

DUCATI 900SS, LAVERDA JOTA & MOTO GUZZI LE MANS

HEDDO



DNISM

A Laverda Jota, a Ducati 900SS and a Moto Guzzi Le Mans on sun-drenched blacktop. It's a recipe to excite the most jaded of palates – but which one delivers the highest highs?

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It's the stuff of teenage dreams: three of the most evocative Italian machines the world has ever seen sit gleaming before me on the gravel of a countryside car park. Anyone who spent the late 1970s reading the print off their precious bike mags will have the names Jota, Le Mans and SS engraved indelibly on their imagination.

It was not only the road tests, with their tales of lusty power and precision roadholding, that were committed to memory. There were also those unforgettable full-page colour adverts produced by the importers in the days before political correctness.

While the Jota boasted itself a 'Legend in its lifetime', the Duke and Guzzi were draped with lissom young women clad in their scanties, beneath catchlines that boasted: 'Ducati Lays It On The Line' and 'Long Legged And Easy To Live With'. *Razzle* and *Hustler* had nothing on those babies.

But are these super-heated memories matched by the 21st-century reality of the machines themselves? Conditions are perfect for testing our *dolce vita* delights. The balmy calm of a late-spring morning is ripe to be shattered by the bark, blat and howl of Italian superbikes speeding through the hills, woods and valleys of the South Downs.

Which of the trio will emerge as the ultimate of the Latin lovelies, the *primus inter pares*? The answer may be only a day's ride away...

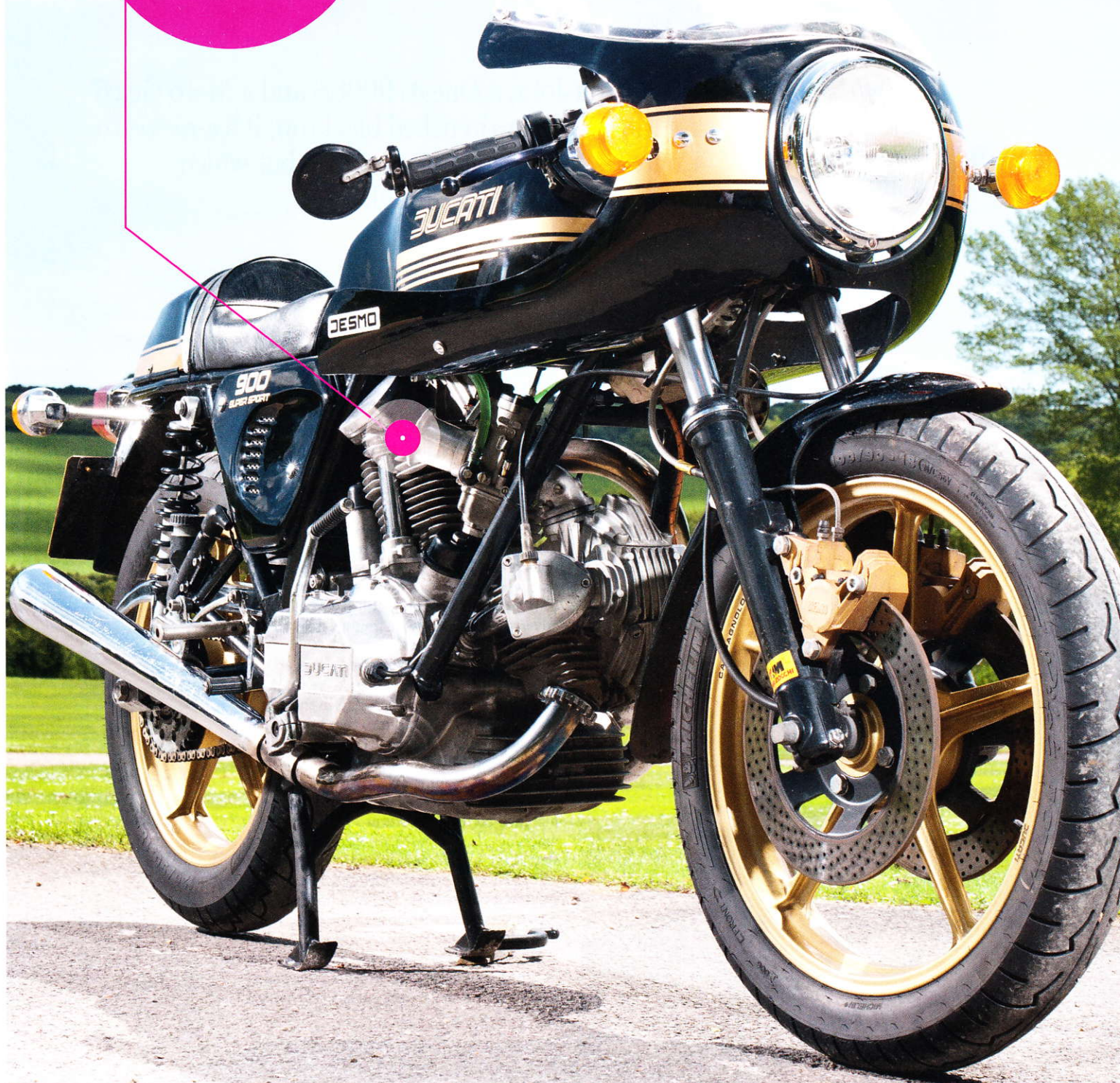
SPECIFICATION

1980 DUCATI 900SS

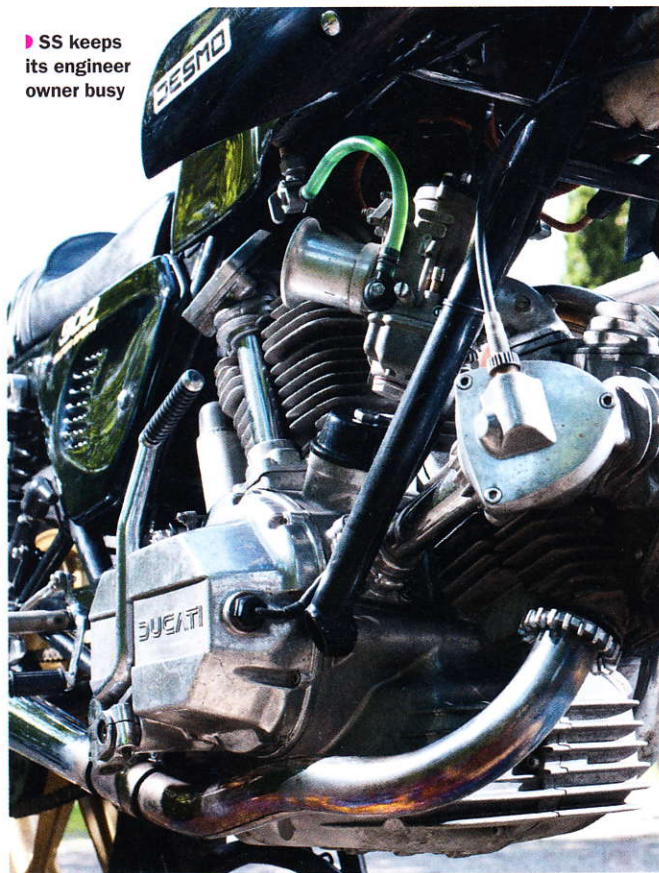
Engine air-cooled, 864cc,
four-stroke V-twin

Chassis steel trellis

The numbers 68bhp,
130mph, 452lb (205kg),
£10,000-£25,000



► Lighter, more rigid cast wheels debuted on the SS for the 1978 Le Mans 24 Hour race



1980 DUCATI 900SS

The machine for which the phrase 'labour of love' was invented

I always wondered why the Ducati importers felt compelled to put sexy models in their magazine adverts for the black beauty from Borgo Panigale, Bologna. The women just got in the way.

Seductive looks like the Ducati's can get a man into trouble quite well enough on their own. Back in the early 1980s I spotted a black-and-gold 900SS parked near a nightclub I was entering with a girlfriend. I'd never seen one in the metal before. I just had to go back for a better look. So I told the girlfriend I had to go to the loo and popped outside. I sat on a low wall opposite the SS, gazing at its every detail, mind numbed with moto-lust. That's where the girlfriend found me half an hour later. It was not a good end to the evening.

Paul Ingram's relationship with his 900SS is a far happier romantic story. When he finished rebuilding the bike for the first time, 25 years ago, he took his wife to the south of France on it for their honeymoon, via the Champagne region. Paul's marriage to his wife still thrives, though the Ducati, perhaps inevitably, has suffered its share of breakdowns.

You can forgive the Duke its highly-strung temperament, not least because of its looks, but also because it is the most overtly race-bred of these three Latin bikes. The 900SS was originally launched in 1975 as a limited run of 246 production racers. It was built with a bevel-driven version of Fabio Taglioni's 90° V-twin – and with no concessions to civility.

The machine's popularity led to a slightly more sanitised regular production version being brought out in 1976. Over the following four years, the engine was updated to address all-too-frequent failures of the crankshaft, gearbox and ignition.

If the bike was rare, exotic and expensive back then, nowadays it

is rare, exotic and extremely expensive. Nostalgic clamour for this machine means that decent examples can command prices in excess of £20,000. A quarter of a century ago, Paul picked his up comparatively cheaply, though the bills have mounted impressively since then. He purchased the bike as a wrecked ex-racer from the marque experts, Brancato Engineering, and rebuilt it. Being an engineer by profession no doubt helped, though the Ducati still did its best to keep in him busy. "While we were on honeymoon in

France, the clutch fell off. But that's normal," he remembers. "I fixed it outside the hotel."

Subsequently, Paul put the 900SS away for years while he rode modern bikes. The Ducati decided to spend its downtime quietly deteriorating in the most costly manner. Two years

ago, Paul came by the funds to rebuild it again.

"The project was hard work and expensive," he says. "The engines on these bikes cost north of £6000 to rebuild if you are thorough – and I have been." Now the bevel engine has mods to address its traditional weak points. The oil filtration has been boosted and the bottom end has been strengthened by Godden engineering (goddenengineering.co.uk). The asthmatic original oil pump has been replaced by one with the capacity to shift 40% more lubricant.

The bike is also treated to lube-and-filter changes every 1000 miles – that means five litres of AMSOil at £14.50 a litre. But still Paul worries about the engine's notoriety for eating bottom ends. Thus his instructions for riding: "avoid slugging it below 3000rpm or above 7000rpm preferably, or 7500rpm if you're really excited." Within those parameters, I really don't mind how hard you use it." Suitably instructed, I swing a leg over the SS; I'm immediately >>>

'THESE ENGINES COST NORTH OF £6000 TO REBUILD IF YOU ARE THOROUGH – AND I HAVE BEEN'

► Looking for a casual relationship with no ties? Look elsewhere



impressed by its dimensions. It's a bit of a stretch over the tank to reach the bars, but the bike fits like a bespoke racing suit, putting you instantly into a low, purposeful crouch.

I switch on both fuel taps and swing on the kickstart. Its lack of an electric boot is one of the things that makes the Ducati feel like it's from a slightly earlier era than the other two. Kickstarting takes a bit of a knack – a knack I don't have – but under Paul's boot the big twin fires up with impressive ease.

With its motor running, the bike feels viscerally alive, sucking gulps of air through the massive 40mm Dell'Orto carburettors and roaring through its scarcely-silenced pipes. I take a grab at the notoriously stiff clutch lever and find that it's a dream to operate. This is how a top-drawer rebuild really should feel.

The Duke pulls away strongly from standstill. There's no power band, just a constant, hard-assed surge through the rev range as the bike gets louder and tauter. The 900SS certainly doesn't tug your arms out of their sockets under acceleration, but thrusts you forward accompanied by a hammer-blow soundtrack.

The carburettors have just been set up. They draw flawlessly, without a hint of hesitation. The handling feels light and neutral – until you hit a corner, then it's a revelation. With its Seeley-inspired, race-perfected frame, the SS really does fall into curves at the twitch of an eyebrow, tipping in with precision and ease.

Paul says: "I think it's the cast Campagnolo wheels that make the difference to the handling. I've tried others, but these are by far the best. People think that they are fragile and a risk, but I have had these professionally crack-tested and refinished with the correct procedure."

That taut precision comes at a price, as I discover when trying to negotiate a bumpy country road at speed – the Ducati had me bouncing off my perch. The rider's soft underparts can take quite a battering on the thinly-padded seat.

The brakes are solidly dependable, front and rear, though the front does demand a bit of a tug. The lovely smooth gearbox is of the 'use and forget' variety. Clutchless changes are a joy – almost as much of a joy as the soundtrack on acceleration and over-run. That classic 'bruum-baaaa' is utterly addictive.

Paul takes over the riding so that I can compare the Jota's performance alongside it. As we park up, Paul is worried that the clutch might be slipping slightly. I didn't notice anything. Certainly, the progress the bike made on the road belied any problems. In fact, I thought the bike to be performing perfectly.

But perhaps that level of meticulous scrutiny typifies 900SS owners. They share a lovingly obsessive attention to their motorcycle's every engine revolution that can verge on paranoia. The rest of us, meanwhile, can simply stand by and gaze in open-mouthed admiration.



► Early bikes used Smiths clocks – these are Veglias

1976 MOTO GUZZI LE MANS

Built for big speed over big miles, as the name would imply

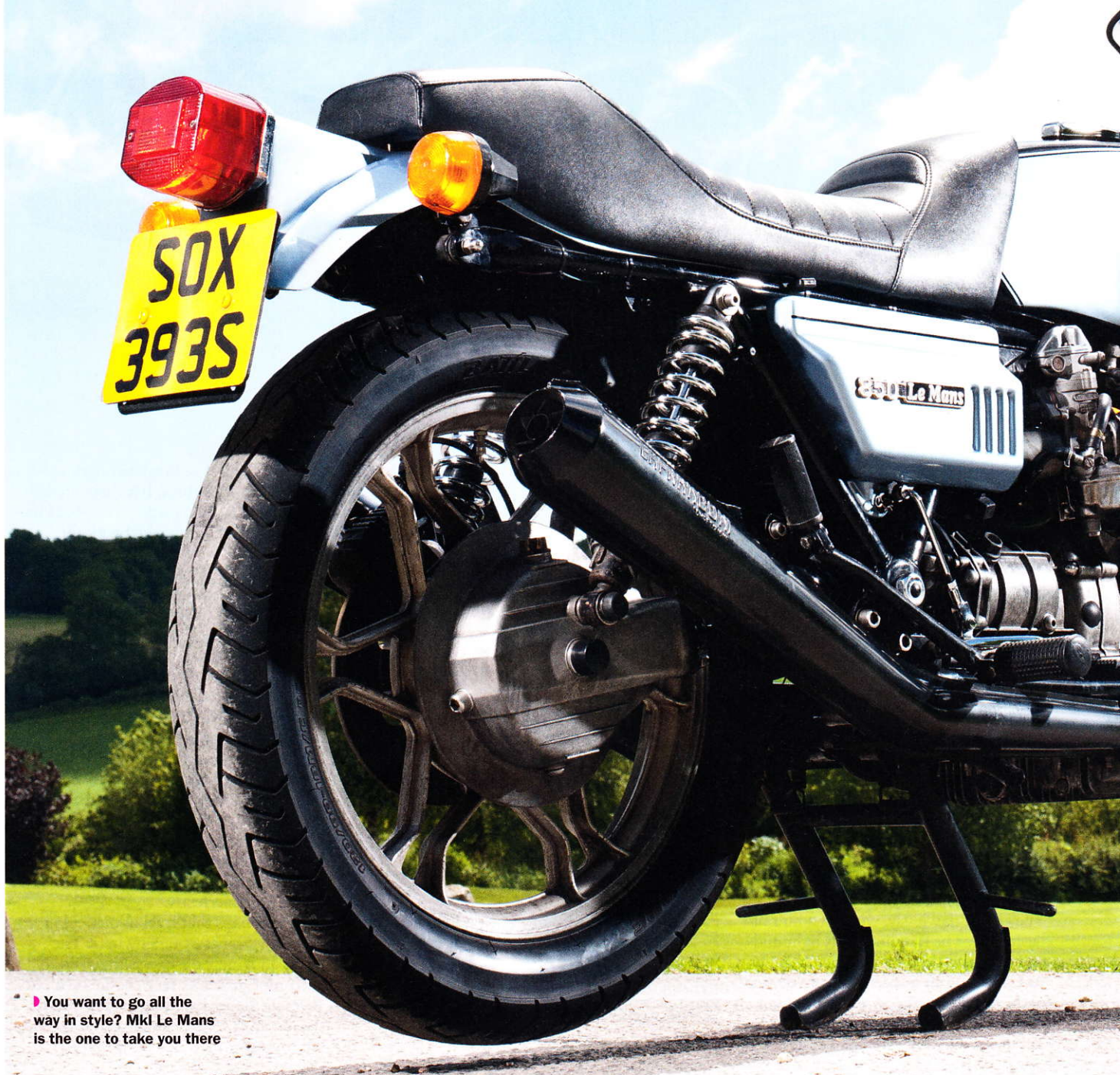
Some designs just get it right first time – so right that they become a true archetype. If it's a Spitfire, then it's the first version, with its bared-teeth octet of Browning guns, that encapsulates the spirit of The Few. If it's an E-Type, only the lightweight original's clean silhouette truly embodies that prized piece of road sculpture. And if it's a Guzzi Le Mans, only the round-nosed MkI has the wind-sculpted lines that make collectors rave. Gazing at this lovely blue bruiser of a bike, with its gorgeous road-wear and gentle fading, you question why the design boys at Mandello del Lario ever bothered to remodel a single panel, it all fits together so naturally.

No wonder so many owners of MkII models have retro-fitted them with bodywork that resembles the first model. This one is no imitation, though. Pete Norman's Guzzi is a true original

version of Lino Tonti's overhead-valve pushrod V-twin, designed to compete with the Jota, 900SS and Kawasaki's Z1. The factory hit the bull's-eye in the aesthetics department – and judging by my first ride, Tonti also struck gold with the mechanicals.

Only one part of the Guzzi's looks comes into question. That DayGlo orange panel on nose-cone fairing divides opinions. I think it's a lovely period detail; the slight fade gives it the look of an Apollo command module flaming its heat shield on re-entry.

It is hard to believe that this bike was once dragged, rusting and neglected, from a lock-up garage in Essex. Pete, a journalist and *CB* contributor from south-west London, restored the bike in 2008 after realising what a find he had made. Despite its forlorn looks, the Le Mans showed only 9031 miles on the clock and had suffered little from the crash that had prompted its



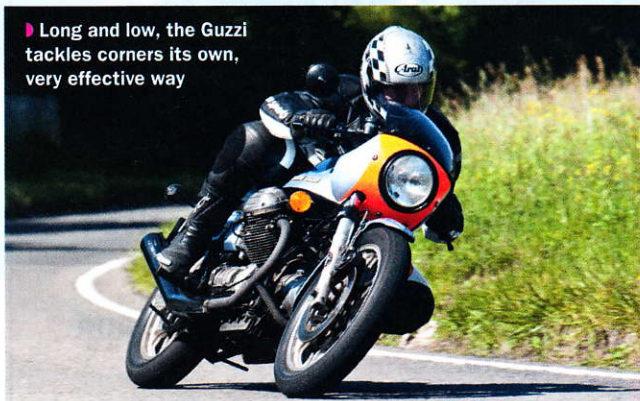
► You want to go all the way in style? MkI Le Mans is the one to take you there

abandonment. Even the engine was remarkably sound. What's more, it was a genuine round-tail MkI bike. Pete had wanted one ever since he was a teenager, when his sister's boyfriend had arrived on a red factory-fresh example at the family home.

The restoration proved gratifyingly straightforward; while Pete busied himself getting parts cleaned and painted, he entrusted the mechanical rebuild to Nigel Billingsley of NBS Motorcycle Servicing in Staffordshire (01889 271818). The overall aim was to create a reliable daily-rider that retained as much original patina as possible. NBS replaced the motor's shell bearings, seals and gaskets, along with a pitted cam follower.

Pete replaced the tired and weary LISPA rear shocks with replica Koni Dial-a-Ride units from Ikon in Australia (ikonsuspension.com), managing to persuade the Ikon people to fit new-old-stock upper spring holders embossed with the Koni brand. That original-modded look is taken one step further with a pair of black and beastly Lafranconi Competizione silencers, whose bark is goosebump-inducing.

► Long and low, the Guzzi tackles corners its own, very effective way



A few details have been changed, in pursuit of reliable electrics. "The rocker switches for the horn and the flash were junked," says Pete. "I rigged a push-button for each of them. And the ignition is now a Sachse unit." To tell the truth, the switchgear still resembles a young child's fit-together game, but that's the only alien thing about the Guzzi experience.

The riding position welcomes you into the bike's embrace. Shielded by the stubby fairing, you can actually see the idiot-lights in daylight – a surprise after the Ducati's tell-tales, whose levels of illumination bring a new dimension to the word 'dim'.

With its broad-shouldered frontage and skinny haunches, there is a touch of the attack dog about the Le Mans, though in fact there's a lot of loveable Labrador beneath the aggressive lines. I was amazed to discover that it is such a go-to Guzzi – you can easily jump on this bike and simply ride without having to reconfigure your brain to accommodate any exotic Italian quirkery (apart from the headlamp switch). The linked footbrake is a cinch and the shaft drive doesn't overshadow the experience at all.

I was expecting clumpy, slow gearchanges, like on a T3 I rode some years ago. I was wrong. The lever requires a firm foot, but the changes are sweetly dependable. >>

'THERE'S A TOUCH OF ATTACK DOG ABOUT THE LE MANS, BUT A LOT OF LOVEABLE LABRADOR'

SPECIFICATION
1976 MOTO GUZZI
LE MANS

Engine air-cooled, 844cc, four-stroke V-twin

Chassis tubular steel spine

The numbers 79bhp, 132mph, 476lb (216kg), £7000-£11,000



Controls feel light, thanks to nylon-lined throttle cables and medium carb springs, along with a PTFE-lined clutch cable.

That V-twin's torque twist at standstill transforms into lovely midrange shove, accompanied by the gorgeous growling soundtrack. Once above 5000rpm, the breathing opens up and, at the top end of the revs, the motor gets hard and gnarly and the power just keeps on coming.

The suspension is the softest of the three, and so is the seat. Such comforts come at a little cost: barging the Le Mans round tight, bumpy country bends, it's the only one that feels in danger of baffling its dampers. Then again, the other two ricochet off rutted tarmac in a manner that would make Barnes Wallace proud. Even on smooth bends, the Guzzi would have trouble holding on to the other two. It's not a bad handler – it's just in tough company here, against the Ducati's precision and the Jota's solidity. A Telefix fork brace helps to keep the Le Mans in order and the Bridgestone BT-45s on the original



► Get behind this for a day, go south... *bonjour Monaco*

FPS cast wheels never feel traumatised.

Once up there with the fastest bikes on the road, nowadays the Le Mans makes a highly capable sports-tourer. Pete's ridden it two-up to Lake Como and back via the Simplon Pass, adding: "I rode it to the Manx that year, too. It did 4000 miles over 12 months and the only thing that went wrong was a blown bulb. It's very easy to cruise at 80mph and 5000rpm in top. Two-up, you don't notice the second person on the back. You can still get about 220 miles on a full tank before reserve."

Since the rebuild was completed in 2008, Pete has added 12,000 miles of joyful riding to the clock. It's testimony to the quality of the restoration and the durability of the old pushrod engine that it has proved so free of trouble, despite being no stranger to the upper end of the tachometer. Tonti's thoroughbred is a loyal workhorse, too. As Pete says, "It's not true that Italian bikes are demanding. All you have to do is change the oil regularly."



► Novice-bib or period-perfect? Dayglo bikini top divides opinion



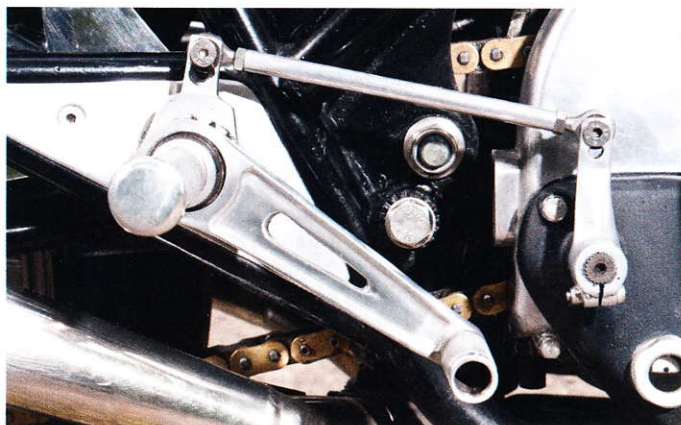
SPECIFICATION

1979 LAVERDA JOTA

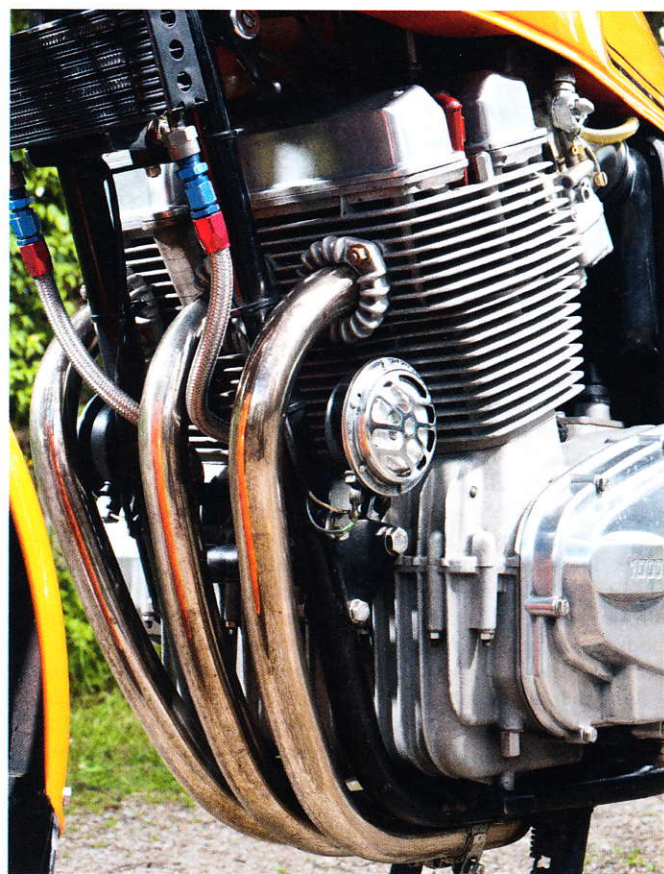
Engine air-cooled, 981cc,
four-stroke triple

Chassis twin-downtube
steel cradle

The numbers 90bhp,
139mph, 505lb (229kg),
£10,000-£14,000



► Dwarfed surrounding countryside shown at actual size



1979 LAVERDA JOTA

Want to test your commitment? Then hurl yourself into the Jota's maelstrom of noise and speed

Anyone who approaches a Jota, ignition key in hand, without a pang of fear knows nothing of the big triple's reputation for brutal heft. The flame-orange bike is the one that has me worried.

With any snarling beast, the time-honoured advice is to stare it straight in the eyes, betray no nerves and face it down. So I swing a leg up over the seat and expect to be perched so high that I suffer altitude sickness. But hang on, I can get both heels on the ground – seldom a guaranteed experience, given my five-foot-eightiness.

Next I steel my left wrist to wrestle the notoriously heavy clutch. The lever swishes back with the ease of a commuter bike. My right wrist is similarly untroubled by a light, quick-action Magura throttle. I was raised on tales of how the three-lunged terror could snatch sports-moped riders from their beds, and only their Bob Heath visors would be found the next morning. Have I been totally lied to about its rider-bullying ways?

The Jota story is certainly muscular enough. In 1976, the UK importers Slater Brothers hotted up Laverda's already fast and lairy 3C by fitting high-compression pistons, lumpy cams and louder pipes (originally made in the UK by Tim Healey) to create the Jota. It quickly won renown as a hairy-arsed ride and grabbed the title of world's fastest production motorcycle. Then the 139mph triple won the Avon Roadrunner production series in 1976 and '78.

But while it was a winner on the track, on the road it still had far to go before its many quirks could be ironed out. The factory never managed that feat. But Nick Davis has, with the bike on which I'm sitting. His example represents the pinnacle of properly sorted Jota-dom, while still retaining all the growling soul of the original.

Nick is a lawyer from Sevenoaks, Kent, whose Laverda-lust was

sparked at the age of 17, when he got his first ride on the back of a motorcycle, courtesy of a near-neighbour who had a Jota. Twelve years ago, Nick was riding modern bikes – but after picking up six penalty points from two speeding tickets on the same day, he resolved to get something that felt much faster at slower speeds. The rosy memories of his first ride rekindled the desire for a Jota.

He heard of one at a dealer in Bolney, East Sussex, who was selling on behalf of a private owner. Nick was not the only man

chasing the bike, and had to buy it unseen to secure the sale. "It has been a process of improvement ever since," he says with epic understatement.

When he saw his prize for the first time, he was happy. "It looked good to my eyes," Nick recalls. "The seller had clearly spent money on it. But after getting it serviced, the engine breather

sprayed oil over the back tyre."

Nick joined the online owners' forum, seeking help. A fellow member who lived locally examined the head and found that the studs securing the cam blocks had stripped. With the head off, it emerged that the pistons were worn. While it was apart, Nick sent the crankshaft to Chris Applebee (01268 776642) for a rebuild.

Back on the road, the engine began smoking, thanks to worn valve guides. "I decided to get a better head instead – one from a 1982 RGS," says Nick. Slater Brothers agreed to sell him the head from a display engine that had spent years in their window. Once again, Nick decided to go a step further. He bought the barrels and pistons off that engine, too, so it all matched. Keith Nairn at Laverda Scozia (07766 694567) changed the new head's valve springs and precision-cut the valve seats. "The factory didn't do a brilliant job on those things in the first place," explains Nick. >>

'THIS EXAMPLE REPRESENTS THE PINNACLE OF PROPERLY SORTED JOTA-DOM'

"The bike has never smoked or burnt oil since. It's bloody gorgeous."

Keith also installed the hydraulic clutch and a modern Sachse electronic ignition. "The old Bosch system had a jump from advance to retard at 3000rpm that made the engine jerky," says Nick. It has been matched with a generator borrowed permanently from a Kawasaki Z250.

Keith Nairn also drilled the camwheels so they can be dialled-in exactly for the valve timing. He then drilled and balanced the clutch so it spins smoothly and flows oil better. The primary chain is duplex, rather than the original triplex. "It's a camchain from a Mercedes van and it makes the transmission much quieter," says Nick. The motor does feel tight and quiet, but the stainless Keihin exhaust certainly is not.

The bike actually shrinks a little once you're on it – a sense of diminution aided, no doubt, by the way the riding stance pokes your nose out above the big, effective Nippon Denso clocks. One quirk does make itself immediately apparent, though – the fact that it's the only bike of the three to have a right-foot shift requires a little brain recalibration. All the other controls are, as computer bods say, 'intuitive'. You don't notice the rare polished Laverda rearsets – they're so perfectly sited, your feet find them naturally.

On the road the Jota belts out a great grunting howl, enough to drown out Black Sabbath on any headbanger's car stereo. As well as the Ozzy-taming bellow, the engine metes out mighty power



► Jota 'bars adjust from merely keen to fully extreme

and manly vibes. Want more horses? Just open the throttle and they come slugging through in fine style. Everything on the Jota feels big – Japanese-burly rather than Latin lithe – although compared with big Zeds and GS1000s, the beast's tendons have been tautened to a rippling state of pugilistic fitness. The standard fork internals have been cleaned and new springs installed; the shocks are Wilbers, from Germany. The ride and cornering is solid, if a little jolty on rough roads. It's like piloting a gold ingot.

Chasing Paul Ingram on his 900SS through sweeping Sussex country roads, I can easily keep pace on the straights, but still feel compelled to back off a little through the turns. The Jota's proddy-racing pedigree proves it to be a capable bend-straightener, but this is not a machine that the uninitiated would wish to try correcting halfway through a fast, open curve.

The braking is mercifully strong and linear, courtesy of Brembo calipers all round (as on the Duke and Guzzi) with a Grimeca front master cylinder. Discs are original equipment and grip better as they heat up. Bridgestone BT45s cope predictably and consistently. Only in town does the bike's race heritage become obtrusive, as the engine hunts and shudders like an impatient steeplechaser.

So has Nick's process of improvement reached its end? He pronounces himself happy with the bike, but for one niggle. "My ambition is to get Keith to swap all the conrods for Carillos, but frankly I don't want to pull apart such a lovely motor."



► Don't worry, orange fans. The carbon-fibre side panels await painting the correct hue

THUG, STEED OR ROAD RACER?

With hearts a flutter and brains drained, time to pick a winner...

...Only that's impossible, so different are these apparently very similar machines. Me? It'd have to be the raw, pulverising Jota, the most Japanese of the three. I guess that's no surprise – years on Japanese superbikes (namely Z1 and H1 Kawasakis) have left me dependent on big, brutal power and the forceful, seamless delivery that comes with multi-cylinder engines. But then I'd want the Guzzi as a daily rider and touring companion, and the Ducati to gaze at, ride on perfect days, and worry about the rest of the time.

Regular CB contributor Gez Kane and production editor Mark Holmes, my riding compadres for the day, have other ideas. Gez is bowled over by the Guzzi. "It just keeps punching. Once you've

got it rolling, I reckon it can accelerate as fast as the 900SS," he says. "Value wise, I think the Mk1 Le Mans remains overlooked too, and something of a bargain compared to the other two."

Mark, on the other hand, is smitten by the Ducati. "In my eyes it's the most desirable bike ever built. It has that combination of lightness, power and super-intuitive handling that makes every ride so rewarding. And it makes a fantastic noise."

So, the decision goes to a casting vote. I turn to Pietro, boss of Italian specialists Motori di Marino at West Chiltington in Sussex. Pushed to make a choice, Pietro opts for practicality. "I'd choose the Guzzi – you could ride it to Rome tomorrow, no problem."

BUYING INTO LA DOLCE VITA

So you're going for it – but which year? Cast wheels or wire? Early SS or late?



Laverda Jota

Introduced in 1976, the first Jotas were built by UK importers Richard and Roger Slater. The bike then went into production in Italy, though in a couple of guises; full-strength UK bikes (hot cams, high-compression pistons and open exhausts) and watered-down Euro spec. Mechanical changes included a move to roller bearings for the centre of the crankshaft in 1979, together with more laid-down shock mounts. A new cylinder head was introduced in 1980, and in 1981 the Series 2 came out (240W alternator on the left of the crank, as opposed to the earlier 140W unit on the right).

"The Holy Grail is a genuine UK Jota in orange with the silver frame, with the paperwork to prove its provenance," says John Fallon of Made In Italy Motorcycles. "There are an awful of 'Jotas' out there that aren't. Genuine orange Jotas are £13,000 for one in average condition; more for a mint one, obviously. Nice wire-wheeled 3Cs are £10,000-£12,000 but the mad thing is a sorted cast-wheeled 3C, which is lovely to ride, might be £8000 – only a little more than the 750 twins. The really early 3Cs are for collectors only – they're scary to ride."



Moto Guzzi Le Mans

"A good Guzzi Le Mans is an everyday bike, which isn't really something you could say of the other two," explains John. "If a customer comes in wanting a 900SS but they tell me they're looking to commute on it in summer, and that they don't know one end of a spanner from the other, I'll steer them towards a Le Mans."

"The Mk1 is the one you want, just because it looks so good. Colours were the pale blue or red for a first series Mk1, though the Series 2 Mk1s also came in white, which sounds terrible but actually looks good in the flesh. You can check that you're buying a genuine Mk1 via the frame and engine numbers (VE 11111 to VE 13040 for the first series; VE 13041 to VE 17311 for the second series).

"Values are pretty reasonable; £8000-£12,000 for a genuine Mk1. People seem to want the louder Lafranconi silencers with the twirly bits in the end, and original seats are highly prized – they deteriorate but none of the repro seats look right."

"Finding original, unmodified examples is tricky. They tended to be bought by more practical riders who covered miles on them and tweaked their bikes – plus only a couple of thousand were built."



Ducati 900SS

In the course of its model development, the 900SS morphed from a road-legal racer with lights (the first bikes were effectively 864cc-engined 750SS chassis – they were even stamped as 750s) to a relatively refined machine with left-foot shift and a dual seat. But it's the early bikes people want.

"The desirability of the 900SS variants is very straightforward – the earlier the better," explains John. "The 1975 bikes are hugely desirable; £30,000 to £40,000 for a perfect one. The 1976 and 1977 bikes were watered down slightly, with a clumsy left-foot shift conversion and 32mm carbs on some bikes. But they're still great to ride and you'll need £15,000-£25,000 for a nice one. Just make sure it's been looked after, with proof of engine attention from someone who knows what they're doing."

"Cast wheels came in for 1978, together with a new engine using essentially the same bottom-end as the Darmah. These were almost exclusively black and gold, and they sell for a couple of grand less than the '76/'77 bikes. They've got marginally more legroom, and the gearshift is nicer."

With thanks to Pietro at Motori di Marino (01798 813260) for the strong coffee and expert help with last-minute fettling, John at Made in Italy for the buying advice (madeinitalymotorcycles.com) and Amberley Castle Hotel (01798 831992)