A star is born

Hitting dealers in the spring, Moto Guzzi's **Le Mans** was an unlikely superbike – but a huge hit. Here's how to buy a corker

Words: **Gez Kane** Photography: **Bauer**

With its transverse V-twin engine and shaft drive, the Moto Guzzi Le Mans flew in the face of the chain-drive Japanese fours flooding the market in 1976. But on its arrival in the spring, it was an instant hit.

Developed from the 1971 V7 Sport, the Lino Tonti-designed Le Mans (subsequently referred to as the Mk1) had a longer-stroke 844cc engine featuring larger valves, higher compression pistons and 36mm carbs which made it good for 130mph.

Low and relatively light compared to its mid-'70s peers, the Le Mans takes faster bends exceptionally well, its long wheelbase providing poise and steadfast handling. And with the meaty twin dishing out surging torque at 4000-5000rpm via long gearing, that 130mph max is genuine.

It verges on practical, too. The Le Mans' riding position is comfortable for anyone up to 6ft – fine for racking up some serious miles. The steering lock is more civilised than that of a Ducati 900SS, and though the linked brakes may divide opinion the system actually works very well. A dab of the brake pedal is all you usually require in town, while the extra bite of the other front disc is handy when pushing on.

And that's one thing you'll certainly want to do on a bike like this. The wonderful, long-legged feeling of the Guzzi's power delivery encourages brisk bend-swinging assaults on cascading roads. All bikes deliver head-clearing joy – but few do it while hurtling through a rolling landscape quite like the first Le Mans.

Raw, stunningly beautiful, fast and full of character. That's the Guzzi. It gives a unique '70s superbike sensation – and the good news is there are still plenty out there to enjoy. Here's how to snare a good 'un.

PRICE GUIDE

Mint £10,000-12,000
Good £6000-8000
Project £3000-4000

THE BIG QUESTION

So... is this *really* a Mkl?

With a significant price difference between the original Le Mans and later models like the MkII below, you'll want to be sure – there are a number of Mkl replicas out there. We asked Nigel Billingsley of renowned Guzzi specialist NBS for a few tips on spotting the real deal.

"I don't think many people would try to con you," he says. "Guzzi owners are pretty straight in my experience. But there may be owners who just don't know and believe their bike is a Mkl. Ultimately you have to go by the frame and engine numbers – the Moto Guzzi Club GB is the place to go for a definitive check on that. But there are a few visual giveaways. Mkls have the front brake calipers mounted in front of the fork sliders, while on MkIIs they're behind them. The yokes are different too: Mkl forks have no handlebar clamps cast-in and are 180mm from centre to centre; later models are 195mm with spacers between the discs and the wheel to accommodate the difference. Mkl switchgear is different as well, and the Tommaselli twistgrip is integral with the right-hand switches. If in doubt, check those numbers."

What to look for

Electrics

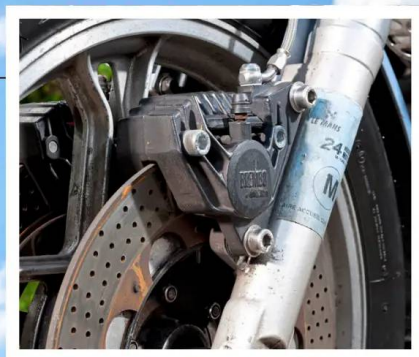
Nowhere near as bad as popular myth would suggest. Check that everything works as it should and have a good look at the condition of the wiring loom. But don't be too worried – pattern looms are available from around £125.

Final drive

Get a test ride to check for vibration from the universal joint. It's usually caused by the joint spinning in the inner race of the support bearing. You need a special tool to change the bearing and it's an engine-out job.

Engine

If it sounds good, it probably is. Legendary reliability and durability is the calling card of a (well cared for) Le Mans – or any Guzzi big twin. A little noise from the top end is normal; if it's too quiet, the valve clearances are probably too tight. Be aware that what might appear to be a leaky sump bolt and an easy fix may be a failed rear main bearing seal. That's a £1200 job to sort out if you don't fancy tackling it yourself.



Brakes

Brakes are Brembo and as good as it gets for the mid-'70s. Check that the linked braking system – with a splitter from the rear brake master cylinder operating one front caliper as well as the rear – is still intact if originality is a concern. Some bikes will have been modified to give conventional operation of the front brakes.

Finish

Not the Le Mans' strong point (unlike Guzzi's current bikes). Take your time to have a good look over the cosmetics. The black coating on the exhaust system is particularly vulnerable. Cerakote offers a virtually identical finish that's much more durable than 50-year-old Italian paint.

Switchgear

Original switchgear is, to be honest, fairly dreadful. It's also very hard to source these days. On anything other than the highly-prized Series 1 models, replacement with later Moto Guzzi (or even Japanese) switchgear is probably a better bet.

RESOURCES

Gutsibits
Long established, independent online Guzzi parts supplier with huge stocks of new, used, pattern and reconditioned Guzzi spares.
gutsibits.co.uk

NBS Motorcycle Servicing
One of the go-to classic Guzzi specialists in the UK. Engine, gearbox, bevel box and complete bike rebuilds plus servicing and repairs.
motorcycleservicing.co.uk

Muzzi Moto
Specialist Guzzi parts supplier who also supply reproduction stainless-steel exhaust systems.
motoguzzisales.co.uk

Moto Guzzi Club GB
For owners of classic and modern Guzzis. Lively social programme, machine dating and a busy forum.
motoguzziclub.co.uk

Baldricks Workshop
Independent Guzzi workshop based in Leatherhead, Surrey.
07536 116176

SPECIFICATION MOTO GUZZI LE MANS

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION	
Type	Air-cooled, ohv transverse V-twin
Bore and stroke	83 x 78mm
Capacity	844cc
Output	80bhp at 7600rpm
Compression ratio	10.2:1
Carburettors	2 x 36mm Dell'Orto
Clutch	Dry two-plate
Gearbox	Five-speed
CHASSIS	
Frame	Tubular duplex cradle
Front suspension	35mm forks
Rear suspension	Twinshock
Brakes (front/rear)	2 x 300mm (11.8in) discs/242mm (9.5in) disc
Wheels	Cast alloy
Tyres (front/rear)	4.10 x 18in/4.25 x 18in
DIMENSIONS	
Wheelbase	1501mm (59.5in)
Weight	195kg (429 lb)
PERFORMANCE	
Top speed	132mph

MODEL HISTORY

1975 The striking new Moto Guzzi Le Mans makes its debut at the Milan Show in Italy in November. The 844cc sports machine offers 130mph performance and sensational café racer styling. Initially it is known only as the Le Mans – it's not until the MkII model replaces it that it becomes universally referred to as the MkI.

1976 Bikes reach the UK in early 1976. 'A touch of velvet – a sting of power,' said the *MCN* headline on their first 850 road test, apearing in the Wednesday April 14 issue. 'Its smooth V-twin engine churns out the power in effortless style and makes long high-speed riding a sheer joy. Although the near £2000 price tag on the machine is high, the Italian performance product is hard to fault.'

1977 A slightly revised Series 2 model is released (below), with a rectangular rear light and redesigned rear mudguard, replacing the round tail light set into the mudguard as on the Series 1 bikes. In his book *Sport and Le Mans Bible*, respected Italian bike authority Ian Falloon lists the frame numbers for Series 1 machines as VE11111-VE13040, while the Series 2 bikes run from VE13041 to VE17311.

1978 With the arrival of the new MkII Le Mans in September, complete with edgier styling as well as technical revisions, production of the MkI ends.

Which to buy, what to pay...

The Series 1 bikes are far and away the most desirable – just under 2000 were built before the Series 2 appeared in 1977, so a genuine original in top condition might make £12,000. A series 2 bike probably offers the best value – good ones can be had for £8000-9000. One in fair cosmetic condition, running well and in regular use, sold at an Iconic Auctioneers sale earlier this year for £5980. We'd go for a proven ready-to-ride one like that.

With only around 6200 MkI models produced in total, there aren't too many bikes to choose from at any one time, so there's often a bit of a scrum for decent ones. If you find the right bike for you, might be best to move fast to secure it.

Living with a Le Mans should be easy and rewarding. The reliability and longevity of the big-block Guzzi engine is almost legendary, with some covering 100,000 miles without needing major engine work. Servicing is straightforward too, with easy access for adjusting valve clearances. Changing the oil filter means dropping the sump as the filter is located inside; deep sump conversions with an external fitting for the filter are available.

If the clutch feels grabby, the clutch pushrod oil seal may have failed. That allows oil to drip onto the clutch itself, causing it to both drag and slip. The rear main bearing seal is another occasional source of oil leaks. Changing that means removing the clutch and gearbox – and is easier with the engine out of the frame.

'One in fair condition, running well in regular use, sold for £5980'

Fortunately, parts supply for the Mk1 remains good – with some caveats. Original switchgear is no longer available new, and good used switchgear makes big money when available. Check for damage to the barrels as original round ones are scarce (although used ones turn up on eBay and at specialists, and 950cc big bore barrels are listed by Gutsibits). But if strict originality isn't vital, you'll be able to source everything you need for a MkI.

Buy the best you can afford – preferably with known and documented history – and a unique riding sensation awaits. CB

Idiosyncratic original switches are often replaced