

Moto Guzzi still the heartbeat of Italy

by Jerry Garrett

It's been a while since we've reviewed a Moto Guzzi motorcycle. Nearly six years, in fact. That, as the small but vocal cult of Moto Guzzi fans would no doubt tell us, is far too long.

But that 2001 review was less than a ringing endorsement for the products of the oft-beleaguered brand. Reviewer Mark Rechtin noted his test bike arrived with flat tires, leaky fuel lines and gunky oil in the crankcase.

MOTO GUZZI GRISO - The Moto Guzzi Griso 1100 fits into the techno-custom segment because of its many styling adornments. Its 88-horsepower, 1,064-cc engine makes a delightful whump-whump sound like a helicopter. CNS Photo courtesy of Moto Guzzi. Moto Guzzi, like the rest of the Italian motoring industry, has traditionally had its ups and downs. One minute the proprietors are ready to shutter the factory; the next, new investors suddenly materialize to save the day and shower the struggling company with cash. This is true of just about any Italian marque, however, be it automakers like Maserati and Lamborghini, or motorcycle manufacturers such as Aprilia or Ducati.

After a dose of cash, they come roaring back stronger than ever.

Moto Guzzi, in fact, is just coming out of its most recent nose dive, with a new lineup of quite possibly its best bikes ever.

Historical digression: The Moto Guzzi logo has the words "Una Storia Italiana - 1921." An Italian Story, since 1921. The "story," however, often has been more like a soap opera. The company was founded by engineer Carlo Guzzi in scenic Mandello del Lario, near Lake Como, in northern Italy. Think of it as Italy's Harley-Davidson, with a much smaller product line and fan base, but with engines just as loud.

Moto Guzzi is renowned for throbbing engines, much the way H-D is. In the '50s, Moto Guzzi shocked the motorcycling world with a short-lived but blindingly fast V-8 for its racing bikes. Like a parade of other Italian engine innovations, it was not known for its reliability. But the V-8 sent a message about Moto Guzzi engines.

In the early '60s, Moto Guzzi developed a 90-degree V-twin based on the V-8 design. The basic architecture is little changed today, although the displacement has grown from 700 cc to more than 1,100 cc. Horsepower has more than tripled. But Moto Guzzi expenses incurred developing the V-twin drove it into financial crisis.

In 1972, the factory was bought by the Argentinian industrialist Alejandro de Tomaso, who proved to be less of a white knight than a bloodsucker. He cut costs, underfunded new models and drained cash to help finance his ill-fated de Tomaso sports car venture.

An American investment group gained control in the '90s, and to no great effect, Aprilia Group saved the company in 2000, announced development of new bikes, then itself collapsed. Most recently, Moto Guzzi (and Aprilia) has been rescued by Piaggio Group, which has pumped in more money.

The immediate result has been the introduction of a new family of 1,100 cc bikes that gives Moto Guzzi an invigorated presence on the international stage. This line consists of the Norge 1200 tourer, which gets a little extra engine compartment "oomph" because it's laden with extra touring bike tonnage; the Breva 1100 is the unadorned or naked version; and the Griso 1100, which is referred to as a techno-custom because of its many styling adornments. I test-rode the fashion-forward Griso, in blood red paint worthy of a Ferrari.

The lean Griso features a fancy twin-spar frame that doubles not just as a rock-solid platform for the mechanicals, but also as a wraparound showcase for Italian design. It handles as precisely as an Aprilia sport bike - not surprising because they share many components. But its big differentiator is its 1,064 cc engine, which produces 88 horsepower, and makes a delightful whump-whump sound like a helicopter. Open the throttle energetically enough and you will thunder off down the road like an Apache attack helicopter.

The Griso is slightly more powerful than the Breva because of a few hot-rodding touches such as longer intake runners, a bigger air box and a less restrictive exhaust can, which is about as big around as a bazooka. (Factory tinkerers already have developed a 110-horsepower version that may see production soon.) All three models get the new smooth-shifting six-speed transmission, although it is a bit of a chore to really find neutral.

A long, 61.2-inch wheelbase, with conservative rake and trail, help keep the 473-pound Griso steady and planted on the road. Most suspension components come from the Aprilia Tuono, along with its fat Pirelli tires. Brembo brakes provide very emphatic stopping power.

The handsome Griso gets its name from a local (to the Lake Como area) folk anti-hero - a sinister, dark, loner type, who ruins happy homes and aspires to carry off the local maidens. We should mention there is a second seating position on this bike, but the maidens probably won't be eager to ride very far on it.

With a 4.5-gallon tank, it should have a range of nearly 200 miles. But be careful heading off into parts unknown, because it doesn't have a fuel gauge. There are a lot of readouts on the digital speedometer head, but they are tiny, hard to read and not very helpful at speed.

Some reviewers have suggested the Griso is the best Moto Guzzi ever. I wouldn't argue, although I honestly haven't ridden many Moto Guzzis. But let's just say that is probably a safe boast to make, because the competition from past models wasn't that tough to top.

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Engine: 1064 cc fuel-injected 90-degree V-twin

Horsepower: 88 at 7,600 rpm

Torque: 60 foot-pounds at 6,400 rpm

Transmission: Six speed

Wheelbase: 61.2 inches

Suspension: 43 mm inverted front fork, rear swingarm with monoshock

Brakes: 2,320 mm front discs, 1,282 mm rear disc

Tires and wheels: 3.50x17 120/70ZR15 front; 5.50x17 180/55ZR17

Seat height: 31.5 inches

Weight: 473 pounds (dry)

Fuel tank: 4.54 gallons

MSRP: \$13,490

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