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# Super Alce

Thanks to army surpluses, Moto Guzzi's 'moose' brings alternative motorcycling to Italy's radical young. Story and photo Paul Bompard.

AT FIRST glance, the Moto Guzzi Super Alce 500cc single looks much older than it is. The absence of telescopic suspension, the exposed valve gear, the shape of the tank, the separate seats, everything down to the long, low dimensions of the frame suggests a bike from the thirties or forties rather than the fifties. Appropriately, in Italian 'alce' means 'moose'.

Guzzi built the Super Alce, which succeeded the wartime Alce, exclusively for the Italian army between 1947 and 1958. At the same time the factory was making the 500cc Falcone in Turismo and Sport versions for the civilian market and the police. The Falcone and the Super Alce have many things in common, including the engine layout and short-stroke dimensions (88 x 82mm) and the outside flywheel. But while the Falcone is modern and manageable, the Super Alce is a kind of two-wheeled armoured car. A shortcoming, perhaps, but also a quality that owners see as an advantage — they love telling how cars usually come off worst in collisions!

Unusual features include a second set of handlebars for the pillion rider and a rear seat mounted about eight inches above the driver's. The extra handlebars were necessary to avoid the passenger having to hold on to the driver's throat, which would hardly have looked impressive in military parades. Rear suspension consists of a case-full of springs under the engine, the springs being compressed as the swinging arm moves up. A scissors-type friction shock absorber is fitted.

Everything seems built to last; the centre stand could hold up a medium-sized car, the side stand is almost two feet long and has a metal disc more than three inches in diameter at the tip for use in mud or sand.

Ease of access to the unit-construction engine is simple. The frame is built in two parts, and by disconnecting the oil and petrol pipes and a couple of bolts beneath the cylinder head, the entire front of the chassis folds up and back, remaining hinged, if desired, under the rider's seat. When a Super Alce engine is overhauled, normal practice is to

remove the front of the bike, leaving the power train in one piece while the rear wheel and the centre stand act as a convenient work bench. Thus any job short of opening the crankcase can be performed with the engine bolted to the frame.

It is a fairly widely held opinion, however, that the Super Alce was obsolete the day it went into production. And it is almost incredible that it was still being built in 1958, and was used by the army until the late sixties. There is also a suspicion that the army may, for whatever reasons, have bought about three times as many Super Alces as it needed.

But this was fortunate for one group of motorcyclists when the government auctioned the bikes off in lots, mostly to breakers' yards and army-surplus dealers. This coincided with the big-bike boom of 1969-71, when new motorcycles were bought as fast, shiny and expensive toys rather than a simple means of transportation. Some motorcyclists, however, rejected the philosophy of 'the more cylinders, the happier the rider'.

It became fashionable among the leftist young and the radical chic to renovate Super Alces, not because the bikes were better than the Falcone or the Gilera Saturno, but because they were available in large numbers at throwaway prices. The Super Alce also represented the antithesis of new Japanese bikes, as it could be repaired and maintained fairly easily. And it seemed a return, on a big bike, to a romantic style of motorcycling.

Consequently, a number of mechanics became specialists in restoring and repairing Super Alces. Probably the best known is Pellegrini, in Rome, who services all the Falcones and Guzzi V7s used by the city police.

'Ever since the early fifties I've been reconditioning Super Alces sold by the army. After a certain number of miles, or if a repair was likely to cost more than a certain figure, the army would practically throw them away and buy new ones,' explains Pellegrini, who is in his late seventies. 'But in recent years people have started treating them like antiques. Last year an American bought five.'

Spares are readily available, even if they seem to be falling into the hands of a continually shrinking number of

dealers, which inevitably sends up prices. But one advantage of the Super Alce is that it was built so sturdily that spares are needed only infrequently.

The 1950 Super Alce pictured here is owned by Stefano Vella, a Rome doctor, and his story is typical. He bought it in 1973 for about £80. For the next six years he enjoyed working on the machine in small bursts of activity, and now has a fine-running bike he rides to the hospital daily.

The Super Alce is indeed a classic, to be used as a means of everyday transport. Returning it to original appearance is not a problem, as the only 'original' finish possible is matt olive green and no chrome! Most Super Alce owners remove the legshields and the second set of handlebars. The shields are ugly and almost useless, while in an accident the bars can trap the passenger, and they make getting on and off the bike uncomfortable.

On the road, the long wheelbase takes a certain amount of effort in tight corners. The brakes are almost non-existent, and riding fast in city traffic means quite often having to decide which side of the car that has just stopped in front of you has more space.

Changing gear is a noisy and violent operation. You pull in the clutch, close the throttle and wait. When the flywheel has let the engine slow to idling speed you stamp down hard on the rocking-pedal gear lever. It usually sounds as if all the gears are breaking up, but you soon get used to it.

Top speed is about 65mph, but the Super Alce can climb a slight hill in top gear at 10mph, or a steep hill in bottom at 1mph. In Rome traffic that has a Norton Commando slipping its clutch in bottom, the Guzzi chugs happily in second.

Roadholding is bumpy but safe, and surprising angles of lean can be achieved with a set of Dunlop TT100s. The ride can be terrifying for the passenger, however, perched high up behind the driver with a clear view over his head and precarious seating on the hard, slippery rear pad. But once the Super Alce's idiosyncracies have been accepted, it becomes a magnificent piece of transport. Not least of its attractions these days is that it will return up to 80mpg.



