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Retrotours classic bike sampler

Discussion in '[Old's Cool](#)' started by [ddavidv](#), [Thursday at 4:28 PM](#).

This past weekend I participated in a ride held by

<http://www.retrotours.com/>

I want to point out at the outset I had/have no relationship with the company or its owner. I found it advertised on the internet while searching for info on old British bikes and though the idea of renting a ride on a classic bike for a weekend was too good to pass up. A few months ago I reserved my spot, picked my bike and waited anxiously for the day to arrive.

I have zero experience with old bikes. When these machines were new I was only old enough to pilot a mini bike around my grandparent's farm. Therefore I have no preconceived emotions or ideas as to what these bikes were or should be from 'rose colored glasses'. My impressions are those of a guy who appreciates old machinery and has a curiosity about them. And, I like motorcycles. 🇺🇸

I arrived at Joel's (the owner of the bikes) home at around 6:45am. He was quick to greet me and introduced me to the four other riders who had also signed up for the trip. In total there would be six of us traveling together. How it works is we each selected a bike we wanted to ride in advance. Throughout the tour we would round-robin through the bikes and try them all. The plan was to leave Joel's house in Kennett Square, PA and ride to Canaan Valley, WV, spend the night, ride the area the following day, then return back to home base on day three. That didn't quite happen.

This was the scene as we geared up in preparation to ride a half-dozen 1970s bikes nearly as old as we are some 900 miles round trip: My only bike right now is a 2008 Triumph Bonneville. From Joel's fleet you may have expected me to pick an old Bonnie to ride to compare. I did think of that but instead chose something else based upon my one friend's BSA and the wonderful sounds it makes. That's right, I picked a BSA Lightning



Joel had restored this from a mess and it really presented well. It is one of the much-maligned oil in frame models and appeared to be pretty stock right down to the shocks. After a period of instruction on starting and the controls of the various bikes (they are all different which makes for some hilarious and terrifying gear changes) we were ready to set off. I'll give my impressions of each bike as we progress, starting with the BSA.

After tickling the carbs (always wanted to do that!) and making sure the clutch was free I successfully kicked it to life. As we left his driveway and entered the roadway I was overcome with a feeling that I may have made a big mistake. My thoughts were that if all the bikes were similar to this one it was going to be a very long weekend.

The BSA was complete rubbish, I thought. Constant vibrations throughout the rev range, mediocre seat, gauges with needles that fluttered like the wings on a hummingbird...good gawd, was I actually going to ride this pile of bolts for several hours? Err...where is my Triumph?

As we meandered along the two lanes trying to escape population negative thoughts filled my head. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this adventure. As we chugged up an incline I heard a pop/bang from two bikes forward and Joel coasted to the shoulder, a non-running BMW beneath him.

The token German bike of the bunch was a BMW R90/6. I had been really excited at the prospect of riding this as old Beemers intrigue me. Unfortunately the bike would not restart and was pushed into a nearby gas station for further diagnosis.



I knew very little about Joel going into this escapade but quickly determined while watching him that he was no ordinary weekend mechanic. He very methodically went through diagnosing the ignition system, ultimately determining that part of an electronic ignition conversion the bike had received was the culprit. Naturally of all the spare parts carried on the BMW the offending piece was not one of them. The BMW was effectively dead.

We were now faced with a dilemma. There is no such thing as a chase vehicle on a Retro Tours trip. After considering a few options it was decided we would all ride back to the shop and get another bike to replace the unwilling German chariot after pushing it across the street for safe keeping at an auto repair shop. With one participant riding pillion we switched bikes and headed back via the more direct and supposedly faster route.

The next bike I climbed onto was a 1974 Benelli Tornado 650S. I remember the Benelli name back when my father was trying to find me a 50-ish cc beginner dirt bike. We had looked at a pretty blue Benelli at a shop but didn't end up buying it. I knew very little about the brand and set off on a machine markedly different than the disappointing BSA.



The Benelli was a bike of extremes: great sounds, nice transmission and really nifty finned aluminum...everything. It also had a clutch so heavy I could barely squeeze it and a front brake that may as well have not been connected (though the rear brake worked wonderfully). The bike is very light-feeling and easy to toss around. Aside from the arthritis-inducing clutch and pucker-inducing brakes I liked the Benelli...even if it did quit at a toll booth and refused to start. (To be fair, it chose that exact moment to run out of gas. Switching to reserve brought it back to life).

The 'fast' return trip turned out to be murderous, with oppressive heat and traffic. We switched bikes again not long before reaching Joel's place and I climbed on the Norton Commando Fastback. I instantly hated it. The cafe style riding position was not treating my back well and the rock hard seat was flaring up buttocks that had suffered on two other non-ergonomic seats so far. Though I liked the smooth engine of the Norton I vowed that I would not turn any more miles on it if possible. After reaching the garage again hot and tired we unanimously agreed to spend the night at Joel's and start again fresh in the morning. One of the participants chose to bail having flared up a back injury that he knew would only get worse. Five bikes for five people remained so all was good.

I have to admit I was having negative thoughts as I tried to fall asleep that night. Riding these often cantankerous machines through traffic had really been a less than fun experience. I considered bailing myself but fortunately steeled myself to continue the adventure on the following day. Things would change tremendously over the next 48 hours.

So, Day 2 dawned to a beautiful day. We left early as the sun broke over the horizon.



Having steered clear of the Norton I instead was told it was my turn to ride the Harley. Yes, a Harley.



You can read about this model in the current issue of *Motorcycle Classics* which I ironically found on my kitchen counter when I got home.

It is an XLCR, whatever that means. I can tell you it is sort-of a cafe/flat tracker style bike with a massive 1000cc engine. I was curious to ride it because I had never ridden a Harley but also expected little of it because...well, its a Harley. The riding position didn't suit me any better than the Norton but the seat was at least well padded. The torque from this thing is addictive. It sounds just like you'd expect (though not as loud as all the unmuffled assclown editions) and everything about it feels chunky. Not necessarily heavy, but stout. The rear suspension is HORRIBLE with very little travel and will blur your vision over even the smallest of surface imperfections despite its upgraded custom shocks. On a bumpy road I hated it. On a glass smooth, twisty road I absolutely came to enjoy and respect it. It took two days, but it did grow on me. I'd never buy one, but I also wouldn't talk trash about it either.

I climbed aboard the last of the fleet, a bike I both anticipated and back-handedly dismissed: the Kawasaki 650 W-3. Blatant British engine case copy aside, there was no mistaking this for anything other than a Japanese standard.



Ahhh, blissful comfort! The seat was wide and easy on my burning buttocks. The clutch was easy to operate and the front brake actually worked...really well. The power was linear if a bit lazy and the transmission shifted like you'd expect. My only gripes with it were a too-low shift lever that demanded a really awkward foot position for me to change gears and a slightly difficult engine to kick start.

Wide handlebars made you feel like you were piloting a truck compared to the others but the handling was quite surprising. Push the old girl and she'd just dive into a turn for you. Neat bike, and I enjoyed my time with it.

We crossed the Potomac at White's Ferry, found some tremendous roads and managed to get to our target of Canaan Valley a day late.



My mood had completely reversed by this time. The five of us had begun to bond as a 'biker gang' and got along well. Although the BMW gyped us of a day spent riding in WV the weather had remained stellar and looked to be good through at least the following morning.

We again rose early, having all agreed that riding in the early morning is something special and very agreeable. Much to my dismay I was assigned the Norton again with its peculiar ergos and horrendous seat. One of the other riders suggested I lower the rear pegs and use those as alternative rests for my feet. This advice proved excellent and worked perfectly to keep my legs awake and my lower back from screaming.



We spent the morning riding some of those WV roads many of you know so well: the ones with great surface, winding paths and a rhythm that makes you twist the throttle ever harder. It was during this morning ride that I found myself riding hard...harder than I had ever done before. Braking, shifting, cranking the throttle and listening to the 750 Commando roar its song out of the twin trumpets.

The damndest thing happened: I fell in love with the Norton. The exceptional front brake, the fluid motion of the shifter, the blaaaatt of the exhaust, the way it effortlessly chewed up the corners and spit them out...it was magical. I have heard of riders talk of 'bonding' with a bike. I now know what it means.
What a great machine!



After lunch the rains came and I found myself back on the BSA, then the Kawasaki. It was funny; the BSA seemed so much smoother, more willing and more fun to ride.

I had a few pucker-inducing moments coming down a twisty mountain road in the rain while on the Lightning but she took care of me, covering for my faltering moves. I was sad when I left her to finish the weekend on the luxurious but vanilla Kawasaki.

The Retrotours experience is decidedly not for everyone. These are old machines and, though fastidiously maintained, may break and cost you a day of riding. Joel fortunately deals with it all with good humor (and financial fairness, if you deem some sort of compensation necessary. I did not.). Where else can you step back in time and experience what it was like to ride historical machines from multiple countries for hundreds of miles? Worth every penny (and the pennies were not nearly as many as I expected).

I can't wait to do it again. 🙌