

I am the LAW

The earliest Guzzi V-twins were built to a very high standard. How has this ex-Carabinieri machine held up?

Words and photography: STEVE WILSON

I loved the look of this ex-Carabinieri V7, right from the start. Mike Russell de Clifford, head of Italian motorcycle specialists Moto Corsa, had secured it via the trade, and dismantled it. Spurred on by a fantastic restored version seen at a show, Mike was about to go to work when a buyer came forward and said he had to have it, but just as it was externally. Wise man – the V7's patina tells you all about its working life with the local civil police (the national force were the Polizia Stradale). On the road, the fully equipped blue machine drew universally admiring, interested looks.

The roads around Moto Corsa provided an excellent test-ground, as Mike has relocated from Three Legged Cross to the Dorset countryside south of Shaftesbury. Twisting narrow lanes turning into long sweepers up and down the flanks of steep green hills – Guzzi country.

My own 'modern' is a hefty 1100 California, but the V7 is still a big, heavy machine – at 516lb (234kg), some 130lb more than an equivalent Triumph TR6P, and about 5in longer both in wheelbase (57.33in) and overall length (88 in). Part of that weight was from the car-type 12v electrics. These included the large police-spec 500W, rubber belt-driven dynamo

(the civilian models had been 300W, which was still a lot more than Lucas' 60W offerings), fitted between the cylinders on these early twins. There was also the Marelli starter-motor mounted on the left side of the crankcase (no kickstart was ever fitted to these twins), with an appropriately massive 32A hour battery. Italian motorcycle electrics after that gained a bad name, but there was nothing whatsoever wrong with this kit.

I imitated Mike in reaching over with my left hand to hit the starter button, set inaccessibly below the right handlebar beneath the choke lever, and so was still able to work the throttle with my right hand at the same time. The engine caught well, I nudged the right-side heel-and-toe change with my heel to engage first (after that it was down-for-up with the toe, on this British-pattern gearchange), and we were away.

First impressions weren't great. Following a smooth enough change into first, shifting thereafter was with the same loud 'clonk' which is still present on my 1990s' Cali. The clutch action seemed 'on/off' abrupt, and from second onward the ride was accompanied by an extreme whirring whine which I thought might be the dynamo drive but which Mike would identify as transmission – the gears. 🗨





From the outside, though, the exhaust note, via new Armour's silencers, sounded great. Other plus points included stable steering, as well as roadholding enhanced by excellent modern Avon tyres on the 18in alloy rims, and good comfort over some bumpy surfaces. But the big downside, not unexpectedly, were the brakes. The 8.66in front stopper, despite being a single-sided twin leading-shoe design, barely brought the machine to a halt from even low speeds, while as Mike had pointed out, the military/police tin legshields/footboards meant that the rear brake pedal could not be pushed all the way down. Used together they were as good as middling 1950s' British anchors, but they had to stop a much heavier machine. Engine braking and anticipation were the order of the day.

Still, there was something about the 45bhp engine's unhurried, but solid power delivery, that made more miles beckon across the relatively traffic-free downland, and with every one we covered, the V7 experience got better. With deliberation, the gearchanges lost their clonk

Above: Smart but not over-restored, this early V7 could be on a cappuccino-break with the carabinieri.

“The engine’s solid power delivery made more miles beckon.”

(becoming smoother than the ‘modern’ version), and the clutch its snatch. Also, when you hit the 55-60mph band where the engine felt comfortable, almost miraculously the gear whine went away. There were no false neutrals or missed gears. And while by no means a sports bike, this over-square, 9.0:1 CR engine with its massive flywheel seemed to have bottomless reserves of unfussy power on tap.

At the end of a three-mile descent, I just managed to haul and stand on the brakes in time to exploit

the V7’s excellently tight turning circle, use a gateway for a U-turn, and take off up the hill again. The Guzzi climbed effortlessly, and I began to realise how good the unshowy acceleration in the gears

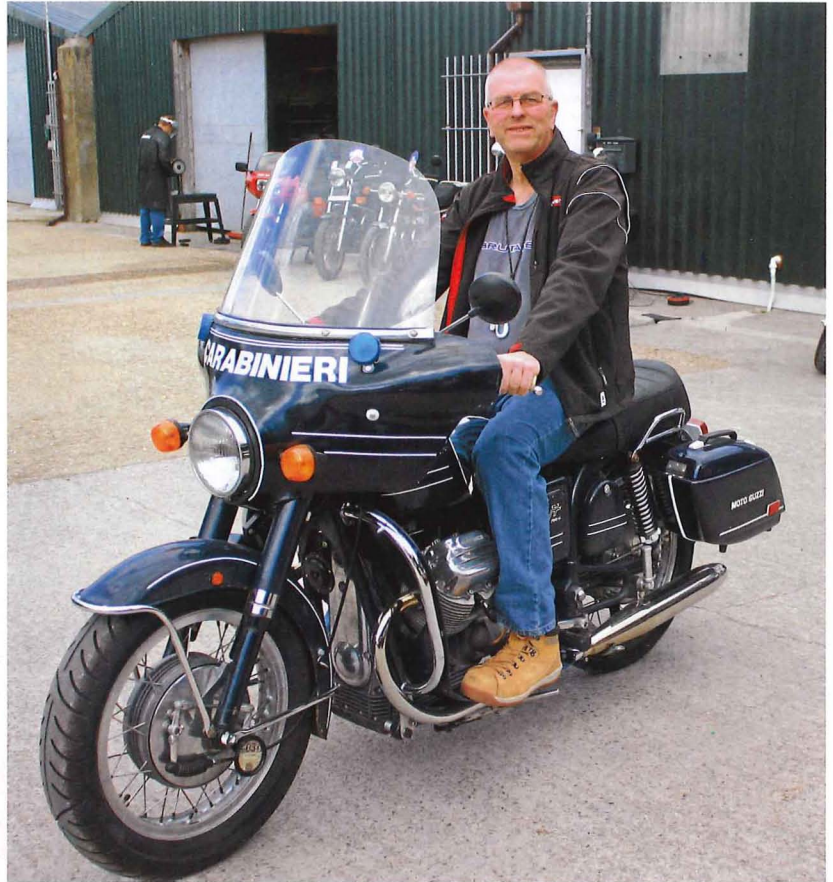
was as we reeled in a white van belting along ahead. The torque meant that most of the climb was done in top, and when a sharp uphill right-hander loomed, the bike’s low centre of gravity saw us sweeping round reassuringly smoothly, and the same went for S-bends and long fast curves. On those roads we rarely exceeded an indicated 70. A V7 on test with *Cycle World* in 1968 topped out at

98mph, but speed was never the point with these machines. It was the whole package; comfort, stability, the reliability of the tireless engine, the electrics and the Cardan shaft drive, which added up to one of the great two-wheel tourers. Except for those stoppers.

The 90-degree V-twin was famously derived from a 20bhp engine designed by Guzzi for a go-anywhere, lightweight 3x3 military tractor (even the motorcycles boasted 'climbing ability 60 degrees'). The engine was developed for two-wheeler use, before his 1966 retirement, by Ing. Giulio Carcano, he of the dohc 350 single and V8 racers. But because of its service background and evolution – there were almost certainly more Army/Police V7s than civilian ones – the emphasis was on durability rather than performance. And with Guzzi undergoing a financial crisis in the mid-1960s, this was reinforced by one all-important export market.

Mike said: "The Mandello factory approached the US authorities about exporting police bikes to North America. The government officials there told them that before they would even consider it, Guzzi must produce a machine which would have to do a minimum of 150,000 miles with just basic maintenance and no major mechanical work. So everything was massively over-engineered – the flywheel which also housed the clutch, the distributor with a single set of points, and that dynamo. Take the fork seals; when you use the special tool (which we have) and see the bushes, the springs and the forks themselves, you realise they're never going to fail – the only time you replace the seals is when you're restoring one."

The same overkill was evident in the one-piece steel crankshaft, the hard-chromed bores in the alloy cylinders, which like the alloy heads and crankcases were high-quality castings, and the helical gears which were all hand-cut and matched. "All the electrics, the switches, fuses and most of the wiring, were in the headlamp," Mike added, "which kept things simple. The CEV switches on this are the originals – so much for 'useless Italian electrics'!" The steel 'loop frame' unlike some later ones, was



Above: Big man, big bike. Mike Russell de Clifford, a frequent visitor to Mandello, knows his Guzzis.

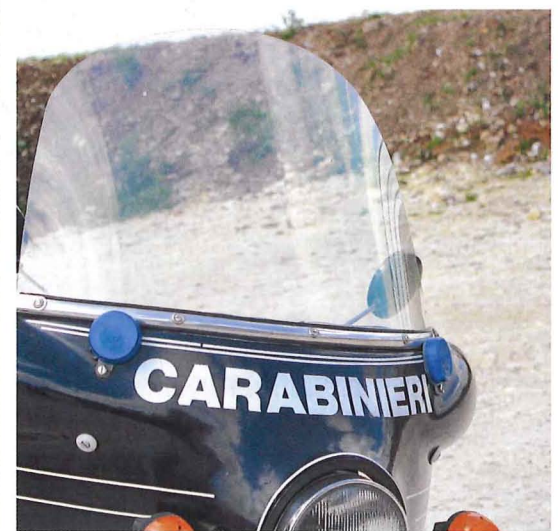
strong enough to pull a sidecar. Taper-roller bearings were used in the steering head, the swingarm pivot tube and the wheel hubs. These suckers were built to last.

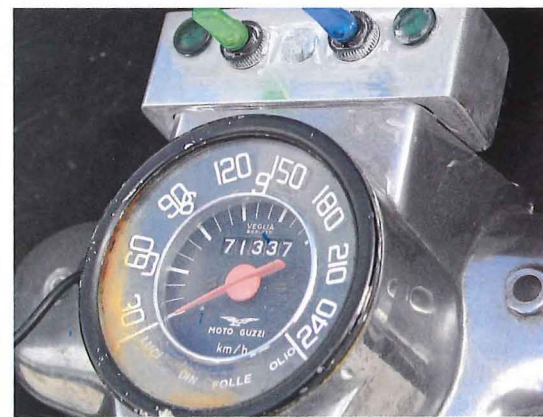
The police machines featured the beefed-up electrics, and a calibrated speedometer. Machines like this for the Carabinieri, the local, civil police, differed from the national Polizia Stradale bikes which had deeper mudguards, and left-side panniers with a lump on their underside, to accommodate a machine-pistol. Most police mounts would have featured a saddle rather than the civilian seat seen ▶



Left: Correct rear light and blue strobe flasher; indicators are probable later addition. 'J' suffix (1971-72) relates to dating certificate.

Right: If blue lights flashed, you pulled over – these guys carried Berettas.





here, with Stradale ones carrying a radio on a rack behind it. Mike confirmed that police bikes were all prepared in a special workshop at the factory, including the PDI, as they were supplied not through dealers, but direct. Mike has also seen the local carabinieri ('sunglasses, sideburns, smoking') bringing their machines in to the factory for servicing. All the police equipment on the test bike is functioning, although to keep the law happy, the siren has been disconnected, the front blue lights normally have white covers over them, and the microphone for the crowd-control loudspeaker has also been unplugged.

After production from 1967 to 1969, the 703.717cc V7 was joined by the V7 Special and its American cousin the Ambassador, with engines bored out to 757.486cc by new chief engineer Lino Tonti. Then late in 1971 came the longer-stroked 844.06cc 850GT Eldorado and GT California, which as Mike said: "was when the Guzzi twins became real world tourers", with the California for 1974 featuring a single-disc

Top right: Beautiful patina extends to the panniers.

Middle right: The early V7 has become extremely popular in America.

Bottom right: Round about '6' is the comfort zone. Blue flashing lights work, loud-speaker (operated by green switch) would, if microphone was connected.

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front brake. But from 1972 Moto Guzzi had been taken over by De Tomaso, and the next chapter, though including the iconic V7 Sport with its lowered 'Tonti frame' and a crankshaft-mounted alternator replacing the dynamo, also featured some cost-cutting. As Mick Walker wrote, "the early (1967-72) V-twins were the best made of the whole series".

"The first V7s went to America in 1969," said Mike. "Sean Connery had recently done a Bond film and they got him to sit on one, which sold the bikes out there. Today Mo at Cycle Garden in California buys up any V7 series machines he can get hold of, and has sold them to Brad Pitt, Ewan McGregor and Jay Leno. He sent an owner from over there to me to have his two Eldorados recommissioned, with a message: "Mo would pay \$10,000 for any V7 machine, sight unseen."

The flyaway prices are a pity, in a way. I really liked this heavy flywheel police V7, and if fitted with a double-sided four leading-shoe front brake from the V7 Sport, for me as a touring motorcyclist, this would be the ultimate Italian classic.

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