

Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans: 1976-1983**RETROSPECTIVE**

Year/model: 1977 Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans. Owner: Ken Daily, Morro Bay, California.

When the Moto Guzzi boys decided to go to work on their rather ponderous V-twin touring machine, they developed a slick 750cc title-winning racer and then turned it into a proper 850cc sportbike.

Racebikes have to adhere to class restrictions, handle best at speed, and generally ignore rider comfort; a sportbike, on the other hand, is intended to keep riders happily in the saddle, offers a less peaky motor, and should keep aesthetics in mind.

And that 850 Le Mans was a superb sportbike, with a great motor, good handling, and very sexy looks. In 1976 the 844cc OHV engine put out 71 horsepower at 7,300 rpm, and this could propel the rider at better than 130 mph. This was no fragile piece of work, as the crankshaft had two main bearings, and a single gear-driven camshaft mounted high between the cylinders operated middling-length pushrods for the valves. Two 36mm Dell'Orto PHF carbs mixed the gas and air, which was compressed to a hefty 10.2:1 ratio. Five speeds in the gearbox.

This all had its beginnings back in 1967 when Guzzi put its 703cc V700 on the market, claiming 40 horsepower at 5,000 rpm, with a bore of 80mm, stroke of 70mm. And four speeds in the gearbox. This was envisaged as a utilitarian machine, for police and army work, where reliability was far more important than power. The frame was a hefty double cradle, a full loop, and the engine sat a bit low due to a whopping great 300-watt generator that the government had requested being stuck in between the cylinders, which needed to clear the top frame rails. Since nobody was looking at racing this beast, the chassis worked fine and was very easy to ride on the road, where a degree of flex is considered a good thing.

At the end of the '60s a new chief engineer had been designated by Moto Guzzi, one Lino Tonti. As with most Italians, he had a passion for the racetrack,

and by 1969 factory folk were discreetly bringing machines to the Monza track—just to see. The new 742cc Ambassador averaged 126 mph-plus for six hours; not bad. In 1971 the five-speed V 850 GT appeared, the engine bored to 83mm, stroked to 78mm, which soon appeared bolted into the American-market Eldorado, with a curb weight of some 575 pounds.

Tonti did want to see what a Guzzi could do in competition. With a very limited amount of money to spend he had three goals—make the engine put out more power, drop some 60 pounds, and redesign the frame. Tonti figured that with an honest 75 *cavalli* at the rear wheel, and a strict diet, the Guzzi could be competitive. Think of Roseanne becoming a fashion model.

He wanted the frame to be lighter and stiffer, and the engine to be placed a little higher, giving more cornering clearance. The end result was a conventional round-piped cradle, using a large tubular backbone, with the heavier tubing requiring a final trade of extra weight for extra stiffness. To facilitate engine removal the two bottom sections of the frame were removable. At the back the swingarm pivot was heavily braced. Wheelbase was just under 58 inches.

To raise the

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tightly squeezed engine without heightening the frame Tonti needed to remove the generator. Since this was not a bike to be left idling by the side of the road, blue lights flashing, radio on, it did not need all that electrical power, and the generator was replaced with a much lighter Bosch alternator. And a lighter Bosch starter. The extra space allowed the engine to go up almost 3 inches, greatly improving clearance.

The goal here was to create a 750 that could compete in Italian production races, which the V7 Sport did quite successfully. But it was a double-handful to ride, and Tonti realized that the 100 extra cc of an 850 could create a more usable street bike. But first he wanted to see how such a bike would work, and entered an 850 in the 1971 24-hour Bol d'Or race at Le Mans, in France. It led for the first 10 hours, but then problems, including a crash, pushed it back to third place. Not bad, considering, and the name hung around.

Tonti got a lot of support when an Italo-Argentine named Alessandro De Tomaso took charge of the company in 1973; here was a man who definitely thought that a sporting image was a good selling point. Tonti had been experimenting with styling since he took over as engineer and was keenly aware that in this world of pseudo-fast bikes, the look was even more important than the performance. A shapely gas tank, mini-bikini fairing, black exhaust system, clip-on bars—this Le Mans concept had a look Sophia Loren would be envious of.

The engine had a lightened flywheel, bigger valves, and carburetors with accelerator pumps and velocity stacks. None of those stinkin' airbox limitations. The cylinders had steel liners, in part because the lack of air filtration meant that

rebuids would be necessary. The mag wheels had three Brembo-braked discs, with linked braking; this irked some people, but Guzzi stuck with the concept for many years to come. The wet weight was a couple of kilos over 500 pounds.

The Europeans loved the Le Mans, the Americans were slower to appreciate its lovable assets. It was a slow revver compared to the Japanese multis and even the Ducati 900SS. Also, the chassis was not the best in the very tight and twisty stuff; this was an open-road kind of motorcycle, dead solid on the long turns, the fast sweepers.

The first Le Mans metamorphosed into the Le Mans II in late 1978, with a larger handlebar fairing and a pair of minimalist lowers; however, the American importer, Joe Berliner, wanted bigger, so the United States got the 949cc CX 100 instead.

It was the Le Mans III, the last of the 850s, which created quite a stir in 1981 when it appeared in all its angularity. De Tomaso and Tonti wanted to update the early '60s engine design, and decided to square the round fins on the cylinders. Along with that was more angular bodywork, from bikini fairing to tail section. And, bizarrely, a chromed exhaust system.

The engine got minor improvements, and the power went up a notch—according to Moto Guzzi to 73 ponies at 7,700 rpm. Although the compression ratio was dropped to 9.8:1. And paper elements kept the dust out of the carburetors. A new 35mm air-adjustable fork was at the front, air-adjustable, oil-damped shocks by Paoli at the back. And a longer swingarm extended the wheelbase to more than 59 inches.

The 850 Le Mans really exemplified the last of the old-fashioned OHV sporting motorcycles. When the III was put to pasture, the new crop of serious sportbikes had four valves per cylinder, twin overhead camshafts and liquid cooling. **33**



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