
Moto Guzzi History



On 15 March 1921, the "Società Anonima Moto Guzzi" was set up at Mandello del Lario, to "Fabricate and sell motorcycles and other activities relevant to or associated with the metal and mechanical industries".

The partners in the enterprise were the well known Genovese shipowner Emanuele Vittorio Parodi, his son Giorgio and ex comrade in arms in the Italian Air Force and motorcycling enthusiast, Carlo Guzzi. In common with every great enthusiast, Carlo Guzzi was unable to find the ideal motorcycle, so he decided to build it himself. At the time, the panorama in the sector was little more than pioneering. Even starting up one of the early bikes was a feat. Riders lubricated the engine with a manual pump with devastating results for clothing and also damaging the uncovered chain drive. Riding a motorcycle was an act of heroism and the list of spare parts to take with you on a trip included practically all the components.

The first motorcycle prototype was produced in 1919 in the Mandello del Lario workshop with the help of blacksmith Giorgio Ripamonti. Known as the G.P. (Guzzi-Parodi) from the initials of the two partners, it was a 500 cc single cylinder with four valve cylinder head and overhead camshaft. It delivered 12 hp and had a maximum speed of 100 km/h. The model drew heavily on aircraft engine technology, well known by the designer.

Already revolutionary and well ahead of its time, the G.P. was modified several times, mainly due to the excessive production costs, before arriving at the definitive version. The name G.P. was abandoned as it could have been confused with Giorgio Parodi's initials and so the name "Moto Guzzi" was born, together with a contemporary icon, the eagle with outspread wings, chosen as the logo to commemorate the rider Giovanni Ravelli, who was to have been the third partner before being killed in a flying accident.

In 1921, the Normale was born. This was the first model marketed, with 8 hp, a maximum speed of 80 km/h and consumption of 30 km per liter. The Normale was the first bike in the world to be fitted with a centre stand, a feature which would later be adopted by all other constructors.

At the beginning of the century, the sophisticated publicity campaigns of today did not exist and the only way to make the performance of a motorcycle known was to enter it in a race.

And indeed, it was its racing debut, another historic date, which eventually brought the Mandello del Lario company into the international limelight. The race was the tough Milan-Naples rally. Two Moto Guzzis took part and the final classification was not exactly thrilling as they ended up coming 20th and 22nd. But victory was just round the corner. Just 30 days later, on 25 September 1921, Moto Guzzi had its first win in the Targa Florio with Gino Finzi. This was the start of an extraordinary series of riding successes which continued without a break until 1957. The packed list of Moto Guzzi wins, continuing until the company withdrew from racing, included a full 14 world championship titles and 11 tourist trophies.

The first victories helped spread the word and the demand increased. In 1921, 17 "Normale" motorcycles were constructed at a price of 8500 lire. The hitherto manual production became industrial and a 300 sq m factory was built employing a workforce of 17.

In 1923, Moto Guzzi was known and admired everywhere and on 7 September 1924, Guido Mentasti triumphed with the C4V (an evolution of the original prototype), outstripping all the international adversaries. Moto Guzzi won the European championship.

The impact on sales led to the factory being expanded and in 1924, 730 motorcycles left the Mandello del Lario premises, twice the number produced in the previous year. Expansion became frantic. In 1925, there were more than 300 employees and more than 1200 motorcycles were produced.

In 1927, 1000 motorcycles were constructed. In 1929 company capital reached 4,500,000 lire and about 2500 motorcycles were produced.

In 1928, the first Grand Turismo in the history of motorcycling was born, the Guzzi GT. The GT featured swing arm and rear suspension a world first. It was known as the Norge from the Arctic Circle rally in which Carlo Guzzi's brother, Giuseppe, took part in the following months.

The dedication and passion of those working at the Mandello del Lario factory is typified by one eloquent fact - the engine mechanics signed the engines which were hand-mounted with a level of care only a genuine craftsmen can achieve.

Racing success travelled hand in hand with technological innovation and in 1934, Moto Guzzi was Italy's most important motorcycle factory. In the triumphant Tourist Trophy of 1935, the first non-English win for 24 years, the Moto Guzzi owned by Stanley Woods used the rear suspension and soon this type of chassis spread through all racing motorcycles.

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The bikes were a 250 cc single cylinder and a 500 cc twin with the new 120° V engine. Capable of exceeding 200 km/h, this dominated the circuits of the world for almost 20 years.

History and legend come together in the feats of legendary riders such as Tenni, the above mentioned Woods, then Ruffo, Lorenzetti, Lomas and Andersson. In the 1930s, the P 175 and P 250 were introduced, forerunners of an entire dynasty with their derivations, the P.E., P.L., Egretta and Ardetta.

Racing models such as the Dondolino, the Gambalunga, the Condor and Albatros were also developed for private riders. The technological evolution continued.

In 1939, the Airone 250 was introduced with a pedal-controlled four speed gearbox. It was to become Italy's most popular medium-powered motorcycle. Experiments were carried out with supercharging with the "250 Compressore" which won the "Freccia Azzurra", a prize awarded to bikes holding both the distance travelled in one hour and top speed in kilometers per hour records simultaneously.

The Second World War was drawing close, but even in these circumstances, the ingenuity and adaptability of Moto Guzzi designers made their presence felt, designing the legendary Trialce, an original three-wheeler that could be quickly disassembled and reassembled, designed to be dropped by parachuted. The Alce sidecar with driving wheel on the outside was also fitted with suspension torsion bar to avoid leaning and loss of control on bends.

After the war, the tastes and trends of the public changed. The motorcycle was no longer a vehicle for a chosen few, reserved for an elite of skilful expert riders. It became a means of transport for everyday use, even for commuting to work. A change of use which was reflected in the design strategy of constructors who orientated their designs towards agile low-powered bikes, inexpensive to purchase and run. In line with the spirit of the times, Moto Guzzi gave the market its first twin, the Guzzino 65. A curiously, the initial price of 80,000 lire doubled rapidly as a result of inflation. Spartan and practical, 50,000 were sold in three years, setting a new Italian record. Extraordinarily long-lived, under the new name of Cardellino, it went through a second youth during the 1950s.

Exactly halfway through the century, the famous Galletto was born, the first large diameter wheel scooter in history and forerunner of a concept which was to become extremely popular in much more recent times. Then in the lightweight motorcycle category came the Zigolo 98 followed by the Lodola 175, the last project personally designed by Carlo Guzzi in 1956. The tendency to be ahead of the times can also be seen in the constant research into the best design and construction methods.

In 1950, the first and only constructor in the world, Moto Guzzi built the first wind tunnel to test 1:1 scale prototypes, leading to development of the very first modern fairing. With this new feature, the bikes exceeded 200 km/h and established their leadership in all races whether on track or road. The racing team was close knit and ingenious, with technicians such as Umberto Todero and Enrico Cantoni working side-by-side with a designer who was soon to become legendary. Only a free thinker not afraid of dreaming could have thought of fitting a monumental and impressive eight cylinder 500 cc engine into the cramped frame of a motorcycle. But Giulio Cesare Carcano obviously set no limits to his imagination and the Guzzi 500 Otto Cilindri (Eight Cylinder) became a reality, with its 80 hp and 285 km/h maximum speed. No one would ever try and go down the road of such a large number of cylinders again, a clear demonstration of the unarguable technical superiority of Moto Guzzi. The bike immediately demonstrated a strong personality and great temperament, winning its first track successes, and only the company's withdrawal from racing interrupted the potentially exceptional career of a unique bike.

In the early 1950s Moto Guzzi was a well consolidated company covering a vast area of 24,000 m² and employing a workforce of more than 1500. But by the end of the decade, Italy's motorcycle industry was starting to feel the pinch. Italy's booming economy was encouraging more and more Italian workers to buy small cars rather than bikes. Car ownership was no longer an unachievable dream for the masses, with a Fiat 500 costing only 400,000 lire.

In 1957 the three leading Italian constructors - Moto Guzzi, Gilera and Mondial - unanimously decided to withdraw from motorcycle racing. On 26 September 1957, Moto Guzzi brought to a close a glorious chapter, marked by such achievements as 14 world championship titles and 11 tourist trophies.

The Moto Guzzi crisis became official in 1964. The company's founders were no longer around to provide inspiration. Emanuele Vittorio Parodi had died during the war, and his son Giorgio had also died suddenly in 1955. Carlo Guzzi was old and sick and had retired to private life. He later died in 1964 at the age of 75. Enrico Parodi, Giorgio's brother, who had already held various management posts within the company, took over the reins.

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In February 1967, Moto Guzzi sold out to Seimm. In an attempt to tackle the crisis and satisfy changes in demand, Seimm introduced a strategy based on low-price machines to woo the bottom end of the market. The objective was achieved largely by cutting production costs. The result was the birth of the Dingo and Trotter, utility machines in the emerging moped category.

In parallel with moped production, however, Giulio Cesare Carcano began development of the first 90° V-Twin power unit, the engine that would soon grow to be the very symbol of Moto Guzzi.

The 703 cc Guzzi V7 came out in 1967. Well received by the market, the V7 was soon followed by the 750 cc V7 Special, and later by the legendary V7 Sport, a machine with extraordinary road holding and attractive modern styling.

America fell in love with this new Guzzi technology and Italian style, and work soon began on the Special, California and Ambassador versions.

These powerful and elegant Italian cruisers captured the American imagination to such an extent that they played star roles in a large number of films and adverts. These highly successful Guzzis fired a passion that still lives on in the States. In 1973, Moto Guzzi was acquired by De Tomaso Industries Inc. (D.T.I. Group).

Acquisition by De Tomaso heralded the start of production of a series of 4 cylinder models, culminating in the successful Guzzi 254 in 1975. But the Guzzi public clearly demonstrated that tradition counted for more than new ideas, and the company was quickly forced to return to the development of the classic 90° V twin that had grown to symbolise Mandello del Lario. Still during the De Tomaso era, after some curious experiments in the form of the 125 cc Tuttoturismo and Tuttoterreno, design efforts became concentrated more and more on style, in partial contrast with Moto Guzzi's conservative reputation.

The glorious 90° V-Twin design was applied to smaller engines and the Guzzi V35 and V50 hit the market, providing a new stepping stone for Moto Guzzi throughout the 1980s.

The same decade also saw the introduction of the "American Style" with the Custom and Florida, and partly faired enduro models. Production nevertheless concentrated on two main areas, Gran Turismo and high performance machines, both typifying Moto Guzzi with its reputation for comfortable long distance bikes and history of racing success.

Without a doubt, the most famous of the period's Gran Turismos was the California. In later models the California was equipped with electronic fuel injection and a three-disc integral braking system with automatic pressure distribution. The Le Mans, Daytona, Centauro and Sport 1100 on the other hand, embodied Mandello del Lario's sporting heritage. All these bikes were equipped with upside down forks, with wheels fixed to the sliding stanchions. This fork design was practically the same as that adopted by Carlo Guzzi over fifty years earlier on the Airone and the Astore and represents an impressive example of the prophetic vision and innovative design that has always been the very essence of Moto Guzzi.

The unmistakable character and style of these eighties machines were echoed in the 1990s by the new California, Nevada and V11 Sport. As a decade, the 1990s saw a return to classical designs and concepts, revitalised and adapted to meet modern requirements by thorough restyling and technical updating.

Unfortunately, the 1990s also saw Guzzi suffering from a whole series of organisational and ownership changes. In 1988, Fratelli Benelli and Seimm merged to create Guzzi Benelli Moto (G.B.M. S.p.A.). The merger led to the Benelli plant being sold off and the closure of Innocenti. Despite these cutbacks, however, the group's results for 1993 were again in the red, so the following year De Tomaso Industries Inc handed control of G.B.M. S.p.A. over to Finprogetti. By early 1996, operations were back in the black, as if to celebrate Moto Guzzi's 75th birthday. The same year G.B.M. decided to change the company's name back to Moto Guzzi S.p.A.. Finprogetti purchased a large share holding in D.T.I. Then when De Tomaso withdrew from the company in August 1996, D.T.I. assumed the name Trident Rowan Group Inc (TRG).

By the end of 1998, operations at Mandello del Lario were under the control of Mario Tozzi-Condivi, who assumed the role of Managing Director. At the same time, talks began to reach technical agreements with other motorcycle companies, with a sell-out appearing as a distinct possibility. On 14 April 2000 an agreement was signed, leading to Moto Guzzi being taken over by Aprilia S.p.A.

The search for the lost spirit of Guzzi, and that elusive balance between innovation and tradition, led to the introduction of the V11 Sport Rosso Mandello. The bike presented at Intermot 2000 in Munich was an exclusive, limited series motorcycle, with all the fascination of 80 years of history and avant-garde technology.

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The 80th anniversary of the historic Mandello del Lario Company marked a period of redefinition of the range. Work was carried out in parallel on both appearance and technology, adapting the bikes to the demands of an ever more sophisticated market. New models of the California family were developed, from the Stone to the California EV Touring with its rich range of accessories. New versions with different configurations were also added to the V11 sports line from the naked Café Sport and Ballabio to the Le Mans sport-tourer and Le Mans Rosso Corsa. The success of the evergreen Nevada continued. Fitted with electronic injection, it also won the heart of the female public with its nimbleness, easy handling and modern colours.

The agile Brevia 750 i.e., aggressive Griso and ultra-sporty MGS-01 Corsa express the various "souls" of Moto Guzzi. Between 28 and 30 December 2004, the final agreement for the acquisition by the Piaggio Group of the Aprilia - Moto Guzzi Group was signed and sealed.

The acquisition created the two-wheeler European leading group: with turnover of 1.5 billion Euro, a 24% share of the European two-wheeler market and a 35% share of the Italian market, annual production of more than 600,000 vehicles, 6,000 employees, 8 manufacturing facilities worldwide and operations in more than 50 countries.

On 3 March 2005, Daniele Bandiera was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Moto Guzzi SpA with the objective of managing company recovery and turnaround with Tommaso Giocoladelli being appointed Directo General on the 15th October 2007.

March 2005 saw the launch of the Brevia 1100. This was a highly successful Italian offering in the hard fought "naked" sector. The launch of the Griso 1100 in September 2005 saw great acclaim from staff and public alike. This machine defies every attempt to be categorised in any traditional motorcycling terms. The Griso 1100 was created as a project based on very individual technical and stylistic choices. From April 2006, the Brevia and Griso were also made available in the classic Guzzi 850cc format.

Guzzi returned to "Gran Turismo" in May 2006 with the Norge 1200 offering: complete protection, a sophisticated chassis and a new 1200cc twin cylinder engine to eat up the miles in complete comfort thanks to a level of standard equipment without parallel.

In March 2006, Gianfranco Guareschi won an historic "double" at the legendary Daytona track with two victories in the Battle of Twins. This success was repeated the following year when Guareschi once more aboard a Moto Guzzi MGS-01 won again. As a result of these transatlantic victories, the beast at the heart of Moto Guzzi took on a new shape in the 1200S. The 1200 Sport was launched in October 2006. It is a highly sophisticated naked enriched with personality and design in terms of chassis and comfort and is powered by the latest evolution of the V 90° 1200cc engine. The Mandello-based company was more alive than ever in 2007. The custom driven 940cc V twin Bellagio arrived in March while in September Moto Guzzi launched the Griso 8V – an evolved form of the naked with an 8-valve engine putting out over 110 bhp.

Proof of the passion that all Moto Guzzi owners share was seen on 14 - 16 September 2007 when over 17,000 Guzzi enthusiasts from all over Europe invaded Mandello del Lario for the fifth GMG "Giornate Mondiali Guzzi" meeting.

Later in 2008, the much anticipated Stelvio 1200 4V will take Moto Guzzi into the great enduro/road bike segment. With 1200 cc and over 100 CV, the Guzzi Stelvio was created for adventure and unforgettable journeys. There is already great excitement about the V7 Classic that, after being unveiled at the Milan Motorcycle Show in November 2007, is getting ready to take on all-comers with its classic, timeless lines. It is a true homage to the elegance of Moto Guzzi style.

But this is just the beginning of a new and thrilling chapter of history.