

MOTO GUZZI LE MANS MK II



LE MANS, L'AMOUR

The promise of Moto-Guzzi's original street racer is fully realised in its svelte successor. *Mark Williams* makes with the ego-gratification.

Photographs by *Ian Dobbie*.

One of the most exhilarating machines I've ever ridden was that spunky looking Moto-Guzzi 750cc S-3, a crude machine in many ways but one which provided an almost perfect synthesis of raw power, handling and braking. When we tested it way back in the summer of '76, it was nearing the end of its production life but we were promised a larger capacity machine with the same thoroughbred character, and sure enough, it was only a matter of months before the fire-engine red Le Mans arrived to throw gauntlets at Laverda Jotas, Ducati 900s and Z-1s. But I never got to ride it.

However, even reading through the lines of our own Jerry Clayton's test of the Le Mans in September '77, it was clear that the bike was flawed, perhaps the victim of hasty

development, but other reports of dodgy electrics, splitting seats and poor finish (always an Italian weakness, anyway) were starting to filter into the office. So it was with a mixture of apprehension and eager anticipation that I took over a well-used Le Mans II. Would it vindicate the ambiguous reputation of the original Le Mans and transport me to the same heights of hard-riding pleasure as the S-3, or would it be a petulant, ill-kempt animal?

Well, the first impression is always visual and on that score alone it's an improvement even on the sexy-looking original. The fairing has most of the aerodynamic advantages of the Spada, slightly fewer of the protective ones and the best aesthetics to be seen on a production bike from Italy, or anywhere else

for that matter. Tough 'n' bitchin'!

Plonk yourself down on the all-of-a-piece angular seat (no ripped seams here), grab the stubby little 'bars and put your feet on the footholds and the Le Mans feels surprisingly comfortable, even for a lanky 6' 2" frame like mine. And the feeling remains the same even after three hours' hard riding, the only reservation being the sore bits on my calves where the hard rubber "cushions" protect your legs from the fairing's edge and the rocker covers; a shorter rider wouldn't have his legs up against these all the time and so consequently wouldn't have the same problem.

Starting's a snap. One of those plastic flickers on the nearside 36mm Dell Orto operates the chokes on both carbs and a dab on the starter

button fires the engine into life almost immediately from cold. The choke can be dispensed with after about 15 seconds but the throttle has to be revved. Right away you're aware of the induction roar from the unfiltered carburettor bellmouths: Rorty. But one wonders about the longevity of jets and valve gear with all that dirty British air, dust and garf going into them.

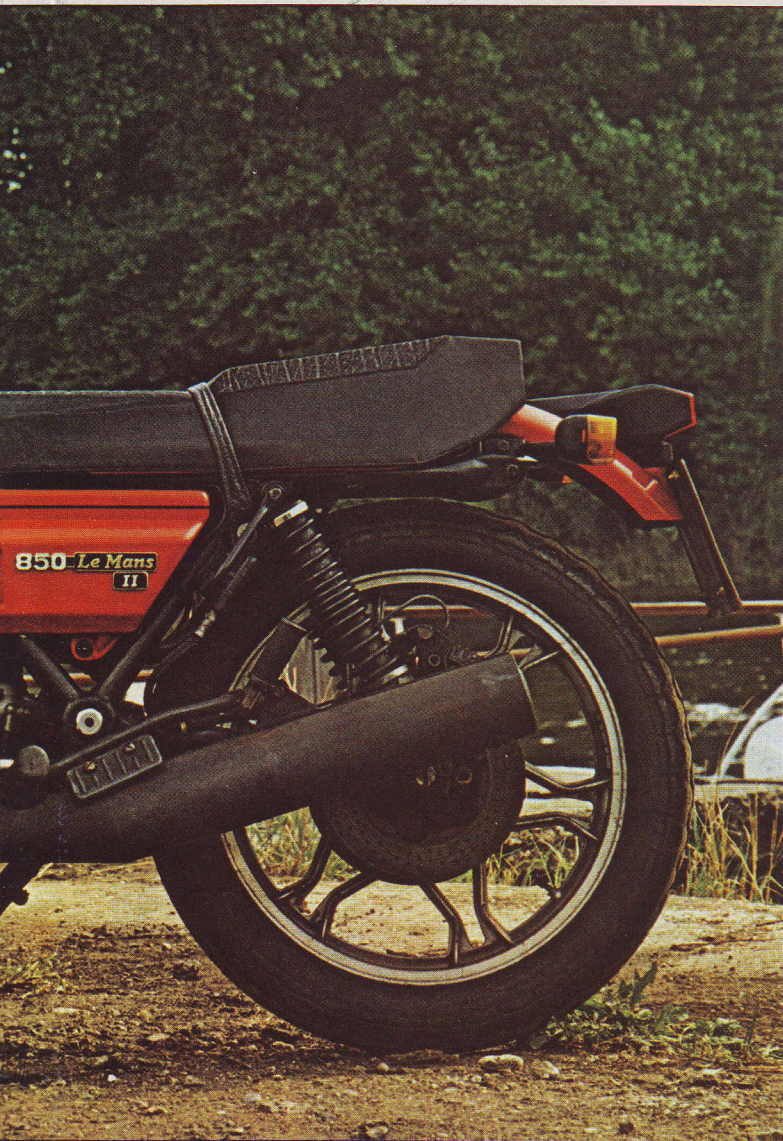
The inside of the engine is tough and efficient, synonyms which apply universally to Guzzi engineering. The 90° V-twin has almost square cylinders of 83 x 78mm bore and stroke and massive plain bearings suspend the crankshaft and big-end. A geared pump supplies the lubrication at a healthy 54/60 p.s.i. from 6½ pint wet sump – heavily finned to further aid an even viscosity.

Sparks are provided by contact breakers, as on all Guzzi's save the V-50/35 series, and a useful 20 amp alternator sits on the front of the crank, providing the current for the massive 12-volt battery.

Clutch action is fairly light

Bottom left: One of the best designed instrument panels around, all set in impact absorbing rubber. Bottom right: Not much room for the knees behind the cylinder and inside the fairing, for the long-of-limb.





and the gear selector is, as ever, notchy but a tad more positive than that other European shaftie, the BMW. Release the clutch gradually with at least 3500 revs in hand and you'll make a clean get-away, anything less and you'll stall or cough and splutter into the middle distance — not a very dignified mode of departure when you're trying to impress your friends. Provided you keep the revs up, the Le Mans is a fairly handy bolide in town, despite its high gearing. Although it's got 10.2:1 compression and those juicy great carbs with accelerator pumps, it's positively mild-mannered. Unless, of course, you decide to get serious and give the throttle a decent yank.

As I already mentioned, there's not a lot of oomph below 3500, but crank it up to 4500-5000rpm and the bike jets forward with an urgent but essentially inoffensive exhaust note and maintains its progress without a trace of lightheadedness. This absolute conviction in the Guzzi's straightline roadholding is continued throughout the bike's handling range and is the product of several factors. A low centre of gravity is

one and the company's own shock absorbers and front forks are two more (although the sealed damper unit fitted inside the front sliders are bought in from Carboni of Belgium). However the tyres fitted to the bike we tested were Avon Roadrunners — the handbook lists Pirelli MT18s, Michelin M45s or Metzeler Rilles/C7s as required rubber. Despite the non-approval of the factory, the Avons seemed to work well on the Le Mans, although we never had the opportunity to test them in the wet.

The ride isn't as hard as the Laverda Jota or Ducati 900SS, but is nevertheless on the firm side and although the seat does less to cushion your bum from the bumps than a contemporary Jap roadster's might, it's perfectly adequate for an eleven stone weakling such as myself.

Only when changing gear at high revs is the change in inertia from the shaft drive apparent, but it's just a slight "squirrel" through the chassis and nothing untoward. (If anything, the surge of power momentarily flicking through the bike adds to the excitement of riding it!) The Guzzi's cornering prowess is little



Left: The design of the fairing allows good cooling for the pots and some warm air through to the legs. Above: Black exhaust and rear shock springs contribute to the Guzzi's understated look.

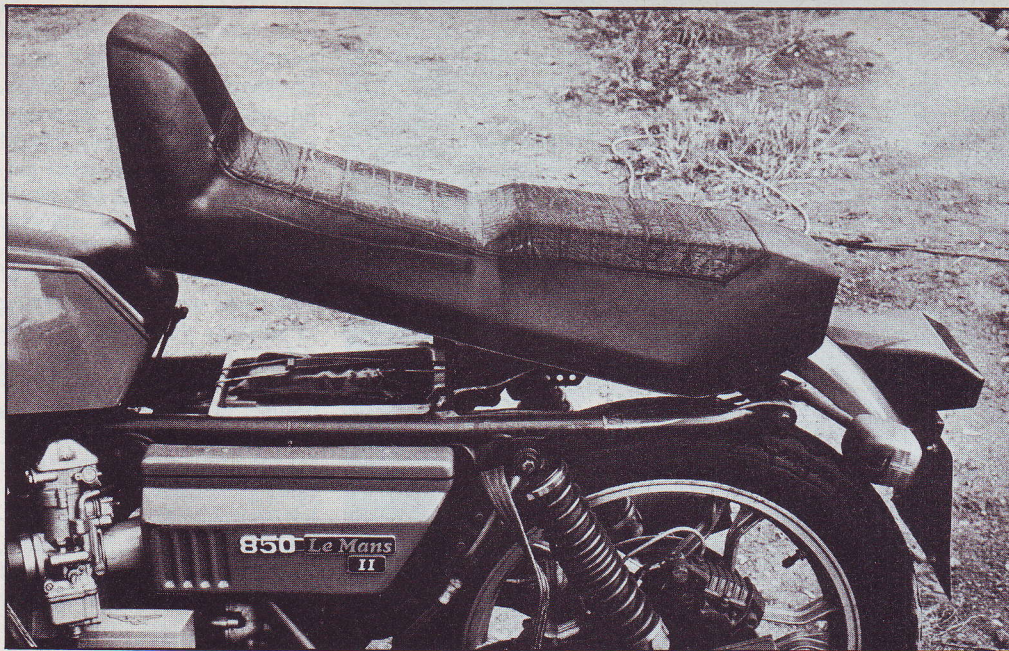
short of sensational and certainly undermines populist notions about the understeering characteristics of shaft-drive bikes. It tucks neatly into a line and holds it all the way around, responding to changes in throttle and even gear ratio with little or no protest. If pushed really hard it was possible to ground the footrests or centre-stand, but this occurred only during moments of spurious bravado.

The power characteristics differ little from that of the original Le Mans which means you get 17.5mph per 1000 revs in top gear, depending on how consistent the speedo inaccuracy is throughout the range – at an indicated 60mph the bike's true speed is 56.5mph. It's a long-legged machine in top and will cruise sanely at any speed up to 110mph, due in part to the fairing which shields the rider from excessive buffeting. Beyond that the tach needle starts entering the 7250-8000 yellow band, territory which holds no unpleasant surprises but would generally remain verboten to the careful owner. If pushed to the 8 grand limit, the Guzzi was tearing along at an indicated 142mph, which probably meant a true velocity of ten mph less.

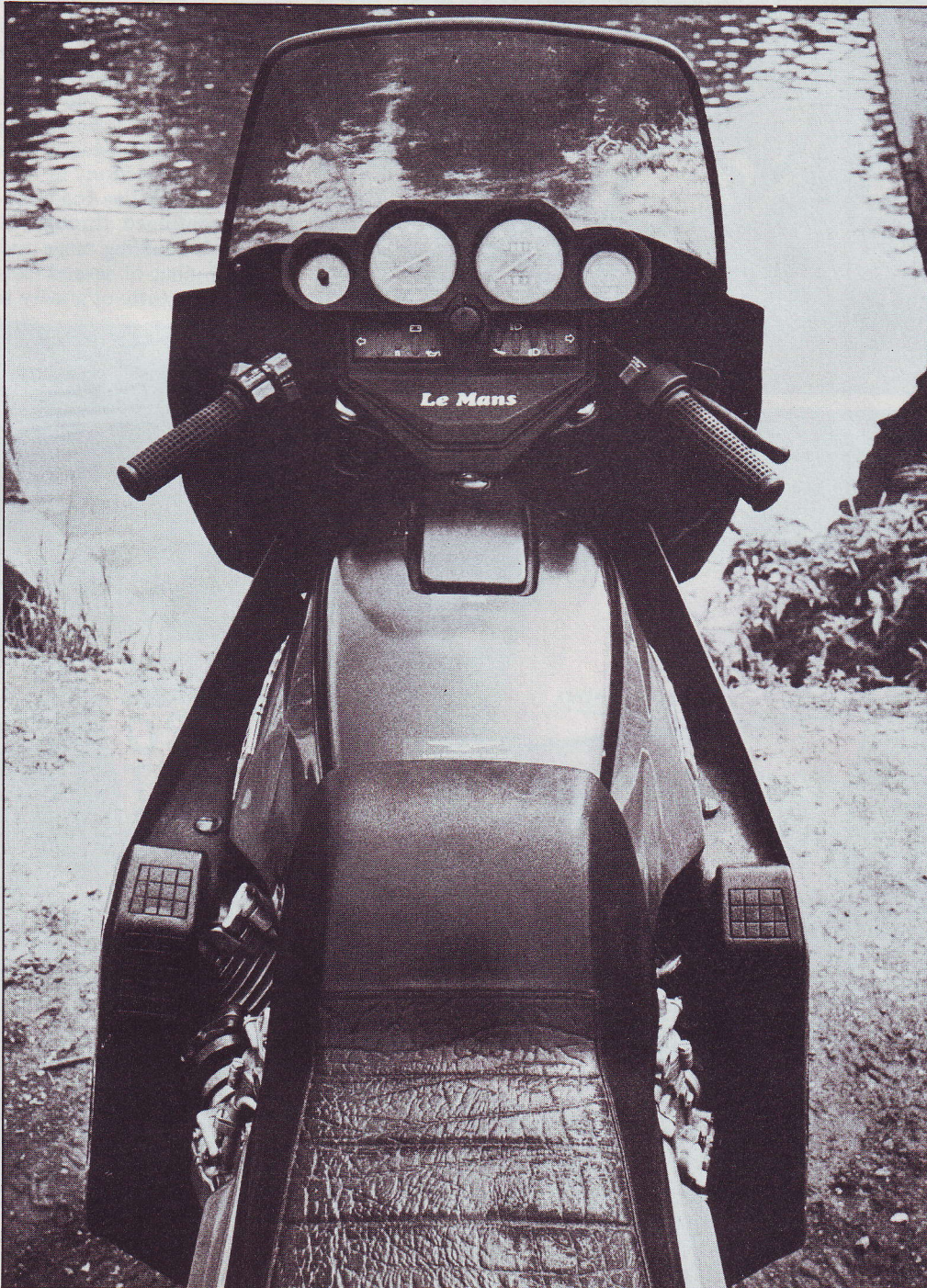
The Le Mans is of course fitted with the linked-hydraulic system which operates the left-hand front disc under limited pressure when the rear brake lever is depressed. Allied to the drilled, cast-iron, 300mm Brembo discs which have fixed calipers, this set-up provides about as safe and responsive deceleration as you're likely to find on any motorcycle in the world, and I don't think I need to say anything more than that in relation to the bike's braking capabilities.

Although the wind/induction/exhaust roar above 100 mph tended to deter travelling for long periods in excess of that speed, the engine only started to feel overstressed beyond 120mph. The clatter from the pushrod valve gear was the only noise that penetrated the aforementioned roar, but only if one's had was ducked below the smoked perspex windscreen. Unlike the BMW RS/T series fairings, the Guzzi's windjammer doesn't deflect the elements directly into the taller rider's face at high speeds – a nice bonus. But I'd rather put up with that than suffer the ab-

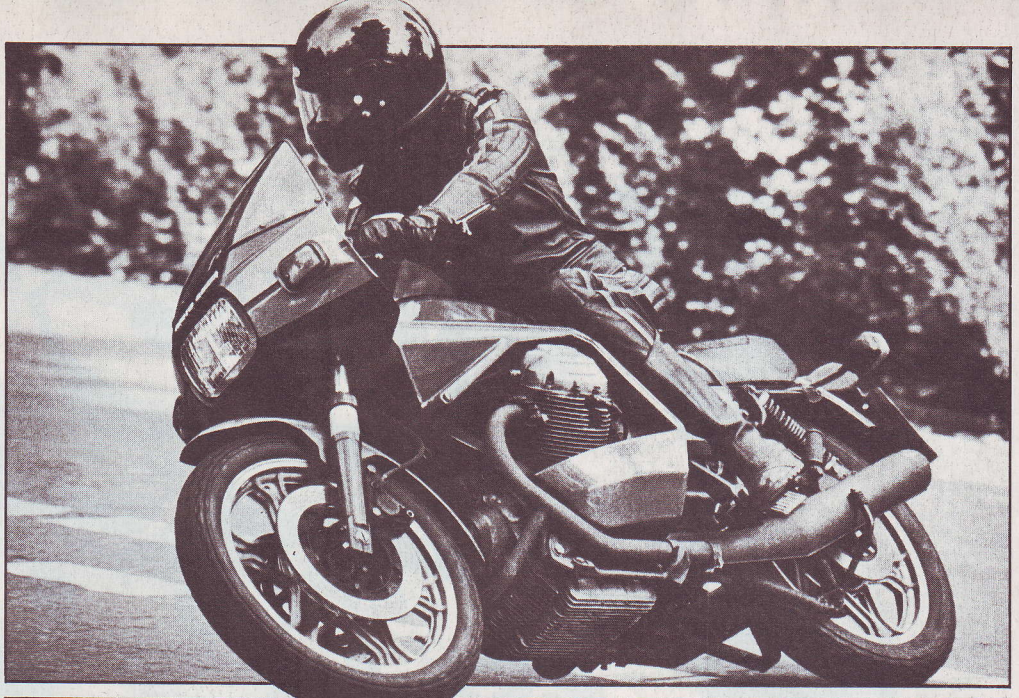
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Le Mans' rear-hinged seat was a hassle to remove but improved in quality compared to early model's. Aerial view of Le Mans' just begs you to jump aboard and get serious!



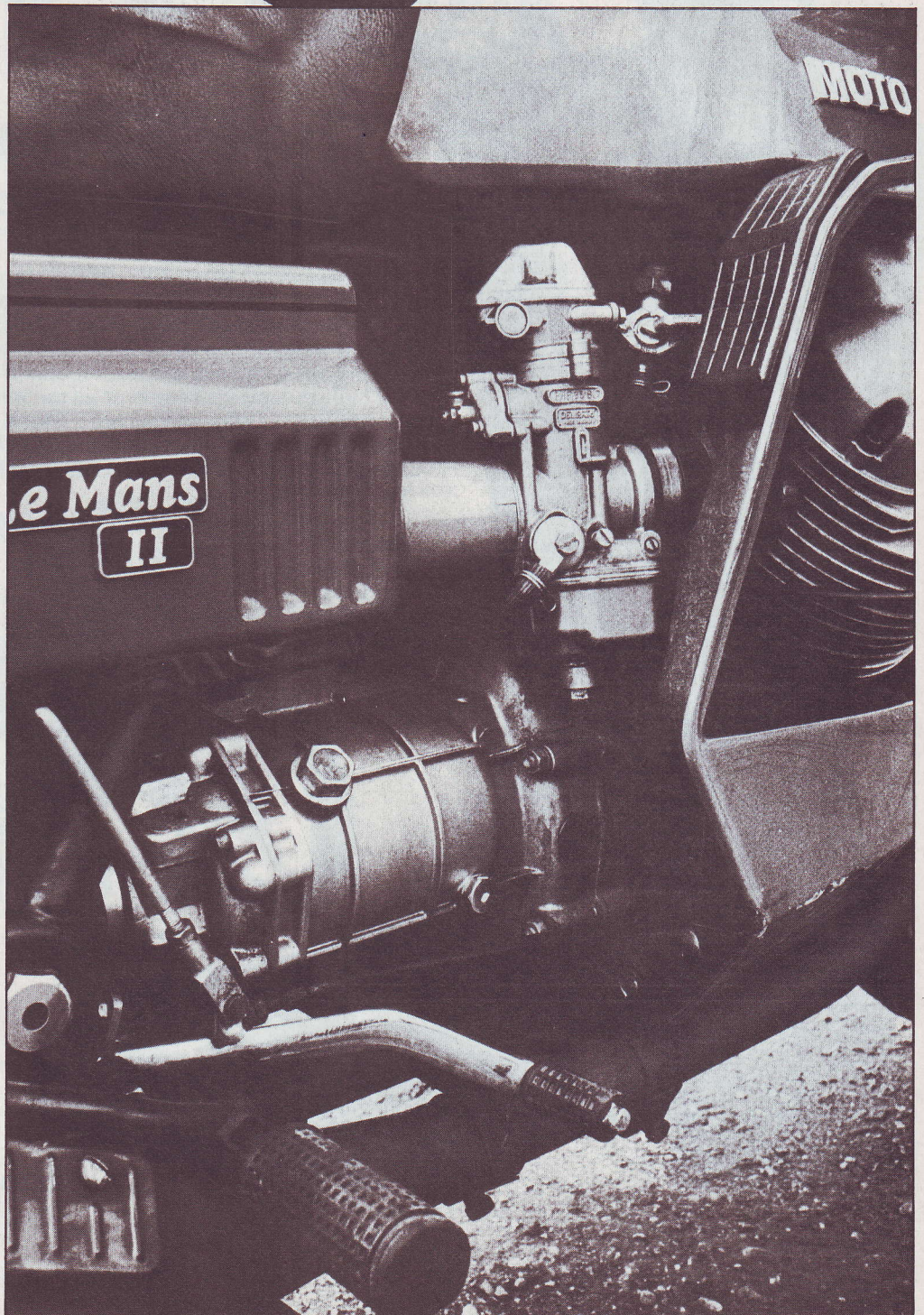
Forks give firm-ish, consistent roadholding and Brembo discs were unbeatable (below). Dell Orto carbs rarely faltered but plastic bell-mouths were unfiltered, (below, right).



sence of a rearview mirror; a serious deficiency on a bike of the Guzzi's performance.

The only criticism I have of fast riding the Le Mans II is an unduly heavy throttle action, it was utterly responsive *provided* a strong wrist was applied to it. There are a few minor quibbles concerning the switchgear, redesigned since the Mk I Le Mans appeared but just as quirky in its own way. I found myself fumbling for the horn button (and the horn itself isn't up to Laverda or BMW standards), and the trafficator switch in situations where fast thinking was definitely, though not dangerously, undermined by poor ergonomics. However the provision of 4-way emergency flashers off-sets these deficiencies to some extent.

The lights themselves are no more than adequate — a 45/40 watt headlamp proving unsatisfactory for safe night riding at speeds beyond 60/65mph, and the dip beam was angled *a la continent* which didn't enhance relationships with motorists caught in the glare on poorly-lit city streets. Again, the design of the switchgear detracted even further from their efficiency. (I should point out in defence of CEV who make the switches for Guzzi and Benelli, that on other bikes with normally bent handlebars, the wrist and thumbs are not at such an unnatural angle to the modules as they are with the Le Mans' clip-ons, and the switches are consequently easier to operate). A clock and voltmeter are new additions to the control panel which is now housed in high-density foam — and the warning lights are easy to read.



A slight ache in the wrist and forearm is the only adverse comment I can add to the above when assessing the Le Mans' behaviour in slow urban traffic. On the open road this doesn't of course apply because the weight of the body is pulled toward the rear of the chassis by the wind and those dramatic g-forces.

Everything on the bike is easy to get at for maintenance purposes — except the tool-roll and handbook under the seat! Before you can slide the retaining catch to release the rearward hinged upholstery, you have to remove a split-pin from the spigot which holds the pillion strap in place. A very tedious business and one I expect most owners will avoid by simply removing the strap altogether. The Guzzi spares network is now well established and prices in many cases are lower than for comparable Japanese machines (but see *2-Wheel Gazette*). However the standard of finish is still not up to the Le Mans' oriental peers; the pinstriping on the redesigned gas tank was peeling off and the petrol filler cap didn't seal properly. It's true that the matt black paintwork on the exhaust system is thicker and less prone to flaking than that applied to the Mk. I, but it's still not all it should be.

At the end of the day though, the Guzzi Le Mans Mk. II is an immensely desirable machine and something of a bargain at £2499. (Indeed some of the niggles I discovered on our test machine such as inadequate horn, headlamp, paintwork etc., could be rectified for at a cost that would still leave you spending less overall than the price of a Laverda 1200 or Jota, Kawasaki Z1300 or Honda CBX, machines which may offer more in the way of technical complexity but little extra kudos or performance.) Perhaps the ultimate accolade I can offer the Le Mans is the conviction that if I didn't already own a Jota, I'd probably buy one myself.

MOTO-GUZZI LE MANS MK II

Price:	£2447
Warranty:	18 months parts and Labour + Autoguard
Engine:	90-deg ohv V-twin
Capacity:	844cc
Lubrication:	Wet sump
Comp Ratio:	10.2 to 1
Ignition:	Coil and contact breakers.
Carburetion:	Two 36mm Dellortos.
Max Power:	80bhp at 7,300 rpm
Max Torque:	N/A
Primary drive:	Gear
Clutch:	Dry plate
Gearbox:	Five-speed
Final drive:	Shaft.
Mph/1000rpm:	17.5 in top
Electrics:	12 volt 20ah battery, 14 volt 20A generator
Fuel capacity:	4.8 gallons
Frame:	Duplex cradle
Suspension:	Oil damped telescopic fork (f) Swing arm with 3-pos preload (r)
Brakes:	Two 11.8in discs (f) 9.5in disc connected (r)
Tyres:	Avon Roadrunners, 3.50x18 (f) 4.10x18 (r).

DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase:	58in
Seat Height:	30in
Grnd. clrnce:	6.9in
Dry Weight:	431 lbs

EQUIPMENT:

Electric starter, rev counter, clock, voltmeter, hazard flashers, fairing, fuelcap lock, trip meter.

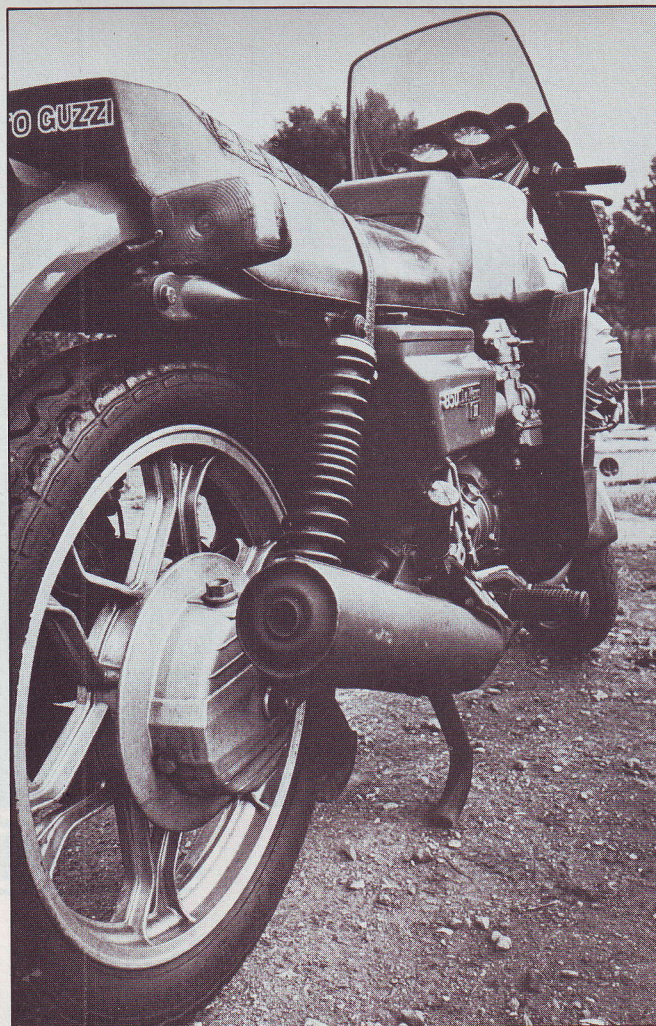
PERFORMANCE:

Top Speed:	142mph
St. ¼-mile:	13.2 sec
0-60:	4.5 sec

Speed at ind.

60mph:	56.5
Ave. fuel cons.:	42mpg
Tank range:	201 miles
Importer/Manufacturer:	Moto Guzzi Concessionaires, 53/61 Park St, Luton, Beds.

Cranked over hard and going like a good 'un, the Le Mans shows its redoubtable prowess as a scratcher... as well as a heavily finned sump and an exhaust balancer pipe!



Business end of the Le Mans; note high-swept mufflers and smart alloy wheels.

