



850 Le Mans

LAFRANCONI

Generation Gap

Moto Guzzi have been making motorcycles for a long time and have made the transverse V-twin configuration their 'own.' **Phil Mather** takes a look at two versions made sometime apart.



Moto Guzzi – a brief history

The company was a relative latecomer in the motorcycle world. Carlo Guzzi, an engineer and motorcyclist seeking to build himself a better bike, constructed a prototype 500cc single in the basement of his home in Mandello del Lario after leaving the Italian Air Force at the end of WWI. Together with two ex-service friends, Emmanuel Parodi (financier) and Giovanni Ravelli (successful racer) he used this as the basis of a machine that they produced in a small factory nearby.

Initially known as the GP, the bike featured a forwards facing, radially finned single cylinder with four-valve head, overhead camshaft and large, outside flywheel. This advanced specification attracted a lot of public attention, and the Moto Guzzi company was formed. Sadly, before much progress could be made, Ravelli was killed in an aero accident. As a tribute to their former comrade, Parodi and Guzzi elected to adopt the air force eagle as their company logo.

Innovation and racing success gave Moto Guzzi twin keys to success. Drum brakes, centre stands,

swinging arm rear suspension and a four-speed, foot change gearbox were all firsts on pre-1939 production machines. On the racetracks they totted-up 14 world championship titles and 11 TT wins – they even built a wind tunnel at the factory for the development of the racing fairings that made their machines so distinctive in the 1950s.

The post war introduction of the Fiat 500 car caused a slump in motorcycle sales that eventually forced the factory to abandon their racing aspirations and concentrate on the production of bread-and-butter lightweights. At the same time, designer Giulio Carcano drew up a v-twin engine for possible use by Fiat, which eventually found its way into a motorcycle intended to replace the Falcone singles supplied to the military and police. The V7 as it became known, due to its configuration and 700cc capacity, established a line of machines that can be traced all the way through to the very latest Moto Guzzis, still built in Mandello del Lario, still distinctively Italian in every way.



Switchgear for the lights, horn, turn indicators and dip beam all in one neat unit. Friction steering damper supplements a hydraulic damper mounted below the tank.



Griso handlebar levers feature span adjusters – if only Moto Guzzi had used these 30 years ago!



Swingarm incorporates a set-up to eliminate any adverse effect the shaft drive might have on the suspension under power.

The object of this exercise, if I remember rightly, was to take a look at a new bike and see what appeal it held for the 'classic motorcyclist'. Then – now here's the smart bit – take a look at a comparable model from, say, 30 years ago, and see how it had stood the test of time.

It would help, of course, if we could find a factory from 30 years ago that was still in business, so that I could compare like with like. So nothing British then, and nothing American either since no self-respecting motorcyclist is going to kowtow to all that carefully choreographed 'lifestyle' nonsense. And since I haven't yet fully recovered from my week with a BSA Bantam (CBG January 2007), I was reluctant to put miles on anything under the half-litre mark.

Royal Enfield Bullets apart, modern motorcycles have little in common with their forebears of 30 years ago. That's nothing to be afraid of; it's really just a case of natural evolution brought about by advances in technology, materials, knowledge and manufacturing processes. Oh – and design, of course, we mustn't forget design. It's what gave us the bathtub and Airflow streamlining, the nacelle, the casquette and the Busmar double adult sidecar – well, maybe not the double adult sidecar...

Then there's that intangible something, part history, part reputation, part charisma; the soul that flows through from the drawing board to the shop floor to the rider. I think we can all appreciate a motorcycle with soul.

Into the unknown

So, for a moment, approach the Moto Guzzi Griso with an open mind. Ignore the giant exhaust 'can', the voluminous petrol tank that is mostly plastic



covering between frame and engine, and the mile-wide handlebars. Throw a leg over the seat, which requires much less of a stretch than most bikes, and take in the experience of something very modern. Comfortable? Exceptionally so – the seat is wide, but not in an ironing board, Norton Featherbed way, and it's contoured and supportive. Low enough at 31in to get one, maybe two feet firmly on the ground once the suspension settles under your weight. That's reassuring on a big bike. There's plenty of room for a passenger too, the padding at the back is just as good as at the front, and although there's nothing for them to hold on to, the non-slip seat covering is reassuringly secure.

In front of you and below, the cylinder heads poke out on either side as on any Guzzi twin, but unlike earlier models the riding position is further back so your knees are never likely to come anywhere close to them. There's a massive aircraft-style petrol filler cap on the top of the tank, but the expanse of tank and side panels is so huge itself that anything smaller would look out of



place. Ahead of the bars sits an instrument cluster that contains a rev counter and some barely discernable warning lights – until you turn the ignition key, that is, when all manner of things begin to happen.

Motorcycle electrics have advanced beyond the wildest dreams of even the most technically minded designers of 30 years ago. Back then, the ammeter in the headlamp shell had only just given way to the charging, high beam warning and neutral lights, and even these were regarded by many as frivolous luxuries – the ‘idiot’ lights they called them. Now we have engine management – fuel injection metered electronically, dependant not just upon how far around the bar you’ve wrung the twistgrip, but by actual engine speed, gear position, ambient air temperature, intake air pressure and critical analysis of the gas wending its way through the exhaust pipes on its way to the catalytic converter.

This may mean nothing at all to the person sitting behind the handlebars, apart from the knowledge that things

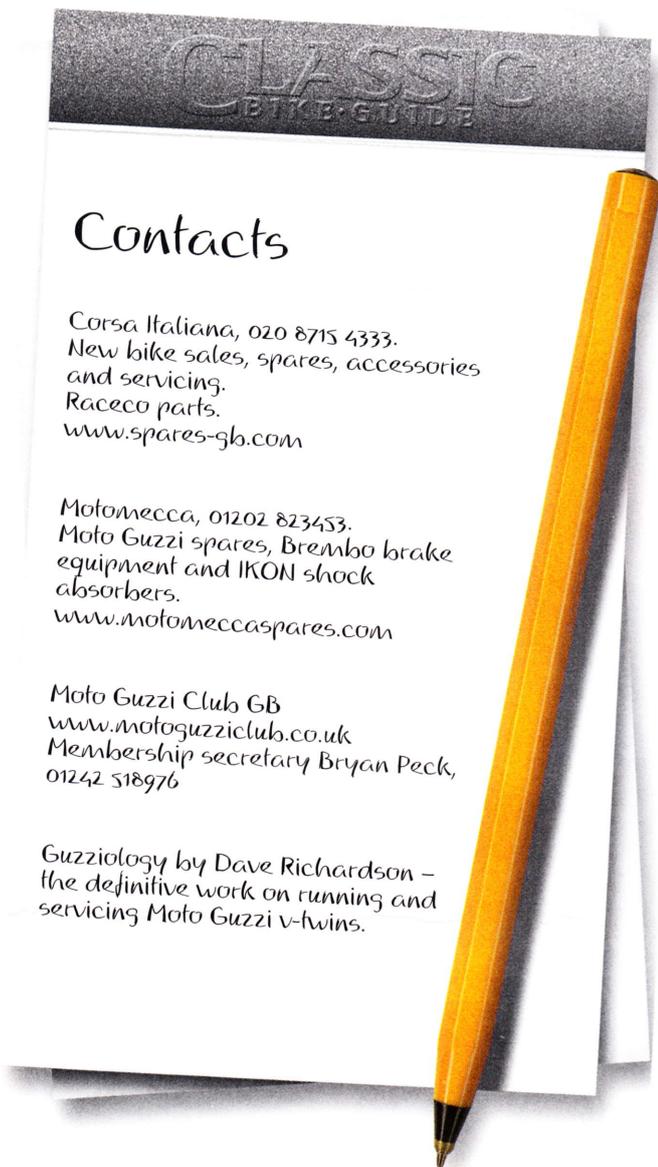
are whirring away in perfect, eco-friendly harmony below decks, but the spin-off gives you fuel consumption, individual journey mileage, average speed, highest overall speed and proximity of your next service, all displayed digitally on the instrument panel at the touch of a button. At a glance you can confirm the time, the temperature and your precise speed, and when the fuel level drops to what is considered a reserve capacity (3 litres, good for about 30 miles with a steady hand), the trip resets to display a countdown to empty.

I found all this rather useful – show me a road tester who wouldn’t – but more than that, who wants to run out of petrol and push 500lbs of motorcycle home, slide on an ice patch when the temperature plummets and winter rain freezes, or struggle through layers of motorcycle gear to check the time on a wrist watch? However, what was curiously missing, under the circumstances, was a gear position indicator – with six rather close ratios inside the box, and a motor willing to pull away from a crawl in almost any of



Exhaust can has to be one of the largest around. Turbine design on the end cap echoes the Lafranconis fitted to the Le Mans.

“Motorcycle electrics have advanced beyond the wildest dreams of even the most technically minded designers of 30 years ago.”



Contacts

Corsa Italiana, 020 8715 4333.
New bike sales, spares, accessories
and servicing.
Raceco parts.
www.spare-3b.com

Motomecca, 01202 823453.
Moto Guzzi spares, Brembo brake
equipment and IKON shock
absorbers.
www.motomeccaspares.com

Moto Guzzi Club GB
www.motoguzziclub.co.uk
Membership secretary Bryan Peck,
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Guzziology by Dave Richardson –
the definitive work on running and
servicing Moto Guzzi v-twins.

them, it was easy to lose track of exactly which gear you were in. On the open road, a steady progression through acceleration and changing-up got you to around 65mph in top, but around town you could be anywhere between second and fifth when you came to a red light and started tap dancing on the gear lever in search of neutral.

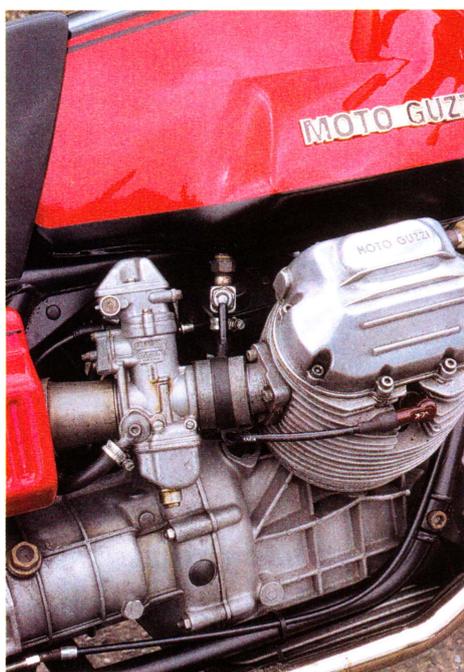
Which brings us to the gearbox, which makes itself known even before the Griso starts rolling; well, actually, the clutch was the first thing I noticed because whenever the lever was pulled in, it jangled like a sports Ducati's. This is not commonplace, I was told, and was the subject of a recall on early bikes for shimmying to take up the slack in the mechanism. So, then, clutch in, clunk, select gear, clunk, clutch out, clunk. All those 'clunks' are the result of backlash in the transmission, a Guzzi trait since the year dot, but they seem to be more obtrusive now than on the old five-speeders. And just as on the old bikes, they're pretty difficult to avoid, no matter how careful you go about changing gear.

Then there's the hydraulically actuated clutch, marvellously light in operation, but without any feel that would allow you to feed it in and out in stages like the old cable operated unit. Considering how bang up to date the Griso is in all other areas, I'm surprised the gearbox and clutch haven't had more attention paid to them. Jokingly, you might say they retain the rawness of the earlier sports bikes, like the handlebars which flap from engine vibration at tickover, but a little bit more bark from the exhaust would accomplish that and add tremendously to the bike's overall appeal. As it is, they spoil the riding experience.

Oh well, press the start button (Guzzi v-twins have never had a kick-starter) and away we go. The old Moto Guzzi have a reputation for being long and heavy, which suggests they are happiest travelling upright and in a straight line, but although the Griso is both longer and heavier, it is amazingly light-footed and copes with congested streets easily. Tricking through traffic, the technique is to keep the twistgrip just off the stop to avoid the jerk as the throttles pick-up from fully closed, and to stay in second gear so you know where to find neutral when you need it. Oh – and avoid narrow gaps, the handlebars are a ridiculous 34in wide and losing the chrome 'bar ends', either through carelessness or lodging them in the sides of bendy-busses, will only save you 3in.

A limit

The bars impose a limit on open road performance too. Even though the seating position allows you to lean forwards, wind pressure at motorway speeds soon tells on your arms and shoulders. Of the two available alternatives – change the bars or keep off the motorways – I preferred to take to the back roads where the Griso excelled. Whether you choose to cruise, or indulge in a little point-and-shoot tomfoolery, this is more than enough motorcycle to satisfy your needs. On the other hand, I am aware, of course, that there are those amongst us who relish pushing the envelope to the limit, and while one mainstream motorcycle journalist found the sidestand a limit to his cornering, I personally didn't encounter this problem. Probably just as well since the nearest thing to knee sliders I possess is a pair of cricket pads.



Massive Dell'Orto carburetors are unfiltered. Accelerator pumps deliver neat fuel to eliminate any hesitation when the throttles are cracked open.



Despite the impressive size of the bodywork and filler cap, fuel capacity limits the range to under 150 miles.



Brembo disc brakes established a benchmark that has seldom been met by others, even today.

I was warned that the front brakes would have me on my ear if I didn't treat them with the utmost respect, but they responded well to the lightest touch and never gave me any heart-stopping moments despite riding through some appalling weather. I understand that riders are now encouraged to use their back brakes in preference to the front, which is totally at odds with the way I was taught. Guzzi originally equipped their twins with linked brakes, so that the foot pedal not only operated the back brake, but the front, near-side disc as well. For all the times you needed a front brake (holding the machine on a hill, for example) and for the occasional white knuckle moment, there was the added support of the handlebar operated off-side disc. So the old system would seem appropriate today, but of course, it's changed.

Hard chargers report that when applied with a vengeance, the front brakes will lock the wheel and smoke the tyre, which seems a little excessive on the approach to a pedestrian crossing. I would much rather know that they will stop me, rubber side down, when white van man carves me up on a greasy, rain-lashed roundabout – which they did more than once, thank goodness. What I wasn't prepared for was the tendency for the steering to 'tuck in' during low speed cornering – rather unnerving when you first experience it – and for the suspension to want to bounce me upright when I hit a bump, heeled over on the same low speed turn.

There are a variety of explanations for this, ranging from the old chestnut of torque reaction from the Guzzi shaft drive, to the size and weight of the monster-truck tyres demanded by modern fashion. I am inclined to suspect inappropriate suspension set-up for a medium-weight rider tackling pot holes, ripples, loose chippings, great blobs of white paint and manhole covers, as opposed to 10 laps of Cadwell Park on a track day. You don't really need a diagram in the handbook to show you which way is the left and which way is the right when turning a suspension adjuster screw – what you need to know is what effect this twiddling will have on your ride.

Which sort of takes us back to where we started; does all this wizardry make the Griso a better motorcycle, or is it an off-putting technological overload? I'm tempted to wonder what anybody would be doing with a Griso in another 30 years time, but I'm not sure that riding old motorcycles of any sort, from the 1970s or 2007, will figure in the answer. No, let's stick to the here and now – the Griso offers speed, comfort, safety, reliability and sophistication, neatly packaged and ready to go. It isn't cheap, it isn't fuel efficient, and owner-servicing opportunities are extremely limited.

In terms of cutting-edge motorcycles then, time has changed very little.

www.classicbikeguide.com



Aah – I remember when...

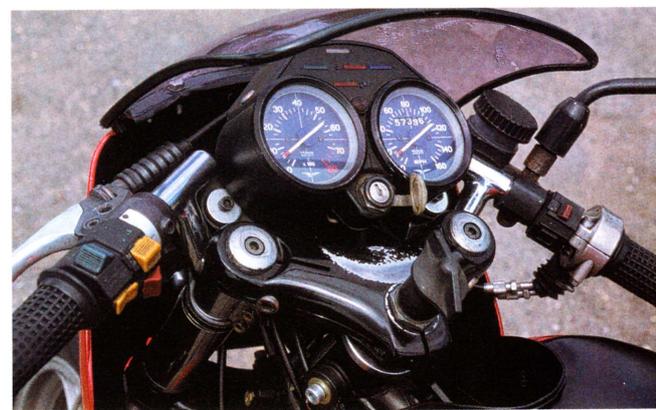
Choosing a sports bike from the current Moto Guzzi line-up isn't quite as cut and dried as it was 30 years ago, when most manufacturers produced a line of 'standard' models, spiced-up by one or two racey, top of the range machines. Back then, low handlebars, tipped-up silencers and a humped-back seat left you in no doubt that this was not yer average ride-to-work commuter. Ergo the Le Mans, long and lean and low, a million miles away from the cooking T3 – or was it? Underneath all the hype, the Le Mans was little more than a T3 in fancy clothing – same rolling chassis, same linked brake system, same gearbox and fundamentally the same engine. The hike in power that everybody raved about came from nothing more than larger valves, a less restricted exhaust system and a pair of unfiltered, 36mm Dell'Orto pumper carbs. A few parts were lighter, like the flywheel, front discs and thin-walled fork stanchions, but by far the greatest weight saver was the extensive use of plastic for the cycleparts.

Plastic? Aaargh, the British motorcyclist's phobia, worse even than the 'monkey metal' that the Japanese used so successfully on their bikes. Plastic instrument panel, turn indicators, fairing and mudguards, and by far the most loathed, plastic handlebar switch units and twistgrip housing. And don't forget the moulded rubber saddle. Cheap rubbish? Well no actually – just a little bit of technological evolution, like waterproof, breathable, isothermic Kevlar motorcycle clothing that means you no longer have to dress like an extra from the set of Quatermass and the Pit whenever you go out for a ride.

But the Le Mans' greatest asset was, and still is, its style – it looks right, feels



Seat is a moulded rubber item – this one, from a Mk II model, provides slightly more room for a passenger than the original.



Instrumentation as we knew it – although the warning light panel provides more information than many bikes of the period.

“Plastic? Aaargh, the British motorcyclist's phobia, worse even than the 'monkey metal' that the Japanese used so successfully on their bikes.”



Multi-function instrument display does everything except put the kettle on.

“A lot of people will tell you that the Le Mans is uncomfortable to ride, which it is if you just want to potter around. Ride it hard and it will reward you with excellent handling and the power delivery of a steam locomotive.”

right when you sit on it and lean over the tank to grip the forward mounted bars, and sounds superb when you fire it up. To anybody who has ridden any bike from the ‘classic’ era, the Le Mans is the business – not quite in the same league as the Ducati 900SS, but head and shoulders above any other road bike. It is, of course, a child of its time – single-minded in its purpose of travelling fast. A lot of people will tell you that the Le Mans is uncomfortable to ride, which it is if you just want to potter around. Ride it hard and it will reward you with excellent handling and the power delivery of a steam locomotive.

Not to say that the Le Mans is without its faults – far from it. The front suspension damping is useless (this can be resolved by fitting a pair of FAC damper units) and the old-style starter motor takes a heavy toll on conventional lead-acid batteries. The headlight is dim, the throttle is heavy, and, whereas I found the Griso handled better two-up, the Le Mans is best for solo use only. And yes, it is uncomfortable to ride pillion on the Le Mans, even though the test bike was



Grab handle is a really useful touch. Note the ‘swirl’ end cap inside the Lafranconi silencer.

SPECIFICATION

1976 Moto Guzzi LeMans 850

Engine type	air-cooled, transverse 90° v-twin
Displacement	844cc
Bore x stroke	83 x 78mm
Compression ratio	10.2:1
Fuel system	2 x Dell’Orto PHF 36B carburetors
Claimed power	80 bhp @ 7,300 rpm
Transmission	five-speed
Electrics	12v, coil ignition with twin cb points
Frame	twin downtube steel cradle
Front suspension	2-way damped 35mm telescopic fork
Rear suspension	swinging arm with Koni ‘Dial-a-ride’ shocks
Front brake	twin 300mm discs with 2 piston calipers
Rear brake	single 240mm disc with 1 piston caliper
Front tyre	350 H x 18in
Rear tyre	410 V x 18in
Wheelbase	58in
Seat height	30in
Fuel capacity	4.9 gallons
Fuel consumption	39 mpg (average)
Weight	437lb

SPECIFICATION

2007 Moto Guzzi Griso 1100

Engine type	air-cooled, transverse 90° v-twin
Displacement	1,064cc
Bore x stroke	92 x 80mm
Compression ratio	9.8:1
Fuel system	multi-point phased fuel injection
Claimed power	84.1 bhp @ 7,600 rpm
Transmission	six-speed
Electrics	12v, digitally controlled electronic ignition
Frame	twin spar, incorporating engine a stressed member
Front suspension	3-way adjustable, 43mm upside down fork
Rear suspension	single-sided swinging arm, 3-way adjustable shock
Front brake	twin 320mm floating discs with 4 opposed piston calipers
Rear brake	single 282mm disc with 2 piston caliper
Front tyre	120/70 ZR x 17in
Rear tyre	180/55 ZR x 17in
Wheelbase	61.2in
Seat height	31.5in
Fuel capacity	3.8 gallons
Fuel consumption	48 mpg (average)
Weight	539lb

fitted with the later, Mark II seat which has, on appearance, a more pillion-friendly hump. And of course, if you’re in the front seat, you have to work at riding, get your weight forward and move it about from left to right to keep the bike on track. In doing so, you will feel the engine vibration and the bumps and jars from the road surface, but that’s all part of the fun.

There was one moment, a split second of uncertainty, when the front end went light for no apparent reason and the bars shimmied, but otherwise the Le Mans did exactly as it was told. The only thing you have to watch out for on a shaft drive Guzzi, is that when changing down it is extremely important to match engine speed with rear wheel speed. In practice, this means a little more pre-planning when, for example, approaching a corner. Given that the gearchange is slow, you’ll have time to drop one cog, but maybe not two. The key is not to try to do too much, too soon – if the revs aren’t up when the clutch bites the back wheel will squeal in protest, which is unsettling if the bike is in any position other than upright. In any case, there is so much torque in the motor that it will pull you through in any gear – you just won’t have quite the right exhaust note to make the experience totally rewarding!

And the winner is

Both bikes have more than enough engine to keep anybody happy. Sort

the suspension out on the Griso and you have yourself a magic carpet ride – apart from those handlebars. If they make journeys tiring, either change them or start working out. In reality, they may be a licence saver because you’re never under any illusions as to how fast you’re travelling – and like all modern big bikes, the Griso will sweep the unwary past the ton in next to no time. But well before that you will find things becoming decidedly uncomfortable. In one of those ‘let’s see what it’ll do moments’ I simply couldn’t focus on the speedo and keep an eye on the road ahead, so bad was the battering from wind pressure. Maybe that’s why there’s a highest overall speed function on the instrument panel.

As for the Le Mans, here is a bike that takes no prisoners and accepts no compromises. Only go there if you want to impress the ladies, upset the plastic rocket brigade and eat your steak blue. It’s an animal that demands you swoop and dive, perfect a smooth riding technique and never stick your knee out, all the while delivering a subtle vibro massage that in no way detracts from the overall experience. If you find this tiring, you just need to ride the bike more.

Thanks to: Steve Churchill for the loan of the Le Mans, and Corsa Italiana for the loan of the Griso. ■

Words and pics Phil Mather