

Sex and the Sidecar

By Robert Smith
John Campbell photos

The reproductive imperative is, of course, fundamental to our existence as a species. This has a number of serious implications for the dedicated motorcyclist. First, sex and the pursuit thereof can seriously interfere with valuable riding and wrenching time. Second (though careful planning can circumvent this), the object of the pursuit may inexplicably turn out to have little interest in motorcycles. Thirdly, most motorcycles (Honda Supercubs in South Asia notwithstanding) only carry two. So when, inevitably, the fruit of this imperative arrives, alternative transportation arrangements may be necessary.

Sadly, nowadays many take the easy way out and abandon the bike, trading two wheels for four. However, the dedicated rider will recognize that parental responsibility is only temporary: within twenty or so years, the offspring will fly the nest, having emptied both refrigerator and savings account. So for the truly

committed yet impecunious biker, the solution is simple: add a sidecar.

Sidecars have never been big on this side of the pond, of course, thanks to Henry Ford and the Model T. But when I was growing up in England, they were the default option for many middle class families. Transportation came down to what you could afford, and powered two wheelers—autocycles, scooters, mopeds—were the first choice of many. But what happened when the baby came along? Cars were luxury items: sales tax on a new car was prohibitive, fuel and road licensing also expensive. Many motorcyclists had learned to ride before testing was implemented, and taking the driving test seemed daunting. In the fifties, you could buy an ex-military BSA M20 or Norton 16H cheap, bolt on a sidecar, and the family transportation problem was solved.



Licensing laws in Britain also favoured sidecars. A learner motorcyclist could drive any engine size of “combination,” but was limited to 250cc for a “solo.” One 16-year-old biker acquaintance of mine simply hitched a bare sidecar frame and wheel to his 650 BSA Golden Flash until he was able to pass his motorcycle test. It certainly

didn't slow him down.

But that was then and this is now. Most modern motorcyclists have never “driven” a sidecar outfit—and that's a shame, because it's a unique experience. The dynamics resulting from adding a third wheel and several dozen kilos to the side of a motorcycle need to

be taken seriously. You steer left under acceleration, and right under braking, or the rig will slew across the road. You accelerate through a right turn, yet overrun through a left ... or you risk going straight on! Forget countersteering: a sidecar counters any kind of steering you're familiar with!

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ALL THIS IS GOING THROUGH MY MIND AS I CONTEMPLATE THE shiny green Ural Patrol outfit parked outside Sidney, BC's Savage Cycle. The Patrol is a sort of Land Rover missing a wheel: big on function, and therefore very purposeful looking. The even more bodacious military spec version, the Gear Up, is mechanically identical but sports full camouflage paint, a sand/snow shovel, jerry can, movable spotlight and machine-gun mount!

As quicker readers will have noticed, the Ural engine bears a strong resemblance to a pre-Spandau Beemer lump. This is no coincidence. In 1939, impressed by how rapidly the German forces were able to deploy fighting power with their machine gun-equipped BMW and Zundapp outfits, the Russian defence ministry secretly purchased five R71s in Sweden and had them reverse engineered. As WWII alliances shifted, and realizing they were Hitler's next target, the Russians moved their motorcycle factory out of Luftwaffe range to Irbit, just east of the Ural Mountains in Siberia—where it remains. After hostilities, they picked up much of the Munich maker's tooling and drawings as well.

What you get, therefore, is an air-cooled 750cc OHV Boxer Twin mated to a four-speed transmission with shaft drive to the rear wheel. On the Patrol and Gear-up, you can lock in drive to the sidecar wheel (there's no differential) for real mud-plugging traction, and all Ural's sidecar rigs have a reverse gear. The whole is contained in a chassis even heavier than an OCC weld-up, with beefy leading-link front

forks (the best type for sidecarring) to match. It's built to last. But it's also modernized where necessary: Brembo front disc brake, hydraulic clutch, Keihin carbs, etc., so it aims to be reliable as well as rugged.

Each Keihin has its own choke control, and with those activated, the motor starts easily on the button—though there's an emergency kickstarter as well. Handlebar controls are thankfully standard pattern, as is the shifter, while the right pedal is linked to both rear wheel and sidecar brake. Two extra controls—the sidecar drive dog control and the reverse selector—are small chrome levers behind the right peg. Pull in the light, smooth clutch, toe down into first, spin up the lazy motor's huge flywheels ... and we're off! The flywheel effect also makes the Patrol almost impossible to stall, and



calls for slow, deliberate gearshifts.

Don't expect to be inconspicuous on the road. Sidecar rigs are rare enough, but one that looks like a Gestapo staff vehicle is un-missable—car drivers stare and gawk as they pass. Pass? Yes, you're not going to be blowing off anything faster than a Hyundai Pony in the Patrol (though Urals hold two 650cc pushrod sidecar speed records at Bonneville!). I wound it to around 110 clicks on the Pat Bay Highway, but an incline trimmed at least 10 off that.

With Editor Campbell stowed in the chair (which he reports to be "quite comfortable"), we cruised off in search of photo opportunities. Driving the rig around southern Vancouver Island's back lanes was lots of fun, though it needed a little muscle and lots of anticipation.

The bike doesn't lean, of course, so the handlebar becomes a tiller. Turns need to be planned ahead. With the Patrol's sidecar wheel almost in line with the rear axle, the unit yaws easily. Adding power in a left turn on wet roads will cause dramatic understeer, for example. (One sidecar pilot of my acquaintance nailed a tree in precisely this way.) On right turns, the chair threatens to lift, though adding some body lean helps keep it down (as does the aforementioned editor!). And though the sidecar brake helps, stop-

ping the lopsided rig on wet roads can easily result in a slide as the sideways loads compromise straight-line traction.

The narrow lanes also gave me a chance to try the reverse gear. With the "forward" gears in neutral, a push on the reverse selector engages backup mode giving a ratio similar to first in the forward 'box. Great for backing out of tight corners, kerbs and ditches, and performing three-point turns, as I discover. All big bikes should have reverse, solo or sidecar.

Time restrictions (and a certain amount of discretion) prevented us from taking the borrowed Patrol deep into the bush to test its mettle in the mud, and the rig's road manners were of more immediate interest anyway. BMW's own research in the 1980s told them their G/S bikes spent 98 per cent of their time on tarmac ...

So back to the starting premise. Is a



sidecar combination like the Ural Patrol a viable solution to the one-plus-one-equals-three problem? In truth, given the urban-interstate lifestyles most Canadians live, a car is more practical but a lot less fun. For hardy and parsimonious rural types, the Patrol trounces any ATV as a passenger vehicle and goes places no SUV would dare at a third (MSRP \$11,999) of the cost. Alternatives? Well, there aren't

any, unless you build your own. Urals are the only factory sidecar rigs sold in North America.

In truth, few Ural sidecar outfits will be used for family ferrying duties. But with its handy luggage trunk and room for three, a Patrol could be the perfect ride for a weekend bushwhacking trip in the backwoods. And if you've never driven a sidecar outfit, you're in for a treat. **CB**

