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When Guzzi Got it Right

The 1976–78 Le Mans set a standard for Moto Guzzi that was unsurpassed for decades, and it's still a bargain

by Ed Milich

There are few machines as beautiful, as practical, and as affordable as Moto Guzzi's 850 Le Mans. Produced only from 1976 to 1978, the Le Mans set a standard for Guzzi that was unsurpassed for decades.

Successor to the dashing 748-cc V7 Sport and Euro-only 750S3, the Le Mans added 8 mm more stroke, 100 cc more displacement, and curvaceous packaging. A stylish "bikini" fairing and sculpted tank combined sharp lines and gentle curves, though the fairing offered little wind protection and obstructed the rider's view of the instruments.

The Le Mans featured an oversquare (78-mm stroke x 83-mm bore) motor, mild cam, reasonable 36-mm Dell'Orto carbs, and the primary balance of a 90-degree V-twin to form a torquey, responsive motor. The Lino Tonti-designed frame was rigid and stable. The bike's power, handling, and reliability made it a practical daily driver, but also good for weekend blasts or the occasional tour.

Unlike earlier models with chrome-plated cylinder bores that flaked, the Le Mans used cast-iron bores. Like all Guzzi twins, the engine's front, rear, and crankpin bearings were plain journals. An automotive-style dry clutch connected the engine to a 5-speed transmission.

Easy to work on, unlike bevel-drive Ducatis

Final gearing was shaft drive, with power passing through a geared rear drive box before reaching the rear wheel. Le Mans pistons are higher (10.2:1) compression, and the cylinder heads have larger combustion chambers and valves (44 mm intake/37 mm exhaust) than its 850-cc or 1000-cc Guzzi peers.

Early 1976 models have a unique rear fender with a built-in taillight and a sculpted, molded foam "bump stop" seat. Later models got a plastic taillight and a more durable seat. Guzzi manufactured its own 35-mm forks, which use (early cartridge-style) dampers from Sebac. Brembo cast-iron rotors with two-piston F08 calipers were featured all around, along with Guzzi's linked brake system.

An experienced wrench can normally complete a Le Mans service, including a complete fluid and filter change and a valve adjust, within an hour. Top ends last 50,000–70,000 miles and bottom ends are good for 100,000 miles. The motor can be overhauled without any shims, unlike bevel-drive Ducatis, and a skilled mechanic can replace connecting rod bearings in an hour via the removable oil pan.

Guzzi's twins such as the Le Mans achieve their longevity through beefy design. The clutch assembly weighs 25 lb, and lightening it is recommended. Electrics are fragile; plastic hand control buttons break off easily, and connections corrode rapidly. The Le Mans exudes the



typical Italian aversion to good electrical design; hand controls use a ground path that passes through the steering head bearings on the way to the battery's black terminal.

Free-flowing (loud) mufflers

The transmission is awkward, with three shafts, inconsistent factory shimming, and six-dog gear engagement causing winces as the gearbox protests during shifting. Early versions of the brake calipers featured steel pucks that corroded and stuck—Brembo still sells retrofit kits with aluminum pucks. The stock steering dampers leak all their oil almost instantly.

The engine's original timing chain tensioner was a rubbing block of black rubber. Thirty years later, these have invariably decayed and are easily replaced with a modern spring-loaded version (\$50).

The typical sweet 850 Le Mans motor is complemented with a set of free-flowing (i.e. "loud") mufflers and a set of K&N filters. With otherwise stock trim, this will produce a motor with horsepower in the low 60s, but with a torque curve that is a Nebraska-flat 50 ft-lb from 3,500 to 7,500 rpm. Heavy front and rear cast 18-inch wheels and generous rake and trail make for a lazy, slow-steering machine. Lighter Astralite, Dymag, or spoked alloy wheels, preferably with modern 17-inch radial tires, improve the bike's handling.

The Le Mans is one of the most copied designs in Guzzidom, inspiring many riders of lesser Guzzi 850Ts, SPs and G5s to throw off their luggage racks and don the Le Mans tank, clip-ons, and side covers. Original Le Mans bikes are noted by the prefix VE on the engine case. Le Mans cylinder heads can also be identified by smaller M6 intake manifold bolts instead of M8s.

The Le Mans formed the basis of several successful Guzzi race bikes, including the first imported example in the U.S., which was tuned by Reno Leoni, raced by Mike Baldwin, and came close to winning the AMA Superbike class in 1977. In 2005 and 2006, vintage Superbike racer Will Harding won an AHRMA championship on the 1976 Le Mans he raced when new.

Guzzi dropped the ball

As with other models in the small company's history, Guzzi dropped the ball with the Le Mans successor, the larger displacement, detuned CX100, whose engine came from the 1000-cc SP tourer. The 1981 850-cc Le Mans III revisited the earlier engine geometry, and the 1984 Le Mans 1000 raised the performance bar, but neither bike's DeTomaso-influenced angular design invokes the style of the 850 Le Mans.

The Le Mans is one of the most affordable 1970s classic Italian superbikes, and you can still find an original example between \$5,000 and \$10,000. Concours versions have barely entered five figures, unlike the 1970s bevel-drive Ducatis. This is likely due to Guzzi's lack of recent racing success, but in any case, 850 Le Mans ownership is one of the best-kept secrets in vintage motorcycling, and prices can only increase. ♦

Perfect Moto Guzzi Le Mans Owner:

Wears Italian leathers and keeps a 12-volt test light in his pocket

Rating (★★★★ is best):
Fun to ride: ★★
Ease of maintenance: ★★★
Appreciation potential: ★★★
Attention getter: ★★★★★

Years produced: 1976–78
Number produced: 7,000 approx.
Original list price: \$3,695
SCM Valuation: \$5000–\$10,000
Tune-up cost: Under \$60 DIY
Engine: 844-cc 90-degree V-twin
Transmission: 5-speed
Weight: 492 lb wet
Frame #: Steering head
Engine #: Left side, below oil filler
Colors: red, ice blue, white
Clubs: MGNOC
More: www.motoguzzi.com;
www.mgnoc.com; www.mgycle.com
SCM Investment Grade: B

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- '71 Mercedes 280SL roadster . . . DB291 Dark Olive w/cognac
- '57 Mercedes 300SL roadster . . . Red, luggage, Rudge wheels
- '84 Ferrari 512 BBi Boxer Rosso Corsa w/tan, 10k km.
- '62 Ferrari 250 GTE 2+2 Red/tan, matching numbers, 65k mi.
- '94 Bentley Continental R coupe . . . Black w/black, 33k miles
- '65 Austin Healey 3000 MkIII BJ8 . . . Cream w/black, restored
- '64 Jaguar 3.8 E-Type roadster Black w/tan, only 28k mi.
- '54 Jaguar XK120 OTS Grey w/red, 3.4l, fully restored
- '65 Corvette roadster Red/black leather, 327ci/350hp
- '57 Corvette roadster Red/red w/white covers, fuel injected
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