

# Buy a Moto Guzzi Le Mans

With 19 years of production and five different incarnations, the 'Lemon' is a Guzzi success story, whatever the nickname may suggest

WORDS: BOB DIXON. PHOTOGRAPHY: CLASSIC BIKE ARCHIVE

The Le Mans is a seminal model in the history of Moto Guzzi. But, remarkably, it almost didn't get made at all. It can trace its origins to the works racers debuted at the 1971 Le Mans endurance race. The company subsequently revealed a prototype 850cc roadster designated 'Le Mans' which coincided with the De Tomaso takeover in 1972. De Tomaso himself was initially unenthusiastic about the V-twin approach, but designer Lino Tonti persuaded him otherwise and the Le Mans made it into production after its official launch at the Milan show in 1975. Its unique styling earned worldwide critical acclaim and over the next 19 years five distinct versions were made.

The motor, a low-revving pushrod unit with origins in a military three-wheeled half track, was based on that used in the T3 tourer. As you'd expect, it provides

effortless high speed cruising but it also offers huge reserves of torque for rapid acceleration regardless of which gear you're in. This is just as well; the gear change is the Le Mans' least endearing feature. The gearbox mainshaft rotating at engine speed is the culprit, an inevitable consequence of the car-type gearbox arrangement.

The linked brakes, spurned by some, are one of the bike's strong points and, with the package of sweet handling chassis, strong acceleration and prodigious engine braking, make the Le Mans an easy bike to ride smoothly. Rapid progress can be metered simply by rolling the throttle and dabbing the foot brake. But this will soon be followed by surging acceleration as you crack open the unfiltered 36mm Dell'Ortos.

With a bit of attention the electrics can be brought up to the standard of the rest of the bike. Looking for performance, style and reliability? You're in the right place.

## MODEL HISTORY

The Le Mans evolved slowly, reaching peak production with the MkIII. The most significant specification changes came with the Le Mans IV when the motor grew and the front wheel shrank. As well as having the unpopular 16in front wheel, the unloved IV also has a reputation for being built during a period when Guzzi had quality control issues. Consequently they can be picked up for very little money.

### Le Mans, 1975 to 1978. Total production 7036

With an engine based on the T3, the sharp handling Le Mans used the distributor off the 750 sport giving a useful 34 degrees of advance. Cams were cooking T3 items but the increased compression and reworked heads gave it the added oomph. Available in red with Day-Glo strip on the fairing, also in metallic light blue and, more rarely, white.

### Le Mans II, 1978 to 1981. Total production 7335

Fundamentally the same as its round barrel predecessor, the Le Mans II was encumbered with an unhappy looking fairing based on the SP tourer. Many have been converted to MkI lookalikes and good unmolested MkIIs are now becoming quite rare. Heavier forks and wider yokes mean the handling isn't as sharp as the early bike. A black and gold option was offered by importer Coburn and Hughes in an effort to clear stock prior to the launch of the MkIII.

### CX100, 1979 to 1981. Total production 353

An oddball but surprisingly effective combination of the Le Mans II chassis allied to a 1000cc SP motor,

the CX100 was a UK-only confection built by Guzzi to circumvent emission laws. It's a Le Mans Jim, but not as we know it. Rare and unusual.

### Le Mans III, 1980 to 1985. Total production 10,056

If you want the full fat Le Mans riding experience but have an eye on the pennies, the smart money would be on a tidy low mileage MkIII. It was substantially different model to the previous incarnations (over 40 detail changes in all) and had a revised frame, air filters for the carbs and an all new exhaust. Available in red, white or grey, with contrasting black highlights.

### Le Mans IV, 1984 to 1988. Total production 4230

Slavishly bowing to fashion, De Tomaso marred the introduction of the new 1000cc Le Mans by hobbling it with a silly 16in front wheel. At the end of its run in 1987 Guzzi offered a Le Mans IV SE available in red and white and distinguished from the earlier bike by the black engine and 'box. A model specific close ratio gearbox was fitted which had higher final gearing.

### Le Mans V, 1988 to 1993. Total production 2113

Sanity was restored with the introduction of the Le Mans V and the re-introduction of the 18in front wheel. The lusty, big-valve litre engine was retained and detail improvements to the chassis components restored the Le Mans' reputation for fine handling. Mounting the fairing directly to the chassis instead of the 'bars helped in this respect. During its five year production run there were few changes save for a colour option of black with white wheels as an alternative to the original black and red.

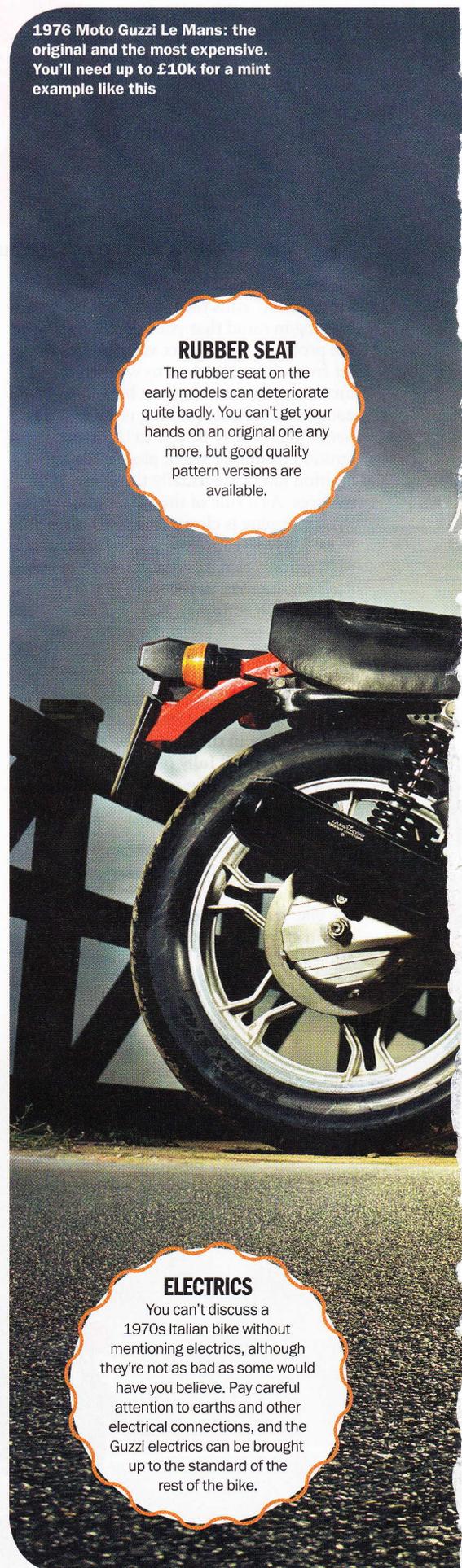
1976 Moto Guzzi Le Mans: the original and the most expensive. You'll need up to £10k for a mint example like this

## RUBBER SEAT

The rubber seat on the early models can deteriorate quite badly. You can't get your hands on an original one any more, but good quality pattern versions are available.

## ELECTRICS

You can't discuss a 1970s Italian bike without mentioning electrics, although they're not as bad as some would have you believe. Pay careful attention to earths and other electrical connections, and the Guzzi electrics can be brought up to the standard of the rest of the bike.



## WHAT'S IT WORTH?

MkI £8000-10,000  
MkII £5000-8000  
MkIII £4000-6000  
MkIV £1500-4000  
MkV £2500-5000

### CLUTCH

The clutch should disengage fully with no drag or jumping forward when selecting gears. Don't dismiss this as simply needing cable adjustment, it could be the clutch splines are worn and will need attention. These were an Achilles heel on all the Guzzi V twins.

### BORES

Check for oil emanating from the crankcase breather tube – it could be worn pistons or bores. Guzzi bores are coated with Nigusil (Guzzi's version of Nikasil) and are capable of high mileages. It's uneconomic to rebore a coated barrel, so a replacement with piston assembly is required. Cylinder assemblies can be bought individually and include rings, gudgeon pins etc.

### SPECIFICATION

## MOTO GUZZI LE MANS 850/1000

### ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

Type	90-degree transverse V-twin
Capacity	844cc/978cc
Bore and stroke	83 x 78mm/88 x 78mm
Compression ratio	10.2/9.5.1
Carburetion	2 x 36mm/40mm Dell'Orto PHF
Clutch	dry double plate
Gearbox	five-speed
Final drive	shaft

### CHASSIS

Frame	tubular steel spine type
Front suspension	telescopic
Rear suspension	twin shock
Brakes front	300mm twin disc, one linked to the rear operated by footpedal
Brakes rear	242mm disc
Wheels	18in cast
Tyres front	100/90 18 / 100/90 18
Tyres rear	100/90 18 / 120/90 18

### DIMENSIONS

Dry weight	432lb (196kg) /476lb (216kg)
Wheelbase	55in (1398mm)/56in (1422mm)
Fuel capacity	4.9 gal (22.5 ltr)/5.5 gal (25 ltr)

### PERFORMANCE

Top speed	124mph
Peak power	79bhp at 7600rpm/81 at 7500
Fuel consumption	43mpg

### ENGINE/CLUTCH SEALS

Oil leaking from the small hole at the base of the clutch indicates a failing seal on either the 'box or the engine. It doesn't matter which – the engine's still got to come out to attend to it.

### JOINTS

The drive train universal joint can wear. Ride up and down a quiet road and roll the throttle on and off. If you can hear a clunk, the joint is on the way out. It's a straightforward job to replace it.

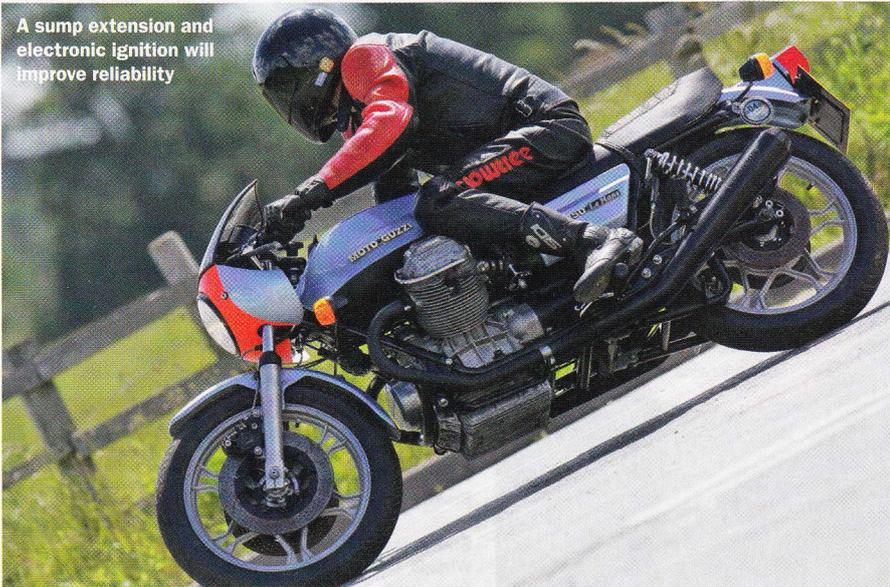
### GEARS

Don't be alarmed if the gearshift is heavy and ponderous, they all do that. The 'box shouldn't jump out of gear. Poor selection between 2nd and 3rd could indicate the shift drum needs shimming.

### VALVE CLEARANCES

Clatter from the valve gear is normal; the valve clearances are quite generous and some noise is inevitable. A very quiet engine could well have the clearances adjusted too tightly – they're easy enough to check so have a look to make sure. Prevention is always better than cure.

A sump extension and electronic ignition will improve reliability



*Expert opinion*

## “The MkIII is one of the best buys”

**N**igel Billingsley of NBS in Ingestre near Stafford is one of the best known and most highly regarded UK Guzzi experts. He has been servicing, fettling and repairing the Mandello V-twins for 20 years.

The Le Mans IV and V undoubtedly represent the best value. The 16in wheel on the IV can put some people off but most of them have been converted to 18in anyway, and they steer better then.

Prices for the original Le Mans have gone through the roof and some are fetching as much as £10,000. In my opinion one of the best buys has to be the MkIII. It's the first of the square-barrel models and doesn't attract the same premium as the round barrel MkI and MkII. In my opinion the build quality on the MkIII is better than on the earlier models, and the engineering tolerances seem to be more accurate, so perhaps the factory had invested in better tooling by this stage.

The handling of some Le Mans models can come in for some criticism. In my experience MkI machines usually handle very nicely, but then the factory changed the yokes with the introduction of the MkII; they were 15mm wider. You can identify these by the extra width in the wheel spacers. The handling suffered and the MkIIs definitely benefit from having a fork brace. The factory reverted back to the narrower yokes for the MkIII.

Because MkI bikes are now commanding such high prices many people are converting the round-barrel MkIIs into MkI lookalikes. It's a pretty straightforward and feasible job to be honest. It's more a case of un-bolting stuff and getting rid of it than anything else. You have to get rid of the clock and the voltmeter of course, and source a few other bits and pieces, but it's an easy conversion and doesn't require any special skills. The fork stanchions are a bit longer on the MkII and will need dropping through the yokes but other than that it can be done without too much expense.

**If you're thinking about modifying or upgrading your bike, consider a sump extension.** The internal dimensions of the standard sump are small, and in some circumstances the pumping action of the pistons can cause excessive crankcase pressure. Some later Guzzis had sump extensions as standard so the issue was obviously recognised by the factory. Some modern synthetic oils don't suit these engines. Instead, use a quality oil suitable for an air-cooled motor.”

**If you're looking to use your bike regularly it is worth biting the bullet, junking the points and fitting an electronic ignition.** The Dyna units ([www.dynatekuk.com](http://www.dynatekuk.com)) are good but I would also recommend the Newtronic ([www.newtronic.co.uk](http://www.newtronic.co.uk)). It's a very simple unit and it's proved remarkably resilient and robust in use.

### USEFUL CONTACTS:

**NBS Motorcycle Servicing**  
01889 271818  
[www.motorcycleservicing.co.uk](http://www.motorcycleservicing.co.uk)

**Electrex World Limited**  
[www.electrexworld.co.uk](http://www.electrexworld.co.uk)  
**www.guzzitech.com**  
US-based Guzzi forum and store

**Corsa Italiana** 01932 252255  
[www.corsaitaliana.com](http://www.corsaitaliana.com)  
**Moto Corsa** 01202 822511  
[www.motocorsa.co.uk](http://www.motocorsa.co.uk)

# A-Z

## How to be a classic know all

Put this into your mind



### PRIMARY CHAIN

Chain through which power is transferred from the crankshaft to the gearbox.

### PRIMARY CIRCUIT

The low-voltage, initial portion of a coil ignition system, used to charge the primary windings of the coil prior to the opening of the contact breaker points.

### PRIMARY CURRENT

The low-voltage current in the primary circuit of the ignition system, also known as the low-tension current.

### PRIMARY DRIVE

The means by which power is transferred from the crankshaft to the gearbox, almost invariably by either chain or gear.

### PRIMARY WINDINGS

The low-tension windings in an ignition coil, made up of thicker wire than the high-tension secondary windings.

### PRIME

With reference to engine starting procedure, to enrich the fuel mixture for cold starting by encouraging extra fuel to flow into the carburettor body, by use of a tickler on carburettors such as the Amal MkI. The term can also refer to the manual filling of an oil pump with lubricant to ensure that it works effectively when new or after reassembly.

### PRIMING COCK

Tap fitted to early

side-valve engines to allow fuel into the cylinder for cold starting.

### PROGRESSIVE RATE SPRING

One that builds resistance to compression as the load on it increases, as opposed to a constant rate or multi-rate spring.

### PSI

Pressure measurement unit, pounds per square inch. Multiply by 0.068 to convert to atmospheres (Atm) or by 0.070 for kg/sq. cm.

### PTFE

Polytetrafluoroethylene is a resin discovered in the late 1930s by DuPont. It has an extremely low friction coefficient combined with very good mechanical, chemical and electrical resistance. It is found, for instance, in lubricants, seals, valves, brake lines and suspension coatings. One of its most recognisable forms is Teflon, fully legitimising the use of a frying pan as a drip tray.

### PULLER

Tool for safely separating components joined by a press fit or key, such as an alternator rotor or flywheel.

### PUMPER CARBURETTOR

One that injects a jet of neat fuel into the carburettor body. With certain engines this improves immediate throttle response and can allow a leaner overall jetting for better fuel economy.