


Guzzi TO Le Mans



Le Mans is a must-go destination for petrolheads, especially if you own one of the classic Moto Guzzi V-twins that takes its name from the famous French race track. Three Guzzi riders went to this year's 24 Heures Moto to watch the action and soak up the atmosphere.

And the rain... Words & Photography **Peter Norman**

Visualise Glastonbury, 90,000 people. Now swap tree hugging and cosmic chants for inline engines held at redline until they backfire flames of fury. Day and night the staccato sound of mechanical punishment blasts from campsites. Riceburner engines in the merciless hands of French race enthusiasts perform their own miracle of survival – and make sleep an impossible dream.

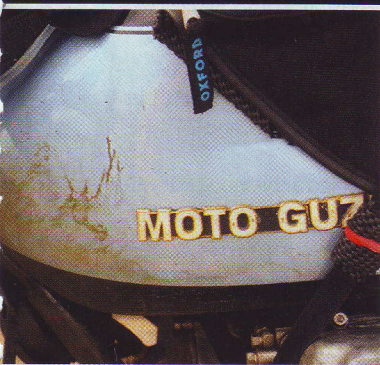
The campsite mayhem and the incessant howl of the bikes on track are all part of the fantastic feel of attending a 24-hour endurance race. If Isle of Man TT riders are the bravest of the brave, endurance racers are up there as the toughest. These were the schoolboys who sat up the back of the bus. Rain starts, bikes slide, they get pushed back into the pits and fairings are patched with gaffer tape before the next rider is sent out to make up lost time. Day and night, it's the teamwork between riders

and pit crew, slowly fatiguing as the race goes through the night, which can bring success over faster lappers.

The 24 Heures Moto is held at the legendary Le Mans Circuit Bugatti in France. Exactly 2.6 miles long with the main straight in a canyon between grandstands, watching a traditional Le Mans' start – with riders running across the tarmac to their bikes – is a brilliant spectacle, a blokes' ballet. Seemingly quaint spots such as Green Garage and Cows' Alley, the last corner where the longer endurance car track connects back in to the circuit, are treacherous on slick tyres within seconds of rain.

Le Mans' first car GP took place in 1906. It was organised by Automobile Club de l'Ouest, "based on the passion of men who saw the automobile as a major invention that would change the world."

Geniuses. Soon they were running bike Grand Prix too. The first



MAIN: Le Mans. A fairground, campsite and racetrack **INSET:** (above left to right) Pete Norman's blue Guzzi; racing; the glow of dawn through the trackside trees. (Below) The urge to burn fossil fuels is overwhelming



World Championship GP at Le Mans was held in 1969, when the big race was won by Ago on an MV.

The Bol d'Or, a 24 hour race for bikes, moved to Le Mans from Montlhery in 1971, but when the event moved again in 1978, to Circuit Paul Ricard, Le Mans began hosting their own 24 hour race. Usually held in April, it became the traditional start to the endurance race season.

This year's race saw 46 entrants in two classes, including two UK entries, Phase One Endurance and Team Alf. By the time the race finished, at 3pm on Sunday, 19 teams had retired. Finishers included a KTM team with 555 laps. The winner, the Yamaha Austria Race Team managed 727 laps, averaging 78.73 mph, with a best lap of 95.63mph.

With pit stops to change riders, tyres and brake pads, the pace is painful. "The rain doesn't get to them as much as wear on their hands," says Team Alf boss Al Hubbard. "They have to bandage their hands to prevent calluses. It's punishing."

Roger Burnett was the first British rider to win in the modern era, in 1989. Carl Fogarty and Terry Rymer took honours in 1992, with Steve Hislop, Brian Morrison and Chris Walker waving the flag by 1999.

"There is something special about Le Mans. Being in the pits, a place with so much history, is incredible," says endurance racer Mick Godfrey. "You can't help but be aware of the bikes and cars that have raced there before you."





The Guzzis on the road

Taking a trio of Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans sportsters to their namesake French track is a tempting prospect. Three days, a brace of ferries and two nights in pre-pitched tents in the poshest zone sounds just fine. We can handle the bum-numbing seats for the 300-mile trip there but we're not slumming when it comes to sleep. It's mid-April and '24 Heures Moto' here we come.

Neil Waugh is along for the ride. He has cajoled a childhood pal, Mike Leitch, to bring an end to the decade long SORN status of his Mark I Le Mans and make the triumvirate happen. Before we leave Mike is scurrying with helicoils, I'm fretting about the arrival of our Gallic ticket courier and Neil is organising spare parts.

Rain-soaked Sussex is our rendezvous for the LD Lines Newhaven-Dieppe crossing. Sodden gloves dry on hot cylinder heads. On the crossing, we digest Neil's autoroute-free journey. Moto Guzzi envisioned an iconic sportster in the early 1970s and named it after the Le Mans circuit. Guzzi was never able to gain race prestige for its eponymous model at Le Mans, but its design proved durable. A prototype 850 designed by head engineer Lino Tonti fought and finished in the 1973 Barcelona 24-hour.

"[It was] not really suited to the tight Montjuic circuit, although the post-race strip down at Mandello showed the machine had stood up well to the rigours of the race," observes Ian Falloon in his book, the *Moto Guzzi Sport & Le Mans Bible*. The Le Mans did win the 1977 Avon Production Machine championship in Britain as well as achieving a double podium finish in the



THANKS TO: LD Lines for the channel crossing

AMA National Superbike Production Race in Charlotte, North Carolina. Guzzi's Le Mans became known as the Lemon in 1979 after a typo in Motor Cycle Weekly, and ours are living up to the nickname. Mine is becoming a cold start curmudgeon, Mike's bored-out bike is running too lean while Neil's Mk II – faired as a 'Mock I' – runs rich, guzzling 30mpg against my 52.

The sun shines as we dock at 2pm in Normandy and we get a move on, traversing hills, valleys and successive stunning villages dotted with thatched cottages. Old ladies, bored youths and roadside workers stop, listen then look as Lafranconi Competizione silencers shatter the rustic peace. Neil has found us a River Seine vehicle punt for our crossing at Duclair. The long-legged Lemons gallop as the terrain flattens between Brionne and Bernay. With the gun barrel feel of an old Roman road the N138/D438 shoots through farmland towards Alençon. The single carriageway is dotted with roundabouts every mile, just like chicanes. We slingshot through them in close formation. Riding behind Neil's over-juiced bike is like following a London taxi.

Drivers flash us about a roadblock ahead and we ease our Tommaselli grips. Cops are corraling all bikes and any cars with youths in them. It's just a document check for us but a young couple are led away by Gendarmes when a sniffer dog gets a whiff of something.

As the sun sinks we take a late lunch of pizza, standing in an Alençon supermarket carpark. We've bought bread rolls, apples and six litres of cask claret. With pizza slice in hand Neil bends down and tweaks a carb mixture screw. "I'll get this mixture sorted soon," he says, optimistically.

It's the school holidays so the roads through villages are lined with kids, encouraging riders to rev, beep and wave as we get nearer the circuit, southeast of the city. We join the queue, slowly overtaking miles of cars crawling towards the campsites. As we enter our camping area, Maison Blanche, my Lemon dies. I blame overheating from the slow snaking run into the campsite. It's a pig to restart.

On Sunday morning, we pack in drizzling rain. My bike manages only the briefest of limps on the offside pot. A test lamp shows my nearside ignition coil is without a firing signal from the digital ignition. A French camper offers some comfort. "Your moto has come home to Le Mans. She wants to stay," he says. I nod my agreement.

The two red Lemons set off to catch their ferry. I salute them and call Carole Nash's breakdown recovery service. My lame Le Mans is on a tilt tray within 90 minutes. Impressive. I'm home the next day.

And the others? Neil's got a lot richer, jettisoning a mixture screw during the East Sussex night ride home. "The nearside pipe had flames leaping out all the way, I quite liked the sight and sound," laughs Neil. "I've since ground down an old Yam air screw and it now ticks over perfectly." Mike's bike burnt out an original ignition coil near Luton – he became another Carole Nash customer. "Can you believe it? Happening 40 miles after I left Neil, who was carrying a spare coil," sighs Mike. "It was quite nice though, sitting in the sun during the wait."

Is that the end of trips like this? Not likely. The buzz of working throttles in haunting V-twin unison is just too enticing. Already there's talk of another citron adventure for our Le Mans.

MAIN: Neil (left), Peter and Mike (with ear plugs) before the journey from Dieppe.

INSET: Gendarmes were not an obstacle; taking it easy en-route; weather didn't add to the enjoyment; Blue Le Mans went home on a lorry

