

# ITALIAN PLONK

Ex-military Guzzi singles make docile tourers/*Mick Duckworth*







Above: Walter Bartels (left) and Helmut Ruhrmeier love their gentle sloggers

Main photo: the 500cc Falcons have been converted to civilian trim by their German owners





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SINGLE-cylinder mania does strange things to people. If you had recently bought a new Harley-Davidson Electra-Glide, would you leave it at home rather than use it on a long-distance holiday? Faced with a 1500-mile round trip, would you spurn your 1000cc Moto Guzzi G5 tourer – and your 850cc T3 back-up – in favour of an eighteen-year-old plonker?

This is what Walter Bartels and his friend Helmut Ruhrmeier did when they rode from Germany to Britain for the 1988 TT. They left big, modern, convenient machines in the garage and came on restored 500cc Moto Guzzi flat singles.

Their Italian thumpers aren't particularly original, historic or sought-after examples of the marque, either. But they do make a smart and very unusual pair, and for Walter and Helmut the Guzzis provide the soft, slogging power they find irresistible.

The almost-matching couple exemplify the final phase of the 88 x 82mm singles made at Mandello del Lario for fifty years. The Falcone Nuovo model was launched in 1969 as an updated version of the much loved Falcone that had been around since 1950. These two found their way to Germany after discharge from the Italian armed forces and were brought by Walter and Helmut, along with two more, about four years ago.

The Nuovo (it means New) is at first glance simply a modernisation of the venerated Falcone. Look closer, though, and it becomes apparent that this model involved several major design revisions at a time when other manufacturers saw the large-capacity single as a dead cause.

In the new engine, Guzzi made radical changes from dry- to wet-sump lubrication, roller to plain big-end bearings, plated to lined cylinders and full enclosure of the outside flywheel.

Traditions were abandoned on the cycle parts, too. Gone was the triangulated rear suspension with under-engine springs, replaced by a conventional swinging arm on bronze bushes. The frame that had been bolted up from tubes and plates was now an all-welded tubular structure, with a U-section top member. Oddest of the visible changes was the huge double-decker Lafranconi silencer. Some civilian machines had an even sillier device with two long megaphone mufflers.

Walter – he's the Electra Glide owner – explains that both machines have been treated to full restoration. As a motor mechanic he has the necessary skills: Helmut, who also lives in Duisburg, near Dusseldorf, is in the metal business too, being employed by the giant Krupp steel company.

Special military fittings, including sirens and gun carrying brackets, were discarded. All the remaining components

were stripped, checked and replaced where necessary. Any Guzzi spares that were needed came via friends who visited Italy.

Acrylic paint was used, and the colours came from personal preference, although the red one – that's Helmut's – is in the traditional Mandello hue. Single seats have been retained on both machines, but Walter fits a pillion seat to his luggage rack for two-up riding, which explains why his bike carries rear footrests. The saddle on Helmut's is from a Guzzi V-twin police model.

The blue version has its original high-rise handlebars, but Walter opted for the flatter shape of bars from a 750cc BMW twin. Both bikes carry Hella handlebar-mounted flashing indicators to comply with German laws and modern mirrors have been added for safety. 'We need them when we have to drive on the left,' Walter says.

The Military Falcone Nuovo had a huge air filter case, containing a Fiat car-type element, mounted on the right just under the fuel tank. 'We didn't like them, because they hide the engine,' explains Helmut, who found a much smaller drum-shaped filter of the type used on civilian versions. Walter has a compact modern unit which gives a similarly unrestricted view of the Falcone's chunky all-alloy pot.

Moto Guzzi connoisseurs don't rate the post-'69 Falcone as being a true Mandello vintage: even the authorities said it wasn't as good as the older type, being heavier with a higher seat. But for Helmut and Walter, the singles offer economy, reliability and easy maintenance in a relatively modern package.

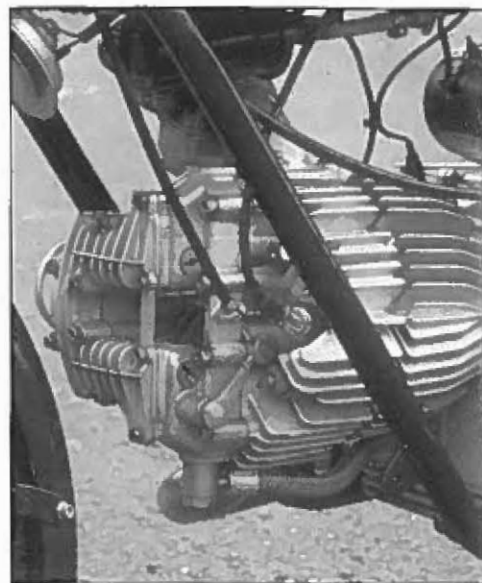
They find the deep 4½ gallon fuel tanks give a generous range of 300 miles. The softly-tuned engines with 6.5:1 compression and 29mm square-bodied Dell'Orto carburettors are happy cruising at a shade over 70mph, with another 10mph or so to come.

The famous Guzzi flywheel, shrouded by an alloy guard on the Nuovo, helps produce the legendary Falcone chugging power, and the tickover of these two machines is uncannily lazy. Walter approves of the sturdy specification he saw inside his engine. 'The crankpin diameter is 44mm – almost as big as on the 850 V-twin,' he marvels.

He makes his own gaskets from Klingerite material, which holds in every drop of the full 3 litres of oil shared between the engine, the four-speed gearbox and the helical gear primary drive. The contact-breaker points in the right-hand engine cover and the ohv tappets under caps on the head couldn't be more accessible. Each machine has two toolboxes.

Grimeca drum brakes, with 200mm twin-leading-shoes at the front, meet with the owners' approval. So does the handling of the chassis, with Sebac five-position rear units and Guzzi's own front forks. The 18in wheels usually have 3.50 section tyres front and rear, but Helmut prefers a fatter 100-size Pirelli at the rear. Strong centre stands make light of the Falcones' 400lb bulk.

Twelve-volt electrics are one of the Nuovo's best points. A belt drive inboard of the flywheel turns a substantial Bosch



Top: alloy guard covers outside flywheel



Above: small air filters replace original boxes

generator and the alloy binnacle above the CEV headlamp carries a full set of 'idiot lights' as well as the Veglia 160kph speedo. Some versions of this model offered electric starting, but Helmut and Walter find kick-starting no problem, even without the cable-operated valve lifter.

Registering the machines in Germany was simple enough. The licensing authorities have attached tags giving the year of manufacture as 1970, believed to be accurate. Refreshingly, Germans don't fuss over their number plates – they happily accept changes to numbers and letters which may be made just because they move house.

Helmut and Walter didn't regret choosing the Guzzis for their long Isle of Man trip. Modern V-twins might have been more comfortable, but they wouldn't have aroused as much interest as the red and blue Falcones did, chuffing along with those peculiar silencers □



*Below: last of the Falcons: the 1974 Sahara was based on the military machine*

*Bottom: Grimeca 200mm t/s front brakes suit owners*

