



# HARD AS NAILS

## ICONS: MOTO GUZZI MK 1 LE MANS

Above: When the Moto Guzzi Le Mans Mk 1 first graced motorcycle show stands in 1975, it set many pulses racing.

In 1976 Italy was top of the heap as far as producing focused and uncompromising fast bikes went. Riding a Moto Guzzi Mk 1 Le Mans stirs the blood and fuels the passion as much today as it did over 30 years ago. James Adam Bolton tries one out.

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**PICS:** MATT CROSSICK

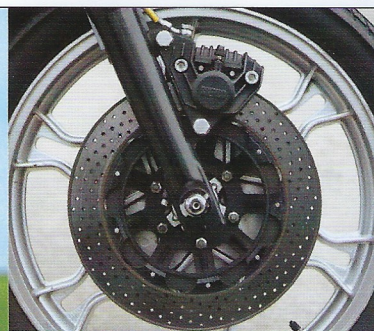
If you wanted to buy a large capacity and fast 'superbike' in the mid 1970s, there were few stark choices. You could pick an efficient but perhaps bland four cylinder Japanese bike like the Honda CB750, and meet the nicest people in the process. Or a Brit twin, an old-fashioned but proud product of a dying industry. Maybe a BMW, but apart from the R90S, not exactly exciting.

So when the Moto Guzzi Le Mans Mk 1 first graced motorcycle show stands in 1975, it set many pulses racing. It was a bike with a combination of looks, attitude and handling, the Japanese could never, ever have realised. Along with fellow Italian

stallions the Laverda Jota, and the Ducati Super Sport, the Le Mans 1 filled a gap in the motorcycle market for sportsters with plenty of performance and race-honed handling, and the Italians were on the top of their game in this era.

Like the Ducati 900SS, the Guzzi Le Mans was an unapologetic and uncompromising speedster. Its frame was a masterpiece from the hands of brilliant Italian designer Lino Tonti, and had already proved its superior stability and handling at all speeds in the preceding Guzzi V7 Sport, S and S3 models. The 850cc 90-degree transverse motor was simple, robust and easily serviced, and shaft rear





Left The Le Mans was a bike with a combination of looks, attitude and handling, the Japanese could never, ever have realised.

Below: Once up and running, the Le Mans sheds its mass easily, and the warmer the engine oil gets, the better the bike goes.

## MODEL HISTORY> MOTO GUZZI MK 1 LE MANS

The true roots of the Le Mans stretch back, like Moto Guzzi's complete range of V-twin bikes up until the present day, to a military vehicle developed by Guzzi, and powered by a 754cc ohv V-twin motor. By 1965 a civilian motorcycle powered by the developed V7 motor was in existence – V7 referred to the V-twin transverse cylinder layout and the 700cc capacity. By 1967 the V7 was in full production. By 1969, Lino Tonti, the brilliant Italian designer had already reduced frame height of these earlier V7s for the watershed V7 Sport model, and he had also developed factory racers based on the 750cc V7 Sport, but with 850cc displacement, 40mm carburettors and a half fairing. The first actual Le Mans prototype was nicknamed '850 tipo Le Mans' by the press in autumn 1972 because Guzzi had some good results in the 1971 and 1972 Bol d'Or races, at of course, Le Mans. Moto Guzzi then officially first called their racers 'Le Mans' in May 1973, at the Barcelona 24 hours race, a good six months after the journalists did.

In fact, the 850 Le Mans as a road bike was ready at the end of 1972 but for various economic reasons, new Guzzi owner Alessandro de Tomaso had no faith in the

future of the Guzzi V-twins and didn't want it to go into production, so the 750 Sport, 750S and S3 models continued to carry the sportster flag for Guzzi.

The Le Mans eventually appeared as a production model in 1975, replacing the 750cc S3. The production Le Mans Mk1 boasted a motor producing a claimed 80bhp at 7500rpm, 36mm Dell'Orto (compared to the prototype 40mm carbs), linked brakes, lighter flywheel, and larger valves than the 750 models. Fashion dictated cast wheels over the earlier and lighter alloy spoked Borrani of the 750s. Colour schemes included Italian red, metallic blue, or even white if desired.

Though watered down from its original prototype, the production Le Mans was a thoroughbred Italian speed machine, well able to stand shoulder to shoulder as with its Italian competitors of the day, the Ducati 900SS and Laverda 1000. The Le Mans sold well in Mk1 form, and raced successfully too. The Mk1 Le Mans became the Mk2 in 1978, and unfortunately underwent a styling exercise that ended the classic looks and racing lines, though the motor and frame stayed the same.

## SPECS> MOTO GUZZI 1 LE MANS

### ENGINE CAPACITY (DISPLACEMENT):

844cc (51.5cu in)

### ENGINE TYPE: 90-degree transverse V-twin

### BORE/STROKE: 83.0 x 78.0mm

### STROKE: Four

### VALVES PER CYLINDER: Two

### TIMING SYSTEM: OHV

### COOLING SYSTEM: Air

### GEARBOX: Five speed

### CHASIS/SUSPENSION/BRAKES:

### FRONT BRAKES: Dual Brembo 300mm discs

### REAR BRAKES: Single disc

### FRONT TYRE: 3.50-18

### REAR TYRE: 4.10-18

### DIMENSIONS: 1437mm

### GROSS WEIGHT: 225kg (496lb)

### FUEL CAPACITY: 22.5 litres (5.94 gallons)

### MAX POWER: 70bhp AT 7000rpm

Power/weight ratio 0.31

### TOP SPEED: 126mph

drive added to attributes that make the bike such an attractive proposition for those in the search of something different nowadays. Its styling is typically Italian, and of the era.

The first models came in Italian racing red, though light blue and even white were available too. Cast wheels, although heavier than its precedent 750 models alloy spoked rims, were fashionable in the mid-70s, and are maintenance free. Massive 36mm pumper Dell'Orto carburettors that stick out from behind the cylinders and feed a pushrod motor with big valves and lightened flywheel power the bike to an almost 130mph top speed.

The small bikini fairing just serves to accentuate the 'standing still but doing 100mph' line of the bike, as does the black exhaust system, humped seat that gave scant consideration for a passenger, and low set clip on bars.

The bike just screamed 'ride me very fast', and punters obliged by snapping up the bikes, even though it wasn't particularly cheap.

Touches of civility came in the form of an electric start, shaft drive, indicators and a braking setup that was extremely powerful. Drilled 300mm discs front and rear, big Brembo calipers and a 'linked' system allowed the heavy bike to









Left: The Guzzi's frame is a triumph in stability, and the typically taut Italian suspension does its job well.

## WHAT IS IT LIKE? MOTO GUZZI MK 1 LE MANS



Just getting the Guzzi off the centrestand, and without dropping or it rolling away is a job, as the momentum pushes almost 500lb of Italian metal forward. Once done though, and with a leg safely swung over, the Le Mans is surprisingly low. Massive cylinders and carbs stick out each side, and clip-ons and small instrument panel give the bike a compact appearance from the saddle. Simple but clever rubber ignition barrel cover stops water getting into where it shouldn't, especially useful on a bike with no kick-start, so choke on, a push of the start button, and the big car-type starter motor cranks the high compression motor into life. Blip the throttle, and yes, you do get that odd flywheel-induced gentle little lurch to the right, but only at standstill.

Once up and running, the Le Mans sheds its mass easily, and the warmer the engine oil gets, the better the bike goes. Dry multiplate clutch on this particular example is light and easy to use, no doubt improved by sensible cable routing and regular lubrication, and there's no hint of slip or drag even under heavy acceleration.

The five-speed gearbox is also without issue, though if you've just jumped off a Jap bike, it would take getting used to, but needs no more than a positive and foot action to shift successfully, if not quickly.

Shaft drive is pretty unobtrusive, though you can occasionally feel it rearing up under acceleration, but nothing to spoil the overall experience. The riding position is race stance and the triangle between seat, bars and footrests and controls places the body into an acceptably comfortable shape, though eight hours in the saddle may change that (and eight hours on this bike is perfectly reasonable, the

motor just exudes strength and robustness).

At speed, the small fairing does actually make a difference, even though the rider is already crouched low down over the long and sculptured fuel tank. Brakes are Brembo, twin discs up front and a one rear, linked in Guzzi's early system that preceded ABS by a decade, though truth is not much more effort than a pull on the front lever is needed as engine braking is so great. Stomp on the rear brake though, and love it or hate it, the linked system does work, bringing the Le Mans to a pretty quick and safe halt.

The Le Mans is all about the motor and the frame. The 850cc motor develops so much midrange torque that it's just a blast to go into corners in third, constant on the throttle, to just enjoy the pleasure of rolling on the gas and accelerating out of them again. The motor pulls like a train all the way up to its 8000rpm redline and 130mph top speed; no power band, no glitches, just straight through linear power and torque all the way. The Le Mans had a lighter flywheel than its touring T3 cousins, and this helps for a much freer-revving motor.

The frame is a triumph in stability, and the typically taut Italian suspension does its job well. Sticky modern Bridgestones really transform the bike's handling. Having just ridden a same era bevel Ducati 900SS to ride this Le Mans, I'm worried the Guzzi won't be as exciting, but it's no disappointment. Beautiful exhaust note from the aftermarket Lafranconi silencers and brutal power and speed from the unburstable V-twin motor place the Le Mans Mk1 up there as the epitome of fast fire-breathing and fine-handling Latin sportsters from the mid-70s.

be brought to a standstill quickly and safely.

However, the Guzzi Le Mans also had its faults and its detractors, who rightly stood and laughed at the black exhaust system that turned rust orange at the first sniff of rain. The paint finish and quality of some components was rubbish. The odd rubbery seat cracked and split in two, and fiddly

plastic switchgear disintegrated easily. Myths built up around the unreliable Italian electrics, especially as push-starting a 500lb motorcycle with a dead battery and no kick-start wasn't easy. Hindsight tells us that it wasn't the excellent Bosch and Marelli components themselves that failed, rather the cheap and over-complicated Italian coloured

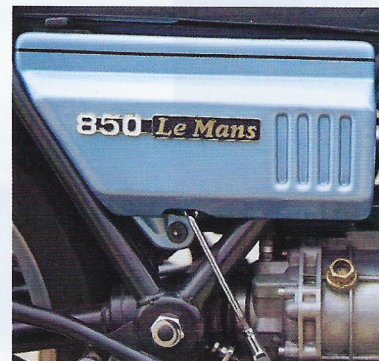
spaghetti that masqueraded as a wiring loom. Japanese bikes must have seemed boringly reliable in comparison.

But to those who owned, knew and believed in the Moto Guzzi Le Mans, this simply didn't matter. It won production races, beating Japanese and British competition. The bike was found to be ideal as a fast sports tourer, munching up





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Bottom: The 850 Le Mans as a road bike was ready at the end of 1972 but for various economic reasons, new Guzzi owner Alessandro de Tomaso had no faith in the future of the Guzzi V-twins and didn't want it to go into production.

the miles for hours on end, only the rider needing to unfold his back from time to time.

The bike stirred the soul, and felt like it too had a soul, beating away in that V-twin motor. One rider was quoted as saying "Pounding up the A1 under 90-degree sunshine, I could almost fantasize that the road signs read Cannes instead of Doncaster."

The Guzzi in equal amounts excited,

frustrated, and always divided opinion; you either hated it or loved it, and it's the same today. Park up a Guzzi Le Mans Mk1 at any biker hangout, and it'll get plenty of attention.

Not for nothing is it probably the best-known production Guzzi of all, and now highly sought after by collectors and riders alike. Those who have never ridden the Le Mans will dismiss it as an agricultural old tractor from another era. Maybe so, but

spend a few hours on the bike, and it will be hard to not see the appeal of this rorty superbike. It came from a simpler time where no one had to be worried about catalytic converters, global warming and carbon footprints – you just filled up with four star, and wanted to ride fast. The Guzzi Le Mans Mk1 was, and is, a perfect icon for and representation of, what an Italian superbike at the nadir of its development should offer; speed, soul and passion.

