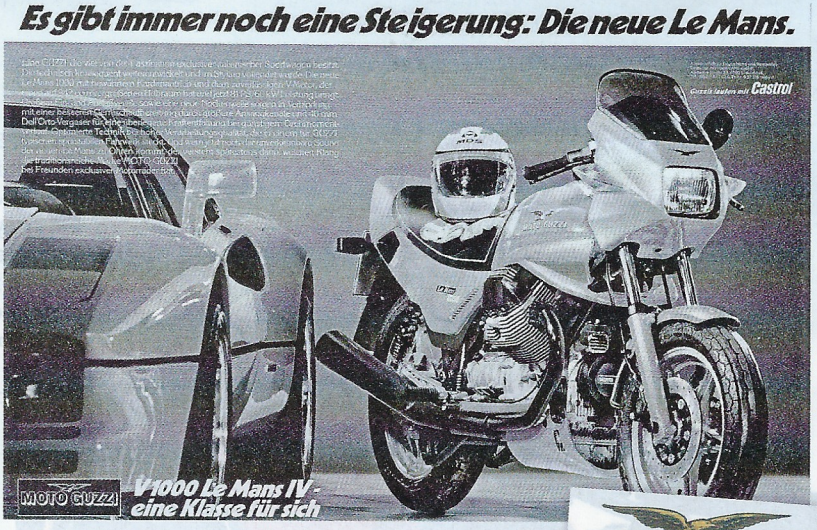
MOTO GUZZI Le Mans

The Moto Guzzi Le Mans series offers an Italian, race-bred, flagship bike, for less than you may think. But it's not for everyone, so read on!

WORDS BY OLI HULME
PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLI HULME AND MORTONS ARCHIVE

MOTO GUZZI'S LE MANS WAS THEIR FLAGSHIP BIG SPORTSTER FROM 1975-1993, produced in five different incarnations and has achieved legendary status. The V-twin engine used in the Le Mans first appeared in 1960 as the powerplant for a tricycle half-track for the Italian Army. It was then used in a chunky tourer, the Ambassador, before ace designer, Lino Tonti, got his hands on it. He first tried to improve high speed handling by lifting the front of the engine, which would otherwise ground on fast corners. He did this by relocating the generator from the top of the engine to the front and raising the engine, but found the change in centre of gravity badly affected the handling, so he designed a new frame and created the sporty V7 750 and 750s.

Tonti carried out a lot of the work in the race shop and at home, as the factory in Mandello Del Lario on the shores of Lake Como was riven by strike action. Some of the first bikes were works racers that took part in the Le Mans 24-hour race in 1971 and as a result, a Le Mans model was announced in 1972. But this coincided with the takeover of Moto Guzzi by Alejandro De Tomaso which delayed the launch. He wasn't keen on the V-twin layout, but Tonti talked him round, and the first Le Mans roadster appeared at the Milan show in 1975.



While the 750 Sport had reintroduced the idea of a seriously sporty Guzzi, the Le Mans that arrived in showrooms in 1976 was something special. With 8mm added to the stroke, increased compression and a whopping great pair of Dell'Orto carbs with bellmouths/velocity stacks, the Le Mans was a performance Italian bike to lust after.

It was unusual in that it lacked the vast quantities of shiny bits that were in fashion. It had next to no chrome, swept back black exhausts, dull alloy, a simple but striking paint job, and an absence of fancy flashes stuck on everywhere, apart from the reflective panel on the nose fairing. It was Italian style at its very best.

It came along as several European manufacturers were releasing big imposing sports tourers. Guzzi's closest rival, BMW, had the R90s, Laverda were about to launch their awe-inspiring triples and Ducati were already staking a claim for greatness with their 750 and 900ss L-twins. What Guzzi managed was the brutish format of the R90s in a better frame, a hefty 80bhp and the good looks that rivalled the Ducati.

The paint job on the Le Mans was a statement in itself; Italian racing red, with matt black panels or a cool metallic light blue. A handful of models were completed in white. The Le Mans would reach 125mph, had massive torque and punchy acceleration. The gearbox wasn't exactly slick by Japanese standards, so the massive torque helped a lot. There were cast alloy wheels too.

The Le Mans, like the company's other V-twins, featured Moto Guzzi's linked braking system which allows one of the front discs and the rear brake to operate from the foot pedal. The handlebar lever operates just the other front caliper.

The Le Mans could out-perform the BMW and looked so much cooler, while the handling was close to that of the 900 Ducati and superior to the Laverda.

The original Le Mans impressed the motorcycling press with its confident, sure-footed handling, excellent braking and aggressive styling. Roy Armstrong won the Avon Roadrunner Production Series in 1977 on a Le Mans 850, beating the Laverda Jotas of Slater Brothers on a bike he rode to meetings.

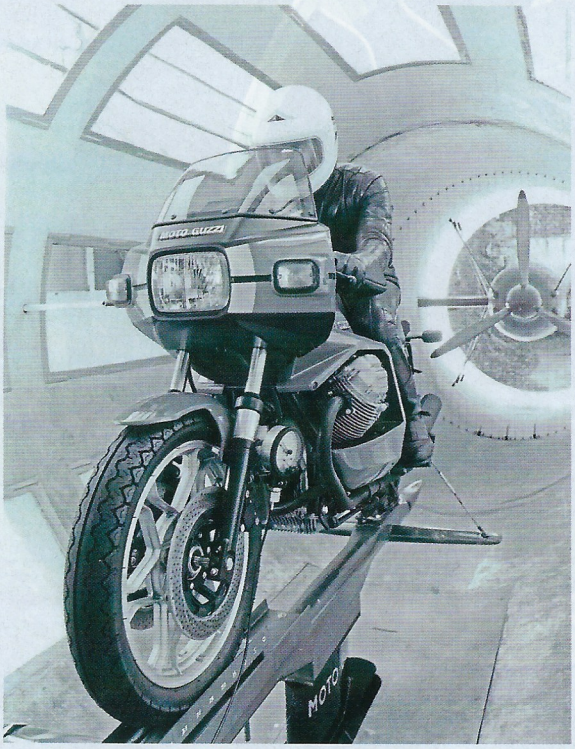
In the autumn of 1978 Moto Guzzi introduced the Le Mans MkII. This was near-identical to the first Le Mans mechanically and was more of a cosmetic revamp, with a look that hasn't aged as well as the Mk1. It had new bodywork with a larger nose fairing featuring a rectangular headlight, as well as fairing lowers used on the touring Guzzi Spada. Moto Guzzi had used their famous wind tunnel to design it. Inside the nose fairing there was a huge foam and plastic instrument cluster with a row of idiot lights, also used on the Spada. The fairing lowers when combined with the clip-on bars made for a troublesome riding position and riders with longer legs found they had to stick their knees out into the breeze.

The MkII is usually seen in red, but also got a less aggressive blue paint job and a rather classy black and gold livery, too. The yokes on a MkII were rather wider than those on a MkI which reduced the sharpness of the handling while the forks featured De Carbon damper units which were long and thin items that sat inside the fork legs. The idea was that these dampers would provide soft springing with firm damping to make the handling both taut and comfortable at the same time. This was a bit of a tall order yet worked most of the time, though some riders preferred the previous set up which had a feel they were more familiar with.

Across the Atlantic buyers got the CX100, which was essentially the same bike as the MkII but used a 1000cc twin in a softer state of tune, to meet US emissions regulations.

In 1983, the Le Mans got a major makeover and emerged as, you guessed it, the MkIII. The new body kit was more angular as was the fashion of the time. The MkIII got new instruments and switchgear. It also got thicker, glossier paint on the frame and bodywork. The engine got some major changes including barrels with squared-off cylinder fins, while Nikasil-coated bores that replaced the steel bores and chrome rings of the previous two models. These machines were available in red, white and silver.

The MkIII sold well but only lasted a few years before being replaced in 1985 by the Le Mans IV. This saw the engine grow to 948cc and sported a compression ratio of 10.2:1, huge 47mm intake and 40mm exhaust valves, and 88mm Nikasil bores. Guzzi also added a racing camshaft and the MkIV could do a 12s quarter mile and top 135mph.



The infamous Moto Guzzi wind tunnel that is still there!

WHAT IS IT?
A head-turning shaft-driven Italian sports tourer

GOOD POINTS?
The handling, power, braking, riding experience

BAD POINTS?
The riding position, and finish can be a little iffy

How much?

COST?
A project:
£3500 to £5000
A decent, clean runner:
£4500-£8500
Concours Mk1:
£17,000

MAX'S LE MANS MK1½

When the Le Mans MkII arrived, pundits raved about the new look. Nowadays the Le Mans MkI is the one to go for, but in 1978 it was felt that the wide nose fairing on the MkII would protect the hard-charging tourer from the worst of the elements. The fairing lowers, it was claimed, would protect the rider's legs, allowing the Le Mans to be a perfect all-weather sports tourer.

Max von Tyszka's Le Mans is, he says, more of a Le Mans Mk1½. Max hasn't owned a Japanese bike since he passed his test, preferring British or Italian bikes.

Registered in August 1978, this Mk1½ was one of the first Le Mans MkII bikes on the road in the UK. At some point in the subsequent 42 years, someone decided that the sexy little nose fairing from the Mk I was the way to go and it was converted into a MkI lookalike. It is so obviously a lookalike that it's clear the previous owner hasn't attempted to fool anyone. It was simply an admission that the MkI is prettier, or at least, more handsome.

Max bought his Le Mans about 18 months ago. "It didn't need much at first, just the paint refurbishing and the seat recovering. The old one had split so I got it recovered and reshaped."

The paint was sorted out by Joeby's Airbrush Art, who added the orange stripe on the front of the fairing and the seat was recovered by a neighbour who usually does furniture upholstery. There are Tomaselli gold commander clip-ons and the original instrument cluster from the MkI. The exhaust system, through which the Guzzi plays its symphonies, is an aftermarket item which is a good few inches shorter than stock. As well as producing a glorious noise it makes it easier to get the back wheel out.

Max has spent a good part of the past 18 months improving and fettling his Le Mans. "I replaced the

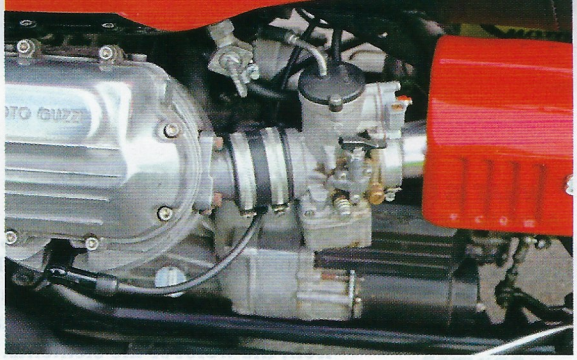
electronic ignition module with a new Dynatech and while the tank was off being painted, I gave the oil lines and breathers a good check over. The carbs are 38mm round barrel, flat-topped Dell'Ortos as fitted to BMW sports bikes, which have two injector pumps. They're a lot easier on the wrists than the old square barrel ones. The 38mm Marzocchi forks aren't standard for the MkII either and are bigger than standard. I've changed one set of switchgear for a more modern Domino set. Tyres are Bridgestone BT45."

There are a few niggles with the Mk1½, says Max: "The side stand is famously awful, but it could be that on mine it needs the mounting bracket bending. There is a neutral in the gearbox somewhere. One issue I have had is the starter motor switch gear which was a bit rubbish about turning itself off. I once rode five miles, stopped and found it was still spinning, which is why there's new switchgear. I use Gutsi Bits for Le Mans parts and Bitza Bikes for all my consumables.

"I couldn't afford to buy a bike that needed a lot doing to it. I wanted an air-cooled twin and was actually looking for a V50 Monza when this came up for £5,500. I'd had a California and imagined that was what all Moto Guzzi V-twins were like, but I've never ridden a bike that handles like the Le Mans. I've never felt so confident on a motorcycle."

"Roy Armstrong won the Avon Roadrunner Production Series in 1977 on a Le Mans 850, beating the Laverda Jotas of Slater Brothers on a bike he rode to meetings"

"It's not clear who Tonti used to set up the Le Mans, but whoever it was must have had very short legs, size 13 feet, a long torso and flexible arms"



The MkIV got new 40mm forks, full-floating Brembo discs, five-spoke mag wheels and a stronger and a redesigned swingarm. In the pursuit of quality, Koni shock absorbers replaced Marzocchi items. Unfortunately, fashion and the tyre manufacturers dictated that the new Le Mans got a 16in front wheel, which was used without changing the frame geometry, badly affecting the handling. The front of the bike got a new and attractive quarter-fairing, but the new side panels and tail fairing weren't a success, being bigger than they needed to be and detracting from the earlier bikes' stripped-down aesthetic. Internally the gearbox got closer ratios and a higher top gear on the last MkIV SE models.

In 1988 the Le Mans V saw the big twin become a sports tourer with a frame-mounted fairing that improved the handling and retained the swoopy rear bodywork. Moto Guzzi had returned to the traditional 18in front wheel and the use of black chrome on the exhaust on some editions, as well as the red or black livery.

The Le Mans, in whatever form, broke all kinds of conventions. By the late 1980s hardly anyone was building push rod twins with the big loping power delivery, yet Guzzi persevered.

Most of the specialists are devoted to the brand, while Guzzi owners are fanatical about their chosen steeds, are open and friendly. There's an air of quiet satisfaction among them, the kind that you get from being so certain in your choice that you don't feel the need to make a fuss about it.

THE GUZZI LE MANS MK1½ ON THE ROAD

It couldn't have been a better day to try out a Le Mans, being warm and dry, with empty roads. At first feel the Le Mans seemed to fit me perfectly. It was surprisingly easy to paddle about, probably down to the relatively low weight and low centre of gravity. It lurched from side to side as it started on the button, though not as much as my old BMW 100/7 from the same era had. I quickly settled down to a lumpy throb like all good V-twins, you can understand why so many modern manufacturers have changed the firing order on their twins to replicate it. There's just something special about a big Italian V-twin and the way it feels.

Then I had to actually ride it, and for a few moments the gloss came off a little. Not because of the way it performed, but because of the riding

SPECIFICATION (MODELS VARY)

ENGINE: 844/978cc air-cooled four-stroke 90 degree V-twin **COMPRESSION RATIO:** 9.5:1/10.2:1 **CARB:** 36/40mm Dell'Orto **POWER:** 80bhp@7,500rpm **TRANSMISSION:** five-speed gearbox/ twinplate clutch, shaft drive **FRAME:** Tubular steel spine frame with removeable bottom rails. **SUSPENSION:** 36/38/40mm front forks, swinging rear fork with twin shock absorbers **BRAKES:** 300mm Brembo front discs, one linked to a 242mm disc at the rear **WHEELS/ TYRES:** 3.50 x 18 front and 4.10 x 18 rear (MkIV 16in front wheel **ELECTRICS:** 12V, points ignition (MkI/II **DIMENSIONS:** Wheelbase 55in (1398mm) Seat Height 30in (762mm), Weight 433lb (196kg)

position. It's not clear who Tonti used to set up the Le Mans, but whoever it was must have had very short legs, size 13 feet, a long torso and flexible arms. An orangutan's dimensions would have suited it better.

When you start rolling along, the height you have to lift your feet to get them on the footrests seems huge at first, and then the racing crouch has you contorting yourself at all kind of weird angles. This is a challenging thing to deal with at low speeds. The consequences of hitting a patch of gravel at 5mph with feet up doesn't bear thinking about.

All that being said, it's not everyday someone gives you the keys to a genuine legend. The only thing to do is crack on, so I did, and the experience was everything I wanted. The challenging riding position combined with a gearshift that was firm and positive rather than slick, again like that on my old BMW, made you want to avoid gearchanges – just get it into third or fourth and open it up, and try to avoid too many changes. With that much torque on tap you don't need to. Power arrives at 4000rpm, at which point the free breathing pushrod vee comes into its own.

The brakes are astonishing for a 1970s motorcycle and the way the engine delivers the power encourages ➧

DO YOU NEED HELP?

OWNERS' CLUB
Moto Guzzi Club GB
www.motoguzziclub.co.uk

SPECIALISTS
NBS
motorcycleservicing.co.uk

Gutsi Bits
gutsibits.co.uk

Made in Italy Motorcycles
madeinitalymotorcycles.com

Right: MkII looks a different beast but has the same heart

WHICH LE MANS IS RIGHT FOR YOU AND WHAT TO LOOK FOR

THINGS TO LOOK out for on all Le Mans models include a clutch that drags or jumps under gear changes. If it does, there's a possibility the splines are worn.

Top end noise isn't necessarily a bad thing. With the heads exposed and quite wide clearances a bit of noise is to be expected. If it doesn't it could be a previous owner had adjusted them too tightly.

If you see oil coming out the hole at the bottom of the clutch casing, the chances are there's a failing seal in there, and you'll have to take the engine out to sort it, though the removable bottom frame rails will make this easier.

If the universal joint on the drive shaft clunks, it's going to need replacing. Useful modifications to look out for are an extended sump – with the appropriate longer dipstick. The bigger sump conversion reduces crankcase pressure. A good, modern, aftermarket electronic ignition set-up is a worthwhile addition.

The very first **Le Mans MkI,** with that striking bodywork and smart little nose fairing with a dayglo flash is the most sought after and commands a huge price differential between it and the later models. The Le Mans MkI and II models had a foam rubber seat which would split and crumble. Pattern replacements are available to order.

The Early MkI had a rounder CEV tail-light, as fitted to pretty much every Italian bike of the mid 1970s from Aermacchi to Morini, before it was replaced by a slender bar light. The bellmouth/velocity stacks on the carbs cause a lot of induction roar and can result in increased bore wear. While 1970's Italian electrics have a reputation for poor quality, the earliest Le Mans is so simple that upgrading it isn't going to be a difficult job.

An unrestored and careworn MkI will cost you £6000. A restored one will have a price heading into the stratosphere, with dealers asking upwards of £17000 for an immaculate example.

The MkII is very close to the MkI, and that's why so many of them now sport MkI bodywork. A bit of research makes this easy to spot. The MkII has a slightly different tank, the yokes wider and the forks are 2mm bigger, and the brake calipers are on the rear of the fork legs rather than the front. The oil filler on the MkII has a longer tube to clear the fairing lowers.

Coburn and Hughes repainted some of the last models in black and gold, a classy paint scheme that had the added advantage of being a bit harder wearing than the original Italian job. As on the MkI, the sidestand is mounted on the front of the frame, and you need long legs to get at it from the seat. The stand design is dreadful, and likely to leave you and your Guzzi lying in a heap if you're not careful.

Using the centrestand is advised, though there's definitely a knack to it. This is not a motorcycle to ride in brogues. An original MkII starts at £6000.

The MkIII is probably the cheapest way of getting into Le Mans ownership while getting a quality mount at the same time. More MkIII bikes were made than any other version. With filters on the carbs there's less engine wear, which is just as well as the Nikasil bores, while capable of high miles, cannot be restored cheaply. It's more cost effective to swap the cylinders if the engine smokes a lot. The steering reverted to the use of yokes with the same dimensions as the MkI. The seat is more conventional and comfier too, though comfort isn't really at the top of the Le Mans buyers' shopping list.

It came with more chrome than the earlier models, which doesn't seem to last as well as the matt black on the MkI and MkII. A good MkIII will cost from £5000.

The MkIV is going to be cheapest of all, though to be honest buying a Le Mans on price isn't entirely recommended. It has a bigger 978cc engine to make up for the drop in performance from carb changes. The use of a 16in wheel also causes trouble today with decent 16in front tyres rare. Fortunately it can be changed for an 18in item easily. It lacks the style of the earlier bikes and the finish wasn't great. You can get a MkIV from £4000.

The MkV had the smallest production run of all the Le Mans models. Although it was made for as long as the MkIII, just over 2000 were sold. It is better than the MkIV, which it strongly resembles, and has improved handling thanks to fine tuning of the frame and other cycle parts, as well as the addition of a frame mounted nose fairing.

You still get the swoopy bodywork, which is something of an acquired taste. A MkV Le Mans is going to be the hardest to find and will set you back from £4500.

Like most 1970s exotica, the mileage on a Le Mans isn't as important as finding a bike with decent history and obvious levels of care. Try to find one from a Guzzi enthusiast.

Above: A MkIII – possibly the best value?

some fast riding. Indeed, it's best not to shut it off too much going into bends, as that will make it sit up and try to go in a straight line. It'll go round most sweeping curves without needing to decelerate anyway. Tighter bends are more of a challenge and the road needs to be read well in advance.

So away with niggles about the riding position. The Le Mans is a gem. It is as good as it looks, being fast, light and characterful. It's delicious to ride, it sounds incredible and looks absolutely stunning. I doubt if the old Coburn and Hughes advertising slogan, "long legged and easy to live with", is in the slightest bit accurate – the bike might be long-legged, but the chances of you putting up with hundreds of miles in the saddle are minimal. It feels as if it would be about as easy to live with as Sophia Loren in a permanent strop, but you'd put up with it, just for the passion. And at the very least it'd keep you flexible. CBG

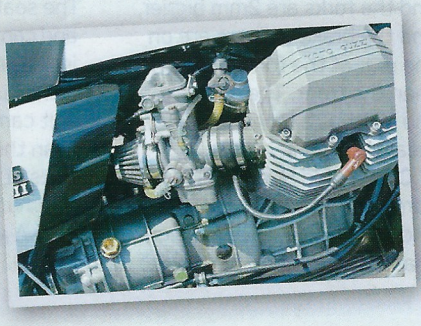
FANCY A LE MANS? TRY A MKIII

APART FROM THE looks, you'll get pretty much the same riding experience from the saddle on any of the I, II or III models, so why not look at a MkIII?

This low miles, white MkIII is for sale at Speed Motorcycles in Exeter. For sale on a Trade/Part Ex basis, the Guzzi will set you back £5999 – about £10,000 less than a restored MkI.

It's more comfortable that the MkI or II, and possibly a little less brutal to ride. The seat is slightly softer, while the footpegs have been mounted on long alloy brackets that seem to be set a little lower than the originals. Certainly, my knees didn't protest as much. It had the clip-ons set slightly higher, which helped too.

On the MkIII the centrestand is just as hard to use, and Moto Guzzi fitted a handle that is at completely the wrong angle to be of any help. It takes a hefty heave to get it onto the stand.



The side stand was relocated on the MkIII to make it easier to operate from the saddle. Unfortunately the geometry is such that to use the side stand you have to actually push the bike beyond 90 degrees to the ground to get it to extend, and there are a pair of very strong return springs which will cause it to flip up unexpectedly if you aren't careful.

Like a lot of Italian bikes of the period, the finish is passable when you can see it, and where you can't see it, such as the inside of the glass fibre fairing, everything is pretty lumpy.

Switchgear is the same set up as on the earlier models which looks better than it works. The instruments are excellent, with a racing style white tachometer taking pride of place on the console, which is much smaller than that of the MkII with the same finish. The squared-off barrels give the engine a more modern aspect, and the carburation is less full-on.

You might consider the 90s style Micron exhaust on this bike a bit out of place, but for your £6k you'll get a genuine Italian classic that will take you for miles and involve you in all sorts of adventures.

Visit Speed Motorcycles at **speedthrills.co.uk**