



LE MANS

Today the 900SS gets the plaudits and fancy prices. But it wasn't always like that. Originally the big Ducati was beaten on track and in showroom sales by the Le Mans. And today, the Guzzi offers real value for money over its Italian rival

WORDS BY GREG PULLEN PHOTOS BY MYKEL NICOLAOU

Ducati 900SS. The very name sends shivers down a grown man's spine. Booming Contis, gulping 40mm Dell'Ortos and the legend of Mike Hailwood's 1978 TT comeback. The big bevel Duke even almost won the illustrious Avon Roadrunner national production championship a couple of times, only to be pipped at the post by those pesky Laverda Jotas. The first time it happened was in 1976 when a '900' version of the earlier 750SS claimed second place in the championship. That bike was prepared and ridden by a young Steve Wynne, who would also claim a leading role in the legend of Hailwood's comeback.

Then in 1978, while battling for the championship lead, Fred Riley fell from his 900SS at Snetterton, his injuries gifting Laverda Jotas the season's top three places.

So when you discover that Hailwood's TT bike owed nothing to the 900SS you could actually buy, Ducati's reputation and current prices look suspiciously like an

auctioneer's smoke and mirrors. Especially when you learn that, back in the day, more people were buying the Moto Guzzi Le Mans, a bike that did actually beat the Jotas to win the 1977 Avon championship. Time, then, to bring together a 900SS and Le Mans to dig some facts from underneath the rose-tinted specs.

The numbers go like this: both motorcycles will just about exceed a genuine 130mph, although ready to ride the Ducati is the lighter of the two by over 30lb (14kg), explaining why it accelerates rather more smartly than the Le Mans. Well, it does if the clutch isn't slipping and you've managed to get it started.

Most 900SS Ducatis now wear 450 Desmo clutch springs to eliminate slipping – at the expense of a big boy's pull at the lever. At least the 900SS isn't as tricky to start as a pair of 450 singles. The Le Mans of course has an electric foot, partly explaining the extra weight. So while the SS is having its carburetors flooded, top dead centre eased over, and a hefty boot applied to its nicely judged kickstart



V900SS:

ITALIAN SUPERBIKE SHOOT-OUT

lever, the Le Mans rider has already pushed the button and gone. Three-tenths of a second faster over the quarter mile? Good luck starting the Ducati that quickly.

The SS also had a reputation for stopping quickly, and not just in the braking department: more the breaking department. Big ends were a speciality until the SS gained the Darmah's meatier bearings and crankpins together with a more subtle advance from the electronic ignition. Ducatis could also, as one racer put it, be 'perfection dressed in tatters'. Designer Fabio Taglioni clearly had no time for cosmetics. After all, when did shiny chrome and fancy paintwork win a race?

Moto Guzzi got around the problem of dodgy chrome by not using any in the first place. The Le Mans' matt black finishes were a deliberate attempt to avoid chroming parts but, combined with the matching eggshell panel on the tank, these lowlights really set off the bike's macho looks. Overnight the garish metallflake and shiny trimmings on Japanese motorcycles must have looked as appealing as Christmas lights in August.

Adding to this brutal and simple aesthetic was Moto Guzzi's desire to build straightforward, usable motorcycles. When designer Giulio Cesare Carcano first sketched out the V-twin it was a far cry from his V8 racing engine of legend. He wanted a robust and long-lived road bike, and it was his successor Lino Tonti who morphed it into the lithe V7 Sport. Tonti then set about developing the drum-braked 748cc Sport into a triple-disc 844cc superbike and was ready and able to launch this, along with the Le Mans moniker, in late 1972. Sadly Moto Guzzi's takeover by Alejandro de Tomaso delayed production for three years while the Argentinean entrepreneur obsessed over his Honda-lookalike multis, variously badged as Guzzis, MotoBis and Benellis. Given the rapturous reception and sales success that eventually came for the Le Mans in 1976, one can only wonder at what might have been if Tonti's instincts had been trusted sooner.

The Ducati 900SS remained in production from 1975 until 1982, usually priced at a slight premium over the Le Mans. Over that period the Le Mans outsold the SS pretty

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Popular convention suggests the 900SS is the more desirable of these two Italian superbikes. But could that be down to rose-tinted specs and the Guzzi have more to offer in terms of all round usability than the Ducati?

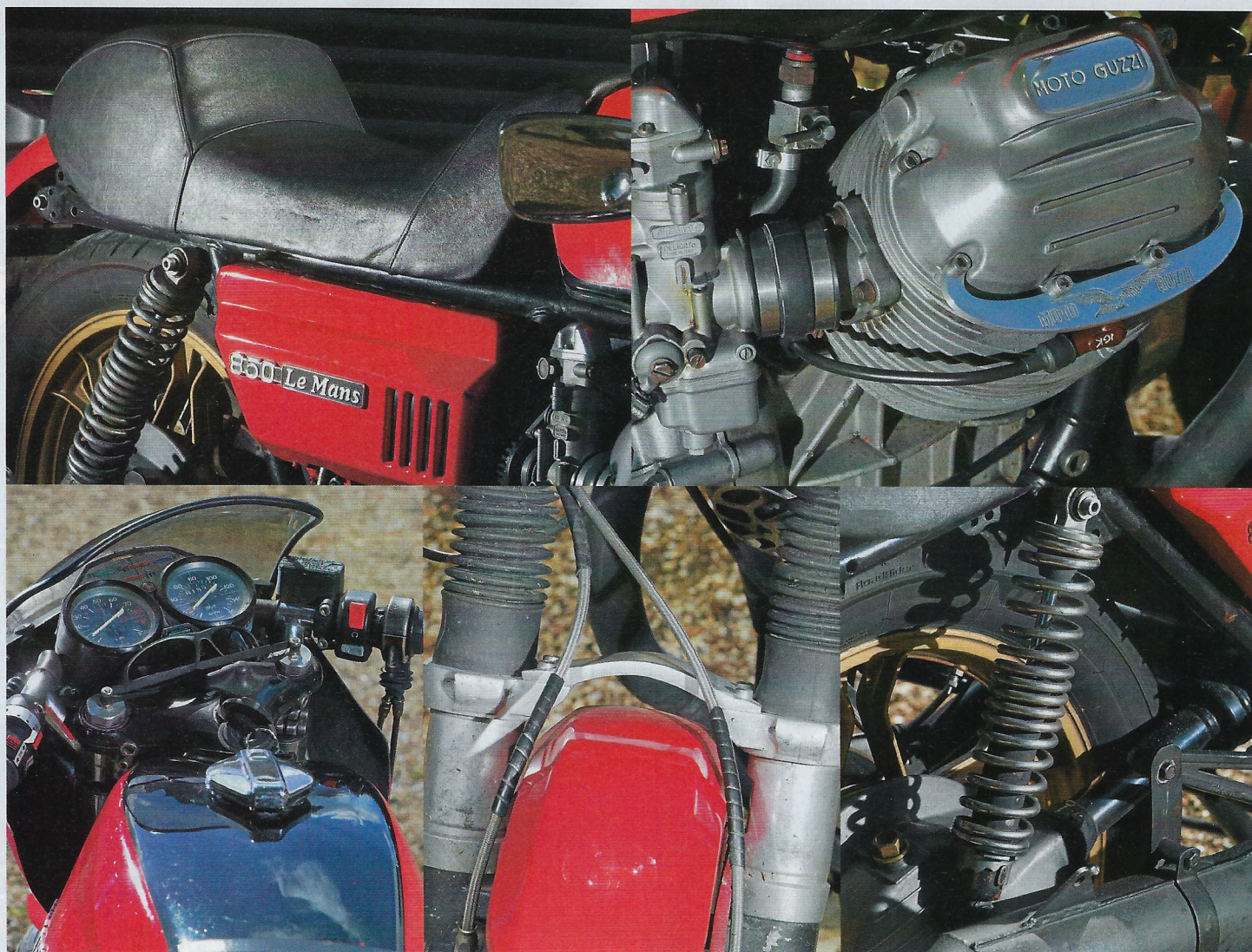


much three-to-one, helped by Moto Guzzi cleverly updating its flagship, reflecting demands for a more civilised product from both riders and environmental legislation. Ducati's answer was to supply the SS with air filters, whispering silencers and 32mm carburettors. When this hurt sales Ducati reverted to open 40mm Dell'Ortos and silencers, claiming these were racing options supplied in the crate, to be fitted by an owner. It was of course a convenient whimsy to bypass the UK construction and uses regulations.

The US Environmental Protection Agency was rather stricter, and influenced motorcycling not just on the road but also on track. During the 1981 Battle of the Twins championship Yamaha managed to protest its way to a win by having Ducati's 40mm Dell'Ortos and Conti silencers declared illegal, and forcing future races to be run with the 900SS restricted to 32mm carburettor trim. The ruling cost Dave McClure a race victory and potentially the series win, so he borrowed a friend's road-going 1978 Le Mans for the final round at Daytona. He won the race, becoming joint series leader and only missing out on the title by counting back overall wins. The Le Mans is that special. But enough of the history lesson. How special is it today?

Well, seeing the bikes together doesn't make you think the 900SS is two or three times as special, which is pretty much what the money men think. Maybe it is just that Guzzi sold so many, although finding one in the sort of condition Ducati hoarders demand would be difficult: Guzzis get ridden, and this one's no exception. Owner Ian





Phillis regularly uses it for rallies and his 50-mile round trip to work as a helicopter test pilot. If it rains especially hard he's also got an ancient MZ250. They really do make these chaps out of The Right Stuff. When Ian had to visit MV – not Agusta, but the helicopter people – he managed to use downtime for a visit to the Moto Guzzi museum. Ian was disappointed that “they didn't even have a Mark I Le Mans on display; just a Mark II.” Uh, oh: time for a little more history. Although some might consider it pedantry.

According to Moto Guzzi there was no Mark I, just plain old Le Mans. The first bikes had a tail-light moulded into the rear mudguard and a one-and-a-tiny-pillion seat. This was quickly replaced with a larger seat, still covered in a bonded rubberised cover that makes the seats impossible to recover and highly prized. Ian keeps his safely tucked away, and anyway finds the aftermarket humped seat better for throw-over panniers. These later bikes also have the black tail-lights common to other Guzzis: although the factory continued to dub this model Le Mans, it's often referred to as the series two for the sake of clarity.

Ian's had the Le Mans for five years, having asked its previous owner to call him if it ever came up for sale. That

ABOVE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Original Le Mans seat came with a bonded rubberised cover than made it impossible to cover. This replacement comes with larger seat hump. 36mm Dell'Orto carbs come with accelerator pumps. Rear suspension is twin LISPAs shocks. Guzzi 35mm cartridge forks up front – with fork brace. Tiny fly-screen was trade-mark Le Mans.

was 15 years ago. “The call was a little bit out of the blue,” Ian remarks with remarkable understatement. He's also quite laconic about the seller's assurances that the noisy engine was down to over-revving and a valve kissing the piston. It turned out to be a knackered gearbox, discovered just in time to pull the engine from a newly stove-enamelled frame. Ian's the perfect guinea pig for this comparison, having owned a Ducati 900S2 in the past, which was the successor to the 900SS. In essence the S2 was a Mike Hailwood Replica with styling halfway between the SS and a Pantah, Ian admitting the big Guzzi feels a “bit of a tractor” in comparison. He had fancied an SS before our day out, but isn't so sure now. After all, unlike an SS, the S2 did at least feature an electric start.

“Watching all the faffing about with the SS, I don't know that I'd want anything bigger than 500cc without an electric start,” opines Ian when a filling station incident involving an impatient white van means hurriedly moving the SS, before putting it back on the stand, folding out the lever and... you know the routine. Riding alone it's no bother, but when you realise a bored Le Mans rider is waiting for you again, fingers drumming metaphorically to the Guzzi's ►

1976 MOTO GUZZI LE MANS

ENGINE: 83 x 78mm (844cc) overhead valve 90° V-twin **COMPRESSION:** 10.2:1 **LUBRICATION:** Wet sump, geared pump **CARBURATION:** 2 x Dell'Orto PHF 36mm slide carburettors with accelerator pumps **GEARBOX:** Unit 5-speed constant mesh **TRANSMISSION:** Final by shaft, with gear primary drive and dry diaphragm clutch **FRAME:** Tubular duplex cradle with detachable bottom tubes **SUSPENSION:** Moto Guzzi 35mm cartridge telehydraulic forks, twin rear LISPAs shock absorbers and swinging arm **TYRES:** 3.50 x 18in front, 4.00 x 18in rear **BRAKES:** Brembo twin 300mm front, 242mm rear, drilled discs with 08 calipers operated via four way manifold linked hydraulic system **IGNITION:** Battery and coil **LIGHTING:** 12 volt 20Ah, 40/45W front headlight **FUEL CAPACITY:** 5 gallons **WEIGHT:** 488lb wet **WHEELBASE:** 57.9in **GROUND CLEARANCE:** 7.25in **POWER:** 80bhp @ 7300rpm (claimed) **TOP SPEED:** 132mph (period road test)

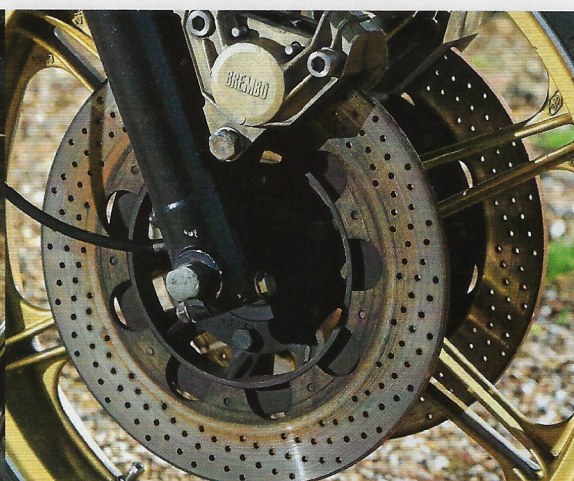


steady tickover, you begin to see his point.

In fact the Guzzi wins all the practicality points – better steering lock and a lower seat height make it much easier to push around, although the latter impacts on the room available for bent legs. Footpegs seem to get more cramped every year as age takes its toll on knees (especially ones reserved for kick-starting) not helped by later 900SS having higher pegs to help production racers with ground clearance. No such worries for us, so Ian has made a couple of modifications to lower his, starting with chopping and relocating the period aftermarket Lafraconi silencers. This allows the retro-fit Tarozi rearsets to be inverted, but on examination the rear brake lever has been crudely repaired.

‘The SS bevel-twin’s gearbox is better than many modern bikes, and it revs quickly but seamlessly to give plenty of power on real roads’





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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Clockwise from top left: 90-degree L-twin features 86mm bore and 74.4mm stroke. Twin 280mm Brembo discs up front. Ducati offers more sporting pretensions in styling and riding position.

"It fell off the stand during the SaddleSore Rally in Worcestershire. The incident proves how good people are; I got a lift from another rider and touring around an industrial estate we found an engineering company. They couldn't have been more helpful. Some old boy spent ages lashing away at the rough edges before welding it up. When he was finally done I said: 'How much?', and he just said: 'Oh, a fiver for the tea will do.' Amazing really. I painted it over with the black paint used on the exhausts meaning to do a better job later, but now it seems a shame to cover up part of the bike's history."

Looking over the Brembo triple discs also reveals that, like many Moto Guzzis, the once praised linked brakes have been converted to a conventional set up. "I think there was a time when it was a fashion thing to de-link them, and it does make them easier to bleed," Ian advises. "It still had the original linking banjo for the brake light when I got it, but I ditched that for a braided hose with a microswitch in a banjo bolt."

Another interesting period modification on this Le Mans is the deeper sump that allows the oil filter to be changed without dropping the sump. Guzzi owners are refreshingly laid-back about deviations from standard, preferring to get on the damn thing and ride, rather than worry about resale values and originality.

Or cleaning. The 900SS had a four hour pimp-and-preen in preparation for the photos; the Le Mans just got ridden to

work. Although the static shots were taken under early morning movie-blue skies, they turned increasingly leaden riding over to Thruxton circuit. We wanted to photograph the bikes there as it was the home circuit for the Avon championship's sponsors: Avon's tyre factory was at Melksham, some 30 miles to the northwest.

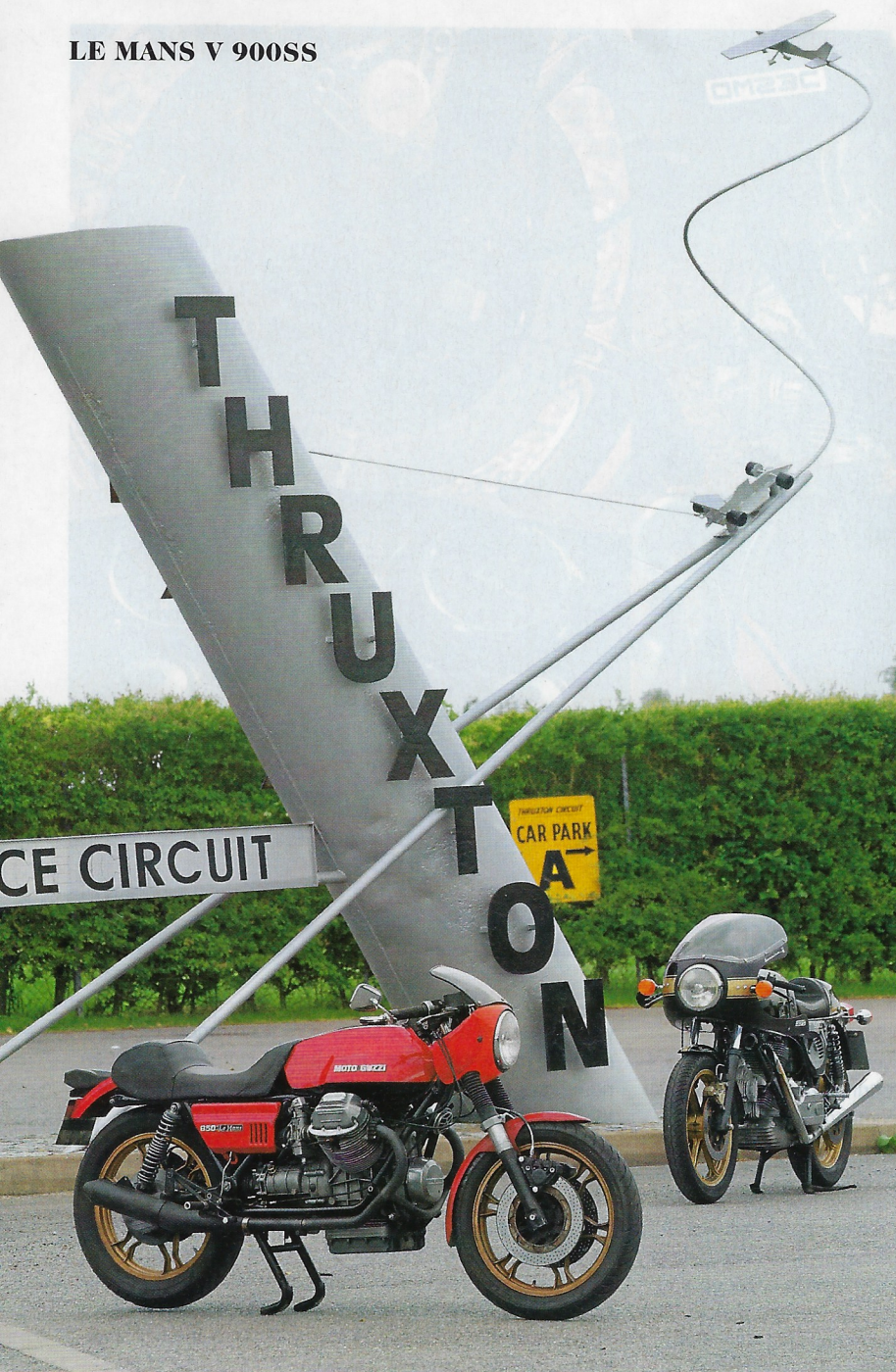
As the light levels fall we decide to call it a day. Ian was due on night-flying duties, and didn't fancy riding home at 1am in heavy rain, so we set off to swap the Le Mans "for something more sensible". Within minutes rain was falling, but the Le Mans pulled away from the 900SS regardless, oblivious to the conditions or the potholes. Although power is top-endy compared to, say, a Guzzi T3, the Le Mans delivery still feels relaxed compared to the more urgent Ducati, something you could guess at just by listening to the exhaust notes. On more nadgery roads than the sweepers of Salisbury Plain the Guzzi's inferior gearshift might be a limiting factor, even if it fights back with almost an inch-and-a-half shorter wheelbase.

The Guzzi's super stable feeling in turns – even by Ducati's physics-defying standards – boosts rider confidence. No wonder the Guzzi did so well on British circuits, which back in the 1970s were chicane-free zones mainly based around old airfields with long open curves that tested a motorcycle's ability to inspire confidence in a rider and allow him to give of his best.

Which brings us to a final slice of history. The Le Mans

1980 DUCATI 900SS

ENGINE: 86 x 74.4mm (863.9cc) overhead cam 90° L-twin **COMPRESSION:** 9.5:1 **LUBRICATION:** Wet sump, geared pump **CARBURATION:** 2 x Dell'Orto PHM 40mm slide carburetors with accelerator pumps **GEARBOX:** Unit 5-speed constant mesh **TRANSMISSION:** Final by chain, with gear primary drive and wet multiplate clutch **FRAME:** Tubular duplex with engine as stressed member **SUSPENSION:** Marzocchi telehydraulic 38mm forks, twin rear Marzocchi shock absorbers and swinging arm **TYRES:** 3.50 x 18in front, 4.25 x 18in rear **BRAKES:** 2 x Brembo twin 280mm front, 229mm rear, drilled discs with Goldline 08 calipers **IGNITION:** Electronic **LIGHTING:** 12 volt 36Ah, 50/60W front headlight **FUEL CAPACITY:** 3.9 gallons **WEIGHT:** 454lb wet **WHEELBASE:** 59in **GROUND CLEARANCE:** 6.5in **POWER:** not quoted **TOP SPEED:** 131mph (period road test)



was also special enough for Roy Armstrong to win the 1977 Avon Championship aboard a bike that started the season exactly like every other Le Mans sitting in the showrooms. Roy worked as a mechanic at Steve Wynne's (yes, him again) Sports Motorcycles dealership, but still had to pay for the Le Mans. He didn't even get the 'PR' (production racing) kit initially, as they were so scarce Sports reserved the only one it had for its own, sponsored, rider.

Towards the end of the season, as it became obvious Roy was a favourite to win the series, a kit was found, with the biggest gain coming from high compression pistons. These were effectively the automatic Convert's 88mm items,

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Thruxton was a venue where the Le Mans excelled on track in the last Seventies British Production racing championship. It was also the home circuit for the then series sponsor, Avon Tyres



stretching capacity to 950cc. Fast enough, super stable and reliable, the Le Mans would shine at circuits like Thruxton.

Riding the 900SS and Le Mans side-by-side you might conclude that while the Ducati offers the purer sporting experience, the Guzzi isn't far behind and is far more versatile. If you really are ready for Guzzi ownership, you'll have also spotted you can build a Le Mans lookalike for even less money: the Le Mans' power boost over the T3 came from higher compression, bigger valves and 36mm, rather than 30mm, carburetors. The two motorcycles even share the same camshaft, although the Le Mans has sharper ignition timing and lighter flywheel, adding to its sporting prowess. Yes, the T3 is 7kg heavier than the hardly svelte Le Mans II benefited from and a bigger battery.

Ridden immediately after the Duke, the Guzzi might be a bit of a shock. The SS bevel-twin's gearbox is better than many modern bikes, and it revs quickly but seamlessly to give plenty of power on real roads. There's also no vibration, just endless shove that fully justifies claims this might be the finest motorcycle engine ever built. But the riding position is pretty extreme, with a fair old stretch to the 'bars and footpegs set for jockey-sized Latin racers rather than lanky old Brits. The Guzzi feels much more comfortable, and once you've got over the side-to-side rocking at tickover and heavy controls (especially the one-two-three, in-you-go gearbox) it all starts to gel.

Maintenance is lawn-mower simple: over the winter Ian gave the top-end a refresh and overhaul all by himself; how many Ducati owners would trust themselves to get Desmo valves back to their infamous zero closing clearance?

Finally just look at the Le Mans. Has there ever been a prettier – yet bull-nose tough – production motorcycle? Glamourpuss looks and girl-next-door reliability for as much as £10,000 less than even a late 900SS? That would pay for a lot of weekends away as Ian proves, telling of his summer plans for the big red charmer. Rallies, race wins and reliability: what more could you ask of a motorcycle? Even if it didn't look as glorious as a Moto Guzzi Le Mans. **CBG**

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