

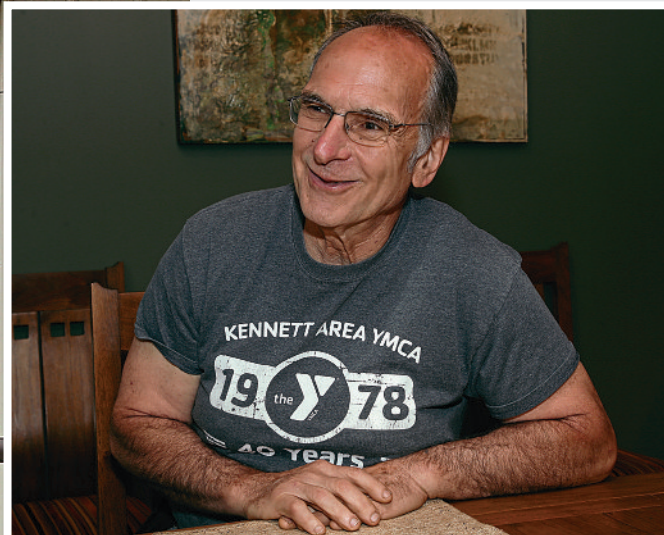
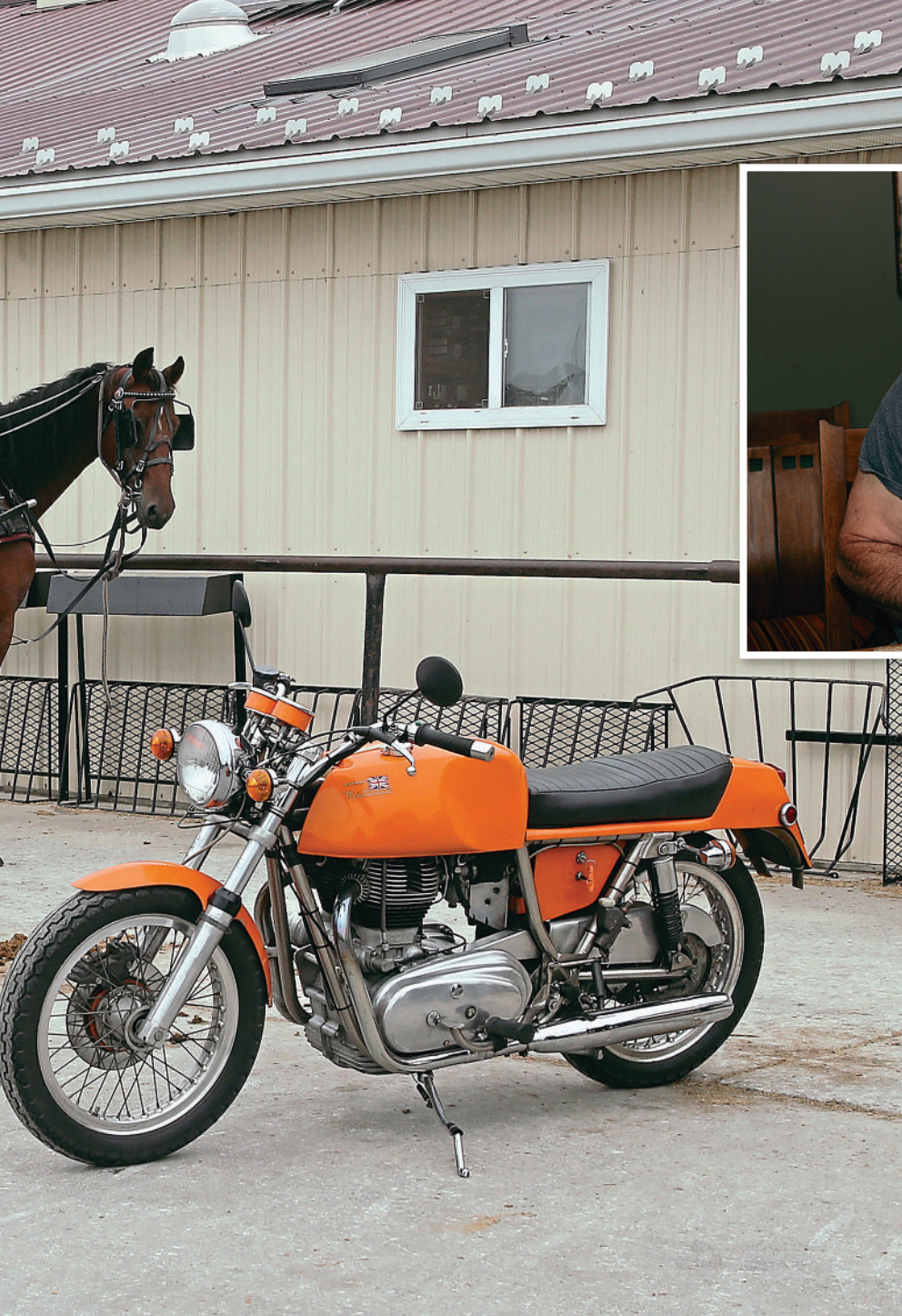


TOURING THE COLLECTION -

Retro Tours & Joel Samnick

Have you ever discovered something that has you asking yourself, "Why hasn't anyone ever done this before? It seems so obvious, and yet..." (The 'and yet' is usually the reason why not, but still...)

WORDS: Alan Cathcart PHOTOGRAPHY: Kel Edge



That was my reaction when I first came across Joel Samick and his Northeast USA-based Retro Tours operation. I visited Joel and his partner Lynn in their spacious home on the Pennsylvania/Delaware border to ride some of their motorcycles. For this lovely semi-rural house comes complete with a large garage and workshop space to house Joel's collection of 1970s Big Twins, and the Retro Tours rental fleet - 23 twin-cylinder motorcycles, plus two fours, all except one built during the 1970s.

They include 1970 examples of Bonneville 650 and T100C Triumphs, a hens-teeth 1973 Yamaha TX750, 1975 Suzuki T500 Titan, 1976 Moto Guzzi 850T3, and a 1977 Harley Davidson. It's a true time warp collection that Joel has available for customers to choose from as they make their way to Kennett Square, Pa., the mushroom capital of the

world (Google it to see why!) and gateway to some wonderful riding country.

"It's important to stress these are not perfectly restored, low-mileage collector's items," says late sixty-something Joel, a true child of the era when motorcycles got used as everyday transportation.

"These are working motorcycles which are carefully maintained, not concours show ponies. I don't want to modernise them too much, but I do put on better shocks, and better lights, and a better horn and stuff like that, and blinkers, too, if they didn't have them as stock. But I want people to experience them warts and all, and most customers appreciate that coming on one of our tours is going to add to their motorcycle knowledge, since in any given day they can end up riding up to half a dozen different motorcycles in succession. On a group tour, we make it a policy to

stop every 50 to 75 miles or so, to refuel, stretch our legs and to swap bikes."

A native of Boston, Mass., Joel had not just one but two life-changing two-wheeled experiences which set him on the path to a lifetime career on bikes.

"I was 16 with a summer job washing dishes at a restaurant, and at about 11pm one night, my friend Steve who had a Lambretta 200 scooter came in, and said, 'I'm leaving tonight for Montreal to visit a friend, do you want to come?' So at midnight when I got off shift, we got on the Lambretta and headed north, riding the 300 miles to Montreal. I had never driven a motorcycle at that point, and only ever been on one ride as a passenger, but we rode until 3am or so. Then Steve got so tired so he showed me how to operate the clutch and the throttle to take a turn driving it. I called my Mom from the Canadian border, and said 'I'll be back in a couple of weeks.' She was not at all happy and told me to 'come home right now!'"

"But I stayed over and had a great time running around AU CANADA on this scooter, which got us home again, too. That was really my first Retro Tour, I guess!"

That was a taster, but the real epiphany came a little later, at college in Schenectady, NY, 200 miles inland from Boston.



"I was doing a double major, electrical engineering and philosophy, but quite soon I philosophised that I didn't really want to be in college at all, I would rather work on motorcycles.

"Someone had given me a CL450 Honda, and I got such a thrill out of tinkering with that and learning how to do stuff on it, I just knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. So I dropped out of college and went to the local Honda shop, but they wouldn't hire me because I didn't know anything. So, I just picked up a broom and started sweeping the shop up for free, until the moment they needed an extra pair of hands, and I got hired!"

That Honda led to a life entirely dedicated to motorcycles, including the summer of '69 spent exploring Europe.

"I was one of scores of young Americans who bought a Norton Commando at Elite Motors in London to see Europe on," recalls Joel with a smile. "One hundred days later, I had seen most of Europe and a bit of Asia, too, so I took more than that Norton home with me that summer. I also took home the realisation that motorcycles and touring would always be a part of my life."

Moving back to Boston, Joel got a job at the local Honda dealer, then began teaching a course in his spare time in Motorcycle Maintenance at the Boston Center for Adult Education.

"Lynn took the course, so that was how we met. She already had a motorcycle and wanted to learn how to work on it herself. I ended up marrying one of my pupils!"

By then, Joel Samick had taken up road racing with the same intensity of purpose that's marked each chapter of his lifetime on two wheels. He started out on a then-new Yamaha RD400, before swapping this for a Suzuki GS550. On that he won the Alphabet Club's Middleweight Production championship, racing at tracks



a shopping cart to get drive chains, lubricants and stuff. I was able to win the Alphabet Club's No.1 plate in Formula 1 in 1981, and then in 1982 I moved to AMA Superbike, and ran all four East Coast races - the Daytona 200, Talladega, Pocono and Loudon.

"I did okay, and it was an eye-opening experience, but I was already into my thirties at that point, and it was very expensive, plus I couldn't really do anything else in my life. I'd go to work, come home from the store, work on the racebike, and then go to sleep, before doing do it all again next day, and then eventually go to a race. Lynn and I were together by then, so when she got a great job down here at the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, I retired from racing, and we moved here to south of Philadelphia."

After a four-year spell working for American Honda as a technical Instructor, a dealership opportunity came up and Joel partnered Lynn to found Powersports East, a successful multi-brand outlet in Bear, Delaware which the couple still own today. "The MSF pulled up roots and moved to California, so we had to either relocate to LA, or find something else for Lynn to do. So we decided to establish the dealership, which started as a Honda outlet, and I began working there as service manager. But I'd told Lynn, 'If you're going to take me out of this heavenly environment working for American Honda and put me back in the retail cauldron, then I can only do it for five years, that's all I've got.' 'I'd already done it for 18 years, and got nicely developed Yoshimura replica Suzuki GS1000, but now I'm going back in. But after five years, we'd had some other partners that we bought out, and it wouldn't have been practical for me to leave, so I wound up

staying for 13 years! And over the course of that time I turned into an ogre - the retail end of business is not pleasant sometimes, and it can just get to you. I was stressed, angry and 50 pounds overweight, so I had to stop."

Joel retired from the dealership in 1998 (Lynn continues to manage it today), and turned his attention to fettling a growing collection of motorcycles, mostly comprising the Big Twins he'd enjoyed riding in the '70s. So then, driven by a belief that motorcycles should be ridden, not stored, Joel began organising trips with friends, all riding bikes from his collection.

"When I left the dealership, I was tinkering at home with about 15 to 18 bikes that I'd accumulated over the years. Some of them had been service derelicts at the dealership, others I'd bought on eBay or just happened across.

"I was having trouble keeping them all in operational condition through not getting ridden enough - I'd got tired of cleaning carburetors repeatedly! I needed a way to keep the wheels turning, so I started to invite some friends to come and do these unstructured four or five, even six-day trips, usually heading south to West Virginia.

RETRO TOURS

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like Loudon, Pocono, Summit Point and Bridgehampton.

"But I had my eye on the Formula 1 Open class, where a guy named Dwight Roy was champion on a nicely developed Yoshimura replica Suzuki GS1000, but now I'm going back in. But after five

"I got my boss to buy that bike as my raise, and he also let me use the company van for transportation, as well as go through the store with practical for me to leave, so I wound up



"Their state motto is, 'Almost Heaven', and it's certainly true for motorcycling! We had some truly excellent adventures without anything being planned – we'd never make reservations, just start riding, and then when we got tired, we'd look for a place to stay.

"But I realised at a certain point that I couldn't continue to do this anymore for free, because it was expensive. I had to buy tyres, and do oil changes and engine rebuilds, and I had to start charging money. I have a close friend locally, Doug Snyder, and he was coming on some of these trips. Doug has a very logical mind, so we did a business plan, put it on a spread sheet, and figured out how much everything was going to cost. Well, there was absolutely no way you could make money out of it for two people if we partnered up, and Doug wasn't about to squander away his savings on a losing proposition. So, I just took it upon myself to start charging

something, and to incorporate, and to advertise. It all came from there."

Retro Tours has officially existed since 2000, and has grown exponentially since then, mostly by word of mouth.

"I wouldn't advise anyone to try this business to make money!" says Joel. "But if you love meeting people of a like mind, and doing adventurous rides on 40-year-old motorcycles, seeing America away from US Highways with cookie-cutter rest stops and McDonalds everywhere, but visiting the real America via country roads and byways, this is for you.

"While I may never grow rich, at least I'll now grow poor a little more slowly, while continuing to enjoy and share the adventure, the thrill and the camaraderie of retro-touring. Every ride is unique, and each presents challenges, but I still love every ride I take, however short."

At a cost of just \$90 per day to include the hire of any of the bikes in the Retro lineup,

plus the guided tour with Joel as leader, basic insurance and home cooked post-tour dinner, it's close to being a bargain.

Joel has experimented with different group sizes and distances.

"I try to tailor the tours to my specific clients, and I really enjoy custom designing trips to suit a client's schedule, interests and desires. From one-day local loops to extended journeys, I'm open to any suggestions, and I try to make it easy for customers to just show up and ride."

Over the years, this routine has evolved into six or seven pre-planned tours per year, with Joel riding support, often on his 1977 BMW R100S with Dutch-built EML sidecar outfit. He's experimented with group sizes of between three to 12 people, and distances ranging from local jaunts to cross country adventures, and even international rides to Canada lasting anything up to two weeks.



THE SCOOP FROM SAMICK

AC: Joel, why haven't you expanded your Retro bike lineup into the 1980s yet? Time marches on, and a bike that was relatively modern when you started Reto Tours in 2000, is now verging on being vintage.

JS: Well, originally the concept was Big Twins from the '70s, because that was the kind of bike that I liked and had collected. But I guess my target population is aging out, so the guys that really like bikes from the '70s may no longer be mentally willing or physically able to go on a single 300-mile ride on one. Doing two or three 300-mile days in a row on back roads on those bikes, they beat you up a little. So one thing we do to mitigate that issue, is we switch bikes every 75 miles, so nothing gets too intensely painful.

AC: Most of your bikes don't have an electric start, and not everybody is able to kick-start bikes any more, with replacement knees and hips and suchlike! So wouldn't it make sense to go forward just a decade into the electric start era?

JS: It does make sense. I get a lot of riders who've never kick-started a bike before, and invariably they want to ride the Norton or the Ducati 860, both of which are really tough to kick-start! I added the '76 Gold Wing to the fleet, and people love it - it's totally user friendly, almost boring, but Hondas are like that, they get the job done. So that was the first departure from big twins of the '70s, and yes, maybe I should advance into the '80s and beyond.

AC: With Big Twins as your parameter, why are there hardly any Harleys here?

JS: I think it has to do with the cost - Harleys tend to be pretty expensive. I do have the XLCR which everybody loves to ride, me included. I like AMF Harleys - everyone criticises AMF, but they did double Harley's sales! Maybe the quality wasn't great, but I don't think it was so good before AMF, either. So, no particular reason why I don't have more

Harleys - if another one comes along, I'll add it to the collection.

AC: Do you run organised tours on a specific date basis, or do you have to wait until you get enough people approaching you to do a tour?

JS: I publish a schedule on December 1st each year, and then some people buy gift certificates for Christmas, and that kind of gets the ball rolling. If I have one rider sign up, I'll run the tour, but if no riders do, I'll just stay home. The average is about four to eight people per tour - so nice small groups.

AC: What's a typical tour itinerary?

JS: I have one-day through four-day tours, all pre-planned. I've done half a dozen trips to Alabama to attend Barber Vintage in October, which is a 10-day trip through gorgeous scenery, with the leaves turning, but it's sometimes difficult to get people to commit to ten days out of their life. We also do couples tours, with half a dozen couples riding two-up. And I do custom tours, where I put three or four one-day or two-day tours as an example, and I say, 'You can pick one, and you pick your date, pick an alternate date, contact me, we'll agree to a date and I'll run it for you'. Or I ask people to tell me how much you want to ride each day, how many days you want to ride, and when you want to do it, and I'll customise a tour for you.

AC: Which areas of the USA closer to home than Alabama do you cover on these tours?

JS: We've been to the Springfield Mile in Ohio, and to the DuQuoin Mile, which is a two-day ride, and more commonly we'll go to West Virginia, or Central Pennsylvania which is very mountainous, to the Appalachian Ridge, Pocono and the Endless Mountains. We go to Newburgh, New York, and stay in the Catskills. Newburgh is on the Hudson River, and they have a museum there. I usually try to go someplace that has an interesting destination. Plus there's a couple of

good one-day rides here in Delaware and SE Pennsylvania, so every year I do a ride called Local Loops - five 25-mile loops, and at the end of each loop, we pull into a small nature reserve, or some other point of interest, and have a snack. We talk a little, and then we swap bikes at random instead of having an order to follow - you just arrange with people which bike you ride next. And then we do another 25 miles and wind up at a different little spot to chat. It's a relaxing yet fulfilling day out.

AC: Have you had many customers from outside the USA?

JS: Yes, quite a few - from France, Australia, Germany, England, Canada, Spain and so on. It's not necessary for English to be their first language - it's helpful, but I'm not inhibited, and so I don't mind making a fool of myself in trying to speak a few words and using hand signals and stuff!

AC: You're an excellent tour guide, as I've discovered the last couple of days. Do you usually accompany tours in the sidecar, or do you lead them on a bike, or in a van?

JS: We don't use a chase vehicle, which would be prohibitively expensive, and in my opinion, it also would detract from the authentic nature of the tour. You know, problems occur on 40-year-old bikes, and we have to deal with them - people know that. So usually, I only take the sidecar if it's a couples tour, or if somebody brings a passenger, so they have the option to sit in a sidecar for a while, and the driver can ride a bike like the RD400C that maybe doesn't lend itself to carrying a passenger. I prefer to ride a two-wheeler, because it's more manoeuvrable, and allows me to rotate through the bikes along with everybody else. I invariably notice things when I get on a bike that nobody said anything about - like, oh, the rear brake is totally to the floor, and nobody said anything!





Retro Tours itineraries can be structured around any number of themes – gastronomic, cultural (Retro HQ is just 30 miles SE of Pennsylvania's horse-driven Amish Country), scenic, or just plain fun riding. Joel likes twisting, lightly travelled back roads leading to places off the beaten track.

"We'll always look for the road less travelled, shunning highways completely, seeking the smallest and wiggliest lines on the map," Joel says of his mantra.

"We try very hard to find routes that put us intimately in touch with the countryside we're riding through. We sometimes use dirt roads, and stops may include local museums, scenic views, and even kitsch tourist attractions. If the weather's fine, we sometimes stop at a small-town market for groceries, then picnic at a scenic spot in the country. When the 'map distance' is 100 miles, we allow 175!"

A hint of the ethos underpinning the Retro Tours operation is to be found in the 31-item waiver form customers must sign to confirm their acceptance. How about Item 3, which states, 'I know that motorcycling is a dangerous activity, and I further realize that the trip I am about to leave on is at the lunatic fringe of motorcycling.' Or Item 23, which says, '30-year-old gas tanks sometimes leak, and high-tension wires sometimes arc. There is a potential for on board fire, while under way, and no extinguisher.'

And underscoring the adaptability required to swap mounts all through the tour, Item 12 states that, 'I will be switching bikes frequently, and there is no uniformity of control locations. Therefore, I will never really be familiar with the 'feel' of the bike I am riding, putting me in a very high-risk situation, even when nothing obvious is going wrong.' So there!

Joel Samick has created a unique product, which I'm not aware of anyone else having matched anywhere in the world. Over the past two decades he's learned what it takes to plan and execute a successful tour, in turning his hobby into a business.

"I've come to realise that the best part of Retro Tours is meeting and getting to know other enthusiasts," says Joel, who these days is very far from the ogre he insists he became a quarter-century ago in the retail motorcycle industry.



RETRO TOURS BIKE LINE-UP (as of November 2024)

- 1970 Triumph Bonneville 650
- 1970 Triumph T100C
- 1971 BSA A65 Lightning 650
- 1972 BMW R60-5
- 1973 Norton Commando Fastback 750
- 1973 Yamaha TX750
- 1974 Benelli Tornado 650S
- 1975 Suzuki T500 Titan
- 1976 Kawasaki 750 B1
- 1976 Honda CB550K
- 1976 Honda CB400 Supersport
- 1976 Yamaha RD400C
- 1976 Moto Guzzi 850T3
- 1976 Honda Gold Wing GL1000
- 1977 BMW R 100/S EML Sidecar
- 1977 Yamaha XS650D
- 1977 Harley-Davidson XLCR
- 1977 Yamaha XS750
- 1978 BMW R100/7
- 1978 Honda CX500
- 1979 Moto Morini 500 Strada
- 1979 Moto Guzzi V50
- 1983 Suzuki GS550ES
- 1984 Moto Guzzi V65SP
- 1971 Moto Guzzi Ambassador 750

Today, he's an engaging and entertaining companion, and a great conversationalist over dinner at the end of a 'short' 150-mile day, with photographer Kel Edge riding with him in the BMW's sidecar.

"Making new friends out of those who come together to meet the challenges that are inherent in what we do on our Retro Tours trips is a rewarding experience, which makes everything worthwhile. We have fun together!"