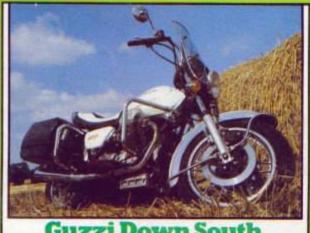


THE INCREDIBLE HUNK





Harleys Up North

GUZAA E GANG BIGUES

Tony Middlehurst rounds up ne Spaghetti Western

It sounds terribly egocentric, but one of my favourite pastimes outside of tying strands of fuse wire across the local Fizzyway is reading ancient copies of this very magazine

It's a funny thing, but magazines seem to mature like old cheese. The longer you leave them between re-reads, the better they seem; even stuff you were embarrassed about at the time of genesis acquires a mellow tinge after a

couple of years.

This effect is particularly noticeable on your own stumbling efforts, but there's a similar oddness about the contemporary concoctions of one's colleagues. Look here, for example, ole Mike Maxwell's write-up on the 1980 Moto Guzzi California. Regard the stirring prosel Chuckle at the turn of phrase! It seems so fresh now, almost as if one hadn't ever read it in the first place . . . ah. Ahem. Sorry Max. One hadn't actually read it in the first place.

But here one is now, reading same, and agreeing with much of same two years later on having sampled Guzzi's 1982 version of this likeable tug. And what with unconfirmed rumours flying around concerning the fate of M-G's 500/650 model range, the big-bore twins now warrant even closer scrutiny.

The large capacity Guzzis have ridden high and handsome on a wave of folklore and fanaticism for many a long year, especially in this country. Although Spada 1000s are few and far between on British roads, the T3/T4 and Le Mans 850s have carved a useful niche for themselves in spite of frighteningly highpriced spare parts (thankfully reduced in recent times) and the usual fears associated with Italian merchandise (rust, poor finish, unreliability etc).

In fact, the new California is an impressive scoot both to ride and to look at, so long as you don't mind looking a bit like a Harlem pimp that is. There aren't many white bikes on the market these days, but that's a colour option on the California (and the Le Mans III) so it's get your shades and shorty helmet out boys and less go for a putt. Non-discerning motorists can easily mistake you for a bobby, which can be quite handy in heavy traffic, but the dirt don't half show up on the tank and sidepanels, so duster diligence is the order of the day.

But what about under the skin? Well, the big difference is in the engine department. A 5mm overbore brings engine capacity up to 948.8cc (from 844cc), a nifty move in that it occasions a quite massive increase in the bike's published horsepower and torque figures com-

pared to the 1980 ancestor.

Somehow, the Guzzi engineers have contrived an extra 15.3bhp and no less than 20.7lb/ft, simply by going over to the Spada engine. Hmmm . . . who are we, to disbelieve? Especially as the new California actually feels pokier than other Guzzis we've ridden.

Picking up the bike at Coburn & Hughes' Luton HQ was a saddening experience, however. Twirling the throttle on the run-up to a long incline half a mile away from C&H produced about as much response as a fly swatter on a rhino's rump; labouring up the hill revealed a distinct lack of power anywhere over about 4000rpm.

Quick as a flash, my finely-tuned brain diagnosed the fact that there was summut wrong wi't bike. Something behind my throbb-ing forehead was saying "Ignition"; horrible memories of a grotesquely backfiring Electra-Glide materialised through the mists on my visor . . . lights coming on in suburban bedroom windows as shotgun explosions issued forth from the accursed Harley pipes at 12.30 am . .

aaarrgh. Then, it was down to a faulty transistor module; the Guzzi wasn't half as bad, but it was backfiring on the overrun and it felt as flat as a cowpat in a wet field.

Returning the machine revealed a seized shaft in the advance/retard mechanism, which meant that the ignition was stuck in the retard mode. Very boring. One new unit later (thanks for staying behind after school, Eddie) and we were back in business. The bike gave

no more trouble after that.

The Spada engine is without doubt the nicest of the Guzzi powerplants. With 62 and a bit pounds/foot of torque, the California at long last possesses the kind of grunt it always looked like it should have (but never really did). It's possible to surprise many a sneering Jap multi owner on one of these babies, thanks to the happy marriage of a tight transmission and a bottom-weighted power band. Considering the colossal size and weight of the flywheel, unchanged in the face of lightening "improvement" exercises by other manufacturers, the California feels at least as fast as (say) Honda's Gold Wing, until 70-80mph anyway when other factors come into play. More of that later.

One slightly irritating fault on our tester was the gearbox's reluctance to remain in first gear. The cog would be selected alright, judging by the steelyard clunk accompanying depression of the neatly effective heel-and-toe lever, but then, with a perverse silence, the box would slip back into neutral, leaving the rider eating dust in a decidedly un-hip posture. Worn selector forks, maybe

As with all shaft-drive bikes, the California will pump itself up on its suspension on upchanges and chirp the rear tyre on downcharges unless the revs are perfectly synchronised. Luckily, though, synchronisation

is easy thanks to that huge flywheel; but anyone wanting to try out the usual shaft trick (letting out the clutch in first gear with the bike against the brake) will have to watch it here, because the single disc operation of the front brake lever isn't really up to the job of keeping the machine stationary

The air-assisted suspension from the Le Mans III has been incorporated on the new California, running at mean pressures of around 48psi (front) and 64psi (rear), give or take 16psi or so depending on load. Both ends are equalised, not that we were about to tamper with the setting following the Le Mans

experience earlier in the year.

Regular readers may remember that bike: the air containers all failed, allowing hydraulic fluid to squirt from the valves whenever an air gauge was offered up to them. The system appears to be very susceptible to rupture, thanks to the very high pressures required Only the Suzuki type of gauge can be used with any degree of success, all other types allowing every last bit of air out of the airbags. No gauge is provided with the Guzzi.

Preload on the rear shocks can be altered in the usual way, with a C-spanner (which is provided). Unfortunately, however, you need to remove the rear wheel to be able to turn the collars owing to their awful design. The spanner itself has all the integrity of a stick of liquorice. It's a source of constant amazement, this Italian insistence on spoiling what is a quality product for the sake of a few lire.

Actually, the California ride is adequate enough for the rider to ignore these shortcomings, although it's a fair guess that potential owners will want to do a bit of two-up touring. In this mode it isn't too difficult to bottom out both ends, so it really is important for Guzzi to look at and sort out the suspension before much more damage is done to their reputation.

Considering Guzzi's unknowing efforts to botch up its suspension, and despite its chubby appearance, the California remains one of the best-handling superbikes on Broads. Maybe it fools the rider a little into being over-impressed; after all, it does seem strange sitting behind a large screen and cowhorn handlebars, routinely scraping the footboards on tiddly corners. But its innate scratchability remains. The California feels light, although in fact it's a five hundredweight machine. Weight is spread evenly instead of being concentrated around the top centre as on most multi-cylinder bikes, so there's none of that momentum-induced flopping around. The Guzzi leans over in precise response to the rider's will, no more, no less; to tighten the turn, simply lay it over a touch and torque some more power through the tyres. Apply the brakes, and it stands right up, but there's no wobble or shake. On the very limit, there's a notional yawing motion whose amplitude is exaggerated by the width of the bars, but this is more in the nature of road feedback than any chassis inadequacy.

On faster roads you've got problems. That screen is an aerodynamic disaster, inducing eyeball wobble at anything over 60mph and a terminal weave of grandiose dimensions over 90mph. Not only that, the rubber beading around its edge manages to intrude on the rider's forward vision in almost every situation you're likely to encounter. Obviously nobody at Moto Guzzi thought it worthwhile to set a California up in the Mandello wind tunnel;

either that, or they were afraid to.

The best solution is to remove the screen post-haste, which makes the bike look rather weird but at least it's possible to keep up with motorway traffic without risking brain damage. We had to take this option last year when the '81 California was my TT transport. Luckily we detected the problem before setting off. We were rather hoping someone at the factory might have taken some remedial action for

the '82 bike, but no such luck.

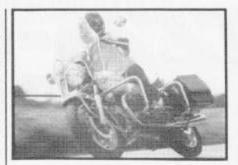
Actual riding position is pretty good, especially if your crotch is about a foot wide. Such an anatomical anomaly would facilitate the process of putting feet down at a standstill, a trick which presently takes some doing for anyone below the magic six foot mark due to the overstuffed skunk-leather seat. Those footboards are well comfy, and the rocking lever gear pedal means you never have to say you're sorry to your hard-pressed boot insole repairman. The brake pedal has that slightly dead (but effective) Guzzi feel to it; the long linkage back to the master cylinder needs regular greasing, a quaint throwback.

As a touring mount the California is at last beginning to come up to the mark, thanks in no small measure to the new plastic panniers. The last ones we tried were so tacky they were best left unused; while the new ones are by no means perfect, they are a big improvement. The sides still flex enough to cause one lock to stick when the other one has been opened, and the "lock" is not going to cause the average Borstal trainee any problems.

But the panniers are truly quick-release, and they will hold a Bell Star helmet. Well, the left one will anyway; for some reason it was impossible to shut the r/h box with the same helmet in situ. The panniers have handy carrying handles so that the little lady can cart them around while you take in the view. Max capacity is 10kg per box, that's 22 pounds to you squire, and don't forget to load them evenly. Doubtless the panniers contribute to the aforementioned high-speed weave, too. Crash bars are a damn good idea, and Guzzi bars are about the best: thick as tree-trunks, but good-looking for all that.

Electrics are still a dubious area on Guzzis. Just to remind us that we were aboard an Italian scoot, the horn was a tootless wonder right from the off. Although the headlamp had finally been uprated to a 55/60 watt unit, the warning lights on the instrument panel still glow with all the dazzling irridescence of a dud match in a coal mine. The bike comes with hazard warning flashers as standard, though.

Hernia-sufferers will be pleased to note the improvement in Moto Guzzi's centrestands these days, but there again they could hardly







have been any worse than the old Convert's so this is a somewhat negative plus point (eh?). The long sidestand still incorporates an ignition cut-out switch, as does the clutch lever. There's a biggish tray under the seat for the pathetically poor toolkit, accessed by swinging the front of the seat up and back on ts rear-mounted hinge. Quite why they chose this method is unclear, since it won't work if there's any luggage on the rear carrier.

On the road, two things are immediately noticeable about this new California: one is the increase in low and mid-range power, and the other is noise. The bike really tramps on now, inviting much earlier upchanges than before so as to exploit the Harleyoid grunt curve. Top speed is unchanged at a little over the ton, a slightly academic figure in view of the limitations imposed by that screen.

The noise appears to emanate from the exhausts (c. Cleverfax Inc) which sound like they might have a touch less in the way of innards than before. Either that, or they aren't making helmets like they used to, because that first scrape up the M1 had the old editorial scone buzzing as if after a low-level raid by a squadron of Avro Lancasters. It's not an unpleasant noise by any means, it's just that there's rather a lot of it.

Fuel consumption averaged out at 43mpg, including rather little in the way of steadyspeed cruising and rather too much hooligan acceleration and braking in urban situations. It's the kind of consumption figure that's becoming acceptable to superbike owners these days, so we shouldn't complain really.

As it stands, the California II is maybe the best Moto Guzzi after the underrated Spada, the Le Mans slipping out of favour with its less-generous engine characteristics. But once more it has to be said: in the two important areas of suspension and detailing, contemporary Guzzis are looking more and more threadbare. No-one wants Moto Guzzi to lose their market share, since their machinery is still charismatic enough to hold a special place in the devoted motorcyclist's heart. But complacency is as dangerous as gnorance, and Italy must be a breedingground for complacency, protected as it is by stiff import controls. Let's hope the message hits home before it's too late, when Italy will become a Guzzi shrine instead of an exporter.

MOTO GUZZI CALIFORNIA II

£2899

PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed — 103mph Standing Quarter Mile — 13.6secs Fuel Consumption - Hard Riding - 40mpg Cruising — 48mpg Best Full-Tank Range — 264 miles

ENGINE

Type — air-cooled vee-twin, pushrod OHV Displacement — 948,8cc Power — 65bhp at 6700rpm Torque — 62 4lb/lt at 5200rpm Bore & Stroke - 88x78mm Compression Ratio - 9.2:1 Induction - two Dellorto VHB30s Exhaust - two into two with balance pipe Oil System - wet sump, 3 litres Ignition - battery, coil and points

TRANSMISSION

Clutch - dry multiplate Primary Drive — gear Final Drive — shaft

CHASSIS

Frame - duplex cradle, disassemblable Front Suspension — tele forks with equalised air Rear Suspension - swinging arm with five-position preload air assisted shocks (equalised) Wheelbase — 61in

Ground Clearance - 6.941

Weight (dry) – 555lbs Fuel Capacity – 5.5 gallions Tyres – Pirelli 120/90 H 18 Gordons Brakes – twin 300mm discs front, single 242mm disc

ear, finked system

INSTRUMENTS

160mph speedometer, 8000rpm tachometer redlined at 7000rpm; voltmeter; warning lights for indicators, neutral. generator, oil pressure, high beam, lights

EQUIPMENT

Electrical - 12V/24Ah battery Lighting - 55/60 watt headlight Sundry - detachable panniers, hazard flashers, crash

Test bike supplied by: Coburn & Hughes, 53-61 Park St.

