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FROM
CALEDONIA

TO
California

Famously, the California Highway Patrol were mighty impressed by Moto Guzzi's big-block 850. Dave Simmons finds out if the Italian V-twin rides as well on Scottish byways as it does on American freeways...

Photos by Dave Simmons / RC RChive





Moto Guzzi was founded in 1921 and the so-called 'loop' frames first hit the street in 1967 – 46 years after motorcycle production started and 51 years ago. The loops have a particular niche in the nearly century-long continuum of the marque, arriving as they did in the slightly underwhelming years before the much vaunted V7 Sport but decades after Guzzi's racing heyday. But why are they called loop frames? I understand it's because of the loop-like structures either side of the leading edge of the rear wheel. As monikers go it's a bit dull, unlike the bikes.

The first loop was the V7 of 703cc, the second was the V7 Special (748cc) and the third was the 850 GT with 844cc. These models were

all European spec but, in an unsurprising turn, the biggest market for the loops – as for contemporary British motorcycle manufacturers – was the United States of America. This market demanded different names, names that carried a touch more glamour – nay audacity – and significantly more prestige. Flushed with its sales success, the Lake Como marketing effort got into gear with the 750 Ambassador and the 850 Eldorado, named after the mythical city of gold which Sir Walter Raleigh's son died trying to find.

The USA names actually capture the essence of these bikes: quality and prestige. They exude quality in design and execution, with few exceptions. By way of an example, just look at the indicator bracket. It weighs no less than

188 grams and is deeply chromed steel. I could stand on it and it wouldn't bend! It has been well designed to serve its purpose for at least one or two millennia. By way of comparison, eight £1 coins and a small apple (I ran out of £ coins) weigh 174 grams!

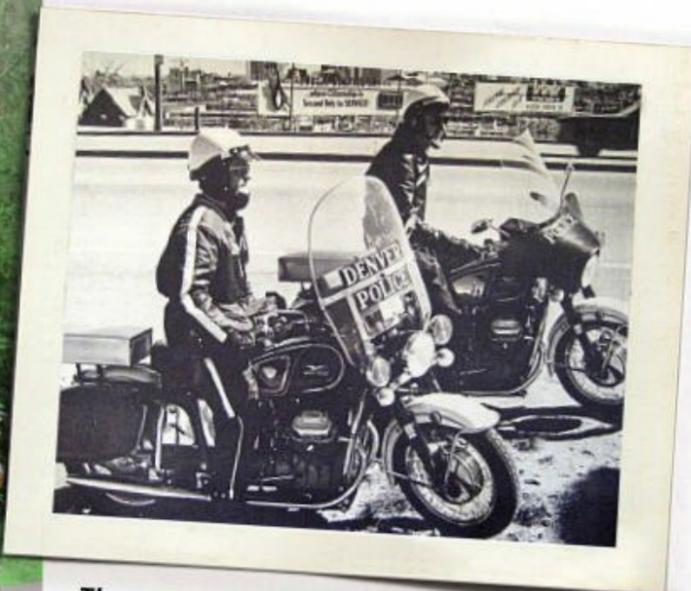
An elephant could stand on the Eldorado's frame without damaging it. The top tube resembles a length of scaffold and the lower an RSJ. It really is solid. The casings and castings are lovely to look at and touch, the paint is lustrous and deep and the chrome and tinwork hefty, the spoked Borrans are sinuously smooth. Pinstripe accented mudguards are long, heavy and curvaceous with stout chrome supports. As a package, it looks fantastic, reminiscent in its opulence of a 1920s transatlantic ocean liner.



As bought. Dave's Guzzi is a natural beauty



Dave's Guzzi as it is now. Police spec stand has been retained as it's excellent



The way they were

the Williams sisters; upright, fit, strong and with thundering presence.

The loops are all pretty similar but there have been a gazillion minor changes I find too dull to write about... but here's a few. The frame remained largely unchanged, the transverse V-twin subject only to minor developments producing incrementally more power. So while a V7 output 40bhp, a 1974 Eldorado/850 GT produced 51bhp. Rocker boxes were remodelled, casings have more or less webbing and all bear the famous round barrels later used on the T3, V7 Sport and Le Mans. All except the late Eldos had gear-driven timing chests with very late bikes changing to a chunky chain. All used a dry plate clutch and had shaft drive, transmitting rotating power from the box to the pinion and crown wheel assemblies, collectively parcelled as the bevel drive.

If anything underwhelmed it was brakes; 253kg of Eldorado mass needs proper big friction forces to stop and the front stopper in particular was never that good. For the 2ls used on most models, slowing can be optimised by using the correct linings, careful set-up and a thicker than standard, bespoke cable to really hold the pressure on.

The 850 GT made for the sporty European market got a 4LS front brake which was an

Only with better cornering.

It's as much go as show too, the air-cooled twin and shaft drive proves a sound mating through many dependable miles. Just look at Nick Adams' enviable unsurfaced Canadian exploits which have appeared previously on these pages if you need convincing of loop dependability in the face of testing conditions. For another tale of a man having a rollicking good time while travelling the length of the Americas on a loop, try Paul Van Hoof's 'Man in The Saddle'.

Somewhat more prosaically, the 850 V-twin is also a well-proven mile muncher on the UK's paved surfaces. Guzzi's big block will maintain a steady 70 or 80mph to just about any mythical or actual population centre that takes your fancy, and the Moto Guzzi Club GB (about which I have nothing but praise) has several stalwart

members who prove that point, year in year out.

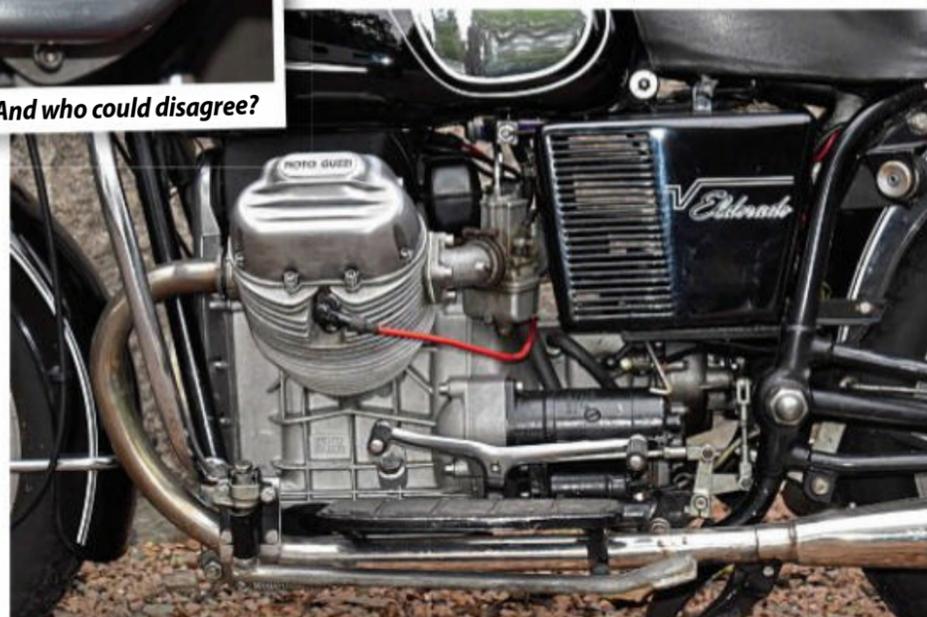
So it's no lightweight then? No, certainly not, and all the better for it. Guzzi would almost certainly not be with us now without substantial orders from military and civilian forces, and the V7 was first developed with that market in mind. Such a script demanded robust bikes that could take punishment, and a loop weighs in at 253kg. As with many bikes, however, you wouldn't know it once on the move. The mass is held well and low and it suits the machine, a solid bike with muscular poise, like an athlete. Think of



'Lovely castings', wrote Dave. And who could disagree?



The right side of the engine is as handsome as the other side, but has the driveshaft all to itself



The left side of the engine is as handsome as the other side, but has the starter motor all to itself... and a neat rocking heel'n'toe gear lever, too



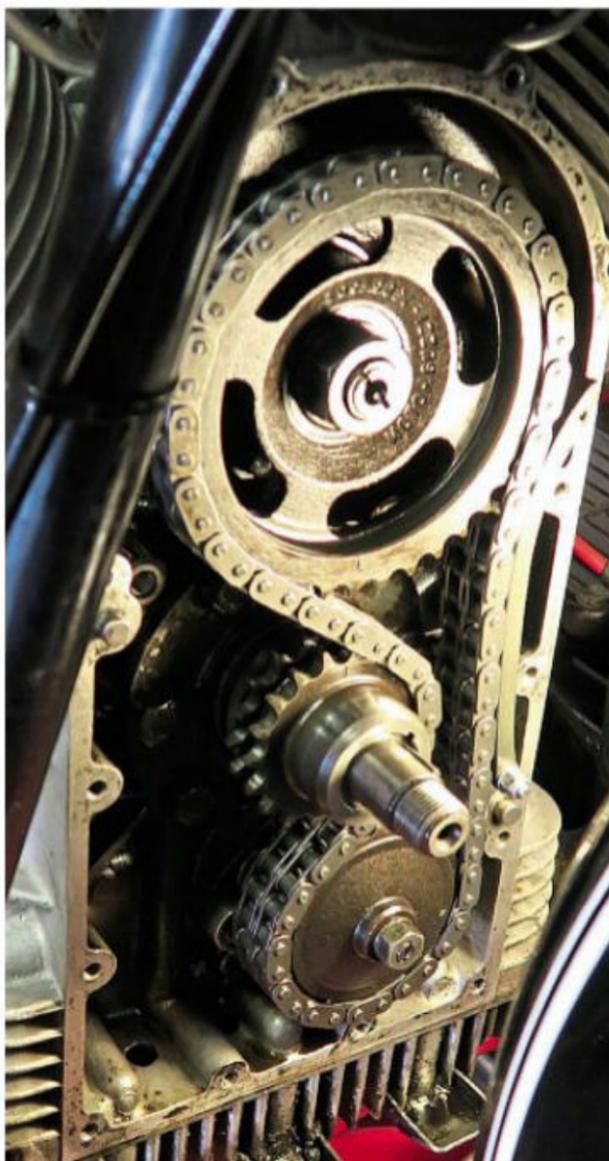
Guzzi metalwork is nothing if not substantial. Contrast 188 grams of quality indicator bracket with 174 grams of coins and an apple. Dave did this test...

improvement and, as is the way of 4LS brakes, looks pretty cool. Also in common with other 4LS brakes, it's reputed to be tricky to set up properly. The 850 GT was specified with a separate rev counter as well as a speedo. This reflected some general divergence between the USA models, marketed as cruisers, and the European models which were more 'grand tourer'; a nuanced difference but it's there.

The very last Eldos got a disc brake up front, and they are rare; any passing fancy to casually graft one on to an earlier bike is quashed with the realisation that the entire front end is different, forks and all. The V7 and Special have

a 4-speed box, the 850 GT/Eldo a five-speeder; whether this was progress divides owner opinion but most seem to suggest the 4-speed has the sweeter ratios.

So what's the one you can see here? It's a 1973 Eldorado, imported a few years ago from the United States following a fairly fresh restoration by a Californian Guzzi specialist. It began its working life in the Los Angeles Police Department, the USA police being a big customer of Guzzis in the 1970s, with several forces including the California Highway Patrol buying them in preference to Harleys (which is quite a thing).



Both the timing chain and its tensioner were replaced



Dave's Guzzi came with a fairly feeble front brake cable. He soon replaced it with something more substantial

At the end of its service it was probably auctioned off, as many were. In full police spec they are imposing in a blingy, grotesque way that I don't like, although some people go to great trouble to reinstate all those original police items such as Dietz spotlights, a single seat with radio behind, wide, wheelbarrow bars and – the *pièce de résistance* – an original friction horn to provide the Dick Tracey air raid howl. An original friction horn could set you back £1500, so you need to be pretty committed to take that route. Police bikes had the horns removed before auction and the brackets were ground off, leaving a tell-tale scar on the left hand loop, so if you're looking for a genuine police bike this is a good thing to check.

I've no interest in police bejazzlement that seems ill-suited to Scottish roads, and bought the Eldorado on its condition, figuring the accessories were pretty easily changed. I wanted a good, restored example, police or civvy, as the restoration of a dog can be eye-wateringly expensive.

Since I got it, many of the police bits have gone and it's now much closer to Euro spec in most respects. That means it's better to ride fast and, to my eye, looks better with straighter bars, a dualseat, Lucas indicators (that were used on late Eldos) and removing the huge Dietz spotlights and their supporting scaffold along with the rear crash bars. (Nick Adams' bike is an original civilian model, so a good reference point.)

One notable exception to my police purge is the footboards. I went to some lengths to find pegs, a suitable gearshift linkage and the correct rocker gear pedal to change over to footpegs... only to find that the footboards were hugely more comfortable for my 31" legs. It's just such a natural way to hold your legs and doubtless the USA police knew this. Before scoffing into your tiffin, you should know they are hinged to allow high angles of lean so there can be no rational



Things to do while it's snowing outside: wheel balancing!

opposition, just prejudice like mine.

I did stop short of getting the 850 GT speedo and rev counter, so far. You can guess the revs after all and the big aluminium police speedometer has the benefit of being readable at a distance. Another indication that this was a police bike is the position of the ignition key on the left midships, a really odd place. Civvy bikes had theirs in the usual position up with the clocks. The police friction horn and

ignition barrel siting means there is a glovebox on the RHS only, whereas civvy models have a symmetrical pair, which may be important too. I bought a second one just to look at in the garage in order to counter my feelings of inadequacy. Allegedly the police ignition is where it is to fool any would-be criminal who may be watching for the officer to reach for the dash to start up his motor. On the upside, the police tank is extra-large so I've kept that and, unlike the contemporary 850 GT, the Eldo retained the snazzy chrome tank panels.

Despite its restoration, the Guzzi has needed a few jobs. The wiring is largely original (not sure why it wasn't replaced, Greg Bender in the USA does superb new looms and his site ThisOldTractor is full of info), so that needed a tidy up, then original HT circuit components

were changed to guarantee sparks. It uses a car-type distributor, familiar to anyone brought up with Brit cars in the 60s. It's quite good and handily located for inspection and adjustment, but they apparently can suffer from water ingress in heavy spray. Then there was the timing chain that rattled and was replaced along with a new tensioner, and a new oil pump because I felt like burning some money, the old one later turned out to be fine.

One of the spark plug holes lost its threads and, following a poor helicoil by a local garage, a Real Expert fitted a bronze threaded boss. I also scrapped the ancient tyres and replaced them with some really good-looking, chunky-treaded period rubber. Servicing is a simple affair with nice big fixings for draining fluids and acres of access. Oil has to be changed often, every 2000 ➤

LOOP LORE

- **ADVICE:** Moto Guzzi Club GB – top club with welcoming people and a great social scene. Active Facebook page, good value with a super magazine
- **INFO:** Greg Bender's ThisOldTractor website is a gold mine of loop and Guzzi information
- **PARTS:** eBay, Gutsibits, Stein Dinse. (USA has Harpers, Cycle Garden, MG Cycle and Mark Etheridge Moto Guzzi Classics)
- **BOOKS:** Paul Van Hoof's 'Man in the Saddle' is an enviable romp down the Americas on a gorgeous, patina-stained loop. Nick Adams' 'Beyond the Bypass' offers insightful post-op Guzzi riding

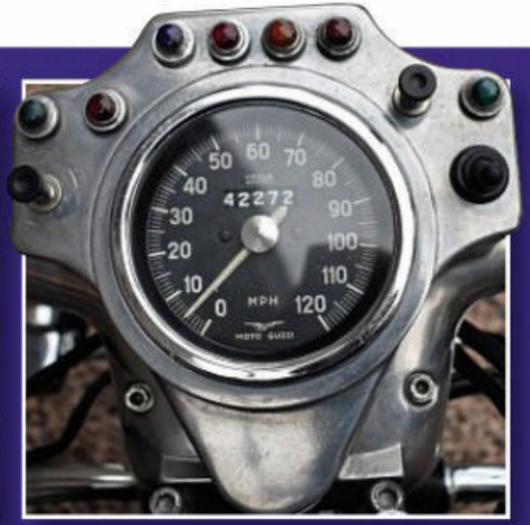


The tank features both posh paint and the wrong filler cap, if we're concerned about that kind of thing



The tyres were replaced, which is almost always a good thing when acquiring a new machine

Eldorado in the snow...



Relics of police service include the remarkable 'dashboard', the curiously situated ignition switch and the painted-over welding 'scar' left by removing the friction horn

miles, as there's no changeable oil filter.

Taking the Eldo out for a blast is an occasion only rivalled by the now departed Norton Big 4. In a giant leap of techno faith there is no kickstart, even as a back-up or an option. That was unusual and progressive for the time, and you have to trust that hefty starter motor. The tiny key which looks like it will drop from the lock, slots in and you get the familiar neutral and oil pressure lights on the polished aluminium binnacle-thing. The police binnacle/dash is quite a thing resembling something from the set of *Blake's Seven*; all flashing indicator lights and mysterious switches, some of which pull, others flick, but few actually seem to do anything useful. The starter button has more clarity of purpose, being a separate big domed thing located by the right-hand grip. A hefty push initiates a laboured churn of cogs followed by thundering pistons.

The engine settles to a throb as I turn on the

tremendous, big, bright headlight, bested only by BMW's contemporary offering. The clutch is heavy and binary in application, first is not always easy to get in, and on release take-up can be sudden, spinning the rear wheel on the loose granite chips. On the street, it starts to pick up the pace, and the heel and toe changes (one down, four up) become smooth up through the box to a cruising 70mph.

I found the police spec 'barrow' bars terrifying and could barely wobble round the gentlest of corners, but now with straighter bars it handles well, very well. It feels balanced and brutish in equal measure with a big flatulent sound track to match. It really does handle, it scythes around the corners – that athleticism again – and this is where the restoration pays off. It's all pretty taut with little mechanical slop in the drivetrain or cycle parts, and that inspires a degree of confidence in wielding the thing.

The front fork is maybe an exception; it's

sound but the springs seem tired. Still, they control the heft well enough and the rear shocks (Hinckley Bonneville items of the correct length) are many times better than the alarmingly soggy originals. It's a comfy place to be, the engine settles to a civilised beat, the seat is spacious with room for shuffled adjustment and there's little in the way of unwelcome vibes. Torque is there but not gargantuan by modern standards and bigger hills require gear changes on the whole. The Eldo undoubtedly has presence and of all the bikes I've owned it attracts the most looks and questions. Stopping is acceptable with an upgraded, thicker front brake cable and a strong grip, but inadequate without.

If you want one, then how much will you pay? A personal import from the USA would probably still be the cheapest option, where rough bikes can be had for maybe \$2000. USA prices tend to be a bit cheaper than UK or European and spares tend to be in better nick too. That said if, like Ewan McGregor, you buy a bike from California-based Cycle Garden (no, mine is not) you could pay several tens of thousands of dollars for a bespoke machine complete with silk screen decals and friction horn should you wish.

UK prices seem to start around £4000 and rise to silly dealer prices of £15,000. Budget £6000 to £7000 and you should get a sound bike. Early V7s I have been told can be particularly hard to find spares for; spares are not all interchangeable between models although there is a lot of crossover. Used Ambo and Eldo spares are fairly plentiful in the USA and there are many new parts available too. In the UK. Gutsibits have some spares, both new and used, as do Stein Dinse in Germany and various USA suppliers. In all cases, be aware that new machines were usually fitted with chrome lined barrels and this flakes over time, ruining bearings with costly results. Gilardoni produce a replacement barrel kit for around £500. If this has not been done you might be wise to budget for it.

Should you get one? Yes, of course. What a great bike the loop is: robust, attractive, and capable with genuine star quality. **Rc**



Ready to go anywhere...