

CLASSIC DRIVER

Legend of Lombardy: The Moto Guzzi story

Lead

It is difficult to think of a motorcycle maker with a more storied and romantic history than that of Moto Guzzi which, 93 years after its founding in Lombardy, is today the oldest bike manufacturer in Europe to have remained in continuous production...

The marque was conceived by World War One pilots Carlo Guzzi and Giovanni Ravelli and their mechanic, Giorgio Parodi. But Ravelli never saw the realisation of his dream as he was killed in a plane crash just a few days after the war's end. Guzzi and Parodi decided to carry on, commemorating their lost friend in the now-famous Moto Guzzi eagle logo (borrowed from the Italian Air Corps) and using a 2,000 lira loan from Parodi's shipping magnate father to get the company going.

Earning the wings



Guzzi undertook the engineering of the bikes, quickly developing the horizontal, single-cylinder engine that would remain a Moto Guzzi signature right up until the 1960s. The men promoted the new marque out on the race tracks, where it gradually came to lead the Grand Prix scene in the middleweight classes, notching up 3,329 wins, eight world championship titles and 11 Isle of Man TT victories before retiring from competition in 1957.



Along the way, Moto Guzzi established a reputation for engineering excellence, inventing the centre stand and swinging arm suspension, creating the first double-overhead-camshaft V8 bike engine and being the first motorcycle manufacturer to use a wind tunnel to help optimise aerodynamics. By the mid-1960s, however, both founders had died and Moto Guzzi was facing a financial crisis that resulted in ownership by state-run receivers, who resurrected a V-twin engine designed some years earlier by Giulio Carcano, creator of the aforementioned V8 Grand Prix unit.

Lombardy lifestyle



Initially displacing 700cc and used in the V7 model, the engine and its shaft drive transmission became the quintessential Guzzi powertrain at the heart of iconic - and now highly collectable - '70s and 80s classics such as the 750-S3 and 850 Le Mans café racers and the California tourer.

Moto Guzzi is still located in Mandello del Lario where it all began and, under Piaggio ownership for the past decade, now offers a full range of sport, cruiser, tourer and adventure sport machines - all, of course, with 21st Century versions of that legendary V-twin engine.



The marque has even upped its game as a 'lifestyle brand' by employing bike-mad actor Ewan McGregor as its ambassador. For most die-hard Guzzi fans, however, even McGregor doesn't come close in the 'cool' stakes compared with the sight of an original, round-headlamp Le Mans, resting on its side stand in a sunlit piazza...

Gallery

