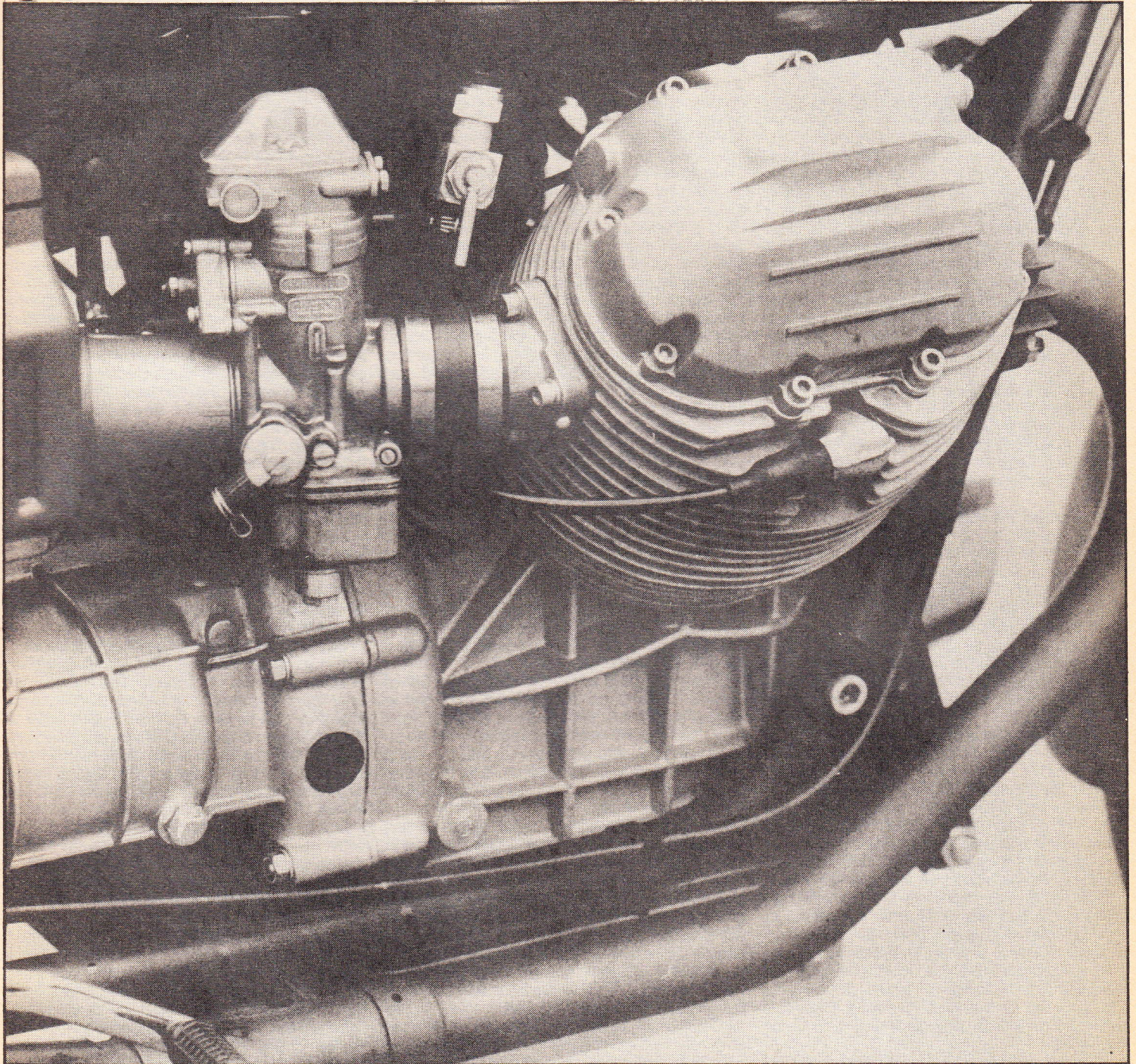


# I CAN VEE FOR MILES

Magic moments on the Guzzi Le Mans and Ducati 900 GTS

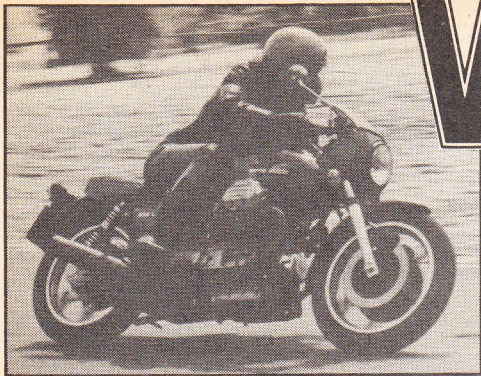


There are certain motorcycles on the streets today, or certain streets in Mayfair and perhaps around the richer pastures of Windsor, that take on the same aura of exclusivity as the endangered animal species of the world. While these machines aren't exactly on the verge of The Big Dive, they qualify for this distinction because of their rarity. They are the bikes that attract attention in the street, and when heads *don't* turn as you burn up the Tarmac, you know it's because you're going too damn fast.

In a country dominated by Japanese conformity (ours, I mean) these special machines stand out because of their beauty, their ferocity, their overspecialisation that recognises but one forte – performance. They incarnate beauty and the beast in one form. The air of pure functionalism surrounds them like a laurel, a halo of dynamism.

The bikes in question are, without exception, Italian; it's the fire of the Mediterranean temperament that lends an Italian machine its compulsion. And while not always given the

best of finishes, you can bet your bottom lira that an Italian sportster is going to outperform any of half a dozen of the best bikes you can mention. A Laverda Jota sits smugly at the kerb, knowing that when it comes to power nothing less than a turbo charger will enable its Jap rivals to catch up. The Ducati Desmo stands supreme as the machine that is the ultimate king of the fast bend at 90mph. An MV Agusta breathes aristocracy, universally recognised as possessing the final word in bulletproof high-performance engines.



But, above and beyond the sheer cash you have to part with to own one of these desirable machines, there's a bigger price to pay for the pleasure of having a slick Italian machine in the garage. They go like the clappers, look like a blur standing still, and are one step removed from high-energy physics when it comes to home maintenance. Which is fine when you've got a particle accelerator in the back shed, but, if not, you're going to have to take it along to the bikers' Brains Trust where the only things between you and the cleaners will be quick prayers and perhaps an arcane spell or two. On a slicko tricko Italian job the engines are complex, and the parts very expensive.

As such, the price you pay for your Latin masterpiece will be merely the first step in a continuing saga of trips to the bank, and, if you're unlucky, eventually to the bankruptcy courts.

But lurking among that pack of expensive, rapidly disintegrating chrome is a bike that, in common with those mentioned, has the grace and line of an ibex in full leap, the acceleration of a cheetah on charge, and the temperament of a snow tigress with cubs. Yet the engine is a simple push-rod vee-twin. And allied to this is a backup service that doesn't gently strip away the lining from the inside of your wallet, and offers parts that don't necessarily mean going to London to get them when you live in the Scilly Isles.

In fact, the engine of the Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans is very much one of a kind with the Guzzi 850T3. Parts have been changed to protect the innocent, namely the T3 riders.

The Le Mans breathes through carb holes that have been dramatically enlarged by 6mm, making 36mm of choke tube and thereby breathing larger quantities of explosive vapour into the cast iron barrels. This is a further difference from the T3, which has chrome-lined cylinders. Further variations in the Le Mans engine, such as two rings instead of three, and a compression ratio of 10:2 as opposed to 9:5 on the T3, result in an increase of 11.5bhp at peak power. At 7300rpm the Le Mans pumps out a pretty fair 80bhp. For 844cc displacement, that's not bad going.

When it comes to laying those horses on the road, the Le Mans is as effective as it looks. With the bikini fairing and the contoured seat that wraps itself lovingly around the back of the tank to protect the rider's balls under heavy braking with a sixteen stone passenger on the pillion, the Le Mans looks a bit of a cutie. In truth, it does resemble a bit of a nancy boy's bike; it's the sort of machine that would provoke gales of wild guffawing at the local rockers' boozer as they climbed on to their Tritons and ageing Nortons to blow the Le Mans across the Tarmac.

But, of course, they'd be in for a shock.

On the M1, I was cruising sedately at around a ton (for all you off-duty fuzz, this is fiction, OK?). The tach hung at around six grand, or something like it. The Guzzi's twin knucklepot mill hammered pleasantly on either side of the tank, with the merest hint of tappet noise (and that's something that's more welcome than you'd realise after riding too many Japanese machines with their twin bloody overhead cams). Then suddenly, in the fast lane, a shape like Jaws on two wheels crept into my peripheral vision. It was a Z1000 with a passenger, flat out, the rider straining to stay on the bike with his arms spread out on the big Kwacker's bars like he was praying to Allah for more speed (and we've all done that at one time or another, hey kids?).

Guess what I did? Go on. Bet you can't. Oh, all right. No contest really. I just opened the oh-so-smooth throttle slides with a savage twist of the wrist; the engine's muted burbling developed into the throaty, rorty roar that I came to know and love after a fortnight. As the tach needle leapt into the yellow range on the Veglia rev counter the Le Mans surged forward. If the Z1000 was Jaws, the Le Mans was a nemesis dolphin in for the kill. Pretty soon there was nothing behind me save two headlamp glares. One being the Z1000 and the other being that of the Duke GTS 900 of Mike Scott, as he, too, slowly drew ahead.

Yes, folks, the engine note of the Lemon in full song can only be described as "hammering". Christ knows what it'd sound like with straight-through pipes on it. It's mean, and rumour has it that on a good day a production Guzzi will take a Jota on the track. I believe it. In fact, the way the Le Mans is built, it looks and rides like a machine that's been built for the road merely to homologate it for the production races. With a ground clearance of six and a half inches you know that you're off if you feel the zorst scraping on a bend. Shit, six and half inches. The tank doesn't look as if it's that far off the ground.

When I say the Lemon is low, you'd better believe it. Hunched across the tank with the narrow plastic foam seat cutting between your legs, the ground looks disturbingly close as the speedo needle just goes up and up. Taxis begin to flash past backwards, and the lamp posts start to blur as they go by two by two. This bike has balls.

But watch it two up. Like I said earlier, under heavy braking the slim seat urges the passenger to climb up your back and on to the tank. This results in heavy pressure on the groin from the tank, and Guzzi have placed a tank pad there for the rider's convenience; it works admirably, and, with brakes like the Guzzi's, it needs it. The Revolutionary Integral Braking System is something that is revolutionary only if you ignore the fact that cars have had it for around 70 years. It works like this: apply the rear brake pedal and the front and rear brakes operate simultaneously. A special distribution valve attached to a rear frame member separates the pressure on the pedal, directing 70 per cent of the force to the left-hand front disc, and the rest to the rear. The handlebar lever operates the right front disc only. The sensation immediately after applying all three of these Super Wonderful brakes is akin to diving into a cleaned-up Sam Peckinpah slow motion sequence. Uncanny, it is. Not once did any of us ultra late brakers in the *SuperBike* office manage to lock up the back wheel. Once I made it skip a bit during a brief encounter with a homicidal juggernaut

navigator. Just once. The rest of the time the brakes were superlative, excellent. Just the thing for a rainy day . . .

. . . Or not. The discs take a *looong* time to dry. On twisty, fast roads that involve a lot of braking, the discs begin to steam and sputter fairly rapidly, doing away with all that nasty slippery water. On motorways and at low speeds around town, however, it's a different and hairier story. The discs don't dry off rapidly, and braking is a manoeuvre to be contemplated well in advance of usual braking points.

And with 80 brake horsies to deal with, stopping-power suddenly becomes a prominent focus of attention behind the taut, white forehead of the rider. I don't expect this sort of behaviour from Brembo brakes, which are normally faithful to the point of invisibility. Discovering the shortcomings of brakes in the wet isn't recommended at 11.30pm on a Friday night after being kicked out of a Young's public house, with one's visor reducing visibility to 10 yards, and the rain streaming down the back of your Lewis jacket.

But the tyres, being Metzlers and new (with the rear racing profile intact), coped very well on streaming roads, communicating only a slight uncertainty on the lean. Handling generally was fairly super, too. The bends had been and gone before I even thought about which line to take. Seems the Le Mans has a mind of its own when it comes to cornering. The first things to touch the Tarmac around a bend were the centre stand tangs. A bit unnerving when you get off the machine and have a look at them, cause they are tucked well away.

I did notice a weave setting in around the long bend at our test track, but Scott the Rot didn't; said I was stupid and that I should have another go. I did, same result. A weave sets in at high speed around a bend. Scott still didn't notice it.

But it turns out that Guzzi Lemons production racers are having the same handling problems on the race track. The trouble can only be put down to the detachable frame member that runs along the bottom edge of the engine on both sides. These are designed to allow the engine to be dropped conveniently, and, looking at them, the Guzzi frame seems to be designed rather like the big Duke frame. That uses the engine as a vital stress bearing in the frame assembly, difference with the Lemon being that the aforesaid detachable members are included as a spacer more than anything else. Personally, I don't see anything that's bolted on like those, taking too much stress.

Otherwise, the handling was faultless, and it was a real joy to take the Guzzi on to the track where a little throttle twisting and cornering didn't have me looking in the single right-hand mirror for feds and/or murderous lorry drivers.

When the Le Mans is accelerating it seems to be charging more than anything else. Dropping the clutch at standstill with 6 thou on the clock made the front wheel jump. The engine goes wap-wap-wap in ever increasing cycles as the power floods in all across the rev range. A four-stroke supreme, stacks of torque and plenty of power in reserve. The engine, push-rod to be sure (and so what?), gives the overwhelming impression of total reliability and strength. The engine runs hot, but so do all Lemons. Could be something to do with the high performance. There are no air filters on the carbs, for some reason. Probably it's because the designer forgot to

include them. The air intakes have large mesh grills, presumably to stop birds and pedestrians being sucked into the barrels, there to meet a hideous fate. It really is a sound to listen to as the starter switch is jabbed and the processes begin inside the engine. If the vapour doesn't ignite immediately you're treated to a cycle of delightful sounds, sucking and wheezing that would have Mary Whitehouse hopping with rage and embarrassment if they ever got on to TV. You can almost see the valves opening and closing if you peer down the carb stacks, but you have to be careful not to get too close otherwise your eyes will be sucked out.

In a strange fit of lateral thinking, Guzzi have turned the crankcase inside out, and put all the crankcase fins on the outside, which may look nice but are a bastard to clean. And, speaking of cranks, the Guzzi flywheels are whoppers.

As the engine revs hard you can almost feel the inertia of the bloody great things. This results in notchy gearchanges, and when combined with the engine speed clutch, things get very delicate. Comparisons with BMW are inevitable. Both those and Guzzis employ the shaft-drive, the engine speed clutch and the sticky out pots, and they share the sideswipe this entails, too. The Le Mans change wasn't so bad as the BMW can get when it's in a vile temper. But it has its own quirks. Second to third had me foxed completely. And once third was disengaged, then everything else got cocked up, naturally. It was easy to go from two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half and thence to four-and-a-half and five-and-a-half, without once engaging a proper gear. It's a drag doing drag starts sometimes.

If you mis-time dumping the clutch, a fear-some lunge forward is experienced, from the combination of heavy flywheel and shaft-drive. It takes care to avoid these clumsinesses, though they only become a real nuisance in the bottom three gears; changes are quite swift in the closer-ratio top two.

In fact, the gears are taller than Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. Break the urban speed limit in first, and all the others in second. A ton comes at the end of the third cog, and the rest is plain sailing if the kopz don't get you. A very well turned out Guzzi Le Mans is capable of hitting 137mph. Ours managed a mere honest 128 big ones. Nothing to be ashamed of, though, even if I did have to wear me brown trousers. Neutral was always easy to find, and

no clutch slipping was needed in town when hacking from A to B.

Some riders in the office (no, not in the office, you dope) didn't like the fairing, said it was stupid and didn't do anything etc etc. But I maintain that these silly bloody fairings, like on the Seeley staff machine, *do* work. Perhaps not too well at low speeds, and so what if all the idiot lights and the instruments were obscured for any rider above four feet ten by the stupid fly screen? But it does work, I reckon. You have to go *really* fast to appreciate it. Still, I did see a Le Mans in the South of France without a fairing, and it did look tasty. Rather like an Agusta.

And who cares if the speedo had around a 15 per cent discrepancy at the top end? I like thinking I'm doing 200mph down my own road. Actually, the speedo went up to 160mph, and with the optimism displayed on the Veglia instrument, it's feasible for the needle to get up there.

The rest of the cycle parts were well-finished, but more designed for elfin riders such as Phil Read, who owns one of these desirable machines. Me, I'm six honest feet tall. My knees stuck forward and my butt pushed off all but the hardest pillion. The trafficator switch was so dinky that constant reassurance as to its status was needed by looking at the front indicators. A plus was the headlamp switch, that had a lock so it couldn't be knocked off by accident. Employing the hooter very often resulted in a flash, as that is on the other side of the rocker switch. Silly bloody things, rocker switches.

And the twist grip has a friction screw, so it can be set tight or sprung. In fact, compared to all the other Italian flash bikes on the market, the Moto Guzzi Le Mans is a paragon of good finish. All this and 44mpg, too. The black exhaust pipes look as though they'll last a good long while before the dreaded Guzzi rust shows through. The way the exhausts are arranged across the rear shox made me cringe in mere contemplation of adjusting the springing. Actually fitting the C-spanner around the adjusters would entail removing both of the silencers; it's a bit of a squeeze, to be sure. The paint on the tank is good and thick, and so is the chrome on those parts that are chromed. In all, the finish bears more comparison to Japanese machines than any other Italian job apart from the Laverda Jota.

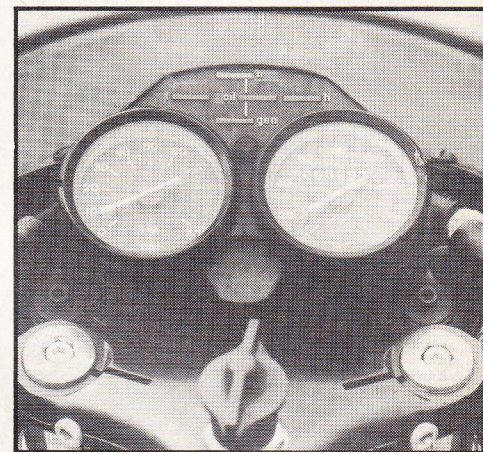
The fuse box under the right-hand side panel is dead easy to get at and to work on, together with the fluid reservoir.

Progressive wound springs at the back provide sophisticated damping. Shrouded dampers inside the springs keep out the muck and bullets; it's a firm ride at the back end but my no means too stiff. Likewise the front. The forks travelled well, and never bottomed. They rode bumps like a valkyrie on heat. In common with other shaft-drive machines, the shaft and its housing are utilised as one swing-arm.

Tell you what, it's a good £2099 worth. Like it? Course you do.

All you need is the dough.

Steve Brennan



## Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans £2099

### PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed - 128.8mph  
Standing Quarter Mile - 13.4sec  
Braking Distance From 30mph - 27.5ft  
Braking Distance From 60mph - 110ft  
Fuel Consumption - 44mpg  
Best Full-Tank Range - 160 miles

### ENGINE

Type - 90 degree pushrod vee-twin four stroke  
Displacement - 844cc  
Power - 80bhp at 7300rpm  
Torque - 50.6kg/m at 6700rpm  
Bore & Stroke - 83mmx78mm  
Compression Ratio - 10:2  
Induction - two 36mm Dell'Orto slide carburetors with accelerator pumps  
Exhaust - two into two with twin balance pipe  
Oil System - wet sump, high pressure system  
Ignition - battery and coil

### TRANSMISSION

Clutch - dry diaphragm  
Primary Drive - direct  
Final Drive - shaft  
Gearbox - five-speed

### CHASSIS

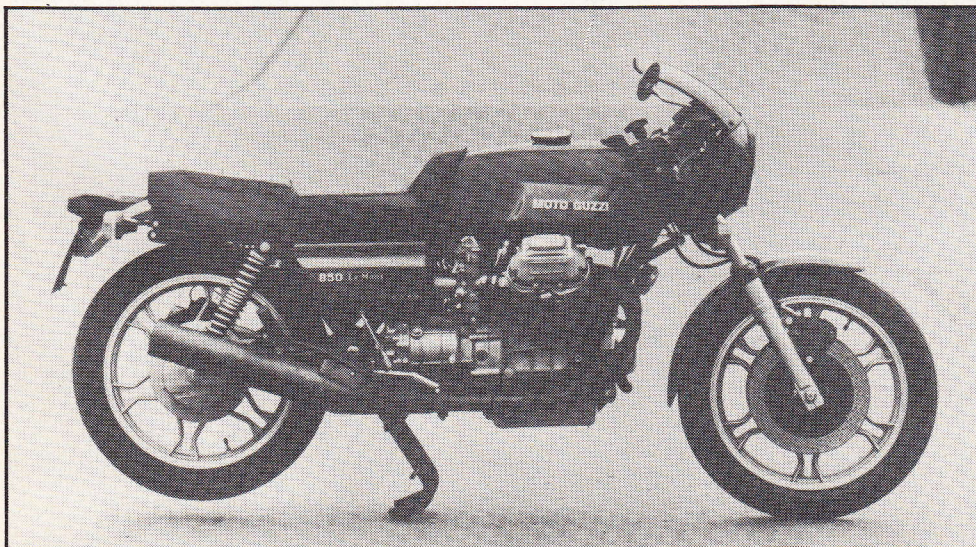
Frame - Duplex cradle with detachable bottom tubes  
Front suspension - telehydraulic forks  
Rear Suspension - swing-arm and shock absorbers  
Wheelbase - 57.9in  
Ground Clearance - 7.25in  
Castor - not available  
Seat height - 30.5in  
Weight (wet) - 488lb  
Fuel Capacity - 5.8gall  
Tyres - Metzeler: 3.50H18 front, rear 4.10V18 rear racing profile  
Brakes - Brembo in conjunction with Moto Guzzi Integral Braking System

### INSTRUMENTS

160mph speedometer; 10 000rpm rev counter yellow lined at 7000, red lined at 8000; warning lights - neutral, lights, oil, high beam and generator

### EQUIPMENT

Electrical 12V20 A/h



November 77 40p

# SUPERBIKE

**FREE**  
POSTER INSIDE



**ITALIAN  
JOBS:  
CUZZI  
LE MANS  
DUCATI  
900 CTS  
LAVERDA  
500**

