

Rod Ker

discovers

'Moto Guzzi's

Lowboy

Le Mans'

**LONG-
LEGGED
AND EASY TO
LIVE WITH**



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Moto Guzzi's Lowboy Le Mans, ran the headline in a certain Seventies bike magazine. This being in the age when motorcycles had swollen to gigantic proportions, and continuing the furniture allusion, the contemporary Yamaha XS1100 must have been the tallboy and the Kawasaki Z1300 perhaps a very fast filing cabinet. Undoubtedly, the Honda CBX1000 was the commode. (NB. A commode is a chest of drawers...)

This was back in 1976, when two-wheeler sales were moving towards an all-time high. Moto Guzzi released the Le Mans Mk.I, an unlikely combination of pose and purpose, just in time to cash in on the boom. While Japanese designers had invented the superbike merely by making everything bigger, with no particular thought for the effect this had on general handling, the Latin alternative seemed incredibly small.

In fact the Lemon, as it was re-christened by motorcycling deed poll, was hardly a new machine, being directly descended from a long line of V-twins that could be traced back – somewhat embarrassingly – to a three-wheeled military vehicle. However, one quality required of anything military is toughness, and it was this basic strength that allowed an ignoble pushrod twin to grow up and form the heart of the most glamorous motorcycle ever.

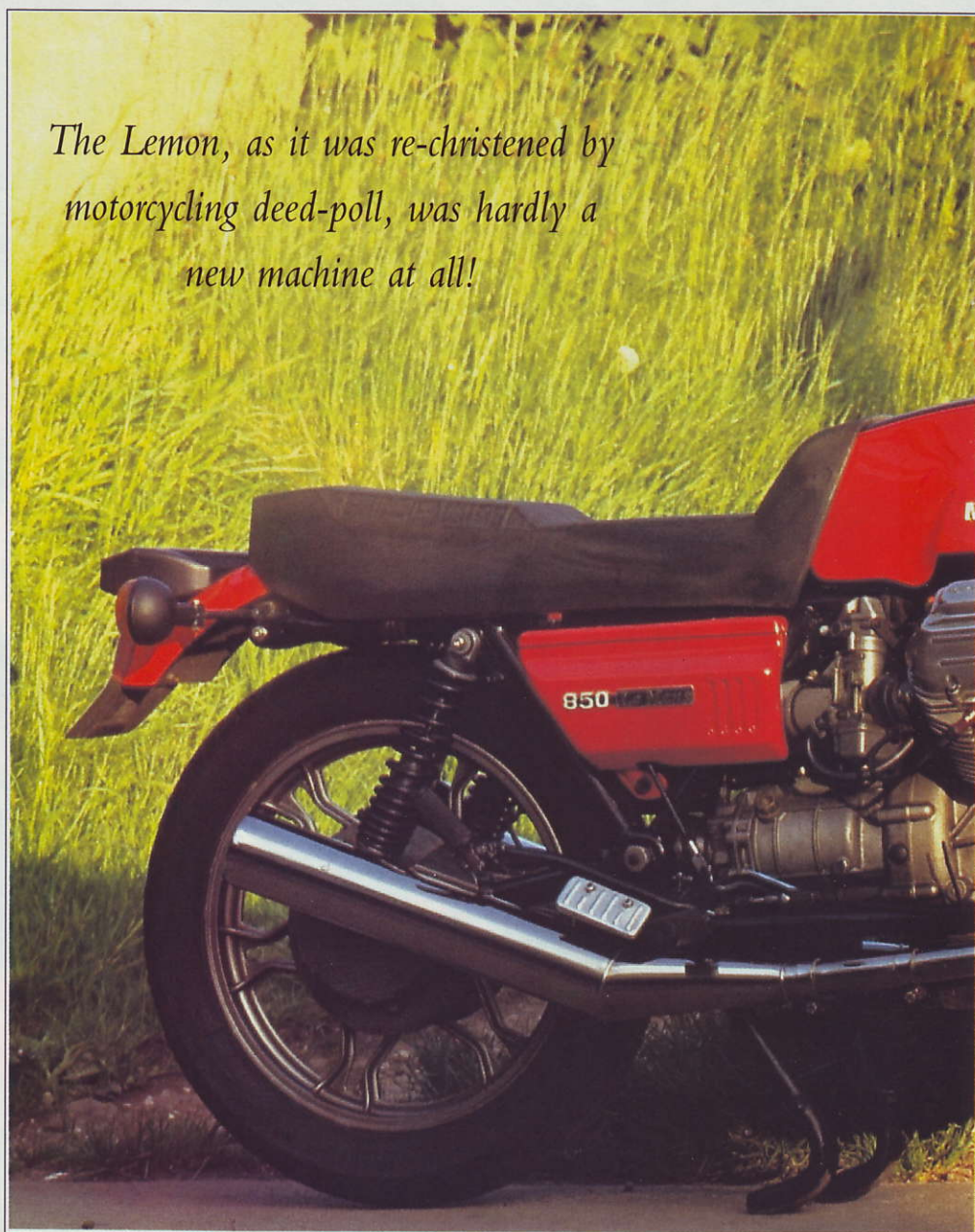
The story started in 1965, when Giulio Carcano was commissioned to design what must have been a sort of khaki Reliant Robin with gun mounts instead of furry dice. Powering this device was an air-cooled, 90-degree V-twin having far more in common with automotive practice than things motorcycle. At that time the Italian police were lumbered with Guzzi Falcones for general duties – a fine vintage single, yes, but not the ideal high speed pursuit vehicle, as even its most dedicated admirers would admit. A replacement was needed. But what?

Putting *due and due* together, it was recognised that Carcano's engine would slot nicely into a motorcycle frame. Which is what happened. Surprisingly, remembering that this is Italy we're talking about, it happened quite quickly, too.

So there it was, sitting majestically on a stand at the 1965 Milan Show: the Moto Guzzi V7, complete with 703cc engine and rather an excess of weight. In most respects, the all-alloy motor, with its distinctive externally ribbed crankcases and car-style gearbox bolted behind, is still alive today, powering current Guzzis. This is understandable because the engine (if not the gearbox) was always good.

But the chassis of the original V7 wasn't so good. Handling tended towards wobbliness, and not only because of the torque reactions resulting from a longitudinal crankshaft and shaft final drive. By the 1970s, when the engine had gained more power through overbores to

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nominal 750/850cc sizes, it was obvious that a complete rethink was necessary in the frame department. A re-style to improve the frumpy appearance would also help.

Vee engines of whichever orientation require a different approach to frame design than other configurations if the resulting machine is to end up as a recognisable and usable motorcycle. Guzzi's solution was to design a frame of essentially straight tubes diving between the cylinders. Engine removal was facilitated by a bolt-on lower rail. The fruit of flirtations in endurance racing, and therefore immensely strong, the only casualty of the new chassis was the car-style belt-driven generator, which had to be relocated on the forward end of the crankshaft. Good riddance, probably. Otherwise everything was as before, including the low-tech distributor.

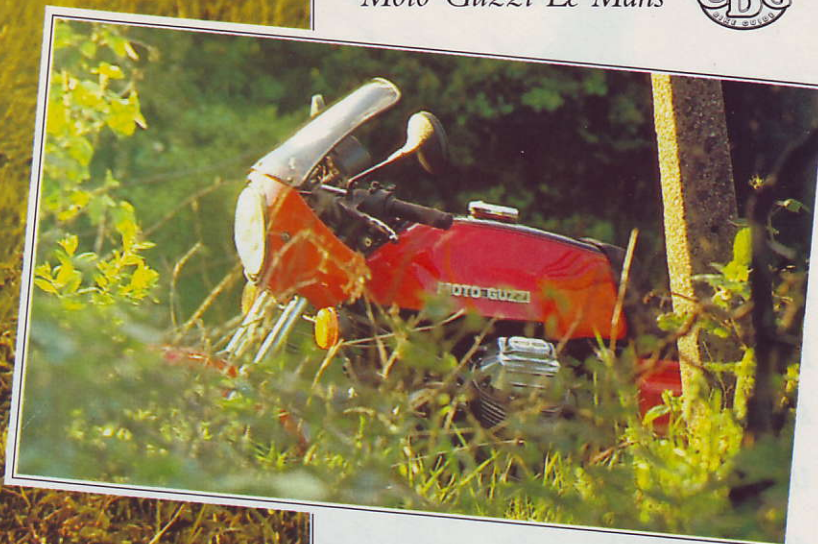
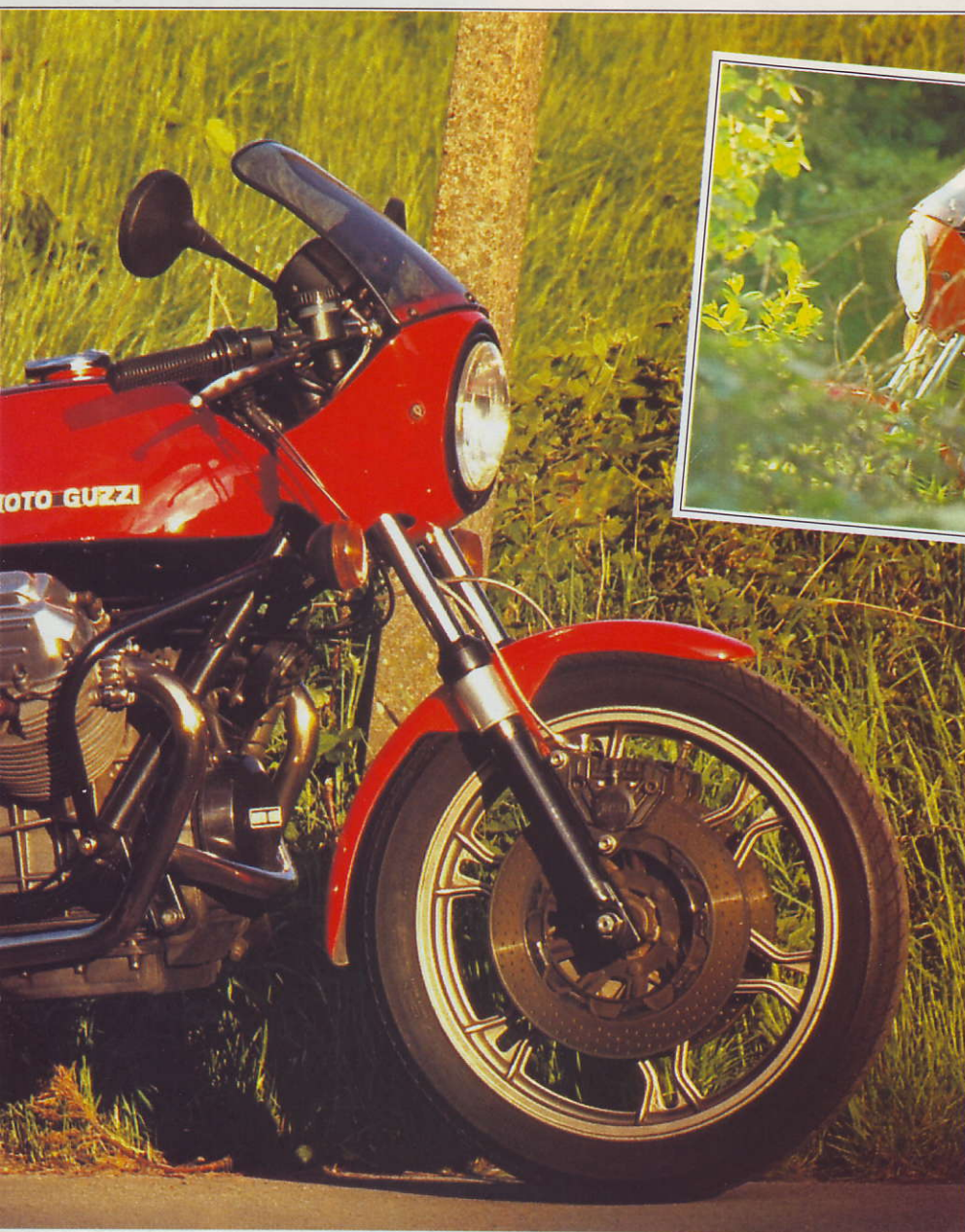
The V7 Sport of 1972 was the most memorable result of the redesign – a motorcycle now acknowledged as a precious and rare classic, in case you're hoping to pick one up for a bargain price. In some respects, succeeding Guzzis were less well engineered. Instead of using a fairly indestructible and expensive train

of gears to drive the camshaft, later engines featured a cheap and not always cheerful chain (although US market Lemons apparently still used gears).

Another restyle in '75 gave us the Sport S3. It was around this time that Moto Guzzi sales in the UK began to take off. Japanese bikes were still woefully inadequate in both suspension and frame. Even their relative sophistication in the engine department wasn't enough to make choosing an instant-rust, spaghetti electric Italian a sign of complete insanity.

The S3 still used the 749cc V-twin, now producing a claimed 70bhp at 7000rpm. New was a trio of Brembo disc brakes, controlled by a patented system which connected one front caliper to the rear unit's hydraulics. Guzzi called this 'anti-skid' braking, which was surely a bit optimistic, but it was possible to stop quickly merely by pressing hard on the pedal. To pull up in the shortest distance it was still necessary to use both hand and foot. Not everyone liked the system, feeling it reduced their level of control.

Simple it might have been, but the S3 performed extremely well on the road, its relaxed gait making three-figure cruising



speeds deceptively easy. Although in quite a high state of tune, only a reluctance to accept large throttle openings at low revs betrayed this. Mechanically, it was reliable, so buyers paying £1750 for this accessible slice of exotica had little to complain about except their qd frame paint.

This brings us to 1976, when the boys from Mandello pulled their master stroke (bore?) and slotted in the 844cc engine, finishing the job with a new coat of paint and a minuscule fairing. The Le Mans Mk.I had arrived.

Describing the tiny piece of plastic surrounding the Lemon's headlamp by such a grand word as 'fairing' is an overstatement. It kept the flies off the Veglia speedo and rev counter, but was really a styling feature rather than a functional addition. Nevertheless, in the days when only the occasional BMW had a fairing, that fly screen *made* the Le Mans.

Cast wheels – distinctly weedy in section by today's standards – were quite avant garde in 1976. Those on the Guzzi were more successful than some (not mentioning Ducati) but were extremely difficult to keep clean and corrosion-free.

Again, in keeping with its sportiness, instead of handlebars the Lemon used clip-ons, awkwardly angled for some, particularly when struggling to open the slides of a pair of 36mm Dellortos. Even before you tried to yank the throttle wide, you couldn't miss the huge carbs hanging behind each cylinder. In more ways than one.

The Guzzi had a seat of sorts (a narrow piece of black foam rubber) and this useful item was located about four inches nearer to the ground than on most of the competition. This wasn't always an advantage, because the footrests were not a great distance lower, leading to acutely bent knees for those of non-simian build. And as the footrests were also placed forward, failing completely to offer any ergonomic correlation with the clip-ons, these knees could and did make contact with carbs and cylinder heads. Contrary to Guzzi's ads, long-legged and easy to live with was not a phrase the average six-footer (tallboy?) would associate with a Le Mans Mk.I. With legs spread either side of the pots, lanky Guzzi pilots knew exactly how turkey wishbones felt at Christmas.

Devoid of any filtration except a piece of wire mesh at the end of the intake trumpet, the gaping pumper Dellortos were at least part of the reason why such a seemingly crude pushrod twin made 80bhp at 7300rpm. They were also responsible for a tendency to cause engine death by drowning if the throttle was opened too suddenly at less than around 4000rpm. Given such unsympathetic treatment, the Lemon would protest by spitting and gulping, generally making a lot of noise but going nowhere very fast.

Helping the carbs to flow large amounts of mixture were a high 10.2:1 compression ratio, coupled with a pair of huge valves and an impressively bumpy camshaft profile. All the horses came from good old-fashioned tuning practice, not simple high revs. Speaking of which, Guzzi painted their Veglia rev counter in two colours: a yellow band from peak power to 9500, and a red danger area beyond. Considering the size of the reciprocating parts, this was surely no mean achievement.

Surprisingly, the exhaust note emitted from the pair of linked, upswept silencers was no more than a distant bass rumble. Most of the

time the racket from the intake end was much louder, which is a very strange way to go about things. Many owners reached for a large drill and made a circle of holes around the silencer outlets to add some sound effects, and would swear that a bit more power was made available by such tinkering.

Complementing the rigid frame was a correspondingly rigid suspension system: Carboni shocks at the rear and Guzzi's special sealed dampers in the forks. Neither end would move unless under extreme provocation, and this undoubtedly helped tame some of the torque reaction from the shaft final drive.

The gearbox was slow and noisy, the riding position was torture, but what no-one could deny was that it went very well. Tall gears meant that acceleration from rest was not spectacular, yet 130mph was possible, making the Lemon about the fastest thing on the road this side of a Laverda Jota. Careful use of the throttle, leading to less furious squirts of petrol from the Dellortos' accelerator pumps, could also produce impressive fuel figures. Sixty miles in sixty minutes at sixty mpg was feasible, giving a range of well over 200 miles. If your body could take hours in the saddle, the Guzzi certainly obliged.

As with all Italian machines of the era, the big problem was the finish, or lack of. The seat, for instance, only remained free of splits until someone sat on it. Cast-iron discs that turned red with rust overnight had a certain macho appeal and could be excused because at least they worked – unlike those fitted to Japanese bikes of the era. More worrying was the way the paint gave up the struggle after a few months. Some parts, including the top of the

tank and exhausts, were deliberately matte. Other parts weren't, although you could be forgiven for believing so.

Interestingly, one frequent cause of trouble was the alternator, made by Bosch, which is not a well-known Italian name... When it worked the generator produced plenty of power, most of it being lost somewhere in the high-resistance wiring system before it reached the electrical components. The standard headlight would only do justice to a restricted moped with a fouled spark plug. The indicators, controlled by a switch memorably described by one roadtester as having a travel measured in Angstrom units, were pathetic. And so on.

This was a pity, because the basic strength and mechanical reliability of all Guzzis was still present. What's more, servicing and working on the engine was simple, although Guzzi's Italian logic somehow resulted in them fitting a quickly detachable oil filter cartridge *inside* a pump held on by fourteen bolts!

Look – Here's One Now!

Considering the poor cosmetics, a high proportion of Lemon Mk.I's have survived. Although most have been rebuilt to varying degrees, a genuinely sparkling example is still a sight for sore eyes. Chris Wain of Stoke-on-Trent owns just such a machine. Hopefully, **CBG** technicolour will do it justice. Finished in the infinitely more desirable red option (can you tell from the pictures?), this 1978 Guzzi wears its 41,000 miles well. In many ways, it's probably better than new.

Having been in branches of the same family since new, a complete rebuild was undertaken a

few years ago. Local Guzzi experts, Clays (01538 754522), get most of the credit for the work. There are a few departures from standard trim, but most of these are the sort of thing any sensible person would want to alter: a Cibie headlight makes full use of the available Wattage, braided hoses improve the braking and a pair of stainless silencers replace the flaky originals.

With the correct battery (a Reliant Robin cast-off just isn't man enough), a Le Mans will electric foot itself into rocking life easily, making those distinctive Guzzi sounds; a hiss from the carbs on choke, a deep rumble from the exhaust. Pull in the clutch and the customary hacking noises emanate from the dry clutch. Gear selection is something best avoided if you want to avoid the attention of the Noise Abatement Society. Crunch, crunch and crunch again.

Once striding along, the Lemon is still impressive for its smoothness and stability. Over 4000rpm the power comes in with a rush and speed builds up quickly. The chassis is capable but bumpy corners can be tricky because the suspension really prefers to stay where it is unless you run over a stray brick or similar. This does help to reduce the shaft drive reactions to a minimum, however.

A recent ride on Guzzi's latest 1000cc, 4-valve Daytona with its entirely redesigned frame and suspension convinced me that in many ways the original was better. A new Daytona costs not that far short of £10,000. A Mk.I Le Mans may have appreciated over the years, but at a third of the price I know which I'd choose.

