



**MOTO
GUZZI**

**LE MANS
MK I**

OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

MOTO GUZZI spent much of the 1960s lurching from one financial crisis to the next (in fact, this is the company's story more or less since the Second World War). An invitation by the Italian government for Guzzi to bid for a contract to supply the army and police forces in the early 1960s initiated a project which began in 1964 to build a new V-twin for the purpose. The bike which resulted was the V7, a bike which Guzzi realised had considerable potential as a civilian machine too. The first prototype general sale version was displayed at the Milan motorcycle show in December 1965, and it proved quite a success. The engine was a simple air-cooled V-twin with crankshaft aligned along the length of the bike, with a capacity of 704cc achieved through bore and stroke dimensions of 80mm x 70mm. It had just two valves per cylinder operated by pushrods, and exceptional accessibility to most of its serviceable components.

The transmission system in fact appeared to owe more to automotive practice than motorcycles', with a big, single plate dry clutch and diaphragm spring mounted on the end of the crankshaft, shaft final drive and unusually for the time, an electric starter. The chassis components were also very solidly made, resulting in a bike which was reliable and durable if rather dowdy and definitely more of a touring machine than sports bike.

New design brings results

But the image of the machine was to change substantially when Guzzi designer Lino Tonti came up with a new, lightweight and sportier chassis matched to a new, more powerful 750cc version of the engine – the resulting bike launched in 1972 was called the V7 Sport, and the initial version built in limited numbers with very high quality components as a race bike homologation machine has entered motorcycling history as one of the great road-going motorcycles. Its red painted frame – telaio rosso in Italian – was more recently imitated on Guzzi's V11 Sport of 1999.

The V7 Sport is credited with saving Guzzi from bankruptcy, but the situation only lasted a few years until financial troubles reared their head once again in the mid 1970s. Another bike

The Le Mans used various features from previous models including a later version of the telaio rosso frame already being used on the 750S3



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staved off the creditors, and it was another Moto Guzzi which is remembered long after production ceased – the Le Mans Mk1, which made its debut in 1976, the telaio rosso frame was mated to an 844cc, 83mm x 78mm incarnation of the same basic V-twin, albeit in a much higher state of tune than the V7 tourer.

The Le Mans was beautifully styled, with long, low and aggressive looks that singled it out from the increasingly bulky and glitzy superbikes coming from Japan.

The standard model produced 71bhp at 7300rpm and had a top speed of around 128mph, although the enormously entertaining Veglia speedometer might read 150mph or more, depending on almost anything including the weather.

Production continued until 1978 when the Le Mans II was introduced, with a few mechanical updates and a more enveloping, two-piece fairing (the upper turned with the bars while the leg shields were fixed to the main frame). But none of the subsequent models (right up to the Le Mans V) managed to match the evocative look and performance of the original.



The Le Mans was significant not just to Moto Guzzi, but also in the history of sports bikes, as it was both fast and civilised, qualities which until then had appeared to be mutually exclusive.

RIDING IMPRESSION

FOR WHAT was once a big capacity supersports bike, the Le Mans feels surprisingly small. It has a long stretch to the handlebars, but otherwise feels very little beneath a taller rider, who soon discovers it's not a very comfortable machine. The cylinder heads foul too easily on the rider's knees while the seat has hard feeling edges and is very narrow, while the bars themselves are angled back sharply. Get the bike rolling and the first impression is of how hard the suspension is – the rear shocks in particular are very firmly sprung although underdamped, giving an extremely harsh ride over poor, washboard-type surfaces.

Stability is exceptional, even at high speed when many contemporary machines start to feel vague and are easily upset by a combination of bump and bend. But this is at the expense of agility – indeed, the Le Mans is a real physical effort to turn into corners, once being described by a road tester during the 1970s as being like trying to swing a plank sideways under water.

The torque reaction from the engine is very noticeable, at tickover manifesting itself as a side-to-side rocking motion when the throttle is blipped, but it's also evident during downchanges as an odd corkscrewing motion, while the rider is best advised not to change gear mid-corner because it can be very disconcerting. Changing gear at any time is a laboured affair anyway, as ratio selection is very slow and agricultural – only a slow, firm and deliberate action with the left foot ensures a positive change, and it's always accompanied by loud noises from the gearbox. Against that, the clutch action is light and easy, especially when compared with the heavy and unreliable clutch of the Le Mans' great rival, the Ducati 900SS.

The power characteristics are surprisingly peaky, with the engine asking for quite a lot of revs before really showing what it's capable of. To get the most from it you need to keep the motor spinning between 5000rpm and 7500rpm, preferably keeping it above 6000rpm. Many owners fit a 950cc conversion which puts this right by endowing the engine with much more low and mid-range torque.

While acceleration off the line is slower than a 900SS or contemporary Japanese bikes such as the Kawasaki Z900 and Honda CB750, the Guzzi's tall gearing and slim frontal profile means it performs at least as well as these or even better at higher speeds, at the same time returning impressive fuel consumption figures. It's also retained the easy serviceability characteristics of those Moto Guzzis it was descended from, and so makes one of the most practical everyday classic superbikes.

A leap forward in its time, and still worth considering today.