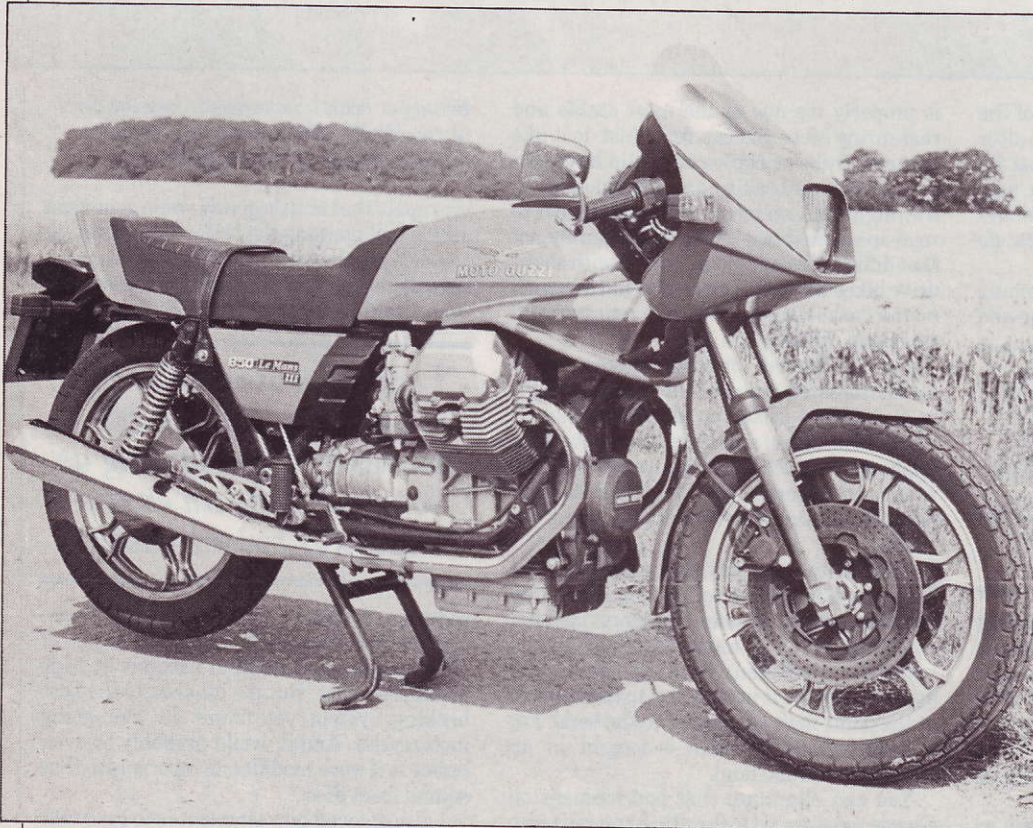
The one problem with the Le Mans is that it is dreadfully uncomfortable to ride at legal speeds. The semi-racing riding position puts just too much weight on the wrists at anything under 80mph. This didn't bother me — I just rode at eighty or more. It did turn the law a bit hysterical, though.

My first speeding ticket on the Le Mans came on the M5 in Somerset while I was on a 300-mile run to the Classic Race of the Year at Snetterton — fair cop, no problem.

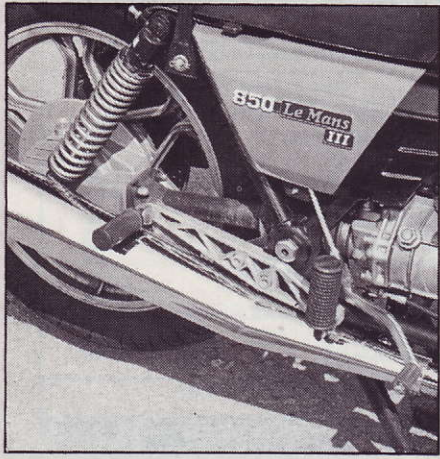
A month later I was following a well-driven hot hatchback up the outside lane of the same stretch of motorway. He was flying until he slowed on a gradient and eased into the middle lane. Naively, I took the bait.

'Bloody car's got no power — let's show him what a real motorcycle can do,' I thought. I opened up the Le Mans, and she soared over the crest of the hill. But when I looked in the mirror to check the fate of the car, all I saw was flashing blue lights: with his superior mirrors, Hatchback Man had spotted the law and pulled over.

The cop was really miffed. 'My Rover V8 was indicating 115mph and you were still pulling away from me on that climb,' he whined. I felt



Mk III spoiler fairing, square finning, chromed exhausts



Handsome latticework footrest support appeared on the Mk III

like saying, 'Well buy a Le Mans, dickhead, and solve your problem,' but thought better of it. And just as well, for he gave me a ticket for a mere 102mph. (Those were the days when a 100mph speeding conviction did not earn British motorcyclists an automatic driving ban).

My licence now carried nine penalty points — just three away from a ban. Something had to change. I tried riding the Le Mans at legal speeds, but it was atrociously painful over the long distances I was covering, and it certainly didn't do justice to the bike. Reluctantly, I decided that the Guzzi had to go.

I advertised it, and a lad came down from Somerset with money bulging in his jacket pocket. I'd covered 12,000 blissful miles in a year, and let the Le Mans go for around £2,200. He got a great bike, I retain warm memories and a few photographs. We were both happy with the deal.

Buying the Classic Guzzi Le Mans

Guzzi's Le Mans models have often been compared — unfavourably — to their Italian V-twin counterpart, the Ducati 900SS. With chain drive and a conventional in-line engine, the Ducati fits most people's idea of a classic motorcycle.

But while the Ducatisti jeer at the Le Man's softer, slightly eccentric image, Guzzi riders smile in the knowledge that they will reach their destination with a bike in one piece: the bevel-drive Dukes are undeniably fragile.

Which Le Mans to choose? If you're changing from British or Japanese bikes, you ought to ride one first to make sure that you can adjust to shaft drive and the peculiar thudding characteristic of the Guzzi's power delivery.

Then it's a case of: how naked do you like your bikes to be? The Mk I Le Mans, with its nose-cone fairing and single seat, is regarded as the most collectable of them all.

The Mk II has an angular three-piece fairing enveloping its cylinders, derived from the Spada tourer. But the instrumentation is better, and there is a stronger battery and a dual seat.

With the Mk III came square-finned cylinder heads — reviled by Guzzi purists — and a smaller fairing with a spoiler. A big white-faced Veglia tachometer dwarfs the

SPECIFICATION	Mk1	Mk11	Mk111
Produced	1976-78	1978-80	1981-84
Capacity	844cc	844cc	844cc
Bore x stroke	83 x 78mm	83 x 78mm	83 x 78mm
Compression	10.2:1	10.2:1	9.8:1
Carburettors	2 x 36mm Dell'Orto	2 x 36mm Dell'Orto	2 x 36mm Dell'Orto
Output	71bhp/7300rpm	71bhp/7300rpm	76bhp/7700rpm
Torque	56lb-ft/6660rpm	56lb-ft/6660rpm	54.9lb-ft/6200rpm
Battery	12v/20amp-hr	12v/32amp-hr	12v/32amp-hr
Tyres	3.50 x 18in 4.00 x 18in	100/90 x 18in 110/90 x 18in	100/90 x 18in 110/90 x 18in
Brakes	2 x 300mm disc 1 x 242mm disc	2 x 300mm disc 1 x 242mm disc	2 x 300mm disc 1 x 242mm disc
Dry Weight	436lb	444lb	453lb
Wheelbase	57.3in	57.3in	58.7in

speedometer. The silencers are fatter and more efficient, and the wheelbase is two inches longer.

With more torque and slightly more power — despite a lower compression ratio — the Mk III is the most practical of the early Le Mans models. After the Mk III, Guzzi's stylists lost their reason and the bikes that classic look.

Mechanically, Guzzis are tough. One of their most common problems is the drive-shaft universal joint: it can develop play, or spin in its support bearing. This is detectable through the right-hand footrest, particularly when you shut the throttle.

Check for the usual engine noises when buying, but remember that all Guzzis produce a 'tappetty' top-end rattle. In fact if a bike hasn't got this noise, it's a sign that its owner has adjusted the valve clearances incorrectly in a misguided attempt to achieve silent running.

Electrics are probably the source of most common faults on older Guzzis. That's mainly because wiring looms are now getting old and brittle, although the regulator box, located where it catches the weather, can also fail.

Le Mans Guzzis will never achieve the prices set by the better Ducati V-twins. But they do offer a unique and exciting motorcycling experience in a fairly tough package at affordable prices.

The Mk 1 is the most sought-after bike; even cosmetically tatty examples fetch £1500-£2000 if they've got an MoT. In immaculate condition, they're advertised at up to £3500.

The Mk IIs can be obtained for slightly lower figures.

Because they're younger bikes usually showing less wear, Mk IIIs fetch good prices. Rough bikes with an MoT start at around £1800, and the average price level for clean, sound bikes is £2500 - £2800. Pristine examples fetch up to £3200. All prices quoted are for privately advertised bikes; dealer prices may be up to several hundred pounds higher.

Thanks to Paul Harris of Spares GB, London (081-543-5929), dealers in Guzzi, Ducati and Ducati-Cagiva spares, for advice on prices. The helpful Moto Guzzi Club GB welcomes new members: contact Penny Trengrove, 53 Torbay Road, Harrow, Middlesex (081-844-4922 between 8-10pm).

PERFORMANCE	Mk1	Mk11	Mk111
Top Speed	127mph	127mph	132mph
Standing 1/4 mile	13.6 secs	13.8 secs	12.8 secs
Ave thirst	45mpg	45mpg	45mpg
APPEARANCE	Mk1	Mk11	Mk111
Colours	Red/Metallic Grey/White	Red/Royal Blue Black/gold	Red/White Metallic grey
Fairing	Small nose, cone, Dayglo panel, round headlight	3-piece, improved instruments, rectangular headlight	Smaller, with spoiler, 100mm white- face tacho, rectangular headlight, Dayglo panel
Features	Single seat	Nikasil liners, dual seat	Square fins, Nikasil liners, new tank, seat, side panels, longer wheel-base