

GUZZI 850

The 1978 850 Le Mans and I really got to know each other well when I took it on a long tour of the UK in 1994. Up one side of the country and down the other. A mixture of motorways and fast A-roads, ideal country for the old shaft drive vee-twin.

Before I went I put in new universal joints, cables and battery - just to be on the safe side. The well cared for bike gave every impression of wearing slowly despite almost going around the clock. In fact, half way through that trip

the bike went into six figures and I celebrated by getting drunk out of my head in Glasgow. A fake Scottish accent stopped the locals from beating the shit out of me and I had a good time with the native girls who seemed into everything - short skirts, drink, drugs and sex. I only learnt afterwards that it was the AIDS capital of Europe.

Back to the bike. The Guzzi roared along nicely at 100-110mph - its natural pace - like some giant puma. Shrugged off most of the fast corners with nary a complaint, only went a little wild at the back end in the more devious bends in the Scottish Highlands. Many a friend had a quick blast, came back with tales of near disaster and the frame feeling like it was made out of plastic. Less than surgeon skill on the throttle can cause the shaft drive to rattle around a little but, as with most things, a little experience with the beast goes a long way. Even my throttle hand has toughened up (it had some good training on an old Commando).

One of the good things about the 850 was that when well set up (basic-

ally keeping the carbs in balance) it gave in excess of 60mpg and didn't tear through the rubber. It could do high mileages in good comfort (once used to the heaviness of the controls) and on the minimum of dosh. It also felt secure through the summer downpours and didn't have any real nastiness hidden within its chassis (once used to the jerkiness of the shaft drive).

One high point of that tour was doing 130mph for half an hour on a deserted stretch of Scottish motorway and not being pulled over by the pig mobile that shot past like I was standing still! Must've been clocking off and heading home for breakfast. Prior to that trip, I'd owned the bike for about nine months, mostly chugging through the traffic in the Smog, with the odd fast blast.

That added up to a limited appreciation of the Guzzi, the early days notable for a long list of complaints, but the more I used the bike the more they faded into the background until the Lemon was firmly in my blood. An addiction!

The trip hardened that feeling, so emotive was the vee twin mill and so esoteric its performance that fondness overwhelmed any minor feelings of disgruntlement. It wasn't quite as good as sex but if there weren't any suitable women around I would quite happily fling my leg over the Guzzi instead.

One of the oddest things I found on my perambulations was that the girls in the remoter regions of Wales and Scotland were much more willing to acquiesce to my demands than those down south. Perhaps, in such relatively poverty stricken areas, the Guzzi and I cut a romantic dash! In London I just got laughed at by young girls!

Pillion accommodations were suitably minimal, leaving the frail little choice but to hang on to me in an intimate bear-hug. The extra mass made the engine chug away a bit like an old locomotive going up a steep incline but eventually the power snapped in just as lovingly as when solo. If anything, the handling was marginally improved with some extra weight over the

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back wheel.

The rising shaft could flummox Guzzi novices, cause them to ride off the road rather than around the curve when they used too much throttle without realising its effect on the handling. A good anti-theft device, I kept telling myself. Harleys are famed for turning on female pillions with their low frequency vibes, the Guzzi had a similar effect on one girl - I ended up a bit weak kneed with all the effort needed to keep her sated! Still, mustn't complain.

On that trip the Guzzi did a few thousand miles without much complaint. Just one oil change and half a dozen carb balancing sessions - you can always spot an old Guzzi hand by the way they can balance the carbs by ear whilst waiting at traffic lights! As mentioned, the universal joints are a bit famous for failing, not surprising given the way the shaft drive bounces around (despite harsh suspension); oil leaks from the gearbox are also common.

The electrics need an upgrade - there's metres of useless wiring, strange relays and switches that seep up any hint of moisture from the atmosphere. Burnt out generators aren't unknown. Any 850 Guzzi that gets serious use - and most still do - will sport a complete rewire and electrical upgrade by now, shouldn't be a problem unless it's bodged.

So inspired was I by that summer trip I ended up doing Europe the next year. Weird shit, seeing how many countries I could do in a week - eight, I think it was! The faster the roads the happier the bike was, despite approaching 120,000 miles. Riding fast isn't a matter of thrashing the Guzzi, though, it's just a case of getting the best out of its power band. I'm always careful to let her warm up properly and don't ride it on the throttle and gearbox at lower speeds - almost impossible, anyway, with the Lemon's slow, clunky and long travel gearchange.

I like the linked brakes. Others don't, but they can be set up as normal discs if they really annoy - though it's a bit of a job sorting out the brake lines. Pad life is poor, though, less than 5000 miles, even under mild abuse.

The 850's considered the classic Le Mans, retains its value despite most of them having

high mileages like mine. In 1996 I bought an old Jota, just for the kicks, and it's another fine speedster but nowhere near as relaxed and competent as the Guzzi. Having owned masses of Japanese fours, as well as many old British twins, the Lemon's the easy favourite of the whole bunch. It has the same kind of character as a Harley but much better sporting abilities. It's a bit more trouble than the Japanese fours but never comes over as bland and the British twins don't have the same kind of engine longevity and toughness. Go buy one and enjoy.

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