

Buying Bikes

Moto Guzzi Le Mans

with Neil Murray

THE Italians have always made horny sports bikes, but with the glitter of stunning styling, exciting performance and class-leading handling has usually come the tarnish of unreliability. And if the mechanical elements have been made solid, the electrical parts have let the side down.

The Moto Guzzi Le Mans is one of only two really desirable Italian sports bikes that have managed to combine excellent performance with decent reliability (the other is the Laverda Jota) and is one of only two pure sports bikes ever to be shaft driven (the other is the MV).

In 1976 speeds of 130mph were the preserve of just four stock motorcycles: the Kawasaki Z1, the Laverda Jota, the Ducati 900SS and the Moto Guzzi Le Mans.

THE BIKES

THE original Le Mans still looks stunning; long (wheelbase was 59.5 inches), low (seat height of 29 inches), lean (476lbs with a gallon of fuel on board, or 70lbs lighter than a Z900), lithe (just look at a picture and judge for yourself), with no adornment save that little dayglo flyscreen on the front.

The engine was basically the familiar 850cc Guzzi lump, equipped with bigger valves and 36mm Dell'Orto pumper carbs devoid of any filtration except mesh screens to prevent ingestion of rocks and small animals.

The Le Mans not only went like stink, but it handled and stopped. Guzzi's integral braking system was then a source of wonder, in an age when few Japanese bikes (and one or two British and Italian ones) didn't have the brakes to match their performance.

In 1979 the Le Mans II appeared. Mechanically identical, this got a restyle that incorporated Guzzi's new three-piece fairing: the lowers remained fixed while the top section turned with the bars. (A larger

version adorned the Spada tourer.)

It also benefited from improved switchgear and a comprehensive instrument panel that incorporated a voltmeter, quartz clock and no fewer than eight idiot lights (left indicator, right indicator, neutral, lights on, main beam, battery charge, oil pressure and brake fluid level, if you're interested).

The clocks were more accurate too - the original Le Mans, or Mark One as it now became known, used to show speeds of 150mph-plus. *Bike's* test of the Mark Two revealed that at an indicated 120, it was only over-reading by 4mph.

The good aspects of the Mark One remained. Top speed was still 130 or so, fuel consumption was an easy 50mpg, and the five-gallon tank gave a brilliant range. Okay, so the seat was still a bit of a plank, the throttle was heavy and the new

fairing didn't suit the long-legged, but the Mark Two was still one of the most desirable bikes in the world, even if the price had now risen by 50% to three grand.

And - and this is important - Guzzis had by now acquired a reputation for being as strong a motorcycle as anyone had ever built and incredibly easy to service. What other 130mph motorcycle used pushrods and could be fettled by the side of the road?

Late 1981 saw yet another revamp with the Mark Three. This got nikasil plated bores and a new exhaust system, which were given the credit for a 5hp power increase, although the Mark Three was no faster than its predecessors. The cylinders and heads were squared off, the fairing lowers dropped, and the nose fairing restyled with sharper more angular lines, which were

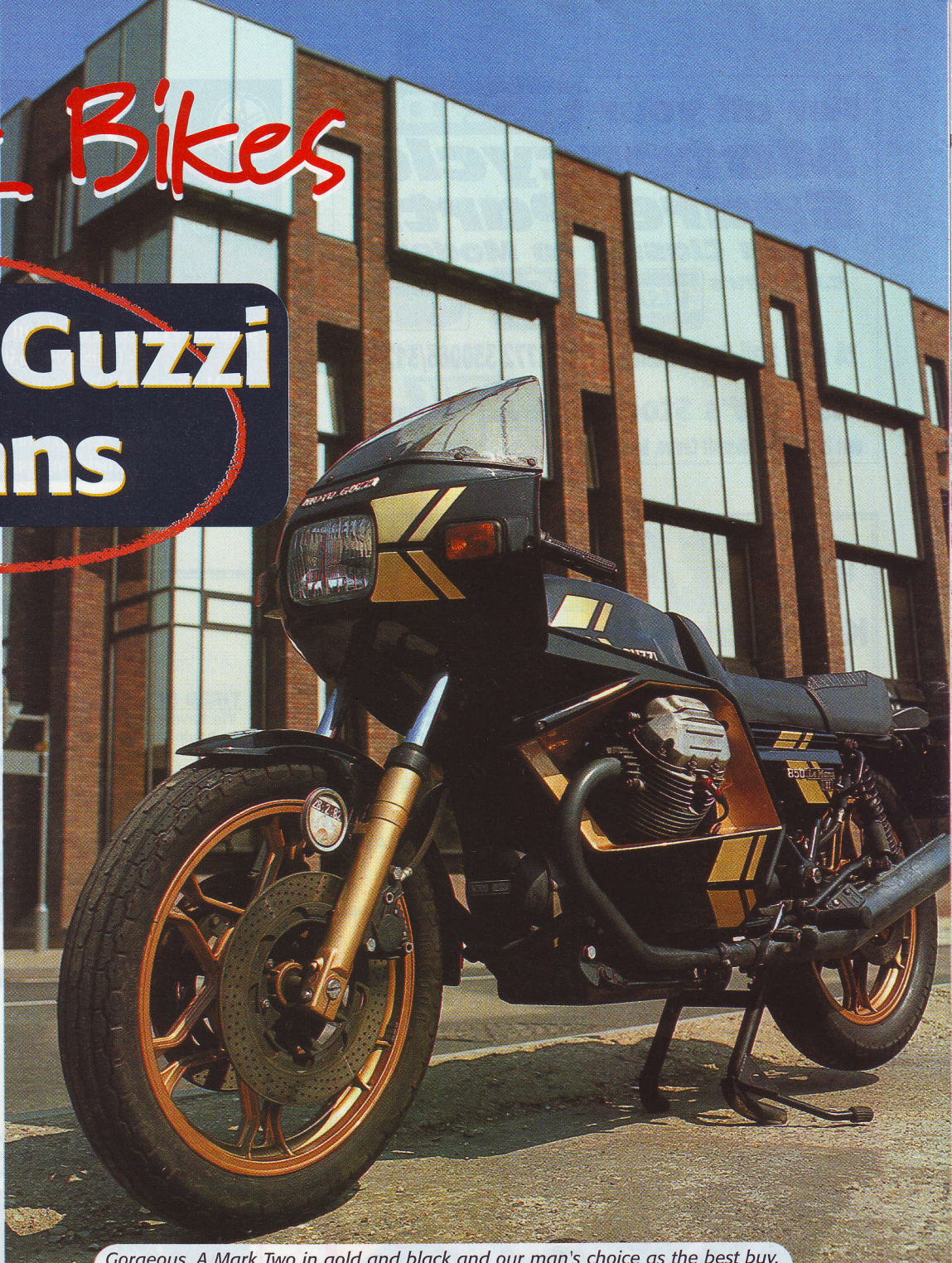
applied to the rest of the bike, making it resemble the then-new V50 Monza.

The clocks were restyled to give pride of place to a large white-faced and centrally mounted rev counter, but in a retrograde move, the clock was dropped.

The Mark Three was superseded by (you guessed it) the Mark Four in 1985, and here things went downhill. The Four was taken out to 1000cc (okay, 949) and the carbs were upped to 40mm, which gave it 140mph potential.

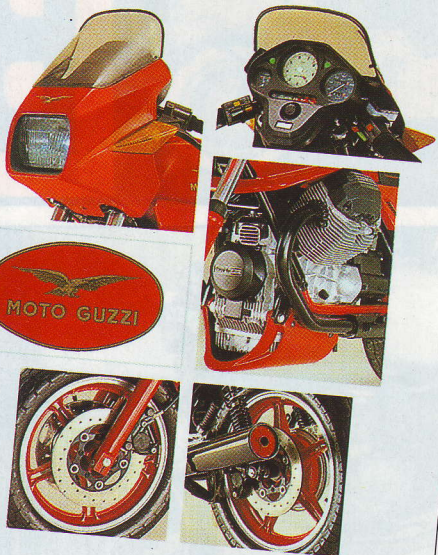
Someone at Guzzi decided that the swoopy styling starting to appear on Kawasakis was a Good Thing and the Le Mans sprouted lots of swoopy plastic, including a belly pan.

Unfortunately - and here's the rub - they also decided to follow the Japanese fashion and fit a 16" front



Gorgeous. A Mark Two in gold and black and our man's choice as the best buy.

Le Mans 1000



MOTO GUZZI Italian excellence admired throughout the world.

Brochure from 1985 for the 1000cc version.

wheel. The smaller wheel was simply dropped into the forks (as it was on other Guzzis) with no changes to rake or trail whatsoever. Big mistake, because the front end felt horribly remote, some of the magnificent straightline stability was lost, and while the steering was lighter, the bars flapped about a bit on bumps.

It just didn't suit the Le Mans at all - in fact it didn't suit most Japanese bikes either.

So enter in 1987 the Mark Five, which was basically the Mark Four with (hurrah!) an 18-inch front wheel. By this time, however, the Japanese had learned how to make sports bikes, and the Le Mans sold only to diehard Guzzi fiends or those who wanted something different. Nobody bought it for its performance any more. The last Mark Five Le Mans were sold in the early 1990s.

FAULTS

MECHANICALLY, as I've said, they're amazingly strong. 100,000-mile Guzzis are commonplace and it's fair to say that there is absolutely nothing in the engine or transmission that is prone to breakage.

The dry single-plate clutch (a-la BMW) will wear out eventually, especially if the oil seal fails and lets oil get on to the plate.

Switchgear is pretty flimsy but it all works. In fact, the electrics are solid all round.

The shaft UJ is the weak point. Some last for ever - others fail every 20,000 miles. The giveaway is a rumbling vibration felt through the right-hand footpeg.

Choke cables stick and are better replaced with flip-on flip-off choke levers on the individual carbs.

The single unlinked front disc

brake suffers through neglect - it usually seizes.

The front forks have sealed cartridges which always fail and you lose all the damping. Speedo and rev counter cables always fail, as does, for some reason, one of the twin bulbs in the tail light. Timing chains rattle but never actually seem to fail. All the rubber components rot early. That's about it. These are very solid motorcycles.

HOW TO BUY

BESIDES all the above, check that you're looking at a genuine Le Mans. It's quite easy to dress up a T3 or even a G5 to Le Mans spec. Not that it really matters.

Some people fit Spada or G5 barrels and pistons to 850cc Le Mans to take the capacity out to 949cc. It gives more torque, but you lose a lot of smoothness and gain very little power. 850cc is best.

A caring owner will have fitted electronic ignition. A V50 timing chain tensioner can be fitted to tension the timing chain. Alternatively a gear conversion is available - worth having.

Check for oil leaks from the little slot at the joint of engine and gearbox. Any sign of oil here means the gearbox seal has failed and the clutch will soon follow.

Mark One and Two Le Mans had no air filtration. Later models usually have their inaccessible air filters replaced with K&Ns. Almost a standard mod.

The finish is better than Ducatis

or Morinis of the same era, but a respray in the right colours is worth having.

WHICH TO BUY

FOR sheer collectable value, the original Mark One is the one to have. The Mark Two is probably the most popular, and the practicality of the fairing and the useful clock make it, in my opinion, the best choice.

These came in red, blue, or black/gold. The black/gold is the best, because these were actually painted in the UK after a consignment of bikes got their finish ruined in winter transit due to a foul weather and a transport strike. The Spada Royale and Black Prince were also UK-painted models, victims of the same consignment. Of course, the paint job is better than the Italian original!

Mark Threes are in less demand, and Fours even less so. Fives are few and far between, but if you want the fastest Le Mans, a Mark Five is the one to have. They look best in red and black.

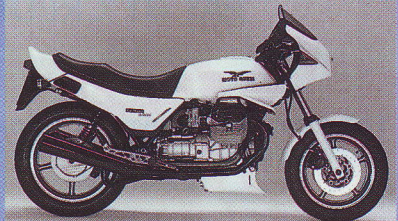
SERVICING

THEY run on 20/50 oil. The filter is a metal spin-on affair, but is sited in the sump so you have to drop the sump to change the filter, and there are 14 Allen bolts holding it on. At least you can clean out the filter screen while it's off. External oil filter conversion kits are available.

Sump extensions increase the oil capacity and make the engine run cooler. A good thing.

Tappets are easily accessible and adjusted in minutes. The points

BUYING BIKES



Where things began to go wrong. The Le Mans Mark Four sporting that silly 16" front wheel.



Last of the line, the Mark Five got the 18-incher back on the front and sold into the early Nineties.

never seem to go out of tune (the low revs help) but electronic ignition makes for smoother running and easier starting.

Gearbox and final drive oils should be changed every 12,000 miles. Beware the drain and level plugs - it's very easy to strip the threads in the gearbox or bevel box.

It's worth unbolting the bevel box to check the splines on the drive-shaft where it goes into the bevel box. There's a sleeve joining the two, and it never seemed to be greased by the factory. Using moly grease will prolong the spline's life.

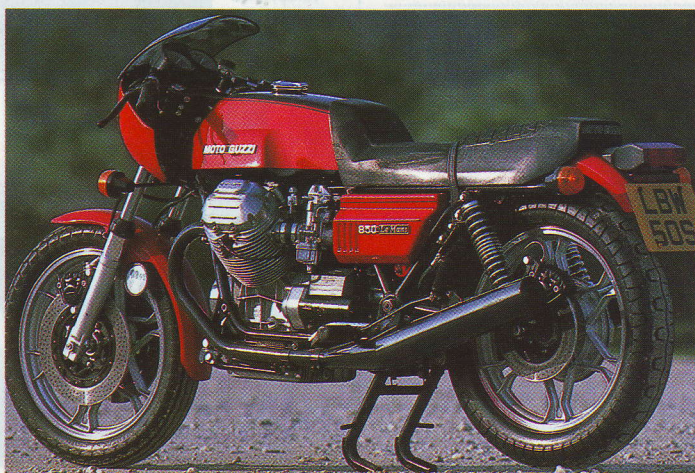
The battery is huge and costly. A Reliant Robin battery fits, but you lose the handy tool tray under the seat.

That's it - a very easy bike to fettle.

PRICES

VARY enormously. You can pay four grand for an immaculate original One, but three grand is nearer the mark. Twos are cheaper and £2500 will get a fine example. Threes and Fours are the same sort of money. A Five will fetch £3500 in perfect order.

It's worth considering rebuilding a tatty Le Mans because the mechanicals are unlikely to be knackered and paint is only paint. There's very little chrome on the Ones and Twos. The Threes got chrome exhausts, and the Fours and Fives black chrome, but nobody really minds about non-standard pipes, unlike with Japanese fours.



This is the collectable one - the first and most expensive Mark One.