Oh, mamma mia...

Moto Guzzi Le Mans 850

Moto Guzzi has produced many great bikes in its 90-year history. But if Guzzi fans had to choose one model to sum up the marque's appeal, it would probably be the original Le Mans 850. One of the most charismatic superbikes of the mid-Seventies, the Le Mans was a V-twin sportster with as much unmistakably Italian style as Sophia Loren.

WORDS: Roland Brown **PHOTOGRAPHY:** Red bike Oli Tennent, Silver bike Phil Masters

Reflections

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WHAT'S IT LIKE TO RIDE?

The first impression is that it's tiny, mainly because that distinctive dual-seat is just 743mm high. The clip-ons are fairly flat and within easy reach, angling back from a cockpit with its pair of black-faced dials largely obscured – if you're tall – by the swept-back screen. By sports bike standards the footrests are set well forward, and are high enough to place your knees above the sticking-out cylinders.

When you press the starter button there's a brief pause, then a whoomph as the motor fires up, sending the bike lurching from side to side. As the Le Mans lopes away it's impossible not to be captivated by the big V-twin's gentle throbbing – it's too pleasant to be called vibration – and by the sounds coming from its pipes and from those gaping bellmouths down by your shins.

With 80bhp pushing a bike that weighs a hefty 216kg with a little fuel in the tank, the Le Mans does not accelerate hard by modern standards, particularly from low speeds. Even in the Seventies, Kawasaki's Z900 left the tall-geared Le Mans for dead away from the lights. But the big V-twin is pleasantly tractable, requiring a minimum of gear-changing to keep it pulling.

It comes into its own at higher speeds, where simply rolling open the heavy-action throttle results in brisk action as the power pulses quicken, and the wind whips over the screen as the Guzzi rumbles towards its 130mph maximum. Once up to speed, you rarely have to slow. The bike feels unshakeable in fast curves, its conservative steering geometry helps ensure that where old rivals would be getting uneasy, the Le Mans powers through with little need for the steering damper at its headstock.

Admittedly, part of its secret is in the stiffness of its suspension, which in Seventies Italian tradition is firm at both ends. The forks, in particular, punish your wrists on a rough road, especially under braking. The shocks pass plenty of bumps through to the thin seat, though at least their lack of travel minimises the unsettling effect of the drive-shaft torque reaction when you open or close the throttle in a bend.

Opinion on Guzzi's linked brake system was mixed even in the Le Mans' heyday, with many riders impressed but others unconvinced. The hand-operated disc is feeble on its own, and the need to use the foot-pedal for all but the gentlest braking means modifying your riding style to suit. But the three big 300mm Brembo discs give plenty of stopping power when used hard together.

The brake system is just one Le Mans idiosyncrasy in a list that includes unpredictable electrics, badly designed switchgear and a rather vague gearchange. But such quirks were all part of the Guzzi experience 35 years ago. And it's easy to forgive the Le Mans when you ride it, or even when you simply feast your eyes on this most sensual of Seventies superbikes.

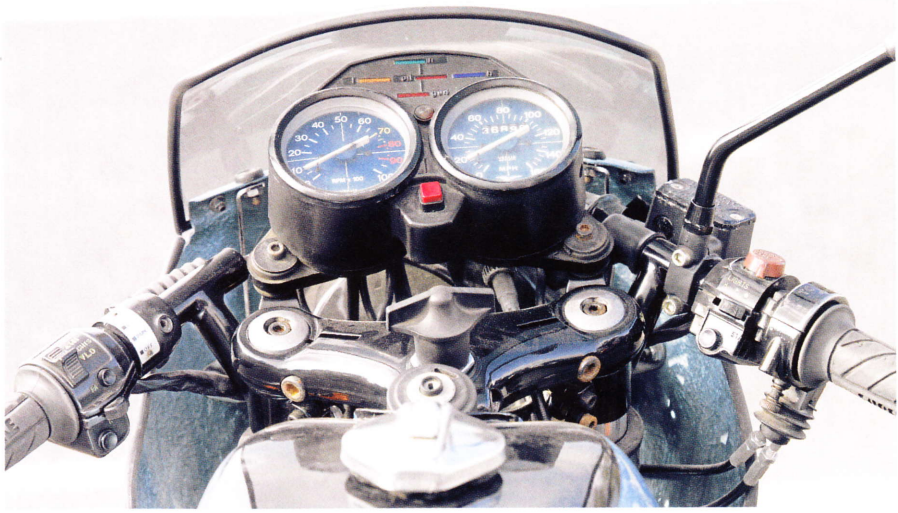
The Guzzi importer's advertising line was 'Long legged and easy to live with' – accompanied, in typical Seventies fashion, by a photo of the Le Mans with a female model who was similarly attractive, suitably long of leg, and would doubtless have proved considerably more high maintenance than the glamorous but reasonably undemanding V-twin.

The Le Mans' heart was an enlarged, 844cc version of the air-cooled, transverse V-twin unit from Guzzi's 750cc S3, itself an excellent unfaired roadster. The two-valve pushrod unit benefited from higher 10.2:1 compression ratio, bigger 36mm Dell'Ortos, plus twin exhausts which, although quite restrained by Seventies standards, gave out a healthy bellow. Max output was a healthy 80bhp at 7300rpm.

Several chassis parts were borrowed from the S3, including the twin-cradle steel frame and Guzzi's own forks. Brakes were by Brembo, operated via Guzzi's linked system that used the foot pedal to work one big drilled front disc, as well as the rear. Attractive 18in cast wheels normally wore Pirelli Phantom tyres that seem impossibly narrow now.

But if some of its components look undeniably dated, few bikes have aged as gracefully as the Le Mans. It's a masterpiece of automotive art, from its rakish screen, through the way its petrol tank is embraced by the raised front of the angular seat, to the bulging grey lump of an engine, the slatted sidepanels and subtly upswept black silencers.

And the Le Mans had the performance to match, with a top speed of 130mph that was more than most bikes could approach in 1976. Equally addictive was the smooth, relaxed feel which, in combination with the flyscreen's protection, slightly leant-forward riding position and well-padded seat, allowed prolonged high-speed riding in reasonable comfort.



The cockpit was not what you'd call a work of art. Not at all.

The Le Mans was not particularly light or agile but it handled well, its stiff steel frame and firm suspension generally overcoming any distracting effect of the shaft final drive. At speeds that would have the riders of high-barred Japanese superbikes weaving, the Guzzi remained stable, its rider tucked down at the clip-ons behind that neat flyscreen. Guzzi's linked brake system was literally yards ahead of most rival set-ups, too, especially in the wet.

At £2000 in 1976 the Le Mans was too expensive to be a best seller, but it gained a cult following, and opened many riders' eyes to Guzzi's charismatic V-twins. The Le Mans remained in production into the Nineties, through four updates, though Guzzi's attempts to keep the aircooled, twin-shock V-twin competitive were doomed to failure.

Where the Le Mans is concerned, the original was definitely the best.

LE MANS TIMELINE

1976 Le Mans 850; original 80bhp model with bikini fairing
1979 Le Mans Mk2; angular full fairing, slightly slower
1982 Le Mans Mk3; regained original power but less competitive
1985 Le Mans Mk4; new styling, 949cc engine with more power and torque, but 16in front wheel gives strange handling
1988 Le Mans Mk5; frame-mounted fairing and 18in front wheel restore handling; produced until 1993.

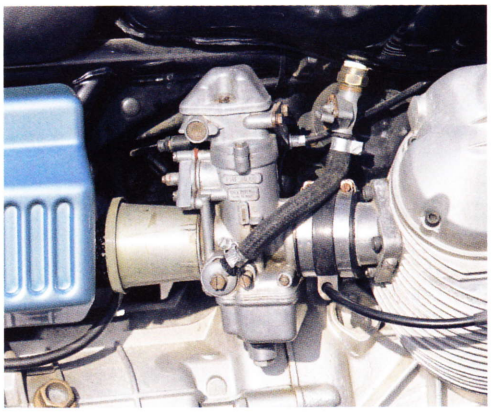
WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The good news is that Guzzi's transverse V-twin engine is generally robust, and that goes for the hotted-up Le Mans as much as the cooking models. "Provided they're treated well they're super durable," says Pietro di Marino, boss of Sussex based Guzzi specialist Motori Di Marino (dimarino.co.uk). "The engines are good for 100,000 to 150,000 miles if they're looked after."

Problems are relatively few, though you might want to make sure that a bike advertised as a Mk1 actually is the early model, because some people convert later bikes to the most popular style. "But generally people are honest about it so a conversion will be mentioned in the advert," Pietro says.

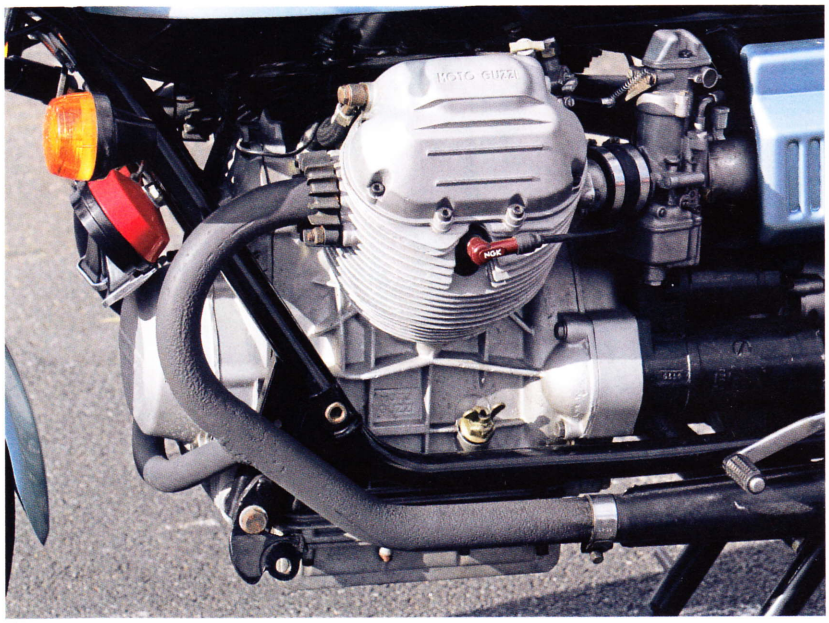
Electrics are generally regarded as a weakness, although even the switchgear isn't as bad as its reputation, according to Pietro.

Spares availability is good, though some original parts are hard to find. "Rear mudguards, indicators and instruments are rare but there are still some around," says Pietro. "It's not difficult to keep a Le Mans on the road."



Simple but effective carbs burn cleanly enough.

Firm forks are good fun in corners on smooth roads.



Yes, it's a big lump of metal but get it spinning and it'll still pull 130mph.

SUSPENSION
The forks are basic fare with no adjustment but the Sebac twin units at the back are at least adjustable for preload.

FRAME
Tubular steel cradle isn't radical but its dimensions do mean that overall the Le Mans feels tiny to ride, it's not cramped but it is compact and bijou.

ENGINE
Using an 844cc version of the transverse V-twin motor from the firm's 750cc S3 the Le Mans engine is brisk enough at speed, despite only making 80bhp.

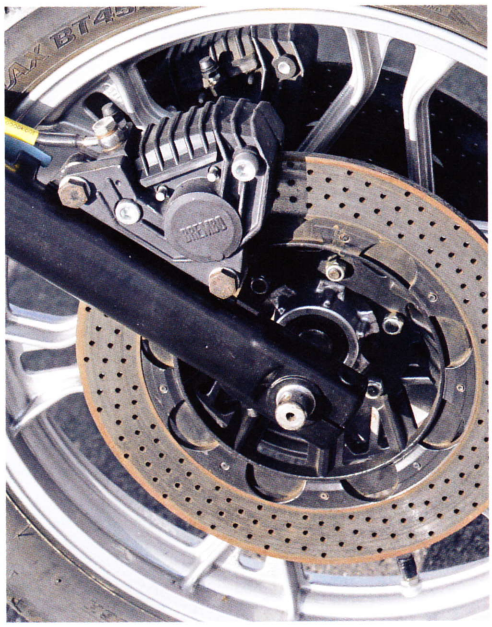
BRAKES
Linked brakes are very much an acquired taste. The front brake feels weak enough to prompt most riders to bring in the back brake when a hard stop is needed.

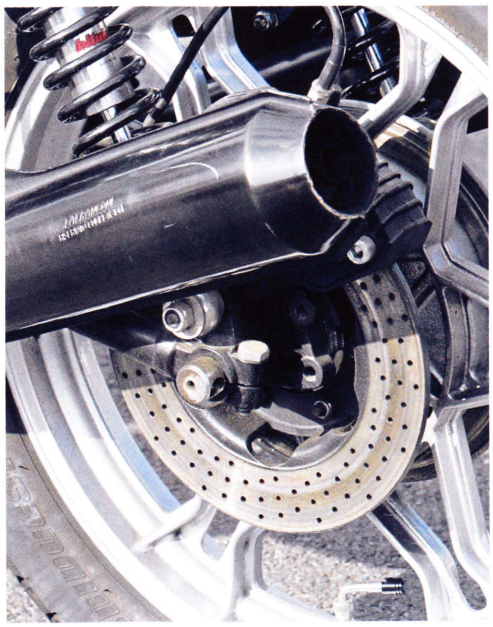
WHAT THEY COST

The Le Mans was very expensive in its day but is now good value by Italian classic superbike standards. "Mark 1s go for £7000 to £10,000 in excellent condition, and between £4000 and £6000 in average condition," says Pietro. Most buyers prefer red so the alternative silver-blue bikes are worth a bit less, despite being rarer.

The fully-faired Mk2 model is next in demand, selling for 20-30% less than a Mk1, so between £4000 and 5000 for a clean one. "The Mk3 and 4 are more difficult to price, because there aren't so many," says Di Marino. "Although the Mk4 wasn't popular it has a very torquey engine, one of Guzzi's best, and there is a demand for it."

It's even possible to pick up a decent Le Mans for less than four grand. "The Mk5s are more common so they go for £3000 to £4000," says Pietro. "And I've just sold a scruffy Mk1 for £3500. Ideally it needs stripping and restoring, but the guy got a bargain because mechanically it's in lovely condition."


Linked brakes aren't to everyone's tastes.


Pipes are just big tubes at heart, but they sound great!

SPEC
Moto Guzzi Le Mans Mk1 (1976)

ENGINE
Air-cooled pushrod, 2-valve transverse V-twin

CAPACITY
844cc

BORE X STROKE
83 x 78mm

COMPRESSION RATIO
10.2:1

CARBURATION
2x 36mm Dell'Ortos

CLAIMED POWER
80bhp @ 7300rpm

TRANSMISSION
5-speed

ELECTRICS
12v battery; 45/40W headlamp

FRAME
Tubular steel cradle

SUSPENSION
Front: Telescopic, no adjustment
Rear: Twin Sebac shock absorbers, adjustable preload

BRAKES
Front: Twin 300mm Brembo discs
Rear: 300mm Brembo disc (linked system)

TYRES
Front: 3.50 x 18 (Pirelli Phantom)
Rear: 4.00 x 18 (Pirelli Phantom)

WHEELBASE
1511mm

SEAT HEIGHT
743mm

FUEL CAPACITY
23 litres

WEIGHT
216kg wet