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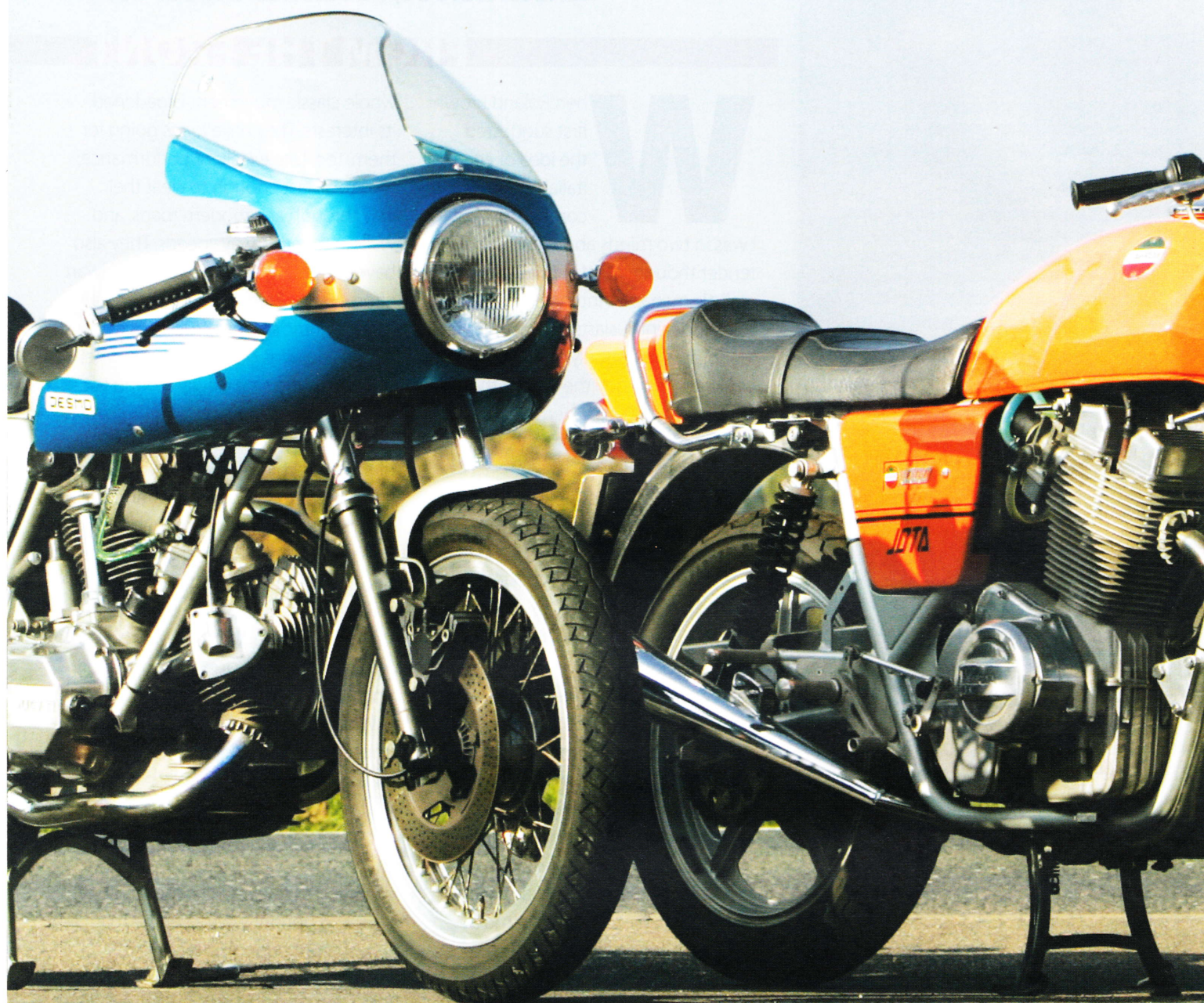
DOWN THE ROAD
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LAVERDA
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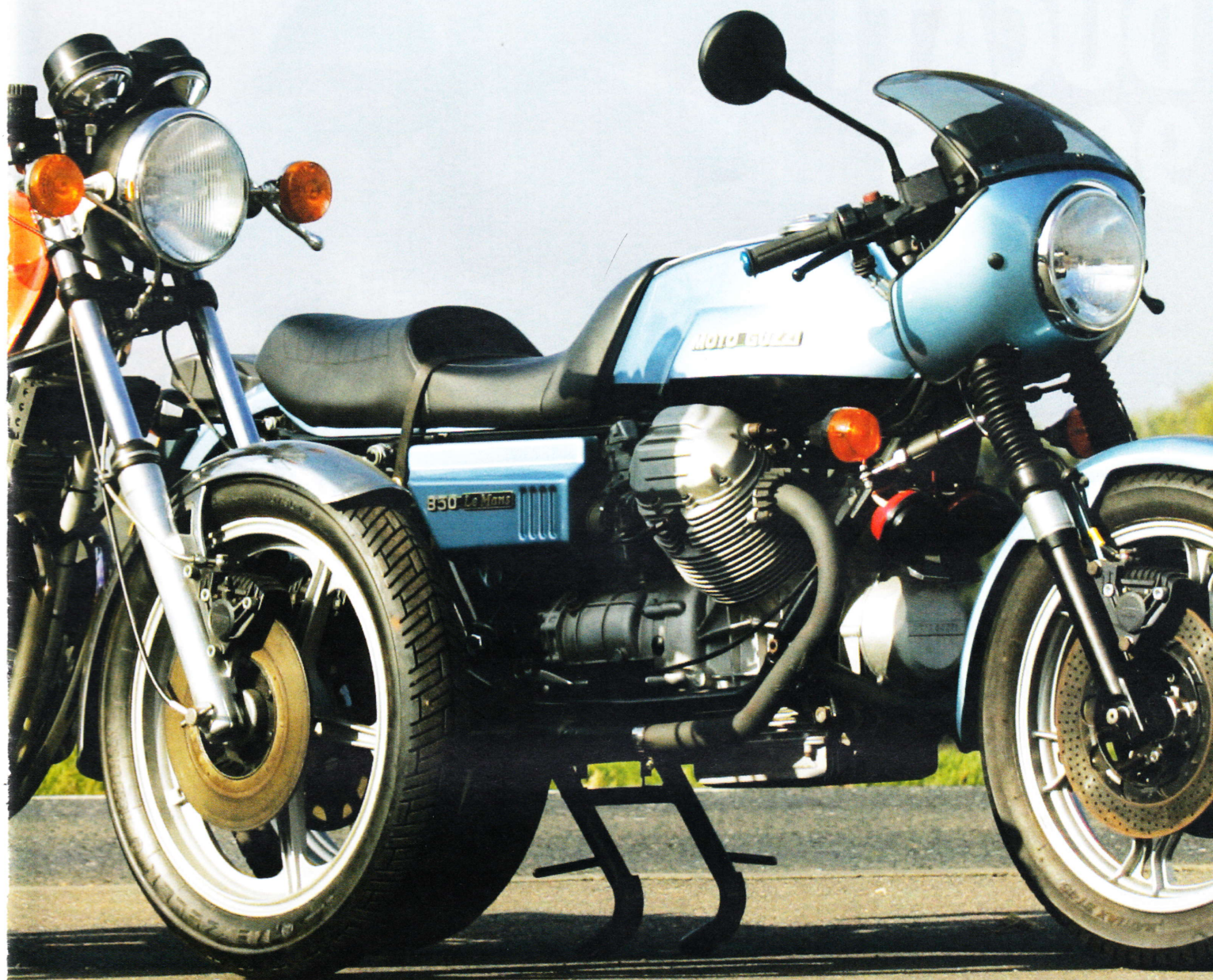
DUCATI
900SS

MOTO GUZZI
850 LE MANS





ITALIANS TO DIE FOR!



We asked Roland Brown to take a trip back to those days when some of the most exciting bikes on the high performance highway were muscle metal from Italy. Of course he obliged; of course he came up trumps...

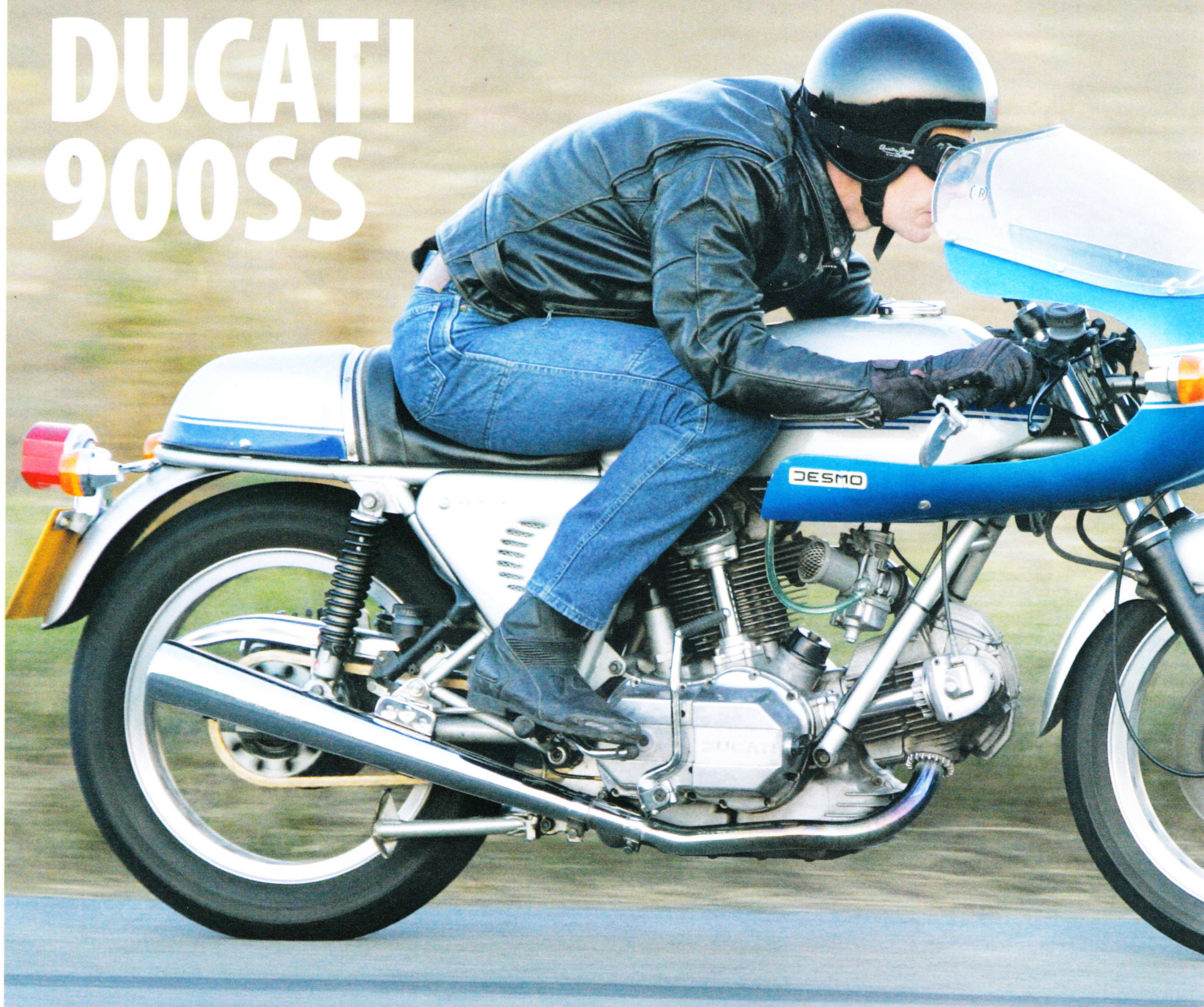
Photos by Phil Masters

For a typical bike-mad teenage boy in the late Seventies it was the decision that you made in your dreams. No, not whether you'd take Susan George, Raquel Welch or Farrah Fawcett home from the disco; nor whether you'd pick Jagger, Springsteen or Bowie to join your band. The really important fantasy choice was between the Ducati

900SS, Laverda Jota and Moto Guzzi Le Mans Mk1. These Italian thoroughbreds formed the holy trinity of Seventies superbiking. Each was gloriously exotic, charismatic and fast. In an era when European bikes still had an undeniable edge over the Japanese in two-wheeled style and handling, if no longer in outright performance, they offered deliciously different looks, personalities and engine layouts.

As with Raquel and all the rest, the closest I got to one in the Seventies was when pinning a poster to my bedroom wall. But three decades later, here I am on a mild morning in Suffolk with sunshine glinting off the tanks of the 900SS, Jota and Le Mans that are lined up in a row outside Mdnà Italia's showroom just waiting to be ridden. This dream has arguably come true a bit late, but I'm not complaining: the Ultimate Seventies Italian Giant Test is finally about to become reality. ➤

DUCATI 900SS



I'd better declare an interest here.

While I'd have killed to own any one of these three bikes as a teenager, it was Ducati's impossibly lean and racy desmo street racer that really did it for me.

(So much so that I tried to buy one on hire-purchase as a student before my parents vetoed that ludicrously optimistic plan.) There was just something utterly compelling about the 900 Super Sport's single-minded nature; the total lack of unnecessary flab to the point that, uniquely among this trio, it lacked even an electric starter.

The 900SS is long, lean and perfectly honed; like a champion racehorse, so fit that its muscles and veins are on display. It has racing clip-ons, rearset footrests, a single seat;

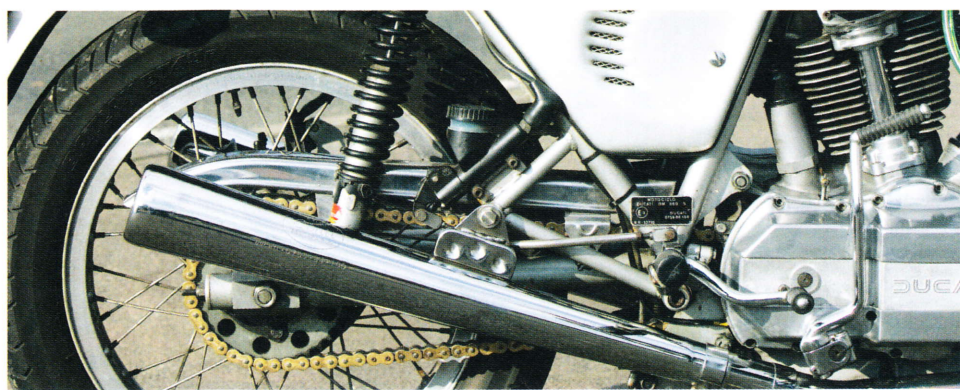
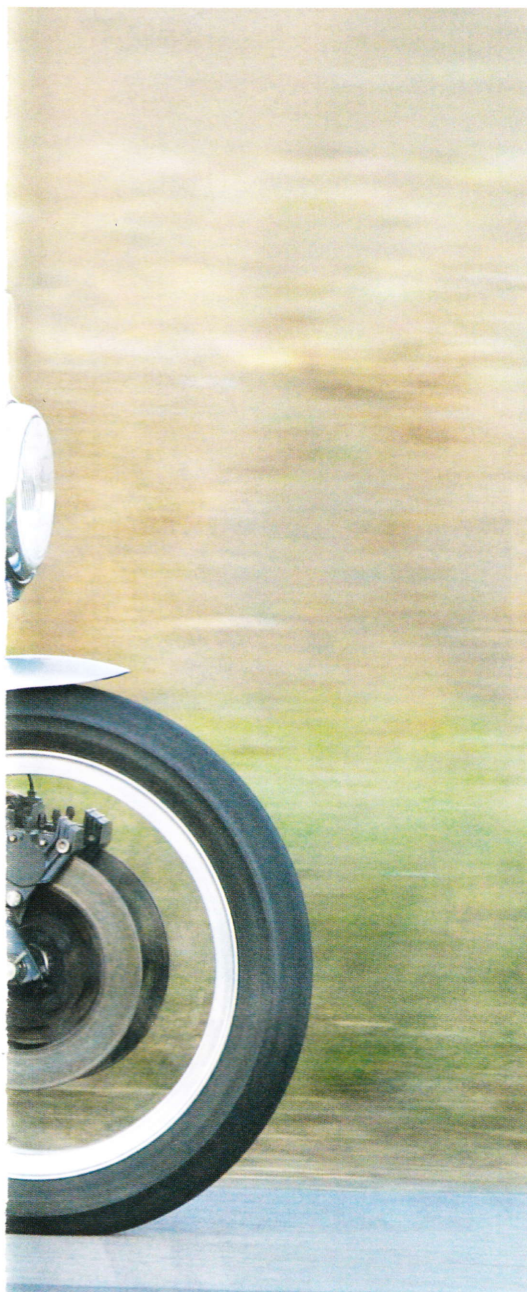
even the fairly tall half-fairing is designed for speed. And of course it has that huge V-twin heart: 864cc of thundering 90-degree torque production, complete with exotic desmodromic valvegear, slurping through open Dell'Orto carbs and bellowing through elegant Conti tailpipes that can in no way be described as silencers.

Of course the 900SS had its drawbacks, too; an obvious one being confirmed when Mdina boss John Fallon mentions he'd had a few problems starting it this morning. Temperamental is hardly the word for a bike that makes Sophia Loren look low-maintenance. But as I roll it off the centrestand (easy to use; and just as well, as there's no sidestand) and reach way forward

to the clip-ons, the Ducati seems so slim, elegant, light and purposeful that its basic switchgear and lack of creature comforts are immediately accepted.

This silver-and-blue bike's a beauty, too: unrestored, with 14,500 miles on its Veglia clock and the appearance of being well used but equally well looked after. Its side panels' transfers are a bit worn, the 'Desmo' stickers on its fairing and tailpiece slightly scratched, and its exhaust downpipes blued. The important bits are tip-top, though, judging from the way it comes to life easily when given a hefty swing of the lever, and sounds mechanically sweet as I sit blipping the throttle to savour that gorgeous Conti music.

It goes like the 900SS did in those dreams



of mine, too, possibly helped rather than hindered by the fact that its Dell'Ortos are 32mm units rather than the famed 40mm juice-buckets originally fitted. The change might have knocked a few horses from the Duke's claimed max of 79bhp at 7000rpm, but they also gave a notably sweet response at lower revs, with none of the model's typically fussy low-rev behaviour.

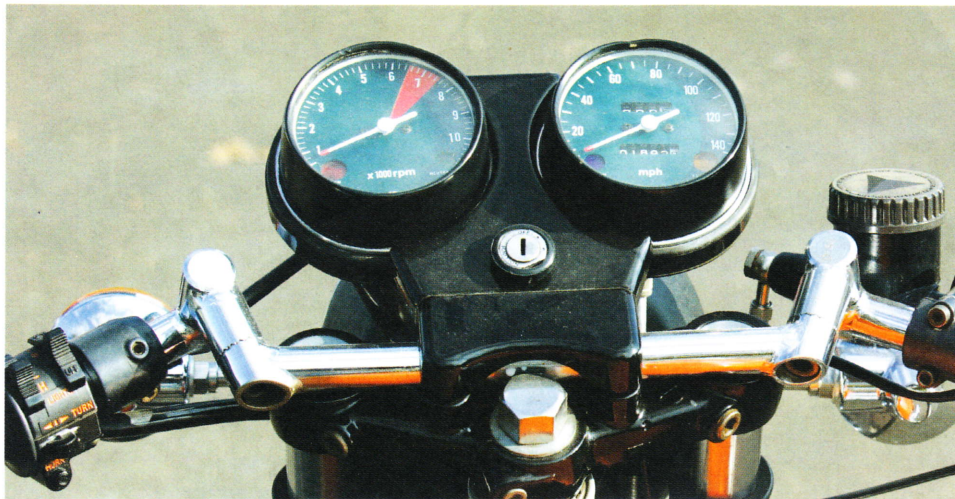
The Super Sport is still seriously rapid, too; barrelling forward urgently with every twist of the throttle, its V-twin engine staying smooth even up at around 8000rpm, encouraging frequent use of the very smooth-shifting five-speed gearbox, whose modern left-foot action adds to its appeal. For a 30-year-old bike the Duke is ludicrously

happy storming well over the 100mph mark, its rider well protected by the fairing (if not from legal trouble by the blurred bar-end mirror), heading towards a top speed of 135mph plus.

Handling is every bit as good as legend suggests it should have been, too: a blend of neutral steering and high-speed stability that seems unexceptional now but was worthy of lavish praise three decades ago, when few superbikes could even approach its famed cornering ability. A stiff steel ladder frame, fairly lazy geometry, and lack of weight all played important parts here. At a claimed 188kg dry, the Ducati was by some way the lightest of this bunch. The Super Sport's suspension is firm but not unduly harsh, and coped well with the generally well-

surfaced but sometimes bumpy roads. The Bridgestone BT45 tyres on the wire-spoked 18-inch wheels wouldn't have been my choice, simply on grounds of nationality, but they do a great job of helping the slim, high-pegged Ducati maximise the benefit of its near limitless ground clearance.

This is a very well sorted example of the 900SS, and it's good enough to rekindle my teenage infatuation all over again. The Ducati could never be the sensible pick of these three models, unless perhaps you were very rich or enjoyed the regular maintenance required to keep it on top form. But when did being sensible have anything to do with it? For speed freaks, romantics and engineering purists, the 900 Super Sport is as irresistible as ever. ►



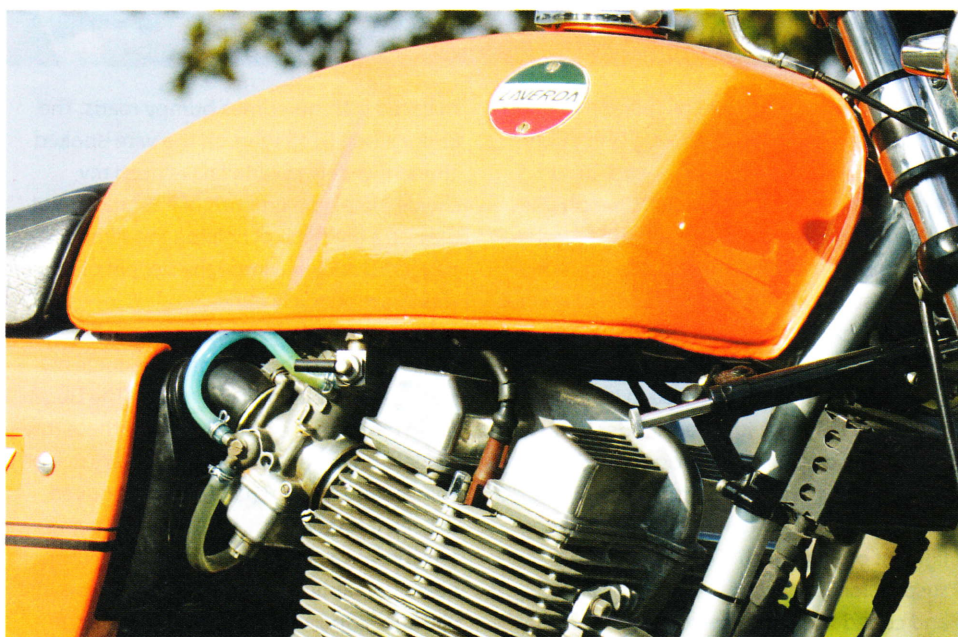
My blast down the Suffolk lanes was the sort of ride that helped forge the Jota legend. Whenever the throttle was open, the result was fierce acceleration, a howling three-cylinder soundtrack and plenty of vibration through the clip-on bars. Through the bends the bike's firm ride and pitching shook my kidneys, twitched the handlebars and sometimes made me feel as though I was trying to hang onto an uncontrollable wild animal.

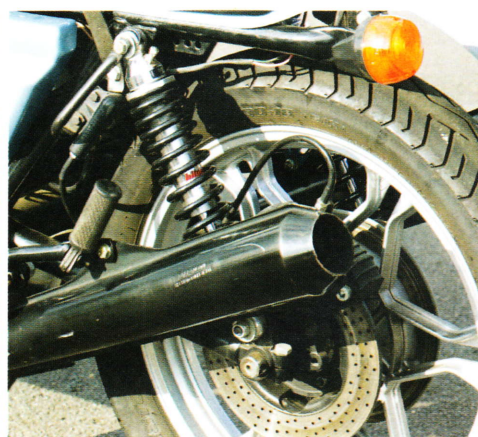
That image of brutal power accompanied by marginal high-speed handling was one that made Laverda's mighty triple one of the iconic superbikes of the Seventies, as well as one of the fastest. The Breganze factory's flagship might famously have started life in 1976 as an unofficial tuned 3C model created and

named by Slater Brothers, the UK importer. But the 981cc triple's ferocious performance, production-racing success and subsequent adoption by the factory did much to establish Laverda as a star of the Italian industry.

Ironically much of that reputation for wildness was exaggerated, and previous Jotas I've ridden have been significantly more rider-friendly than this very clean but less than fully sorted example. It was always a man's machine, though, the Jota; or at least a bike for riders physically big enough to cope with a stretched-out riding position, a tall seat, and a wet weight figure of 237kg that makes it by some way the heaviest of this trio.

That dohc motor was always the Jota's main attraction; the key to its all-conquering horsepower and muscular, barrel-chested look. That was certainly true of this very clean machine, first registered in 1980, which





For such a fast bike the Le Mans was always deceptively relaxing to ride. In its mid-Seventies heyday it was a rip-snorting roadburner; one of the fastest and finest-handling superbikes in the world. But even then it had a distinctly less racy, hard-edged character than the 900SS or Jota, thanks to its tractable, long-legged power delivery, its rock-solid handling and its shaft final drive.

Fast-forward three decades, and all those characteristics are very much present and correct in the sleek silver-blue Le Mans that is throbbing along below me while I crouch behind its ineffective but stylish flyscreen, in a vain attempt to find some shelter from the

wind. This particular Guzzi was tested at short notice and required some minor work to be at its best. But it was fast and capable enough to remind me just why the model captivated so many motorcyclists — me very much included — back then.

In fact merely looking at it is enough to get the adrenaline flowing, because the original version of Moto Guzzi's definitive V-twin remains one of the most attractive motorcycles ever built. That flyscreen; those big, air-cooled transverse cylinders; the way the angular dual seat continues over the back of the petrol tank. By Seventies superbike standards it's impossibly low and compact, too. Later versions just didn't recapture the almost feminine beauty of the first Le Mans.

This 1977-model machine is still a looker although its seat and exhaust are non-standard, and its discoloured clutch cover and downpipes show evidence of the years and distance covered since then. The Guzzi's ability to excite its rider hasn't diminished much in that time, either. When I wind back the typically heavy throttle, that big transverse V-twin sucks deeper through its 36mm Dell'Ortos (which would have worn filters when new), and accelerates with pleasing enthusiasm and a soulful, characteristic thumping sound from its exhaust.

Seconds later the Le Mans is accelerating through 100mph feeling as effortless as it always did, heading towards a top speed of



MOTO GUZZI 850 LE MANS

just over 130mph. That was serious speed when the Le Mans was introduced in 1976. Guzzi's work in uprating the 750 S3 model's engine with 844cc capacity, increased compression ratio, bigger carbs and a new exhaust system had resulted in an 80bhp maximum that was matched by only a handful of rivals.

Chassis changes were less dramatic, as the Le Mans borrowed the S3's Mandello-built forks and steel frame, combining them with rear shocks that in this bike's case had been replaced by aftermarket Bitubo air units.

(Its forks had also been fitted with non-standard gaiters at some stage.) Stability was always the Le Mans' big asset, and this example didn't disappoint. It held its line

in bends, and soaked up most bumps with its reasonably compliant yet well-damped suspension, despite the weight of the traditional shaft final drive.

Changing direction required a fair bit of pressure on the narrow clip-ons; not surprisingly given the bike's conservative steering geometry, 18-inch front wheel and hydraulic steering damper. Some notable production-race wins confirmed that the Le Mans could be ridden very quickly. But it required a very deliberate riding style, with gearchanges made very positively through the slow five-speed box.

Its braking was very highly rated but also an acquired art, thanks to Guzzi's unique system, where the foot pedal operated

one front disc as well as the rear rotor. Unfortunately this bike's other front disc was slightly warped, which limited the assistance the hand lever could give and reduced the bike's stopping ability.

As with the Ducati, Bridgestone rubber provided very adequate grip, if not a period look.

That brake required attention but didn't spoil my enjoyment of a machine that reminded me of the unique magic of Guzzi's greatest ever flagship. The Le Mans might have combined its racy style with a less aggressive character than the other two Italians, but it still delivered a huge dose of speed and excitement. That's as true now as it ever was.



	DUCATI 900SS	LAVERDA JOTA	MOTO GUZZI 850 LE MANS
Engine type	Air-cooled SOHC, desmo 2-valve 90-degree V-twin	Air-cooled DOHC, 6-valve transverse triple	Air-cooled, pushrod, 2-valve 90-degree transverse V-twin
Displacement	864cc	981cc	844cc
Bore x stroke	86 x 74.4mm	75 x 74mm	83 x 78mm
Compression ratio	9.5:1	10:1	10.2:1
Carburation	2 x 40mm Dell'Ortos	3 x 32mm Dell'Ortos	2 x 36mm Dell'Ortos
Transmission	5-speed	5-speed	5-speed, shaft final drive
Frame	Tubular steel	Tubular steel	Tubular steel
Front suspension	Marzocchi telescopic, no adjustment	Marzocchi telescopic, no adjustment	Telescopic, no adjustment
Rear suspension	Marzocchi shocks, adjustable preload	Koni shocks, adjustable preload	Bitubo shocks, air adjustable
Front brake	2 x 280mm Brembo discs	2 x 280mm Brembo discs	2 x 280mm Brembo discs linked system
Rear brake	229mm Brembo disc	280mm Brembo disc	280mm Brembo disc
Front tyre	100/90 x 18in (Bridgestone BT45)	100/90 x 18in (Metzeler ME33)	100/90 x 18in (Bridgestone BT45)
Rear tyre	120/90 x 18in (Bridgestone BT45)	130/80 x 18in (Metzeler ME99)	110/90 x 18in (Bridgestone BT45)
Wheelbase	1500mm	1460mm	1511mm
Seat height	770mm	813mm	743mm
Fuel capacity	18 litres	20 litres	23 litres
Weight	188kg dry	237kg wet	216kg wet
Bikes supplied by Mdina Italia, The Service Station, Barking Tye, Suffolk IP6 8HU; tel/fax: 01473 657444; www.mdinaitalia.co.uk			

Conclusion

Being able to ride these three machines gave an opportunity to discover their relative merits, but could never settle the old argument about which is best. One of the joys of the trio was that each brought its own distinct look, character and performance to the party, so in many respects direct comparisons are impossible.

Firstly you have to decide whether you're discussing as-new performance or these particular examples. If you're talking about ultimate performance in their heyday, the battleground is crucial. On a twisty road or track, the Ducati's lightness and handling would surely give it the edge. On a faster track, the Jota had the power to come out on top. The Guzzi wouldn't be far behind in either situation — and on a long

road ride, would make a strong case of its own. As tested, the choice is a little easier. This Jota was just a little too hairy. The Le Mans' brake flaw was easier to live with, and could be easily sorted, though the bike's overall condition didn't quite match those of the other. So the well-sorted 900SS won my vote — and also restored my desire to own one some day. But if you chose differently I wouldn't be at all surprised. **RC**