



A Frenchman's FANCY

When Axel Bellmatx decided to 'get into' 750cc Moto Guzzis, he didn't just buy one. Or two. Or three. Or four...

Words and pictures by Adam Bolton

"I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't go on holiday – I just buy Guzzi 750s."

When I first investigated the possibility of meeting a man who had decided that his burning passion in life would be collecting only the 750cc Moto Guzzi models from the early part of the 1970s and as much related paraphernalia as possible, the thought fleetingly entered my head that he was either eccentric, mad, or possibly both, and that he could also be probably quite dull to talk to too.

How wrong I was. In fact I'd taken his words far too literally, and so sitting on the terrace of his home in the foothills of the stunning French Pyrenees, I was admittedly relieved to discover that, like any self-respecting Frenchman, Axel Bellmatx was partial to a glass or two of the local appellation contrôlée. I also at once appreciated that this urbane and passionate Guzzi collector didn't really need to jet off to exotic climes with the amazing scenery and fantastic biking roads that lay at his door. We'd met 'virtually' as fellow

Guzzi 750 owners through various websites, and while I love my Guzzi too bits and am happy with the one for now, it transpired that Axel was the proud owner of at least eight models in various states of rest, road readiness, repair and restoration, and he was and is still looking for others.

A little history to set the scene. In five years from 1971 to 1976, Moto Guzzi produced four V-twin air-cooled shaft drive 750cc models that to many classic enthusiasts are iconic, not just because they were the forerunners of Guzzi's sporting production up until this very day, culminating with the recent exquisite MGS-01 racer, but because they were simply beautiful to look at and intelligently designed.

Under the experienced and creative hand of head designer at Guzzi, Lino Tonti, the basis of ugly duck V7 Special tourer was transformed into a sleek, low and elegant swan that was the V7 Sport. It wasn't all go and no show either – the V7 Sport prototypes signalled a return to competition for Guzzi, and were tried and tested before entering production by racking up

speed records, and factory and privately prepared V7 Sports took part with success in endurance racing. The bike proved itself to be durable and very quick, and the mythical first 150 or 200 V7 Sports, (the number depends on who you believe) and now affectionately referred to as the Telaio Rosso (red frame) or TR, were constructed 'by hand' in the race department. Such was Guzzi's pride in the low and extremely stable frame, they delighted in painting it a bright red in order to show it off to the maximum.

The V7 Sport was an astounding success with the public, despite its high price. Italian magazine *Motociclismo* tested the V7 Sport at Monza in 1972 and pushed it to 125mph (201km), lapping four seconds quicker than most peoples' benchmark for a 1970s superbike the Honda CB750, and 11 seconds quicker than the Kawasaki H2 750. Hot stuff indeed for a shaftie sports tourer.

The V7 Sport continued until it was superseded by the 750S, which featured a twin Brembo disc front

Top left: Axel Bellmatx with just some of the Guzzi-assorted paraphernalia that he owns.

Top middle: Another delivery... yet more Guzzi parts arrive in the post.

Top right: The black and green 750S was Axel's first 750cc Guzzi, and the start of a long-running obsession.



Chaplain worked for Guzzi dealer Charles Krajka, but built this machine in his own time... in his Parisian flat.



The 36mm pumper Dell'Orto carbs fuel the race-spec Guzzi.



BUILT BY FORMER RACER CHRISTIAN CHAPLAIN, THE ENDURANCE RACER SPORTS AN 850CC ENGINE

end, rear drum and different paint scheme. The S3 750 was the last model in the chain of 750 models to leave the factory, the '3' relating to the three huge and powerful disc brakes all round. The S3 was the first Guzzi model to wear the unusual linked braking system, loved by some and hated by others. The S3 was discontinued by 1976 as the legendary Le Mans I was introduced. Capacity was raised to 850cc, and although the Le Mans was a fast fire breathing roadster that set its own standards, for many 'Guzzisti' of today, it lacks the classic lines and beauty of the 750 machines. Bikes that even 35 years on have impeccable road manners, handling and robustness. You can tour two-up around Europe on them, scratch them, thrash them, even go shopping on them and they won't complain.

Axel's singular infatuation for these machines is betrayed as soon as you walk into his dining room. There in one corner, casually parked by the radiator, is a beautiful V7 Sport, 1972 vintage. Restored to blueprint original condition, apart from the paint shade that Axel decided to tone down a little from the standard pea/line green, the bike has never been started up, and sits as quiet testimony to Axel's passion, or should that read obsession!

"I'll never start it up – I don't need to," he states in his perfect English, but with not an ounce of our English irony. "I always wanted to have a V7 Sport in my living room. I do turn the motor over by hand every now and again." What a shame, you may be thinking, but it's his and all paid for, and Axel's got other bikes to ride, so this Sport has become the ultimate sacrificial lamb on his temple to the Guzzi 750.

Why the Guzzi 750 in particular? "I'd always ridden singles from a young age, and I liked bikes that didn't require too much maintenance, so shaft drives were ideal. I owned a Honda Deauville, and then a BMW R1150GS, and enjoyed the characteristics of twin cylinder engines. I liked to try different bikes, and never really kept one for long, so at one point I bought a Guzzi V65 GT. People had warned me off Guzzis, saying that the electrics were rubbish and they were unreliable, but I had no problems with the bike, it was extremely reliable and I did many thousands of miles on it. The handling was good, and I liked the linked brake system. I then started to collect Guzzis as I liked them so much, but the more modern ones; a V35 Imola, a V50 Mk 3, a California 2 with a DBS (French) sidcar, a V75 and a V65TT

trail bike. At one point I had 10 different models but they were all fairly cheap to buy – I just enjoyed using them for different purposes. I also joined Scuderia Guzzi, a French Guzzi owners club, and started to see and fall in love with the other older bikes at their meets. I bought books and read up on the V7 Sport, and decided I wanted one! Such classic lines, attention to detail and beauty."

Axel's first 750 was to be by chance a 750S, bought for £1000 while he was working in Paris. The bike had been restored some years previously but lain unriden and uncared for. "I got it running, and used it a lot. By then, I had left Paris and moved to the South of France, and had a smaller garage, so decided to sell off most of my other bikes, hoping the space would soon be filled by a V7 Sport." Seems Axel started to become famous, (or should that read infamous?) as a character within Scuderia Guzzi circles who always talked and enthused about the V7 Sport, as someone tipped him off about a V7 Sport with a 950cc motor in running condition and French documents. It was time for Axel put his money where his mouth was, and he did. "I bought it at once and then set about buying up various original parts like the switchgear and the



chrome crashbars. The motor wasn't the correct 750 unit, but I didn't mind, I liked the extra power."

Axel's collecting went further at this point now he'd procured his first Sport. Scouring the ubiquitous eBay, websites, magazines and small ads, he started to amass parts, posters, brochures, parts books, scale models, articles, well just about anything he could find for or related to the bikes. "Many of the parts for these bikes are getting harder to find so I spend every spare penny buying parts that I came across, at the right price though of course," he smiles.

As if on cue, the man from 'La Poste' comes struggling down the path with a huge sack that turns out to contain two original Borrani rims with the beautiful Guzzi double ts brakes in place. The postman must fear the days that Axel expects another package from somewhere else in the world... are parts hard to come across, I ask?

"The lockable toolboxes for the V7 Sport and 750S are particularly rare, and a good 750 crank is also difficult to find. The earlier bikes had no decent oil filter. People were lazy about the oil changes, which were really important, and I have come across a few 750 motors with broken cranks – unusual for a Guzzi though. The most elusive spares must be the



Far left: The Guzzi logo, a neat detail on the rocker covers.

Left: Proudly displayed on the rare lockable toolbox, the V7 Sport logo.



original chrome Lafranconi silencers, I have been searching for three years for a pair. Ancillary parts are easy to get, being still available from Guzzi or reproduced." His 750 collection wouldn't be complete without the final model to roll off the production chain, the linked brake S3. "I really wanted all three models, as I was fascinated by the evolution of the 750 models. But I couldn't find one for sale, they only made 950 of them, and they're fairly rare."

In the meantime, another V7 Sport turned up at the right price to tempt Axel, and he simply couldn't resist. The bike was in boxes and 99 per cent complete, and its young owner had lost interest in the project. This was the bike that was to become the 100 per cent correct Sport in the living room, and Axel picked it up from near Paris in his trailer, and dumped the boxes at the doorstep of Barnabe Ortega (Languedoc Moto RénovSarrazou, 81230 LACAUNE – 00 33 (0)563 37 08 36), French Guzzi restoration guru in the Massif Central, with the plain request 'please restore to as original condition.' Work was to take six months, enough time for Axel to be tempted again. "I heard about a dismantled 750S with sidcar documents, hard to get in France,

and I had enjoyed owning a sidcar, so decided to buy it." The bike came with many new spares and was good deal. Axel also found a Squire sidcar with Guzzi linkages that was small and sporty looking, ideal for the low-slung 750, so once again Barnabe Ortega found himself with another pile of boxes in his workshop and a Squire chair in the shed. This restoration is still ongoing.

Axel's curiosity about these bikes seems to have no bounds, demonstrated by his setting up in 2003 a website dedicated to the models, and a register of Guzzi 750 frame and engine numbers and condition of the bike, to try and ascertain how many examples may still be around after 35 years.

Above left: A dining room display... not many have a Moto Guzzi in their dining room, but Axel does!

Above: The V7 Sport signalled a return to sports-bike manufacture for Moto Guzzi.

Yet another V7 Sport, this one in boxes and awaiting its turn for attention.



► Emailing and calling owners through websites and 'for sale' ads, Axel has managed to build up a database of information. "I am always careful to make it clear that it is for my own personal research only," he explains, "as people can be correctly concerned about giving out a frame number, but most people have been very friendly and helpful. Only once an Italian owner got annoyed and started talking about fakes and so on, but he didn't understand what I was aiming for." So if you possess a Guzzi 750 and have ever been contacted about frame and engine numbers, you'll know who it was...

THE TELAIO ROSSO DISCOVERY

One day, a friend told Axel of an interesting modified and unrestored V7 Sport with endurance racing kit that was languishing in the back of a Parisian Guzzi dealer with a cheap price tag. Apparently it was a genuine one owner bike from new, and hadn't been ridden or touched since 1981. Axel asked as usual for the frame number, and when he received the reply, his heart began to race. "I literally fell from the chair, astonished!" It transpired that the number tallied as a frame number for one of the original Telaio Rosso bikes, rare and collectable. The Holy Grail of Guzzi 750s if you like. Axel called the shop at once, and said he'd buy it and would be up to pay and collect the next day to pay. 1250 miles later, Axel had bought the bike, and taken it home. "Not a yellow and red frame Telaio Rosso, but something for me much more interesting, unrestored and with an interesting past."

The bike was ordered as a standard new V7 Sport from Charles Krajka, who had been official Guzzi importer until 1971, and then a Guzzi dealer. Krajka raced Guzzis, taking part in the 1969 Bol d'Or on a V7 frame racer, and was in close contact with the Guzzi factory at Mandello during the development of the V7 Sport. His chief mechanic was called Christian Chaplain, and was he who was asked by the owner, a race bike fan, to build a Bol d'Or replica for the road. Chaplain agreed to take it on as a private job. The owner received the bike new, along with a Bol d'Or type fairing from Krajka, went to Italy to buy some special parts, then passed everything on to Chaplain, who built the bike in his flat in Paris. It had an 850cc motor (which importantly retains the Telaio Rosso engine



numbered crankcases), high compression pistons, 36mm pumper Dell'Orto carbs with straight manifolds, competition cam, Menani handlebars and fruity Lafronconi competition silencers. "I have spoken since to Chaplain, who remembers the bike well," explains Axel. "Apparently it needed to be pushed and started on the button at the same time to get it going, but was very fast with a top speed of 138mph. It was never raced by its one owner, but he travelled regularly to the Bol d'Or, Le Castellet and other racetracks. He rode it until 1981 when his sister was killed in a bike accident, and this shocked him into stopping riding bikes, and he didn't ride it again." A bike with such provenance needs to be treated carefully, and Axel says that although he'll have the motor stripped and checked, "...and to see what other special parts their may be inside," the rest of the bike will always remain untouched. "I can't wait to ride it," grins the proud owner, and who can blame him. Maybe I can blag a test ride when it's ready - please Axel?

Finally, the elusive S3 turned up,

running and with documents, rebuilt - albeit with an incorrect red frame, the choice of its lady owner - but now one of Axel's regularly used Guzzis. Yet still he can't stop. Barnabe the Guzzi guru has recently turned up another complete but dismantled V7 Sport with crank-damaged motor, and is now nestling in Axel's garage. Axel's contacts quickly supplied a 750 motor with decent crank to replace the damaged one, so Barnabe will have his hands full for months to come by the looks of things. Oh yes, the garage. Newly completed, and suspiciously perfectly Guzzi 750 in width, it now houses Axel's collection, with room to spare. "I also have a spare frame and enough parts to make another bike, but I'm not sure yet what, but it will be interesting."

Axel's passion for these bikes and the history that surrounds them is infectious. He is always interested in hearing from owners about their bikes, whether restored, wrecked or in pieces and can be contacted by email at: bellmatx@wanadoo.fr or through his informative website at: <http://monsie.wanadoo.fr/guzziv7sport>

The S3 sports an incorrect red frame, the choice of its first owner. Around 950 of the model were built



Below: Not just a collector, the Guzzis are used by their owner whenever he gets the chance.