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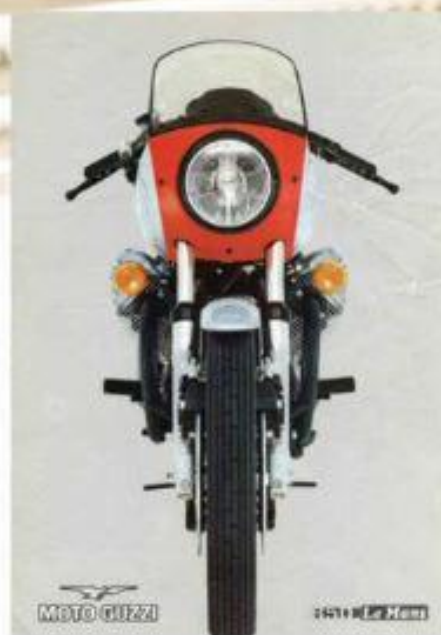
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IAN  
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COLLECTABLES  
MOTO GUZZI 850 LE MANS

# FAST FASHION

Form normally follows function. But Moto Guzzi's 850 Le Mans changed the game when it put style first

WORDS IAN FALLOON PHOTOS BEN GALLI

**M**oto Guzzi established a new order of form over function when it released its 850 Le Mans in 1975. It was a halcyon time for the Italian motorcycle industry, and Ducati, Laverda and MV Agusta were all producing first-rate sports machines. But Guzzi was determined not to be outdone. The result was a bike that was faster than its competitors but also more stylish, with cast alloy wheels, a seat partly covering the

fuel tank and a small fairing with an orange dayglo front section. One of the great sports motorcycles of the mid- to late-1970s, it was a masterpiece.

## STROKE OF BRILLIANCE

But the 850 Le Mans wasn't just about looks. It also performed well for its time. To achieve that, Guzzi engineer Lino Tonti lengthened the stroke of the V7 Sport's 750cc engine to 78mm and used 83mm pistons to give 844cc. However,

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MOTO GUZZI 850 LE MANS



most of the added performance over the 750S3 came via the cylinder head, with larger valves, a higher 10.2:1 compression ratio and a pair of Dell'Orto 36mm carburetors breathing through velocity stacks. Guzzi claimed the engine produced 80hp at 7300rpm, but this was optimistic. The high, domed pistons did increase performance but combustion was inefficient, making the engine prone to detonation and running hot.

To improve throttle response, the Le Mans had a thinner and lighter flywheel.

Another update was to the exhaust. Painted matt black to complement the styling, it featured single-walled 40mm header pipes, with a balance tube across the front. Although quiet and efficient, the main problem with the exhaust was that the black paint wasn't durable and failed to prevent rust.



### COMPACT CHASSIS

The 850 Le Mans' chassis also was similar to the 750S3's. The 35mm cartridge fork included thinner-walled tubes and the light alloy Borrani rims were replaced with cast alloy FPS wheels, with the same WM3 rim sizes (2.15x18-inch). The Le Mans also featured the 750S3's integrated braking system with Brembo 08 calipers, drilled 300mm front discs and a 242mm rear. These brakes were extremely effective, and certainly among the best in 1975. Although the 198kg dry weight was considerable for a sports motorcycle, and the 1470mm wheelbase was moderate, the Le Mans was extremely compact.

### FORM FIRST

But the Le Mans was more about style than performance. During the mid-1970s, European manufacturers began to see the factory café racer as a way of



**“More than any other, it epitomised the 1970s café racer style”**



## FIVE LE MANS FACTS

The idea for an 844cc twin began back in 1971 when Jan Kampen in Holland built an 810cc version for a Zandvoort endurance race.

Kampen was in regular communication with Lino Tonti at Moto Guzzi and Tonti decided to build an 844cc racer based on the V7 Sport.

Kampen had access to the University of Delft test bench and tested 65 exhaust systems. Tonti commissioned Lafranconi to build the final version, which became the standard aftermarket Le Mans exhaust.

Moto Guzzi entered two 844cc racers in the 1971 Bol d'Or 24-hour endurance race at Le Mans. Mandracci and Brambilla led for more than 10 hours before a broken rocker delayed them. They finished third.

At the end of 1972, Tonti produced some special V7 Sports as an entry in the "Premio Varrone" design award. These were called Le Mans and included the patented linked braking system.

The real prototype for the production Le Mans was an 850 racer prepared for the 1973 Barcelona 24-hour race. Not suited to the tight circuit, the 850 finished fifth, but a post-race strip-down convinced Tonti the Le Mans was ready for production.

Unfortunately, de Tomaso preferred the Benelli Six to spearhead his sports line-up. The production of the 850 Le Mans was delayed by two years.



1. The Le Mans has a globe on the panel to warn of headlight failure.
2. Original bikini fairing had a wide dayglo stripe down the front but the shape remains distinctive without it.
3. The Dell'Orto are as supplied, with just velocity stacks, but the pipes on this bike have been replaced with the fashionable Lafranconi Competizione mufflers in black chrome.
4. Teo Lamers opened the world's largest Moto Guzzi dealership in The Netherlands in the '80s. Thanks for allowing us to shoot your bike, Teo.

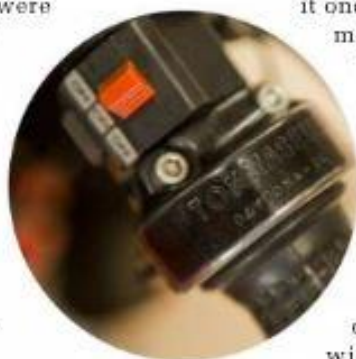
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MOTO GUZZI 850 LE MANS



## “It was hard to find a better balanced, all-round sports motorcycle”

countering the threat of cheaper, faster and continually improving Japanese motorcycles. BMW started the trend with its ground-breaking R90S at the end of 1973. Norton followed with the John Player 850 of 1974. Then Ducati decided to put its limited edition 900 Super Sport into regular production in 1976. But none of these were as stylistically successful as the Le Mans. It may have suffered from marginal execution and indifferent quality but, more than any other motorcycle, it epitomised the mid- to late-1970s café racer style. And, unlike others, the Le Mans has stood the test of time.



### STILL LE MAN

The Le Mans was the right bike at the right time, offering similar performance to the Ducati 900 SS and Laverda 1000 3C, in a more civilised package. Tonti's magnificent frame was more than up to the task of harnessing power from a 90-degree V-twin, and helped make it one of the best handling motorcycles available. With the excellent Brembo braking system, it was hard to find a better balanced, all-round sports motorcycle while an electric start and shaftdrive made it easy to live with.

The Le Mans was a class-leading machine with the looks to match. ●

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Le Mans Bible  
[www.Veloce.co.uk](http://www.Veloce.co.uk)

Moto Guzzi & Le Mans sites  
[www.vdcon.nl](http://www.vdcon.nl)  
<https://goo.gl/JwpjY3>  
[www.Guzzisti.it](http://www.Guzzisti.it)

Moto Guzzi Clubs  
[www.MotoGuzziClubqld.org](http://www.MotoGuzziClubqld.org)  
[www.MotoGuzziClubVic.asn.au](http://www.MotoGuzziClubVic.asn.au)  
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