



Glorious Guzzi

Roy Poynting rides one man's no-expense-spared, ultimate Moto Guzzi Le Mans



From this view – with down-turned bars, fly screen, twin pipes and those protruding cylinders – it could only be a sporting Guzzi.



Neat fly screen very much part of the Le Mans look.

MOTO GUZZI HAVE ALWAYS BEEN EXPERTS IN wringing everything out of a design concept. They did it with their flat singles, and in more recent days they have churned out innumerable variations on the transverse V-twin theme. Capacities have varied from 350cc to 1100cc, and states of tune have ranged from, 'wake me up when we get there', to 'omigawd, hope I've paid the insurance!' If you can identify all the models, you're a better man than me (well, more obsessive anyway), but even I know that some of the most distinctive and desirable vees are the Le Mans variants.

Why? Because – along with motorcycles like Velo Thruxtons and BSA Gold Stars – the Le Mans Guzzis have that aura of being a racer on the road. And like those English machines, they really do have a racing pedigree, with Italian production bike successes confirmed in the UK by victory in the 1977 Avon championship.

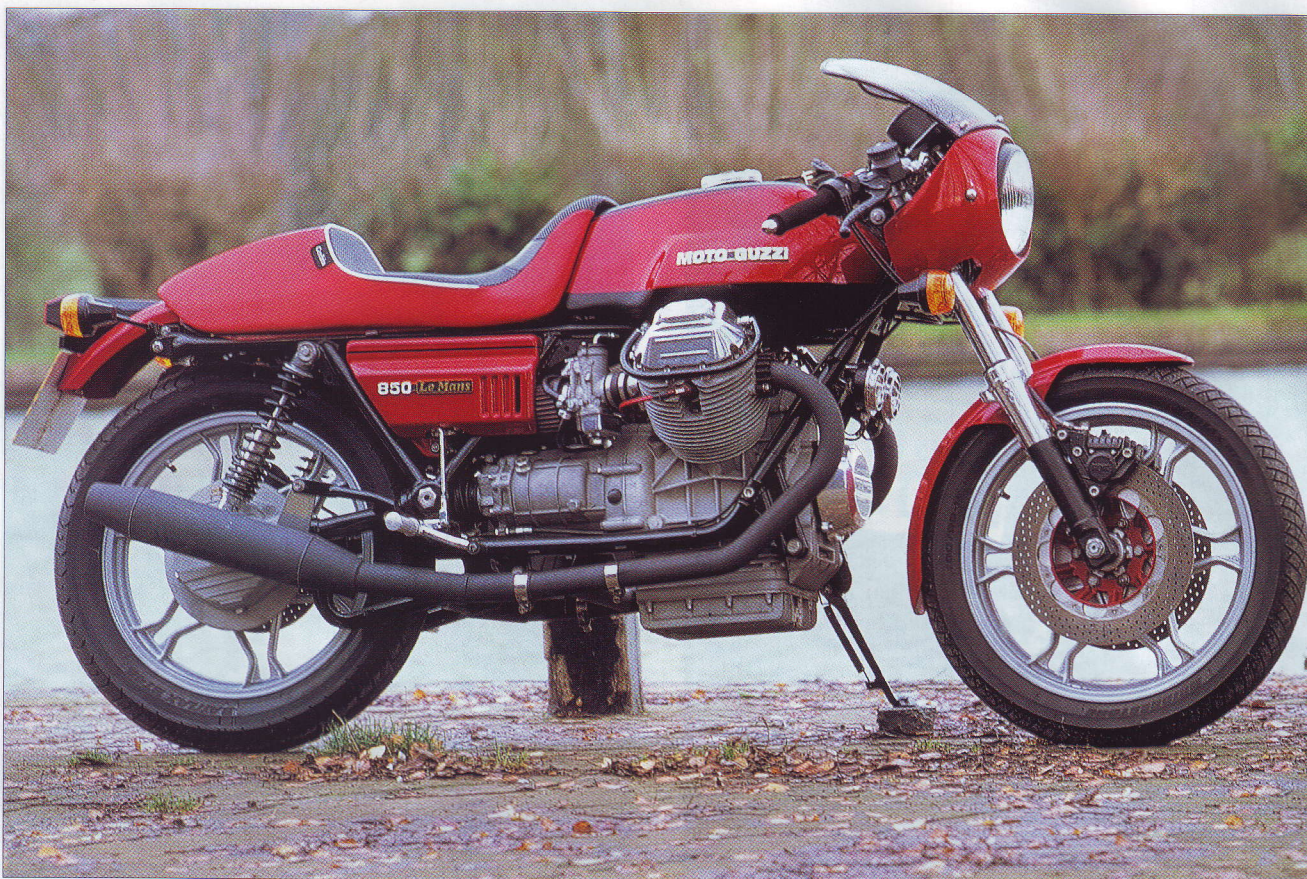
Four Le Mans variants were produced, and – although there were significant mechanical differences between them – they are most easily identified by their appearance. The MkI (1975 to 1978) featured here, had a small, rounded, handlebar fairing, while the MkII (1978 to 1981) had an angular full fairing. Then came the MkIII (1981 to 1984)

which looked like its predecessor without the lower part of the streamlining, but which can easily be distinguished by its squared-off rocker box covers. And finally, the capacity was boosted from its previous 850cc with the Le Mans 1000 (never officially called the MkIV), which was produced until the early-Nineties with a 'belly pan' fairing around the lower part of the engine.

All Le Mans Moto Guzzis undoubtedly had looks, class, charisma and performance, but the early ones also had a dire reputation. Even their owners referred to them as 'lemons', and some certainly soured the marque's image. *Motor Cycle* magazine had one on test in 1976, and couldn't refrain from some uncharacteristically blunt criticism.

The 1976 test bike's smart looks only lasted until its first refuelling; and that wasn't very long with an average consumption of less than 40mpg! The cap then leaked petrol, which removed the coach lining from the tank. Cosmetic disasters continued, with a 'short two-up spin' resulting in the dual seat splitting in two places.

The tester – John Nutting – wasn't very enamoured with the detail design, either. The clutch and throttle cables were routed so close to the exhaust and cylinder that their covers melted. And he noted that the silencers had to be



The ultimate Moto Guzzi Le Mans?

removed before the preload settings on the rear suspension units could be adjusted!

The instrumentation came in for disparagement, too; with Nutting wryly suggesting that an over-optimistic speedometer was partly responsible for Moto Guzzi's 'monster reputation'. 'You begin to doubt the instruments,' he wrote, 'when you're ambling down the motorway at an indicated 90mph and 850cc Minis whizz past like you're standing still. Getting 140mph on the clock is no problem at all,' he added, 'but bears no relation to reality'. Finally the speedometer cable broke, but he obviously felt that was no great loss.

It was strong stuff, but the remarkable thing was that the Le Mans was good enough in other areas to compensate for the shortcomings. Tester Nutting reckoned it was one of the best handling machines *Motor Cycle* had ever tested, with massive stopping power, and thrilling performance.

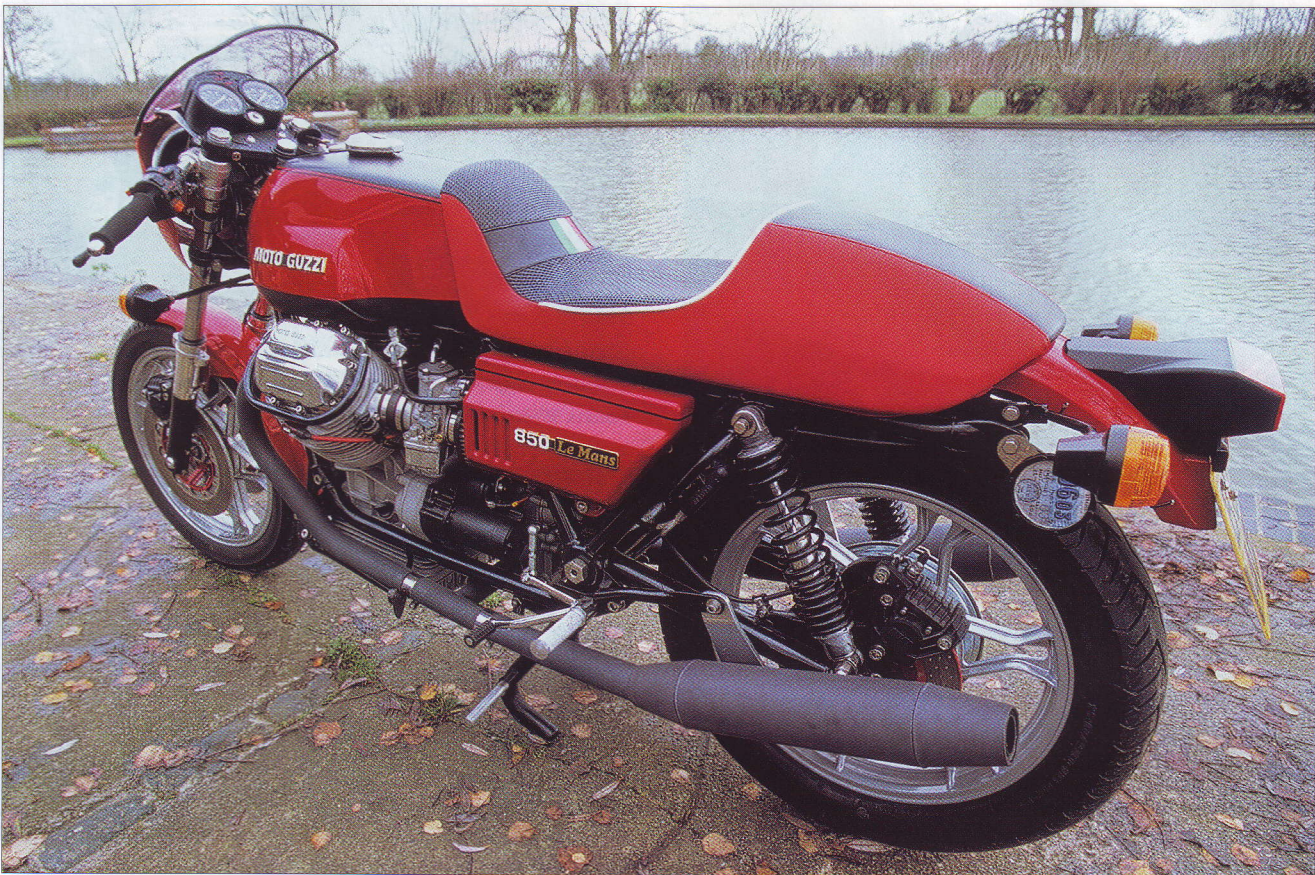
Motorcyclists are generally an optimistic breed, and our test bike's owner – Alan MacKenzie-Wintle – was among those who concentrated on the plus points, and chose to ignore the warning signs. At the time, he was a junior scientist with the Atomic Energy Authority, and had learnt to ride on a Suzuki Sports moped before passing his test on a Honda 400 Four. Then he fell under the spell of a nearly-new MkI Le Mans, and ran that for a while. His ownership ran according to script, and his delight at the handling and performance alternated with despair at the poor finish and unreliability. "It would go onto one cylinder in wet or

snowy weather," he remembers, "and I'd arrive home on a 375cc single with a glowing exhaust pipe." Unsurprisingly, Alan soon graduated onto oriental superbikes, and then moved down the capacity scale with a fast and furious Yamaha 350LC before a 10 year break from motorcycling.

But then, four years ago, he wandered into a classic motorcycle showroom, saw another MkI Le Mans, and felt the lure once more. "My wife and I were playing in a nearby hockey tournament, and I'd only gone there during a break," he grins, "but I bought the Guzzi on impulse, and then had to go and tell her what I'd done." I don't know how he managed to convince her that he'd made a wise move, because no sooner had he started to ride the Le Mans, than he rediscovered how the model dished out pain and pleasure in equal measures. As a youth he'd reacted by changing bikes, but he was now made of sterner stuff, and wondered just how good a Le Mans could be if only the bugs could be ironed out.

"I hatched a plan to make the ultimate MkI," he says, "and in November 1998 I went to discuss it with Moto Guzzi specialist Steve Wesson (01273 621392). He told me I was mad, but he sold me the frame, engine, and other bits and pieces I needed to start the project." The bill – the first of many – came to over a grand, with the dearest parts being the forks.

Alan started accumulating more components like Koni rear shocks, a new screen (Sprint Manufacturing 01985 850821) and the special Corbin seat. This cost \$300, but



Rakish good looks are the defining characteristic of this, the handsomest of all the 'marks' of Moto Guzzi.

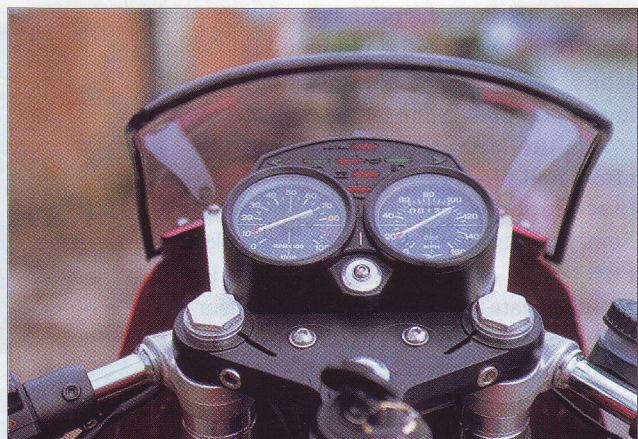
would have been much dearer except for an American relative who bought it from the makers and shipped it over. In general, prices could be described as expensive rather than totally outrageous (Wessons charged £120 for a pattern rear mudguard for example), but only those who have completed this sort of ground up rebuild can appreciate how quickly the costs stack up.

By the middle of 1999, Alan was still stockpiling parts, and Motomecca (01202 823453), Custom Fastners (01686 629666) and Hagon Products (0181 502 6274) were among those who contributed. The total cost had risen to around six thousand pounds, and he was nowhere near having a running motorcycle.

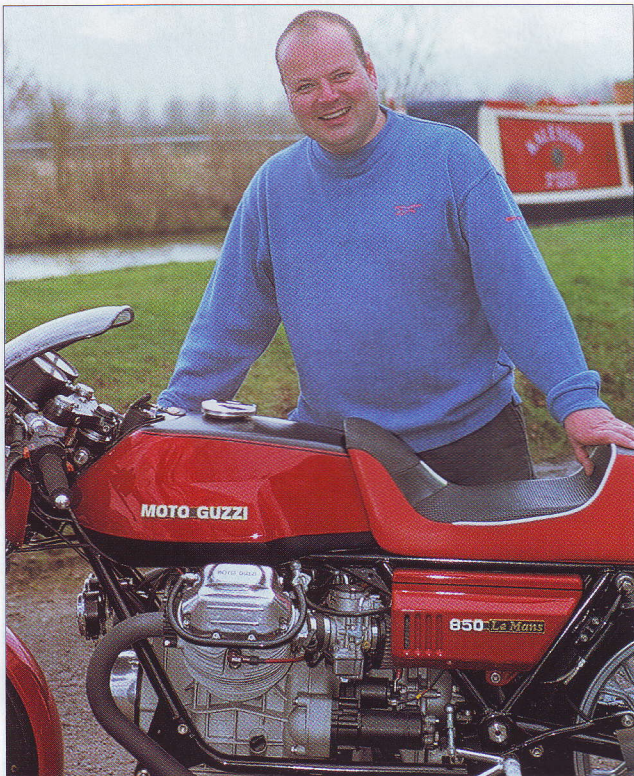
Alan could have had his engine rebuilt as standard, but he's clearly a man who'd prefer to gold plate his ship than to spoil it for a haphazard of tar. He took his incomplete engine to Moto-Guzzi tuning specialists Raceco (01728 602101) and restated his plan to make the best MkI Le Mans he could. Raceco's invoice spreads over four pages, and includes much exotica including special cams, lightweight cam gears, balanced crank and a Hall-effect ignition system. The most dramatic change from standard spec – and the most expensive individual items – were Wiseco forged pistons running on Carillo connecting rods in bored-out barrels that boosted the capacity to almost one litre. The barrels were topped off with lead-free, gas flowed, twin-plug cylinder heads, and they alone cost in the region of £1000 pounds.

I'm sorry to emphasise the cost of things (and so possibly is Alan who hadn't totted it all up until I quizzed him), but the fact is that the engine rebuild had approximately doubled Alan's previous expenditure, and he still hadn't got a running motorcycle.

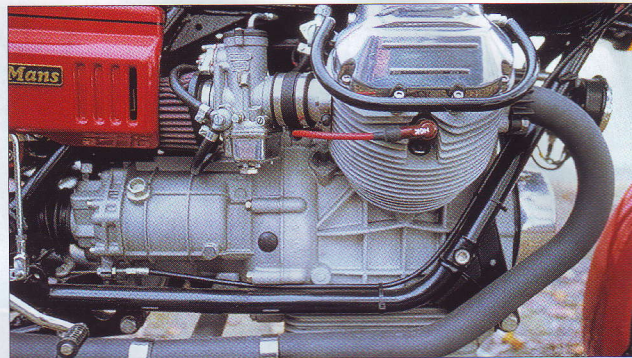
Now Alan doesn't claim to be expert enough to build the bike of his dreams, and anyway – now the busy agent of a multi-national computer company – he doesn't have enough free time. So, after a few months delay to allow his bank balance to recover, he carted the whole lot off to Andy Williams at Italian Motorcycle Engineering (01327 831143).



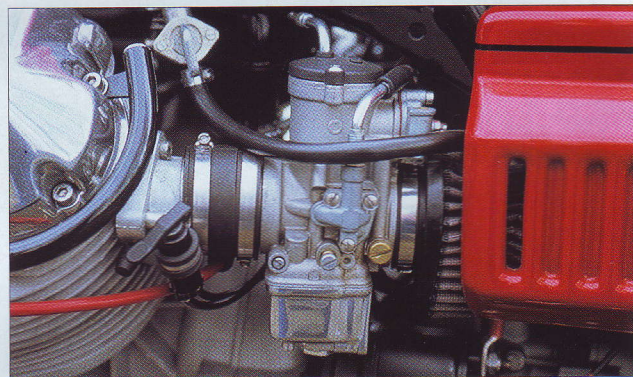
White numbers on black faced twin clocks, which apparently read somewhat optimistically on Guzzis in the Seventies!



Owner Alan Mackenzie-Wintle had his first Le Mans at the end of the Seventies – frustrated by its imperfections he vowed to build the machine he really wanted.



Standard engine is 844cc and 71bhp – this reworked version boasts 992cc and over 80bhp.

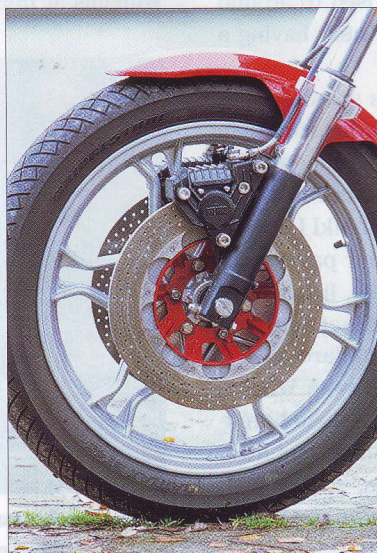


Carbs' are twin 36mm Dell'Ortos.

Anybody who has ever done an ambitious rebuild will be well aware that it involves much more than assembling a kit of parts (let alone a kit amassed by somebody else) and Andy's work continued over the best part of a year. It involved devising and making a wiring loom, fabricating handlebar end-weights and countless spacers and brackets, and refurbishing the front forks. He also organised the plating and re-painting of parts. Everything is top notch, and even the matt black finish on the exhaust system should last indefinitely, because it is a hi-tech ceramic coating by Camcoat (01925 445003).

Finally, in late 2002 – with Alan MacKenzie-Wintle nearly four years older, and over 18 thousand pounds worse off – what could well be the ultimate MkI Le Mans took to the road, and Alan immediately offered to let me evaluate it.

Was the Moto Guzzi worth all this effort and money? Well, the answer to that depends on your viewpoint. Somebody brought up on the clocklike efficiency of oriental bikes would probably hate the way you can both hear and feel the engine. The rustling and shuddering make you well aware of large lumps of steel and aluminium working against each other down below. You could cut the sound out with earplugs, but you cannot fail to notice the way

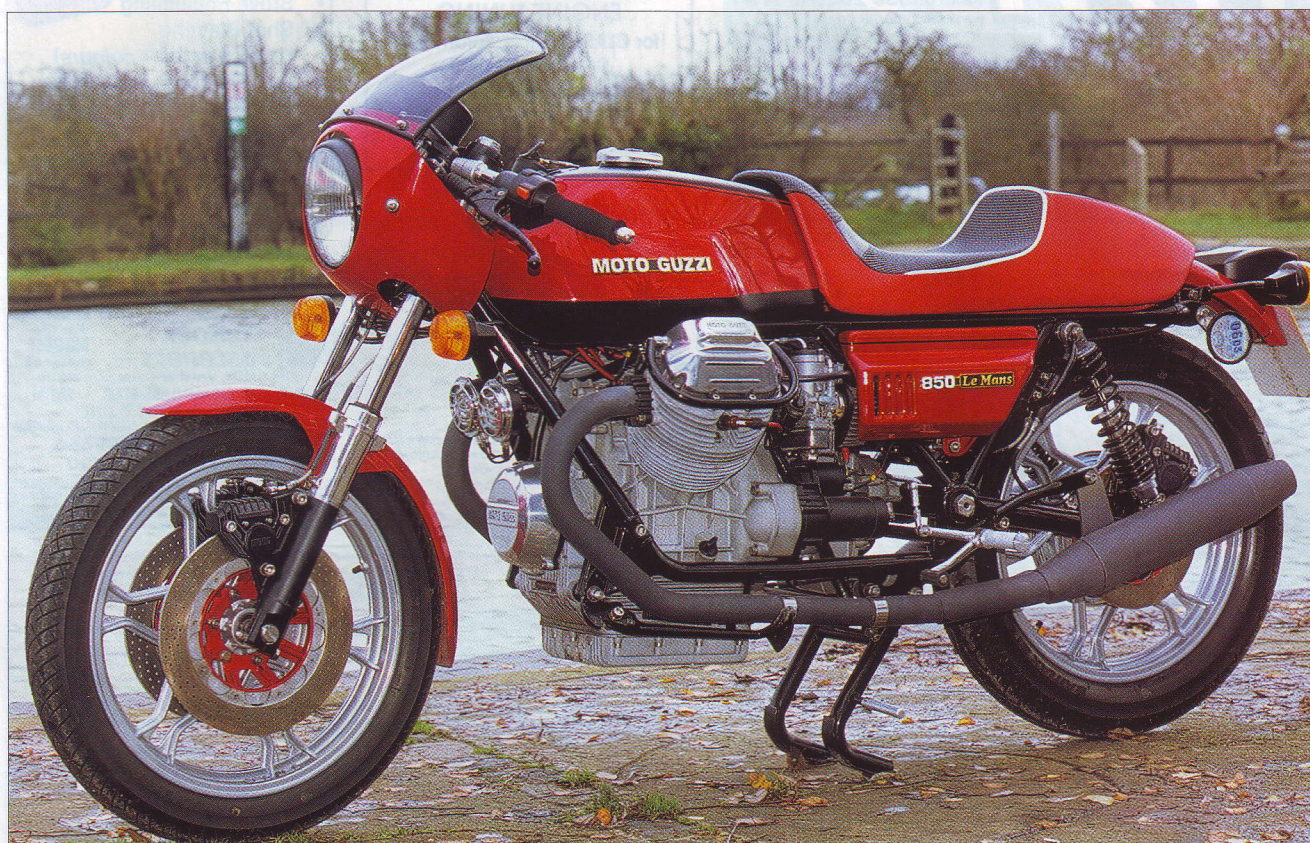


torque reaction to the heavy flywheel makes the bike lean sideways when you blip the throttle. Even when you are on the move, the Guzzi nods left and right as you pobble along at small throttle openings.

However, I distrust turbine-smooth engines (with older bikes it usually means they've stopped!) and I loved riding the Guzzi. And so would almost anybody who cut their teeth on British motorcycles, because it's what we dreamed our big twins would be like, until we discovered that full use of their performance usually resulted in uncomfortably destructive vibration. Once the Guzzi's revs rise above tickover, the engine is smooth enough, without being over-sanitised. And the power flows in with a massive and seemingly unending surge. I limit myself to 5000rpm in the gears, because of the newly rebuilt motor, but that's enough to leave aggressively driven 'repmobiles' standing, and rumbling along at 1000 fewer revs sees the Guzzi cruising effortlessly at motorway speeds.

What about the braking system? The Guzzi has what sounds like a complicated solution to a non-existent problem, with the foot pedal operating the rear brake and one of the front discs, while the hand lever operates the other front disc.

Twin front discs are courtesy of Brembo.



Attention to detail and much money lavished has resulted in a handsome machine.

Significantly, I've travelled several miles before I remember that this is something I should investigate, and experimentally brake hard to discover that the combined foot brake slows me up with no hint of bias, while the hand-operated front brake does its business without drama. That works for me, but if you are the sort of extrovert who slews the back end into a parking place, or performs 'stoppies', you'd better look elsewhere!

Such tricks would be demeaning for a bike like this anyway, because, despite its racing successes, the Le Mans is really a grand tourer. Get it rolling at 70 or 80, and the wind takes the weight off your wrists, the engine thrums like a contented lion, and you get the feeling that only refuelling stops would prevent you from travelling wherever you wanted in unsurpassable style. The stable handling comes into its own at speed, too, and you soon forget your initial irritation with the large turning circle which is inseparable from a long motorcycle fitted with clip-on handlebars.

It takes a remarkably honest man to spend an arm and a leg on a motorcycle, and then admit that it's not his all-time favourite. "No," says Alan, "the bike I enjoyed riding most was my Yamaha 350, because of its combination of speed, lightness and agility. The Guzzi, on the other hand, is really only suitable for main roads." That's logical thinking Alan, but I bet a yen to several million lira that when you get the Le Mans out on the open road on a fine Sunday morning, your exhilaration will convince you that you chose the right bike to restore.

TCM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY JOSLIN

Fact File

1978 1000c Mkl Moto Guzzi Le Mans

Engine type	ohv transverse 90 degree V-twin
Capacity	992cc (844cc as standard)
Bore x stroke	90mm x 78mm (83mm x 78mm as standard)
Output	80hp (est) (71hp as standard)
Lubrication	wet-sump with gear pump
Carburettor	Twin 36mm Dellorto
Ignition	transistorised with 'recurved' distributor
Gearbox	five-speed in unit
Transmission	direct primary, dry two-plate clutch, shaft final drive
Frame	duplex loop, with removable bottom rails
Suspension	Moto Guzzi telescopic forks, Koni 'Dial a Ride' rear units
Tyres	100/90 x18in front, 120/90 x18in rear (originally 325 x18in and 410 x18in)
Brakes	front - two 11½ in Brembo discs, rear - single 9½ in Brembo disc
Seat height	29½ in
Wheelbase	59in
Weight	485lb
Top speed	130mph (est)
Fuel consumption	40mpg
Price new	£1999

Club contact

Moto Guzzi Club GB, Paulette Foyle, 43 Poplar Avenue, Bedworth, Nuneaton, Warks, CV12 9EW
Vintage Motor Cycle Club, Allen House, Wetmore Road, Burton upon Trent, Staffs, DE14 1TR.