

RetroTouring – The Redneck Giro

First a few apologies. Part of this is going to sound like an advertisement. Sorry it's part of the story... Second this will be as much or more about the bikes as it is about the ride. And finally scenery pictures are sadly lacking.

I guess the place to start is the early in the saga... Early August has me receiving a call from Ogden Publishing. Seems I just won Motorcycle Classics' Retro Tour Sweepstakes. All I have to do is find a way to get myself back to Philadelphia for a 3 day ride through Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia put on by Retro Tours (www.RetroTours.com) on 1970's vintage Italian motorcycles.

September 6th found me flying into Philadelphia where unbeknownst to me my adventure would begin when I was picked up at the airport by Joel, the main force behind Retro Tours. The cell phone conversation at the airport was interesting.

Joel, "I'm on the red and white Yamaha."

Me, "Uh.... OK." I'm wondering just how this is going to work since I packed all my riding gear in a rather large duffle.

What Joel neglected to mention was the red and white Yamaha was also equipped with a side car.



Picture riding through rush hour traffic... in a sidecar....., duffle bag set on the side of the car with you holding it. Needless to say you attract a certain amount of attention.

A couple pictures from the sidecar once I had adjusted too my "ride".



A couple comments here. The sidecar had NO suspension so I got to feel every bump in the road. Also Joel is a very skilled sidecar pilot and it shows in his riding. It was a BLAST.

Thursday evening was spent getting to know my fellow riders on this adventure, learning about the bikes we'd be riding, relaxing and enjoying some adult beverages.

Before we start the ride, let's meet the machines.

A 1971 Moto Guzzi 750 Ambassdaor.



A 1973 Benelli 650 Tornado



the 1973 Laverada 750 SF



the 1975 Ducati 860 GT and the only kickstart bike of the bunch. 🤪



The little bikes:

A 500 Moto Morini Strada



and the newest member of the fleet, nicknamed "the baby Guzzi" on this ride, a V50 Moto Guzzi



More on the bikes later as the ride progresses.

First the plan. 6 bikes, 6 riders, 3 days, 700 to 800 miles total switching bikes every 100 miles, ride all 6 bikes. Day 1, Kennett Square, PA to Berkeley Springs WV. Day 2, (the planned long day) Berkeley Springs to Fairmont, WV and back. Day 3, Back to Kennett Square. Never repeat a road and have fun.

Also an introduction to the players; John and Steve from New Jersey, Fred -Toronto, Bruce - Iowa, Richard Backus editor of Motor Cycle Classics - Kansas, our guides for the trip Doug and of course Joel, and yours truly. Sorry no group photo. Those reside on Richard's camera.

Onto the ride: Friday morning has us finishing up paperwork, getting gear out to the BMW with sidecar that Joel will be piloting for the trip and meeting with Doug, and with John and Steve who drove down that morning.



Pictured: Steve (back to the camera), Fred, Doug, Joel (green Kawasaki jacket) and John

The bikes lined up ready to go.



I started out on the Ducati and as you recall this is the only kick start bike of the bunch. The rule is everybody else starts their bike *after* the Ducati is started. The challenge, kick it through without banging your shin too hard on the foot peg." *Fortunately, the electronic ignition provides good low-rpm spark, so results usually come in just a kick or two. Once in the saddle, though, the starting drill is quickly forgiven as you discover a very roomy, comfortable seating position perfectly suited to LONG distance travel. You really spread out, with low-effort steering inputs to the high, wide bars as you roll the throttle on and off in top gear, letting the loping character of the torquey engine haul you from corner to corner. The longish wheelbase and slow steering geometry provide very good stability and reinforce the feeling that you could go all day, and really cover some miles, with little effort. The five-gallon fuel tank makes it so.*

*GT means Gran Turismo, and Grand Touring is what this bike is all about. The dual Brembos up front stop this 500-pounder with two fingers. The stout Ceriani fork sets a high standard, matched by IKON shocks in back. Go ahead, lean it way over: the triangulated upper frame member uses the massive crankcase as a stressed member, and ground clearance is abundant (it is a Ducati, after all). The ultra-smooth 90 degree engine is always willing, never lacking for power."**

Joel's description of the Ducati is very apt. I don't get to test the lean angle here as the roads are not extremely tight.

The route out of Kennett Square takes us out highway 82 through several small towns to highway 372. Things go smoothly with all of us slowly acclimating to the machine we're riding. Once we hit a straight section of road this also has us all searching for the various controls; turn signals, brakes, light switches... We look a little like a clown act or actually a lot like one. This scene is repeated every time we switch bikes.

A note here: Several of these bikes date from before the DOT mandated standardization of controls. So we have both left and right hand shift **and** the shift pattern varies across the board. Between them they have almost every pattern you can picture. The only pattern missing was none had all the gears one direction from neutral. Add to that switches all varied in location also so you often resort to hand signals for turning movements because you couldn't find the turn signal switch.

The first segment takes us through Amish country and it's interesting to see the horse drawn equipment and buggies. There was one sight I thought was a little incongruous. The teenage Amish girl in the buggy going down the road talking on her cell phone. We made short stop about 50 miles out to compare notes stretch our legs and see

what issues anybody is having with the bikes. Turns out the V50 isn't running cleanly. It started out running on 1 cylinder then finally cleaned up and ran on 2. Joel had just picked it up earlier in the week so this was its maiden voyage and shakedown cruise.

On to Hanover and our first bike switch. This lands me on the Ambassador.

“When the Italian army needed a Jeep-like utility vehicle during WWII Moto Guzzi developed a three-wheeled contraption that could climb the steepest grades, powered by a robust V-twin motor built to automotive/agricultural standards: designed to last practically forever. Availability must trump practicality, for somehow this lump of an engine found its way into a motorcycle frame several years later. The resulting stone-reliable shaft-drive machine was used extensively by military and police forces in Italy and, ultimately, around the world, including the California Highway Patrol.

This old-world engine layout has a lot going for it, placing the exhaust ports and under-stressed cylinders right out into the cooling air stream, like a flat twin but with less width. The 90 degree V angle gives perfect primary balance and the associated excellent smoothness at road speed. The huge heel/toe shifter, however, connects via a sloppy linkage to one of the most cumbersome transmissions ever devised. Fortunately, the motor produces useable power over a very wide RPM range, for the time spent between gears can be lengthy, as the rider waits for shaft speeds to match before clunking into the next cog. Sometimes, the noises from the gearbox are so pronounced that riders on nearby bikes wince, but things can smooth out with practice.

The frame tying this all together is typical Old Italian: on the heavy side, but very stout, with geometry that gives great stability with slow steering. The starter and belt-driven alternator are the same Bosch units used on Volkswagen cars. The sprung-and-padded seat is one of the best of all time, and good for all day. The double-leading-shoe front and rear brakes are typical of the era, but the front has been fitted with custom high-friction linings to better deal with modern traffic. The suspension is dated now, but was considered top notch in its day. As a whole, the Guzzi feels as venerable as its colorful history, and gives a rock-steady ride that is quite pleasant, so long as the rider does not try to hurry things too much. Think of it as a Spaghetti Harley-Davidson”.*

A few pictures from that afternoon.

Bruce on the Laverda



You can almost see John with the Benelli



Joel and Fred



Steve had moved to the baby Guzzi at the fuel stop. Soon he and Joel vanished from sight in the mirrors. A stop at the next corner had us waiting and ... moving to shade as it's apparent the baby Guzzi has issues. Doug had just decided to go find them when they showed up. The baby Guzzi running on one cylinder. Time for some minor maintenance. Not sure what all Joel found but with a new plug the baby Guzzi is back and moving forward.

Bruce and Richard while waiting for the baby Guzzi



On to Berkeley Springs. The roads are interesting, the Ambassador happy as long as I don't decide to shift. Fortunately with that engine frequent shifting is not required.

Our residence for the next couple days is "The Homestead", an early 1800's log house, moved to this location several years ago.



the inside:



Day 2 found us groggily getting out of bed after a night of BSing and adult beverages. My thanks to John and Richard for volunteering to cook breakfast. That meant they drug themselves out at 6:00 or before to start coffee and cooking. Today is supposed to be a long day and that also meant we were on our way for trying to meet our planned 8am departure.

Another switch of bikes that morning lands me on the Morini.

"The Bologna, Italy factory started as a family business in the 1920's. Two strokes evolved into four strokes and Grand Prix racing produced many successes for the small company. Then in 1971, Morini shocked the Italian motorcycle industry with the introduction of a 350cc V-twin, followed by a similarly designed 500cc version in 1975.

These fabulous power plants were so innovative and effective, that they guaranteed the company's commercial success through the 70's and 80's.

These motors use Heron head combustion chambers: the roof of the chamber is flat, the 'hemisphere' is cast into the piston crowns. One advantage of this construction is that the head castings are greatly simplified, reducing construction costs. Another is that high compression ratios are allowed, in this case 10:1. The camshaft is carried quite high in the cases, and driven by a toothed belt, operating the parallel valves via short push rods. The 72 degree V angle gives good smoothness as well as being compact. An unusual electric starter is backed up by a kick starter. Grimeca calipers squeeze 3 disc brake rotors to slow you down. Ducati electronic ignition provides the spark. Suspension chores are handled by Marzocchi, front and rear, and a hydraulic steering dampener is standard.

*The result of a clever design combined with quality components is an effective, lightweight motorcycle. The engine produces 35 HP at 8250 RPM. With a fueled weight of only 350 pounds, acceleration is pleasing, although the motor must be kept on spool. The 5 speed transmission makes this easy and fun. With its decent suspension and brakes, this little bike can stay right with its larger stable mates, making up for less power with heavy late braking and hard cornering. The European sport style handlebar and broad, long seat give a comfortable upright seating position. All in all, this machine is totally non-intimidating, and the ride is....whimsical, just lots of fun. No wonder the factory saw fit to put a cartoon like decal on the tail section. It depicts a blond witch flying across the sky on her jet powered broom, with a huge grin on her face. That about sums it up."**

She is a fun little bike that is a blast to ride. Joel has converted the Morini back to a right side shift so I now have to adjust to that drill. Nice part is decent front brake so I can stop while searching for the rear brake. Also has a realllllllyyyyy long throw to shift.

From Berkeley Springs Highways 9 and 29 down to Highway 50. Fun roads and Highway 50 allows for decent time. Highway 50 up Mount Storm was a blast. Unfortunately Mount Storm lived up to its name. By the time we reach the top it's starting to rain. A quick stop to don rain gear and we're off. About half way down the Benelli ran out of fuel. Fortunately Joel and the Beemer are behind with some fuel. We stopped at the bottom of Mount storm to wait for Joel and Fred and were glad we did. It seriously rained for a while. We also added some fuel to the Benelli and the Morini and opted to continue before fully refueling.

The Morini is now struggling as we climb up from wherever we stopped, running on 1 cylinder and missing badly when running on 2. I watch as the leaders pull away. I stop and Joel pulls up, we have a short discussion as the Morini idles and revs fine sitting. Maybe a simple solution, hold my left leg away from the bike as it's easy to block the intake with your pant leg on that side. We're off and within a mile I'm looking for the next pull off. That was not the solution. Next guess is the rain has the pods soaked and it's drawing water/starving for air. Off come the pods and we're off again. Ok now it only misses occasionally.

We stop, regroup, and gas up around Aurora, WV. Rain has slowed our progress and the question is do we continue or reroute. After a short discussion we decide to reroute. We can shortcut the planned route and head north to Highway 39. This cuts about a hundred miles off today's planned ride but still leaves some fun roads and perhaps has us a little less miserable.

It's also time to switch bikes. This lands me on the Benelli, another right hand shift.

"The Benelli is a unique and interesting version of the tried-and-true 650cc parallel-twin formula, and the Italian influence in design and execution contrasts with its British rivals. For instance, the crankcases split horizontally – making oil leaks the exception rather than the rule. The flywheels are very light, so blipping the throttle gives a racy-rapid response but starting out requires a bit of clutch work. The in-unit transmission has a very low 1st gear, followed by a huge jump in ratios to 2nd, with fifth gear as sort of an overdrive. The front brake is also unique, being a two-sided affair featuring four shoes. The handlebars, mufflers, gas tank, instruments and headlight are all mounted on deep rubber bushings. There is an oil-level sight window (very uncommon back then) and the back-up kickstarter is, oddly, positioned horizontally.

*But 'the proof is in the pasta', and punching the oversized starter button twirls the motor smartly, giving instant results. The Lafranconi mufflers make lovely music as you move out, enjoying the taut suspension. Steering is admirable, and stability excellent. The frame has been overbuilt in typical Italian fashion, and while it may be a little portly, it is also stout. The seating position is natural and comfortable with the Euro-sport bars. At highway speeds, shifting your feet back to the passenger pegs gives a relaxed crouch and good aerodynamic balance, and the Benelli will whisk you along, all day long."**

That unique front brake is less than stellar. The required pull is significant for marginal slowing. Our cutoff road under most circumstances would have been a blast. But.... It's raining hard, these are naked bikes, I can't see and I'm on a bike I can't stop or slow reliably. I have to admit I wimped out at Oakland, WV when we stopped for lunch and switched bikes with John. This put me back on the Ducati.

Hwy 136 across Maryland to 46. Somewhere around Piedmont we stop again for relief from the all the coffee we drank at lunch and to look at the Morini's shift linkage. The source of the really long throw is found to be a missing nut, allowing a lot of play in the linkage. One 6 mm nut later and the shifting is much improved.

On across 46 to Paw Paw for fuel where we switch bikes again. This lands me on the Laverda, another right side shift.

*"Reverse engineered from a 305 Honda, the Laverda engine is a scaled-up version. The bike is no lightweight, which contrasts somewhat with its innate sporty character, but is pretty much what one might expect of a sport bike built by an Italian tractor company. The Nippon Denso starter and BIG battery spring the engine to life, and the seating position is purely Euro-sport, with high footpegs and an optional solo seat. Unrestrictive LaFranconi mufflers spin the decibels into charismatic music, and the belt-driven Bosch alternator reminds you of its presence via the charge light, which flickers at idle. Japanese tach and speedo are large, steady, and easy to read -- and look like they were lifted from a CB-750K2 Honda. The clutch pull is notoriously heavy but the 5 speed transmission is still manageable though shifting action is somewhat agricultural. SF stands for 'super freni' -- super brakes -- and the design is unique. The brake shoe actuators are articulated to increase leverage, and the twin-leading-shoe front drum is reasonably powerful. The rear brake is even better. Together they do the job, but without much margin. This machine likes to stretch its legs, with the relaxed, torquey engine teaming up with the long, stiff frame, Ceriani forks and Koni shocks to munch the miles. Sweepers bring big smiles, where the great stability pays dividends."**

The Laverda is a fun bike. Not one I'd like for a long ride but a lot of fun through the twisties. With its sport bike positioning you're cramped and have some upper body weight on your arms until you hit about 60. Quite possibly the best sounding of the bunch.

As mentioned, the Laverda also has a clutch pull that would give you a work out if you rode it on a consistent basis, definitely not the bike for riding around town. The thing is above second gear you really don't need the clutch, accelerate, load the shift lever, back off the throttle and you've hit the next gear. Downshifting requires a little more thought but a similar process.

A stop in Berkeley Springs for Chinese takeout and we're back to "the Homestead".

Day 3. Finds us preparing for the return trip to Kennett Square. The weather has cleared and it promises to be a beautiful day for a ride.



Somewhere during the course of the previous evening or that morning Richard and I decided to switch bikes. That put him on the Laverda and me back on the Benelli. I was determined to put some miles on it since I had bailed on it yesterday. The Benelli, other than the woeful front brake, is a lot of fun. It truly does pull nicely and handles well.

Our ride takes us up 522 through some very pretty areas at a decent pace.



At Fort Littleton we refuel and switch bikes again. This lands me on the "baby Guzzi". The V50 is a sports bike in a small package. The bike is light, agile and fun. It also feels very versatile. I have to remember I'm not on my Husky. This truly is a bike that begs to be dual sported. With a longer travel suspension and a bigger tank it would be a decent toy for the unpaved routes.

I've lucked out. The first segment is 533 which has a nice tight twisty section. Doug who's leading the pack also decides it's time to set a little less laid back pace. The pace through the corners while not overly aggressive does liven things up a bit. The "baby Guzzi" handles very well, lean it over, choose a line, any line and she is amazingly happy. Brakes are a linked system with a 75/25 split on the pedal, front to rear. Add a handle full of the lever and the stopping power is excellent. The system can be surprising if you've started out with a handful of front lever than add the pedal.

533, 997, 234, 194 on down to Hanover. Fuel, lunch and time to switch bikes. Who wants more time on what? Because Steve opted to stick around Berkeley Springs yesterday the "baby Guzzi" hasn't been ridden by everybody. Richard takes her and I ended up back on the Benelli. Not my favorite bike but we have a decent road that allows me to have some fun carving some corners with her without having to do any heavy braking. About 65 miles into this segment we stop for more pictures. We also discuss the next gas stop... about 40 miles from here back at Kennett Square. This could be fun as the Benelli's been hitting reserve along about 90 miles. My task, keep her running that long since we're talking tap the Beemers tank if I need fuel. Fuel economy mode has me twisting the throttle gently while pushing her down the road. I hit reserve about a mile from the filling station. On back to Joel's place for dinner, relaxation and a recap of our adventures. Steve and John head back to New Jersey while the rest of us enjoy a relaxing evening.

Dinner after the ride.



Photo by Retro Tours.

Monday morning finds the rest of us heading our separate ways. Bruce and Fred ride out around 8:00 and Lynn gives Richard and me a ride to the airport a little later in the morning.

The shameless plug. If you have any interest in 70's vintage motorcycles and like scenic back roads, Retro Tours may have ride for you. Joel has a variety of scheduled tours with his fleet of 20+ bikes. These include all Japanese, British and Italian themed rides. You can check the bikes and tours out at: <http://www.retrotours.com/> He'll also customize a tour for you. Rates are extremely reasonable, especially when you consider what you get for the price. The tour I was on included being picked up and delivered to the airport (the FJR is not the normal pickup bike), dinner the night before the ride and when we returned, breakfast the morning of the ride and the morning after, and both Thursday and Sunday night stays at his house. You're responsible for gas, food, lodging, etc. on the road. Get a group of 5 or more together and you can get a discount. I'd be happy to coordinate a group if there's any interest.

To paraphrase Fred, this is the most fun you can have with some exotic beauties and be able to tell your wife about it.

* Motorcycle descriptions courtesy of Retro Tours (www.RetroRours.com/bikes)