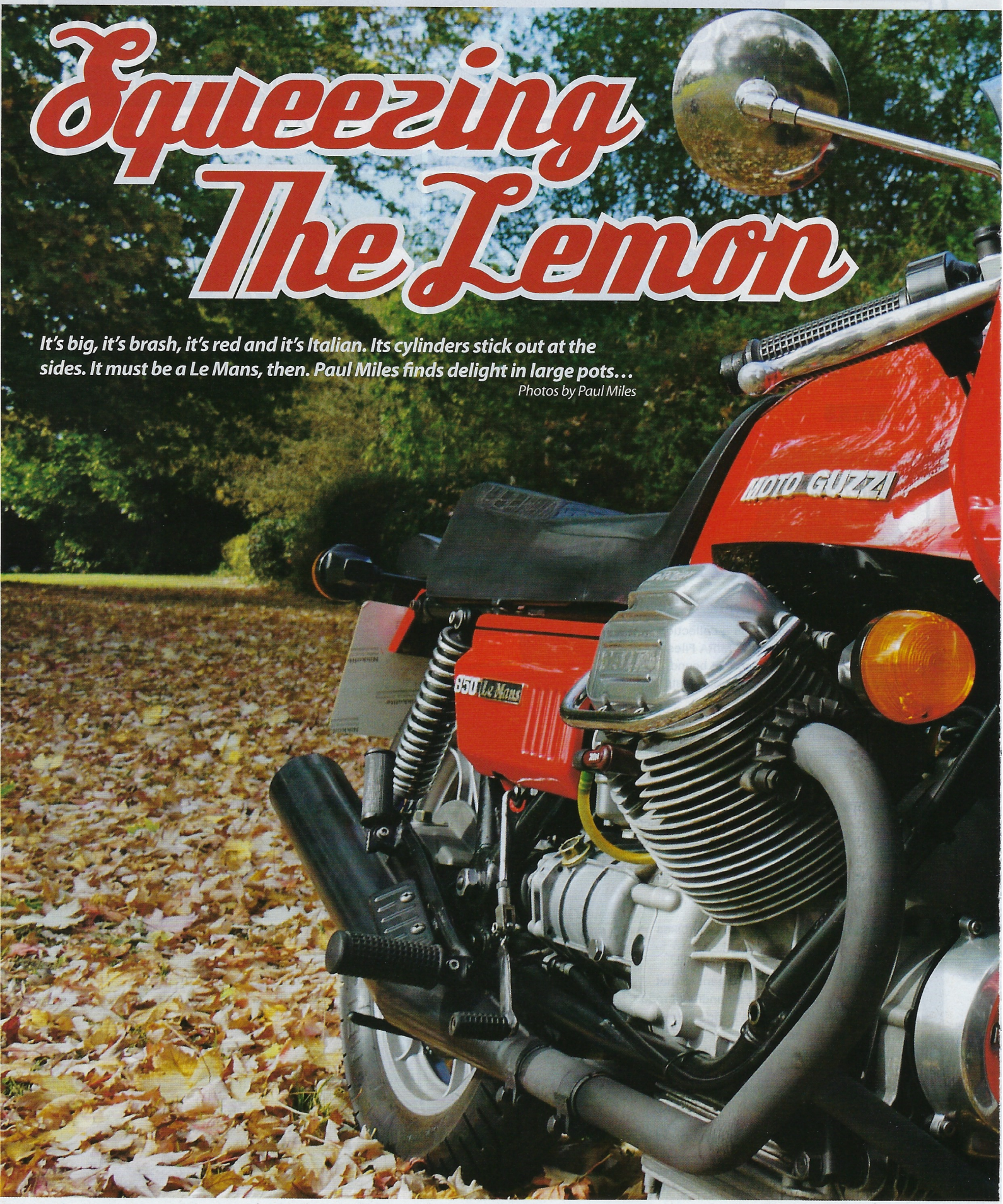
Squeezing The Lemon

It's big, it's brash, it's red and it's Italian. Its cylinders stick out at the sides. It must be a Le Mans, then. Paul Miles finds delight in large pots...

Photos by Paul Miles



It has to be a disappointment to ride; nothing that looks this good could possibly work that well, something has to give. Ten minutes later and... Blimey! This thing really rocks. Man and machine in imperfect harmony, blasting down the road at some indeterminate speed, shaking its rear end like a crazy thing – the bike, not the rider.

Hang on, the speedo needle is emerging from the impenetrable darkness of the cockpit fairing, which obscures all but the lower portion of the clocks, and we're travelling at... gulp... 135mph. That's the thing with the Le Mans; it looks fast, but everyone knows that it has a tractor of an engine, has shaft drive and weighs a ton, so it can't be. Except it is. Very fast.

Guzzi Le Mans. It trips off the tongue like Marilyn Monroe and everybody can immediately picture the bike you're referring to. The first one, the fast one, the red one. But Guzzi, like so many Italian manufacturers, seemed to have little regard for their history and proceeded to shamelessly plunder the legacy of that famous first edition for the next 20 years, producing increasingly ugly bikes that reflected only the ghost of the original.

When it was launched in the UK back in 1977, Moto Guzzi had been playing with their V-twin design for a few years; the sublime early twins were hand-built and incorporated gear driven cams, exotic but costly to produce. The sporting V7 ➤

eventually gave way to the disc-braked 750S and then the triple disc 750S3. These were produced under the instruction of the new owner, Alessandro De Tomaso, who demanded lower production costs and increased output, necessitating the use of chain drive for the camshafts along with other cost-cutting changes.

I remember the Bike magazine road-test of the S3; they photographed one resting against a wall and somebody had graffiti'd 'Guzzi Rules' behind it. I thought it was impossibly cool. Only one thing, though, it was too slow, its headlight being metaphorically sucked out by rivals Ducati and Laverda, as well as by the Japanese offerings. The factory remedied that after a couple of years of very slow sales by releasing a big-bore version with new styling, the 850cc Le Mans. And the world turned on its head.

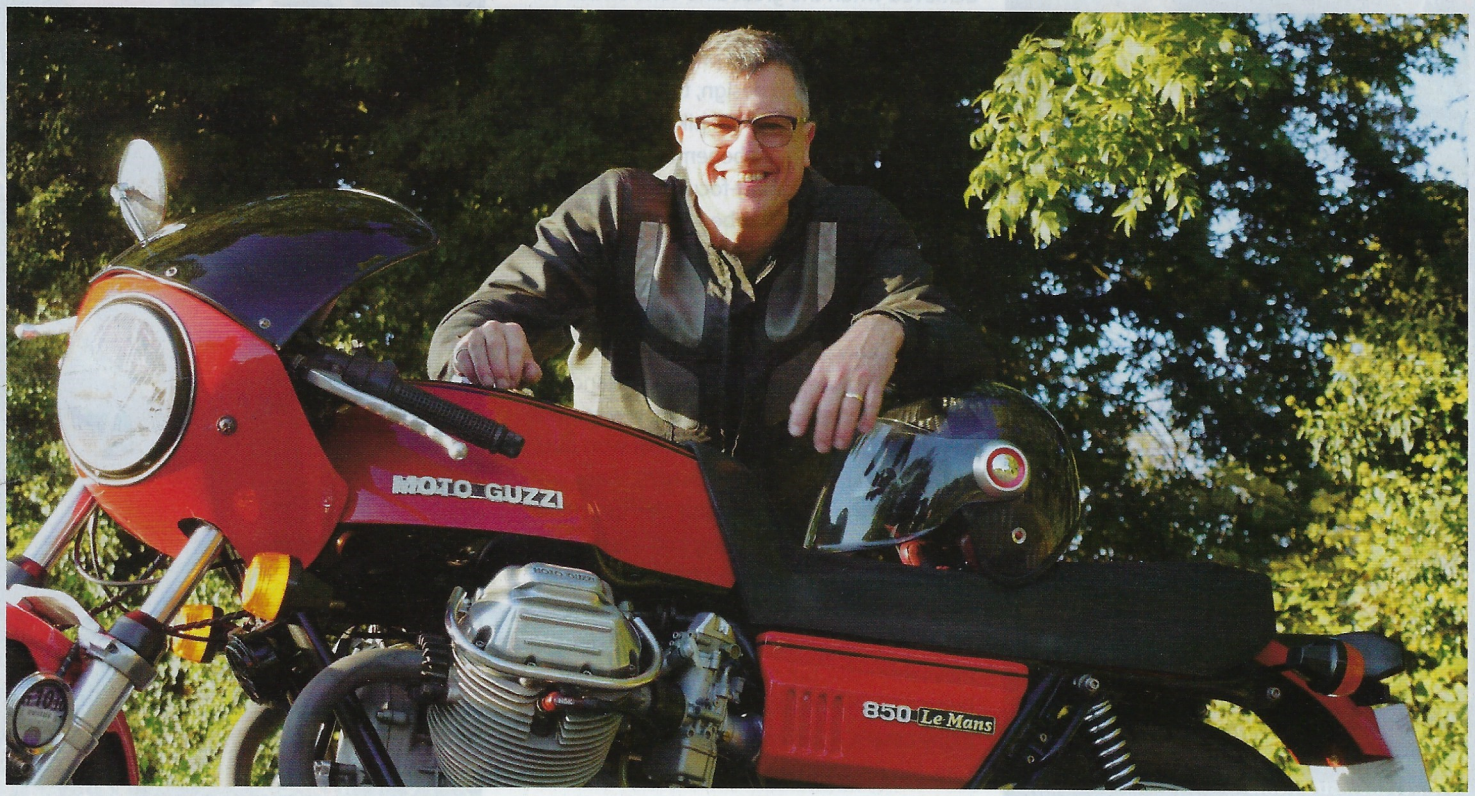
Finished in fire-engine red, with a matt black top to the tank, supposedly to avoid distracting reflections when racing, it sported 36mm pumper carbs, futuristic alloy wheels, drilled discs and a bikini fairing. The motorcycle press went crazy for it; the Le Mans was just too photogenic to ignore and it graced the cover of motorcycle magazines the world over, as well as crossing over into lifestyle publications and, err, gentlemen's

Le Mans. It could be nothing else. Neat head-protector bars. Wonder if they work in a spill?

magazines. A series of moody shots, complete with heavily made-up lovelies, were taken by the late, great, Bob Carlos Clarke and posters of his art graced the walls of a million teenage bedrooms.

As well as looking great, it turned out to be a pretty good motorcycle, too. A bike that looks like it's doing 135mph when parked and then actually can do it is a compelling combination. Successfully campaigned in production race series around the world, the Le Mans is still one of the go-to racers for classic racing today.

And, being a Guzzi, it turned out that this, the sexiest bike of the 1970s, wasn't even all that expensive to own, once you'd stumped ➤



The big fast Guzzi boasts a typically big fast Guzzi riding position, with the handlebars well below the tank top. Some riders find this to be comfortable, we understand

This is a symbolic photograph. Artistic, creative too. Italian machinery is similar, in some ways…

Plainly the Le Mans really is moving while standing still. The handsome stylish flyscreen obscures the instruments

up the colossal purchase price, roughly twice as much as the nearest equivalent Japanese machine. Fundamentally, the customer was buying a twin cylinder, air cooled, OHV engine, complete with fuss-free shaft drive. Much mirth was made from the fact that the motor originated in a three-wheeled military vehicle, which isn't quite true. But even so, what's so terribly wrong with a squaddie-proof engine design that you can fix with a Swiss Army knife?

The Italian alternatives that offered comparable performance were the Laverda Jota and the Ducati 900SS, both far more expensive to buy as well as to live with.

No, with the Guzzi you got the looks, the performance and almost Japanese-like usability. Well, almost, it was Italian, after all. The Lego inspired switchgear was always considered to be a liability and the clocks offered no more than an approximation of either revolutions or speed. Furthermore, staying with the Lego theme, Moto Guzzi, like so many other Italian companies, made a large variation of models around a similar platform; engine components and frames, for example, are readily interchanged. More of which later.

So, looking at the wonderful example we have here, you might notice just how low the whole machine is, the seat height allows even a modestly tall rider to sit at traffic lights with both feet firmly planted on the floor. This was achieved when the great Lino Tonti struck on the idea of running the horizontal top tubes of the frame between the projecting cylinders. So successful was his design, the whole generation of Tonti-framed bikes are revered as great handlers, even behemoths like the California, or the touring-focussed T3, which share almost identical tubeware.

The alloy wheels, triple drilled discs and bikini fairing were a first for Guzzi on the Le Mans and really set the yardstick for future designs. Sadly for the Mandello del Lario concern, they were perennially broke and lacked the funds to fully develop new models as well as going racing. Guess what won out?

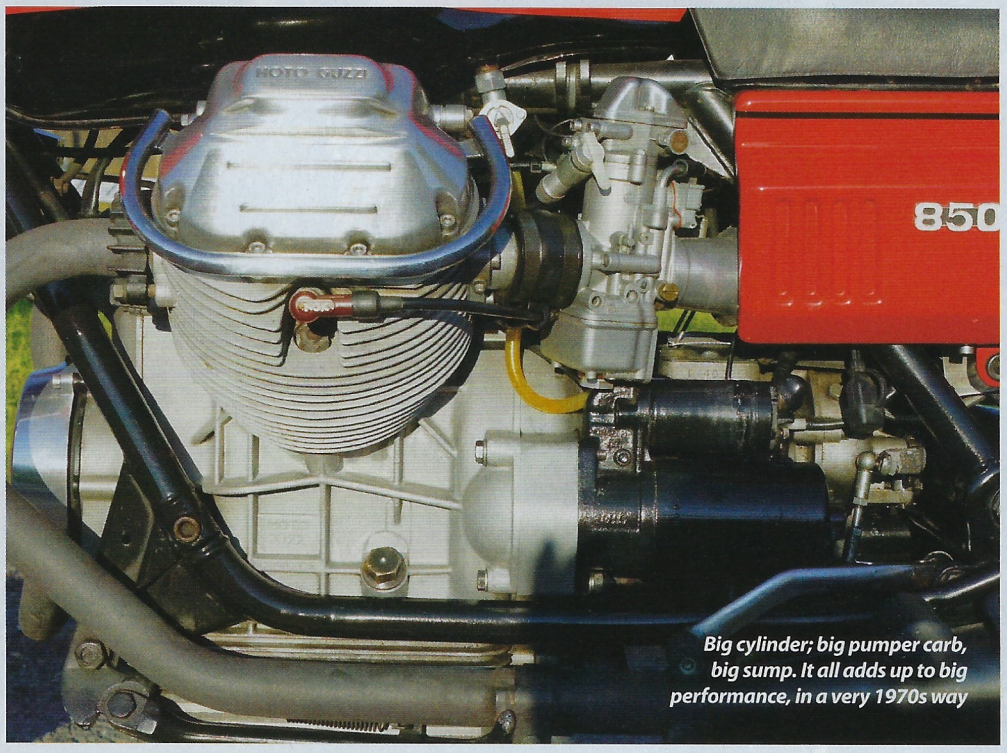
The Le Mans II, launched in 1979, was essentially the earlier bike, but clad in a more efficient but pug-ugly fairing and a less-voluptuous tank. It also had better, but uglier, instrumentation and slightly more reliable switches. Later models grew in size to the inevitable mille, but they succumbed to the fashion for the 16" wheel in the 1980s, like so many others. A sad end to an illustrious line, for sure, but the brightest star was and is the Mk1

Long, lithe, low, Latin, lively. Lovely

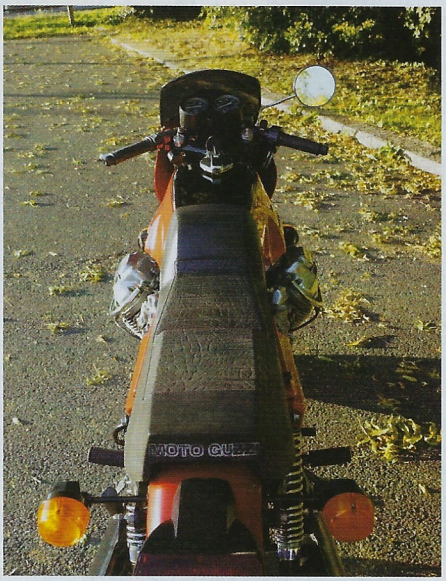
Le Mans. Which is why there are so many fakes out there.

There, I've said it.

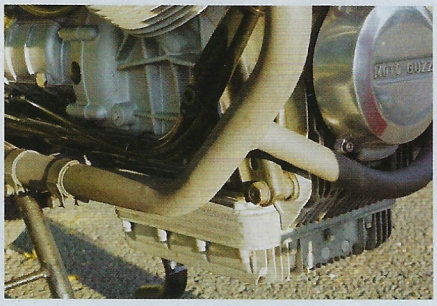
Simply put, a lot of folk bought Tonti-framed Guzzis of various flavours, crashed them and decided to rebuild in a different style, often as café racers and frequently in the poster boy look. If you trawl internet auction sites you regularly see adverts for Le Mans Replicas, some better than others, and it's very unusual to actually find a Mk2 Lemon that hasn't been partially converted to Mk1 style, such is the impact of the first design. These are often referred to, and not unkindly as it happens, as the Mock One Le Mans. The bike you are admiring (if not, check your pulse) here carries a question mark over its authenticity, although clearly having Le Mans written through it like a stick of rock, the frame code has one differing letter from the accepted list. In the distant past it was possible that Guzzi just used any old frame, they're all the same, or that the bike had a major prang and a replacement frame was issued, or it's ➤



Big cylinder; big pumper carb, big sump. It all adds up to big performance, in a very 1970s way



Flat seat is more comfortable than you might think



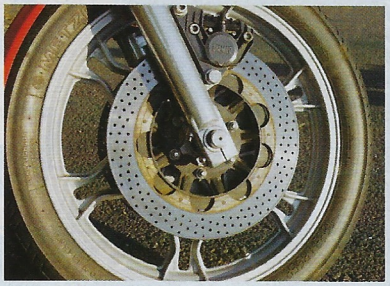
The exhaust features two balance pipes in its quest for smooth quiet running, and yes, that is one deep sump

a converted cooking model (though that would be some job, bearing in mind that just about everything is different).

This is an ongoing issue with genuine Mk1 bikes as they command a higher price than replicas, of course, and that value has been spiking of late. If you want to buy an early Le Mans and it has to be a factory machine (though you'd only need that if you were showing it or collecting for speculating), investigate very carefully. Frame numbers will help, it should begin with VE****, but the factory records are notoriously incomplete, Guzzi simply didn't consider the future collectability of their motorcycles, they just built up as many as they could, interchanging parts as they went along. It's the Italian way. 'Experts' report that the numbers of Mk1s built are either 914, or 'around 4000', or perhaps some other figure. I wouldn't get too hung up about it, buy one because it's a nice bike you'd like to ride, the RC way.

So, packing away our forensic-inspection anorak and actually looking at the motorcycle rather than the logbook, we can see the now-

One of the two big carbs. Matched with big inlet valves, they encourage the engine to breathe deeply



Three drilled discs look well, and work well. One of the front brakes is operated by the foot pedal, as is the single rear disc

familiar, round-barrelled twin, jutting out from between the frame tubes. The Le Mans heads contained bigger valves and inlet ports (easily confirmed by the use of 6mm studs to mount the carbs compared to the 8mm of the smaller heads) and giant Dell'Orto 36mm carbs, with open bellmouths and accelerator pumps (love that term, it just sounds so fast). The black exhaust pipes sweep down and there are two balance pipes, one just under the headers and the other under the sump. The five speed box is conventional but the brakes utilise the famous Guzzi linked system. The front brake lever operates but one disc, with the foot pedal distributing braking force to the rear as well as the other front rotor. Wash the bike and the next day the 300mm discs are orange with rust, the true mark of performance for the 1970s rider; how times have changed.

Rolling the bike off the centrestand and climbing onto the one-piece moulded foam seat, the Le Mans is extraordinarily low slung, like a red, racing snake. The adjustable bars on this bike are aftermarket and brilliant, the riding position is surprisingly comfortable, although the stock footrests are a little too far forward for prolonged high speed work. Pressing the starter button rewards you with an enormous shudder through the bike and it fires up with a huge sideways shake before settling to a steady, but energetic idle. Ahh, that'll be the torque reaction, then!

Blipping the throttle sends the bike lunging to the right, an immensely entertaining pastime that will keep you occupied at traffic lights for ages. A mighty stamp is required to select a gear, any one of the five will do, the torque does the rest, and then we're off!

At lower revs it really is a shaky old bag of nails, but if you pile on the speed it all smooths out and begins to make more sense. We really should mention the clocks again at this point. Both the main dials, as well as the idiot lights, are almost completely obscured by the fairing screen unless you're flat on the tank in the crouch, it's the Italian way. Adopting a more neutral pose atop the beast, the rider can see only that their speed is less than 10mph, or more than 130, or indeed that the engine has stopped, or is buried in the redline. I like this approach, it's somehow liberating and allows you to concentrate on other things, like the handling.

The front forks, remodelled by Maxton Engineering, are a triumph. Eytie sportsters of this era usually wear scaffold-pole stiff forks, but these both float and control the pointy end of the motorcycle beautifully, all very impressive. The rear of the bike, complete with heavy bevel-box drive, demands special attention to work properly ➤

and the previous owner fitted Hagon shocks. I'll offer no comment other than to state that I wouldn't fit them to a pram, much less 219kg of performance motorcycle. IKON shocks, formally Koni, with their adjustable damping, are perfect for keeping the tail from wagging too excitedly and need bolting on pronto, please. As it is, the lack of controlled damping lets that heavy box bounce around a bit too much for my liking. Luckily, the brakes are typically superb. The well-sited foot pedal is the one to use and slows the mighty twin rapidly and without dive, as both ends dip together; the front brake relegated to dabbing and panic-stopping duties only.

Did I say 'mighty'? This thing is fast. Touring Guzzis, like the T3, are pleasant enough, like a slightly more thrilling BMW, but the Le Mans, with its big valve heads, pumper carbs and, umm, 948cc high compression conversion, is a rocket. Wind open the ridiculously heavy throttle and it thunders off; only the flappy rear end limits your limit, there's more than enough power at all sorts of revs, I'd imagine. Guzzi claimed 80bhp when it was launched, but they'll have been tiny, prancing, Italian ponies. I reckon it's about 80 proper British, shire horse power now.

Riding back on the Guzzi after testing a Ducati Supersport recently, I had ample opportunity to compare the two machines and their contrasting approach to making a sporting roadster. The Ducati is all creamy power and precision handling, but completely uncompromising at anything other than flat out and leaves you a bit star-struck. Whereas the Guzzi is comfortable, practical and possibly even faster in a straight line race. The slightly erratic handling, far from being a fault, actually endears the bike to the rider; it feels alive, like it's responding to your urging it onwards. It also idles in traffic, has a great centrestand, indicators and a dual seat. You could tour Europe on a Le Mans (I did just that, a long time ago), something I'd find unthinkable on a SS Ducati.

Then there's the expenditure. Running a Guzzi costs peanuts compared to the opposition, with home servicing the accepted norm. Even buying the machine needn't be too painful, choice is plentiful and for less than the price of a run of the mill Commando, you can own a proper Italian legend, a Tonti-framed Moto Guzzi, that, if you squint a bit, looks like a Le Mans. A little more, say the price of a Enfield Interceptor allows you entry into the world of a proper, world-beating legend. Bargain.

My Ducati Monster-riding daughter should have the last words. She's used to seeing various old heaps mouldering in the eclectic garage and usually ignores them, but, on spotting the Le Mans remarked; 'Hey Dad, I like that, it looks beefy. Can I have a go?'

Italian café racers. I love them. RC