

Falling In Love Again...

WHEN Mike Nicks tested Moto Guzzi's sports 750, the S3, in *Bike* last year, he called it the most beautiful production motorcycle you could buy.

As for me, it was love at first sight. So infatuated was I that it's the only bike that's kept me awake at nights feverishly plotting schemes to get together the readies to make one my own. My God, I even thought of selling the Ducati (gasp) — and I hadn't even ridden an S3.

That was the trouble. When, with sweaty palms and racing pulse, I achieved the consummation of this particular passion it only brought frustration and disillusionment. It was like discovering that some gorgeous woman you've lusted after for months turns out to be about as passionate as a fillet of frozen cod when at last you get your evil way with her. The S3 was a fantastic bike in many respects, but somehow it just didn't feel as exciting as it looked. Its performance wasn't as fast as its style — I'd just expected too much.

Then came the rumours about a successor to the S3 even *more* stunning, if the stories could be believed. Well, I wasn't going to be blown out again, I resolved. I'd wait until I'd ridden the bike this time, and evaluate it coldly and objectively. Hah, some people will never learn — but how can you be cold and objective about a bike that's so fine you go all weak at the knees just looking at it?

Sorry folks, but despite my good intentions I'm infatuated all over again. The Le Mans just looks so goddamn beautiful that if I was rich enough I'd buy two of them — one to ride and one just to stand in the living room to admire as an *objet d'art*. It represents the ultimate in motorcycle styling as an art form — the synthesis between engineering and aesthetics in which the Italians are supreme.

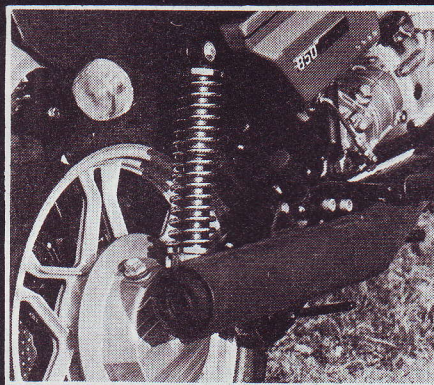
What is so amazing about the Le Mans is the way a basically ugly, brutish, lump of V-twin motor has been transformed into a thing of grace by a brilliantly simple use of line and contrasting colour. The frame, tank, forks and external appearance of the motor are the same as the S3. The visual transformation is achieved with bold contrasting panels of Italian racing red and eggshell finish black on the tank, new seat, mudguards and side panels creating a theme of sharply chiselled angularity, a sleekly tucked away matt-black exhaust system, a pair of the prettiest cast alloy wheels you could find and, the final touch, a tiny headlight cowl and flyscreen that is nothing but pure decoration.

The result is the sleekest, horniest thing you've ever seen on two wheels. It's long and lean, all matt-black racing machismo and tastefully extrovert flamboyance. And it looks so potent; the dull grey bulk of those massive cylinders thrusting out from the

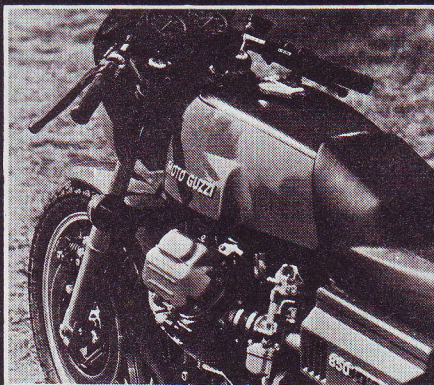
lovely tank nestling between them, and the enormous carburettors flaunting great gaping velocity stacks. Maybe in a way it's too much of a stylist's bike, with appearance given a higher priority than utility. But you can forgive them when they've created something so beautiful.

I'd been selfishly gloating over the prospect of riding the Le Mans after calculating that Mr Nicks would be visiting the TT when we were scheduled to test the bike. Mine, all mine, for a whole week. This time there was no disillusionment, but there were still frustrations — it turned out to be a week jinxed from the start. While in the custody of another publication, the Le Mans had been dropped sufficiently hard to bend

Well, how could a guy not fall for the horniest thing you've ever seen on two wheels — or the Moto Guzzi Le Mans for that matter. Road test by Bill Haylock. Photography Bob Carlos Clark.



Shaft drive means less maintenance hassles, more time for riding. Notice neat exhaust.



Apart from protecting delicate parts of rider's anatomy, the unusual upholstery looks super smooth.

a fork stanchion, and the clutch had been butchered in standing quarter runs. The delay while things were straightened out and put back together meant frantic driving through London with a brand-new, unregistered Le Mans lashed to the back of a pick-up truck, in order to make a previously arranged photographic session. It has become apparent that it was going to be one of those weeks when the whole world conspires to thwart every plan.

But things seemed brighter after a couple of days, when the forks were straightened, and the clutch fixed with used plates robbed from another engine, the proper spares not being available because of a delayed shipment from Italy. And so at last I launched off from the Coburn and Hughes emporium at Luton and pointed the Le Mans back towards Peterborough. Within the first couple of miles, still cautiously feeling my way around the bike, it became apparent that the Le Mans is more than just a re-styled, over-sized S3. Despite a higher compression ratio (now 10.2:1 compared to the S3's 9.8) and massive 36 mm carbs — 6 mm bigger than the 750's — the Le Mans is so much more tractable than its predecessor. No doubt the 8 mm increase in stroke, giving the extra 100 cc's, helps. And so does the lower overall gearing — the Le Mans' first gear is 11.6:1 while the S3's was 10.8:1.

Those simple changes belie the transformation in the power characteristics of that chunky, uncomplicated pushrod V-twin which forms the basis of all the big Guzzis. While the S3's 750 motor was curiously highly strung with no low speed torque worth mentioning, the Le Mans feels really punchy, quite unlike the woolly softness that makes the touring versions of the Guzzi motor so relaxing.

Riding such a bike through built-up zones while it still feels unfamiliar, is little fun. The crouched racing stance and the lusty motor are made for the open road — and that's where I began to discover what the Le Mans is all about. Peeling off the roundabout, onto the slip road down to the A1M, I gave it the gun at last. Winding the throttle open in third, the bike surged forward with acceleration that effortlessly gathered momentum; the exhaust note rose from a soft chuffing to a hard-edged bellow, and the power came on stronger and stronger as the revs soared. By the time I'd reached the end of the slip road and pulled onto the motorway I was way over the speed limit. Then I changed up into fourth and the relentless surge of acceleration continued. Cars in the distance suddenly seemed to have gone into reverse and started rushing towards me. By the time I notched fifth my face was fixed in a manic smile and I'd started involuntarily uttering oaths under my breath with the sheer mind-

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warping exhilaration of it all.

The next 40 miles were about the fastest, most maniacal and exciting I've ever experienced, until the adrenalin-induced euphoria was shattered by the unholy din of a cracked exhaust pipe. It sounded like I was about to be overtaken by a Massey Ferguson at 120.

The Guzzi Le Mans is the *poseur's* ultimate cafe racer — it's built to boost the prestige and ego of anyone in the fortunate position of being able to shell out the £2,000 required. But even if you don't get a kick out of parading around on a bike that looks so beautiful and expensive (and you can't be human if you don't) just the way it goes is justification enough to sell your soul to the finance company, 'cos it's the ultimate speed freak's machine, too.

A top speed of 132.15 mph, and a standing quarter time of 13.09 sec. make it the fastest production bike we've put through our electronic speed trap. Admittedly, we've never speed trapped a 900 Kawasaki, but although the two bikes are pretty evenly matched on performance, the Guzzi wins on handling. Neither have we yet tested the Ducati 900SS or the Laverda Jota, both of which are reputed to be even faster. But the Guzzi is still the best looking.

Those performance figures are achieved with the cracked exhaust pipe, which might be expected to reduce speeds slightly. What caused the pipe to crack I don't know. It could have been due to the previously mentioned crash. Or could it have been due to

vibration? Yet the Le Mans is not a shaker by any means; it doesn't vibrate more than the other Guzzi twins, and *they* don't crack exhaust pipes. Unfortunately, a consignment of Le Mans spares was delayed leaving Italy and didn't come through until after our speed trap session.

The jinx struck again at the end of the test track session. Having recorded a 13.09 sec. standing quarter on the second run, I thought the Le Mans must be capable of getting into the twelves. But the bike disagreed. On the fifth run, with a twelve second time eluding us by a few thousandths of a second, the clutch decided it had had enough. Makeshift adjustment got it working just about well enough to ride home, but further testing was out of the question. The clutch seems a little fragile — the lining material of the two friction plates is riveted, rather than bonded to the metal, and the linings had broken up at the rivets.

However, most people who've paid £2,000 of their hard earned savings on a Le Mans aren't going to do five consecutive standing starts, dropping the clutch with the motor screaming at max revs. Without this sort of treatment the clutch would probably survive a normal life.

But everything turned out fine in the end. I collected the Guzzi with repaired clutch and exhaust and a whole weekend to just get on it and ride. The heatwave was still simmering, and the only way to stay cool was to keep moving. All you needed was quiet country roads and a sleeping bag strapped on the back to crash out under the stars at the end of the day.

Pounding up the A1 under 90 degree sunshine I could almost fantasise that the road signs read Cannes instead of Doncaster. That's what the Le Mans is all about, pure hedonistic escapism. Motorway miles roll under the wheels with incredible speed. By no stretch of the imagination is the Le Mans a long distance tourer, with its

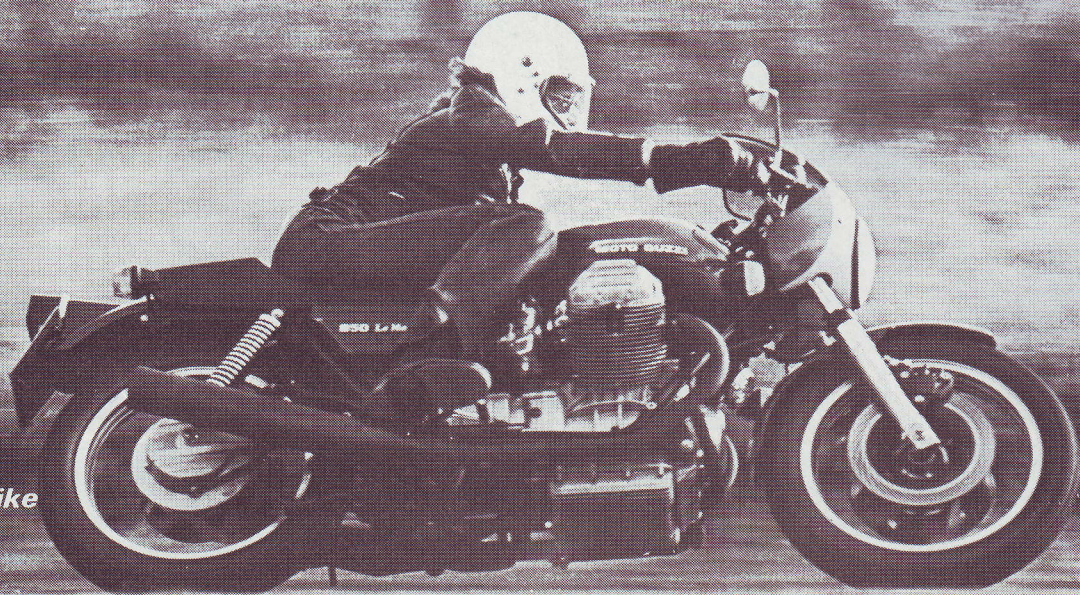
crouched stance and thinly padded seat, but the concentration and exhilaration of riding fast keeps discomfort at bay until you have to slow down for traffic or towns.

Rider comfort is greatly improved over the S3, though. The clip-ons are set high and don't seem such an uncomfortable stretch to reach. The throttle action is much lighter, thanks to a fulcrum arrangement on top of the Le Mans' enormous Dell'Orto carburetors that works much better than the direct cable linkage to the square throttle slides of the S3. The footrests are a little too far forward, but resting my toes on the pegs achieved a reasonably comfortable position for long distances.

A pseudo racer's crouch is the only position for good control at the high speeds the Le Mans is capable of. With knees clamped firmly around that voluptuously shaped five gallon tank, and backside firmly against the hump of the seat to prevent every surge of acceleration sliding you back, it's almost possible to believe you're aboard one of those endurance racers from which the Le Mans takes its name.

High speed stability is so good that I left the hydraulic steering damper in the off position all the time, and yet the bike was rock steady — even at 130 mph when bumps on our test track were bucking the rear wheel into the air. Couple this stability with the effortless way that the big-hearted V-twin pounds out power, and you have the supreme motorway cruiser. At a true ton the throttle is hardly open and the pace feels almost leisurely.

But you'd be missing a lot if motorways were the only kind of roads you let the Le Mans loose on. You might think such a hefty chunk of motorcycle isn't a country lane scratcher, but you'd be wrong. For a start, the Guzzi feels amazingly compact when you first climb on. From above it looks long and lean and the feeling is enhanced by the incredibly low seat height



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of just over 29 inches — three inches lower than most bikes in the same class.

This compactness, the low centre of gravity, and the riding position give you the confidence to throw the bike through bends with an enthusiasm few other machines of the same size and power would inspire. Although at 476 lbs. the Le Mans is lighter than the S3, partly through pruning equipment to a functional minimum, it's certainly no lightweight. And yet it can be flicked through S bends with an ease that belies the weight. In fact, before long I had started grinding away the centre stand lugs. Had the bike been mine I'd have sawn them off; it's not that the ground clearance is particularly poor, it's just that the Le Mans corners so well it's a pity to have that limit to banking when everything else is so neatly tucked away.

Steering through bends is as rock steady as it is on the straight. It's precise enough to stick accurately to a line, and responsive enough for lines to be changed halfway through a bend. The old bogey of torque reaction from the in-line crank only rears its head as a slight twitch if you roll the power off or on sharply while cranked over.

A somewhat less than slick gearchange is the Le Mans' only flaw as a scratcher. The changes between the top three ratios are OK, but the lower two shifts are real crunch-o-matic. Strangely, the gearchange seems to have deteriorated in the transition from the S3. What makes it worse is the long travel of the pedal, and its position in relation to the footrest. To change up smoothly into second and third requires the left foot to be removed from the peg to hook the pedal upwards firmly and deliberately. It's impossible to achieve a noiseless action, and you won't impress anyone with slick racing changes — they'll just jeer at the crunches if you try. Fortunately, the motor's flexibility means you can stay with the silent shifts between the top three gears most of the time.

To make up for that gearchange though, the Le Mans boasts the best braking system in biking. As with all other big Guzzis, the left disc of the front pair and the rear disc are linked through an integrated hydraulic circuit operated by the foot pedal. For normal braking you just tread on the pedal and the circuit apportions the hydraulic pressure between front and rear discs to bring the bike to a controlled and stable halt. The lever on the right handlebar is connected to the right front disc. It's purely a panic handle to be grabbed when you suddenly realise you're approaching a bend far too fast (which can happen frequently on the Le Mans) or some car driver tries to occupy

the same patch of road as you. When that happens, just go easy with the right hand though — it's possible to lock those twin 11.8 in discs instantaneously at 60 mph if you just grab everything, as I discovered during braking tests on the strip.

I don't intend to get drawn into facile arguments as to whether any bike is worth £2,000. In one little Yorkshire town where I'd stopped for a quick pint I overheard one guy say to his mate, "Ee, look at that bike — that must've cost all of a thousand pound." I resisted the temptation to tell him to double that. It would probably have prompted the usual inane reply, "Ee, you could've bought a good car for that."

When those sort of people are talking about a good car they generally mean something like a Ford Cortina, or some other form of four-wheeled transport about as exciting as a loaf of sliced Mothers Pride.

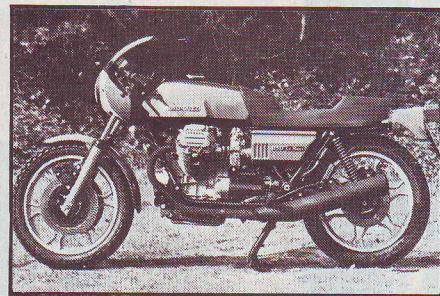
But all this still doesn't excuse the odd touch of shoddiness that shouldn't appear on a bike costing so much. Like the matt black finish of the exhaust system that was already turning to rust with the test bike only a few months old. I'm told that the factory may now be using a black chrome finish instead of matt paint, and so it should. The rev counter is so inaccurate as to be useless, while the speedo is outside the legally allowed margin of ten per cent accuracy. These instruments are basically the same as fitted to all the 850 V-twins. Normally the rev counters are not so wildly optimistic as that on the Le Mans, which sometimes spun right off the end of the scale, but all the Guzzi speedos I've come across have been more than ten per cent optimistic.

It's a tremendous kick to see the speedo needle nudge 160 as you crouch flat on the tank, but it becomes something of an anticlimax when you discover that that represents a true speed of 132 mph. At 100 mph on the speedo, you're actually doing 82 mph, and the error is between 15 and 20 per cent right round the dial. The Guzzi factory in Italy have been told about it, and it's about time they did something.

Apart from that, the quality of finish is reasonable, if not exceptional, and equipment is of a higher quality than on most Italian bikes. The switchgear is the same as fitted to other Guzzis, including the clever combined light switch with catch button to prevent the headlight being flicked off while dipping. The flasher switch is a bit too small, and it all looks a little flimsy, but was still working fine after 10,000 hard road-testing miles. The lights are up to normal standards, but that really isn't enough with the Guzzi's speed potential.

The Guzzi is not a bike to inspire indifference. You either look at it as just another form of two-wheeled transportation and think, "My God, that's never worth 2,000 quid"; or you fall for its looks, excitement, the way it makes you feel and just wonder where the hell you're going to get £2,000.

Checkout



Engine	OHV, transverse 90 deg. V-twin
Bore x stroke	83 x 78 mm
Capacity	844 cc
Compression ratio	10.2:1
Carburation	2 x 36 mm Dell'Orto
BHP at RPM	80 at 7,300
Primary drive	gear
Clutch	twin friction plates, flywheel driven
Gearbox	5 speed
Final drive	shaft
Electrical system	12v 280w generator, battery/coil ignition
Lighting	45/40 W headlight 5/21w tail/stoptlight

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	59½ ins
Overall width	28 ins
Seat height	29½ ins
Ground clearance	7¾ ins
Kerb weight	
(with 1 gal. fuel)	476 lbs
Fuel capacity	5 gal (inc ½ gal reserve)
Oil capacity	5.3 pints

EQUIPMENT

Trafficators	Yes
Electric starter	Yes
Trip mileometer	No
Steering lock	Yes
Helmet lock	No
Headlight flasher	Yes
Kill button	Yes
Toolkit	Yes (15 items)
Spare parts	No
Others	Screen, hydraulic steering damper, cast aluminium wheels

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres (front)	3.50 x 18 Pirelli
(rear)	4.00 x 18 Pirelli
Brakes (front)	twin 11.8 in discs
(rear)	single 11.8 in disc

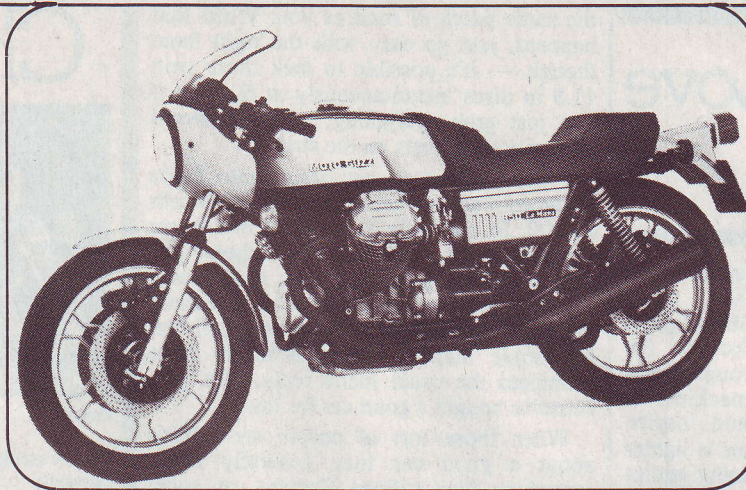
PERFORMANCE

Top speed	132.15 mph
Standing ¼ mile	13.09 secs
0-60 mph	4.82 secs
Speedometer error	
at indicated 30 mph	25.6 mph
at indicated 60 mph	48.5 mph
Braking distance	
from 30 mph	26ft 6ins
from 60 mph	115ft 6ins

Overall fuel

consumption	37.06 mpg
Price	£1999 inc VAT
Guarantee	6 months parts and labour plus 12 months Autoguard cover.
Supplied by	Moto Guzzi UK, 21 Crawley Rd, Luton, Beds.





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