

Moto Guzzi Club GB member Keith Bilney has travelled far and wide on his 1978 Le Mans but never before to Russia. At the second attempt he managed it.

MOSCOW by Guzzi

When I visited Mandello in 1991 I saw a promotion for a Guzzi factory-sponsored trip to Moscow, the first international Moto Guzzi Moscow meeting. My interest was stirred and I duly sent off my deposit. Then the air pipe of the rear suspension on my 1978 Le Mans II burst, leaving me with a broken collar bone and a nearly written-off

bike; I had to cancel. I found I was able to transfer my deposit to the following years tour and once again prepared to go to Russia, having repaired the bike over the winter.

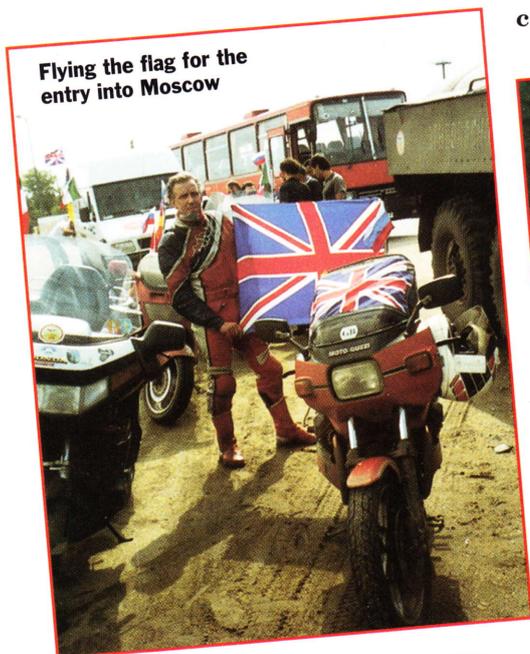
In the meantime, I hardly dared go out on the Guzzi and I had some doubts when I discovered that I was to be the only English person going, on the only Le Mans.

There were several routes, converging on Moscow and the total price of the one I had chosen was around £1,100. This seems a lot, but when you consider what you're getting, it's not that bad. It covered everything within the former USSR, including petrol, hotels, food and drink, entertainment, the lot. I can assure you that it was worth every penny!

Starting off Thursday, (5 August 1993) the plan was to go to Budapest and meet the other participants there. There was Mike, a French and English-speaking Australian from Switzerland, Phillip, a French and English-speaking Swiss, and Klaus, a (West) German who also speaks some English. The others were all Italian and there were about 18 bikes in all.

I set off early for Dover and caught the boat to Calais. I had allowed three days to get to Budapest although it could have been done in two. Pre-planning the route involved drawing a line from Budapest to Calais on the map and working out a route of fast main roads which stuck as close to the line as possible without using toll roads. I did 600 miles on the first day, stopping overnight in Volkack.

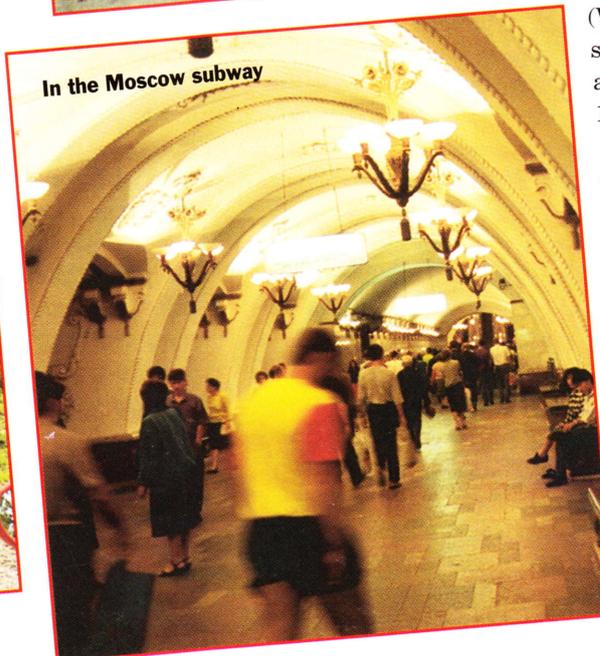
The next days hard ride



Flying the flag for the entry into Moscow



Yet another border crossing



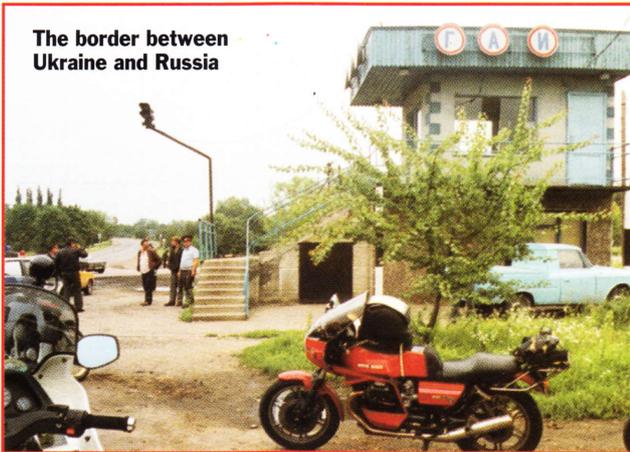
In the Moscow subway

was 400 miles, across the border into Hungary, then a short ride to Moson where I stopped at 4.30pm. No trouble at the border, they just looked at the passport and I was waved straight through. That just left me with 90 miles to Budapest the next day and the Hotel Tanne in Budekeszi, which is on the west side of Budapest. At the hotel we got to know each other over our evening meal and after a last briefing, we turned in so as to be fresh for the morning run to and through the Ukrainian border.

The next morning Klaus managed to chuck his California down the hill outside the hotel before we'd even started an engine, breaking his screen and mirror and grazing his arm. As we set off we had with us a back-up van with two factory mechanics and Katrina, the main organiser of the tour. Of Russian descent, she was likeable, very efficient and an excellent organiser. We passed through scenery not unlike Norfolk, with thatched roofs made from the reeds growing on the flats to either side of us. I also saw the reeds being cut into what I think we call shooks; at least, that's what my grandad called them!

There were about five miles of stationary trucks waiting at the border (it can take a week to reach the border in a truck once in the queue). The formalities took about two hours for us after which we headed for Uzhgorod, our first overnight stay in the former USSR. The weather was still good and the hotel, whilst not perfect, was fairly representative of what we found during the tour; I have seen much worse in Czechoslovakia! It was cleanish, but lacking in the niceties we were used to such as door handles, hot water, door locks that work etc. We had an unusual meal – glasses of tea with spoons of jam! Unfortunately, the Ukrainian folk group we were promised didn't materialise, but this was the only time we were let down in this way.

Tuesday morning saw us off for an early start as we had about 140 miles to cover that morning. This may not seem a lot but believe me, on these roads it is! Although they are straight and wide, they are far from flat and there are no level bits between the bumpy bits. Even the new road sections, few and far between, are not smooth and



The border between Ukraine and Russia



Motorcycle tourists hit Red Square

all the roads are liable to contain potholes big enough to throw you off. Add to this tar which is squidged up two feet high in the centre of the road by trucks and large dead animals creating extra hazards ... I now know there isn't a bumpy road in Britain!

We had lunch and a brief sight-seeing tour in L'Vov before carrying on another 130 miles to Rovno for our overnight stop. By this time we had a coach carrying our luggage, a fuel tanker for our petrol and our back-up van with its mechanics. It sounds like a very slow ride but, believe me, it wasn't! I wouldn't have missed this ride for the world! I'm not sure that the second Goldwing owner to drop his bike would agree though. He found a tramline raised about

six inches above the cobbled road surface and ended up facing the way he had come. The buildings, parks, roads and people are really poor-looking, especially out of town. The people seem resigned to what they have, or should I say have not, got. The entire country is in a very run-down state, as though it has suffered a total lack of maintenance for a long time.

We arrived in Kiev at about 2pm on Wednesday after 190 miles of slightly better roads. The hotel, set in a wooded area, was goodish – or were my standards slipping? At least there was hot water! We had two days here, with a sight-seeing trip into the city on the first afternoon where, at one point, it poured down about one inch in ten minutes; we were then attacked by mozzies; glad I took some repellent.

The next morning our guides took us to various places of interest, including monasteries and the arch given by Russia to show their tie with the Ukraine. We also visited a display of military vehicles which included a pair of aeroplanes which, although the the placard made no mention of it, I would swear were a DC3 Dakota and a late Spitfire in Russian colours! *Note by Assistant Editor: large quantities of military vehicles and aircraft, including DC3s and Spitfires were supplied to the Soviet Union during WW2. A copy of the DC3 was produced by Lisunov as the Li-2.*

Spotted by my comrade Mike was a tank made from an old caterpillar tractor with metal plates welded on to it. On the tracks it said 'Made in Russia'. Not strange? – it was in English!

After lunch with entertainment by a brilliant Ukrainian folk group was a cruise on the the Dneiper River. During the trip I enjoyed the undivided attention of the English-speaking guide and was able to talk to her more informally. Gleaning facts and discussing topics not on her usual itinerary, I learned of a building suffering from lack of maintenance where, a little while ago, a grand stone-pillared and balustraded frontage collapsed and killed hundreds of people.

The following day we headed for Oryol in Russia, a run of more than 300 miles. I managed to get up to 120mph whilst

MOSCOW

by Guzzi

continued

catching up, but after hitting a raised tar lump at about ninety I slowed down! The weather got colder and the Italians put on their oversuits. We had no trouble at the Russian border and shortly after we finished off the petrol in the tanker. Happily, another one was waiting to take over. Unfortunately the driver managed to roll it just in front of me! This meant a two-hour delay whilst we got two passing trucks to right it. I wasn't too happy when I noticed that the truck drivers were smoking, despite all the spilt petrol, but when I went to point this out to the policeman I found that he was smoking too, so I ignored it and stood well back!

There are no garages or filling stations, so if somebody breaks down they either repair it, recover it themselves with the help of passers-by, or simply leave it where it is. This means you may sometimes find a car in the middle of the road with the driver underneath repairing it, but you get used to that. Petrol is bought from the black market on the side of the road. This must be fraught with hazards for the purchaser and I bet it's dearer if you run out! Another common sight is whole families sitting on the roadside or centre reservation with a few apples to sell. I can't see these people getting any better off.

We had a police escort at all times on our way, and when other traffic saw it they pulled off the road. I think they have to do it and it sped up our progress quite considerably, but I don't think it did much for Western motorcyclist/Russian public relations.

We had a reasonable meal that night, with white wine and beer – even if it was

Moscow city limits



Russian. As we kept on about beer, Katrina gathered up the spares from the Italians who didn't drink beer and gave it all to us; we must have had about ten cans each that night. We were also entertained by a very professional Russian folk group and singer. The following day, Friday, we tanked up at 7am, ate breakfast at 8am and set out at 9.15 on the road for Moscow. Having travelled about 270 miles, we stopped to erect our flags on the bikes and then rode into and through the city to the hotel. There was much interest from the locals; they don't see anything like this very often! After unpacking, parking and lunching, we went to visit Red Square. I couldn't believe it, we were actually there!

Our guide told us that when she was small, she and her family had to come here to see a military parade. They had to walk in the snow for hours and then stand around freezing their bits off for five hours and then walk back home. Krushchev and the officials supposedly stood in the cold too, but in actual fact the stones where they stood were heated the night before, so that they could be warm on top of the Mausoleum.

The Basilica Church of St Basil, which is recognised by everybody as the main landmark of Red Square, stands at the river end of the square and is a truly magnificent building. As with most things here, it has a darker side. After it was completed, the Czar had the eyes of the architect put out and and, I think, had his hands cut off too, in order that he might never again create such a beautiful building. The Russian people have an extremely barbaric past and, having had the KGB building pointed out to me, I'm not sure that it was in the distant past!

During the evening meal we met the group which had come via the Polish border. They'd had problems in Byelorussia where all petrol supplies had been withdrawn and confiscated for 'agricultural purposes'. They'd lost their tanker and had to carry a supply in jerry cans obtained by subterfuge. They told us that the hotels and roads had been terrible but, when we returned by that route, we found them to be better than our route in both respects. The group of English-speakers had been enlarged by the addition of Vincent and Suzy, an Irishman and a Hungarian woman from Amsterdam, and Heinz, a German who only spoke German.

The next day we paraded the bikes with flags flying and a police escort to Red Square where we were swamped by interested Muscovites. Most people here seem to like Great Britain but there were some exceptions; I did hear 'Westerners go home' being shouted a couple of times. It was here that I was persuaded to swap a Union Flag for a USSR Red Flag, which I later paraded in Shaftesbury at the V-twin Rally.



Dancing with the Earth People



A dash of local colour

We then moved off and found ourselves heading out of town. After crossing a field (very difficult for the Goldwings, down goes another!), we arrived at a wooded area by a lake. Here we were invited to join in the festivities with a group of Earth people. They looked like flower-power hippies to me, but assured us that they were very different. We had a meal here, spit-roasted pig just for us. After a lot of dancing and log fire jumping we went back to the hotel, where I dropped off a young local who had cadged a lift. He was only about 14 and, although he seemed a little backward, he was speaking English, Italian, French and German, so he can't have been that daft can he? I can only manage English and a little German.

Later there were simultaneous firework displays on either side of the city and we got an excellent view from the roof of our hotel. Vincent got talking to some Muscovite Hells Angels types, one of whom looks just like an American Indian and has an old Harley Davidson. Pity he couldn't get a leather jacket though, plastic just isn't the same!

We had two more days in Moscow and fitted in a visit to the Kremlin which to my surprise is a church area with government buildings in it. We also visited the GUM department store, an Irish pub and went on the Metro twice. We returned to Red Square to see the little yellow man, as the locals call him – Lenin, then got a coach with a noisy axle and no shock absorbers to Zagorsk (which is now called something else) where we found a very nice street market. It was more friendly than usual, more like a boot sale, where I could have bought lots of things except that I was running out of dollars. In Russia the currency is American dollars or the local money: don't take anything else; they don't want it!

The next day about ten bikes headed for St Petersburg but the rest of us, about 26 bikes, were going west towards Poland. We had about 220 miles to cover that day on roads that were slightly better but still very rough. We saw our first and last filling station that was actually selling petrol and as we headed for Byelorussia we began to see some white lines, but only in big towns.

We had lost Phillip from our group, he'd gone North with the other group, taking our favourite leader Katrina with him. We missed her, and the organisation from then on was not so good; although Paul tried he didn't have the same flair. He is a very nice chap and gets on well with everybody but we feel that we are no longer part of our group, but 'the other group' tag-

ging on.

No one, including the police escort, had been briefed about the petrol tanker. The result was that when we approached the tanker on the side of the road, the police and some of the Polish route group didn't recognise it. There was a quite fast collision between two bikes riding two-up. Luckily, they landed on the soft shoulder so only minor injuries and damage were sustained.

The funny part was that the police continued oblivious, followed by some of the bikes. Vincent realised that there were no bikes following and passed the police car to tell them, just before one of the many police border check points, which resulted in him hurtling through the check point apparently hotly pursued by a police car. The border police joined in; luckily, no one got shot.

Our route took us through Smolensk and on to Minsk the following day. As we got into Byelorussia it was noticeable that things improved. More effort is put into work and industry. There is more cultivated land than in Russia and it's being worked, sometimes mechanically, sometimes by hand, but it is being done. I even saw a man walking behind a single shear plough being pulled by a horse.

As we got towards Minsk, we saw houses being built, weekend mini-mansions for people who work in the city and live in tower blocks during the week. Minsk was destroyed during the war and thousands killed, as happened in a lot of places here. The city, they say, has been built on top of their war dead and all is new and has their spirit in it. It seems to be working; they are into electronics and telecommunications as well as other industries. The affluence shows in the hotel and food as well; both were superb.

The following day while regrouping in a layby I noticed that my back tyre was flat, so I whipped out the wheel and slipped off the tyre. The mechanics had arrived by then and fitted a new tube for me. This was a blessing in disguise – all our spare fuel was in jerry cans in the VW back-up van. We'd assumed it was in front and were trying to catch it up when, in fact, it was behind trying to catch us up. I never did find any puncture in that tube.

After a final meal together in our hotel in Brest we prepared to go our separate ways. I joined a group which aimed to cross Poland in a day to be at the Czech Grand Prix on Sunday, a ride of over 500 miles. We arrived at the Czech border just as night fell and there we met up with our back-up van, which was lucky since



Righting the petrol tanker

we had not discussed our route or border crossing with them. In fact, I'm not even sure we knew it!

After a night in a good hotel a fast run got us to Brno in time for the first race. No problems parking; they simply closed off the motorway by the circuit and used it as a car park. After the 500 race I had to leave since the van was going and my kit was in the back. Truth to tell though, I was impatient to be riding on my own again.

The ride was better than I could have hoped for, miles of fast, smooth and swoopy roads through some glorious scenery with people waving as I went by. I felt great; if there is a heaven it will be like this, swooping along forever on my Guzzi Le Mans – which was running faultlessly as usual. I feel sorry for anyone who hasn't discovered bikes!

After a couple of days touring Czechoslovakia, taking advantage of the low prices, I headed for home and arrived in Shaftesbury in time for the V-twin Rally. And I still didn't get the long distance award! Them fish and chips don't half taste good after all the foreign stuff though. ■