

RIDE REPORT: COUPLES TOUR, HISTORIC CENTRAL PA. Sat/Sun, June 13/14 2020

These are strange times. It's mid-June, and Pennsylvania has just begun to wake up from Covid shutdown, with some counties going yellow. Of course, the pandemic is foremost in everyone's mind. Should we venture out or stay at home? Originally, there were six couples who reserved bikes for this tour, and it was marked "Sold Out". One couple from Georgia had to cancel early on to deal with some family issues. Their spot was immediately filled by a wait-listed couple. Then, as the time drew near, another couple cancelled because of an elective surgery that was badly needed but had to be postponed because of...,you guessed it: Covid 19. Finally, a few days prior to departure a second couple cancelled because of the risks associated with the Corona virus, leaving us with 4 couples staying over in a rented house with 5 bedrooms: social distancing should be easy.

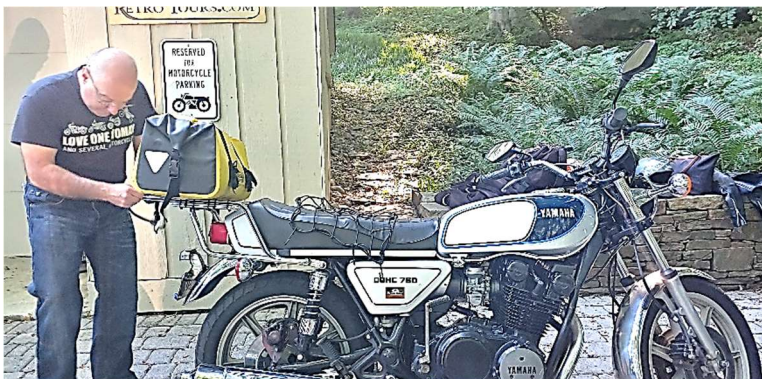
I take the risk of being exposed to or transmitting infection quite seriously. I think we all should. To me, it's a lot like riding a motorcycle: I know it's dangerous, but I want or even need to do it. I do everything I can to minimize the danger, like wearing a good helmet and MPPE (Motorcycle Personal Protective Equipment). I maintain good riding skills and keep a safe distance from other vehicles. Would it be safer to drive a car? Perhaps, and certainly safer yet to isolate myself at home. But you know what? We just finished 8 or 10 weeks of isolation. For me personally, it's time to get out, as safely as possible, but I respect anyone who makes a different decision.

Apparently, my wife Lynn, Ed and Liz, Andy and Marion, and Richard and Lauraine all feel pretty much the same. I tested negative 5 days before the trip, and we are all keeping masks tied on around our necks, so that whenever we stop and take off our helmets, we can pull up the mask. Richard and Lauraine came in from Eastern Long Island yesterday, Friday, normally a 6-hour drive but only 4 hours in today's light traffic conditions. Ed and Liz drove down from Allentown this morning and Andy and Marion drove in from the Mainline suburbs. We have a light breakfast here, the briefest of riders' meetings, since everyone is a repeat offender, and get the bikes and the sidecar loaded and rolling right on time at 9:30. Most of the luggage fits inside the sidecar trunk, with just a few small personal items on the luggage racks. A few considerate husbands have tied larger than necessary bags to their racks so their passengers will have something behind them for security.

Lynn and I, of course, are in the BMW R100S/RS/EML sidecar rig. This is a classic machine with

handsome good looks, comfort, great handling, and, supposedly, famous Bavarian reliability. More on that later. Ed jumps on the 1977 XS750. The newest addition to the RetroTours fleet, on only its second tour. Richard owns several Moto Guzzis, (and several Harleys, and several others) and is drawn to the '76 850T3. Andy and Marion decide to give the '76 GL1000, 'ole yeller' a try.

LEFT: Ed says, "Secure bag, secure wife"



On most tours, this one included, I prefer to ‘spiral out’ with a series of right-hand turns. This is to allow everyone to acclimate to a strange bike, especially true with a passenger on board; tire pressures have been set to compensate, and rear shock spring preloads are all at maximum. Once around the block clockwise, we enjoy a short stretch of curvy Route 82, still acclimating, then zig-zag at slow speeds through the backside of sleepy Kennett Square. We cross Route 926 and pass through Unionville, then turn onto an obscure farm road which soon peters out and becomes a graded dirt road through planted corn and soy fields that are made especially glorious by the morning sun’s long rays.

About the weather: I had received several inquiries earlier in the week about potential cancellation because the forecast was for rain showers. We advertise as a rain or shine operation and recommend packing full rain gear. Riding through weather is an integral part of classic motorcycling. Still, no one minds that today’s weather is positively brilliant. It may rain tomorrow, but today is a day made for riding. Yippee!

Back on route, we follow the Brandywine River past the normally crowded but Corona-silenced canoe rental operation in Mortonville, then ride past the contrasting steel mills of Coatesville before picking up old Route 340 west. At the sign of the Red Horse we veer left, crossing the Octoraro Trail and then pick our way past Amish buggies along 897 until we arrive in Myerstown where lunch is to be taken. Normally we would stop at a local diner, but to maintain distancing, Lynn has packed a picnic lunch and so we pull into a small park where we have the long picnic tables all to ourselves. Lunch meats, cheeses, bottled water, and delicious bread are served along with fruit and cookies. There is even a clean porta-potty nearby, and a pond with its resident Canadian geese squawking away.



The Myerstown Community Park: Tulpehocken Creek runs through it. Just a few meters away is the Meier Homestead, where the town’s namesake, Isaac Meier lived with his wife and 6 children. The house, known as the “Old Fort”, was built in 1750. In 1770, Isaac, a wealthy plantation owner, was shot to death in the neck while he was enjoying a beer at the local tavern. His murderer was never caught.



Liz: colorful AND happy. A flower in bloom.





Lunch is served

The good meal and welcome rest are essential, as Route 645N now takes us over the Eastern Continental Divide, winding its way through hairpins and sweepers, affording grand views all along the way. It terminates at Pine Grove where we pick up Route 125 north. A favorite of area motorcyclists, Route 125 climbs over several small mountains, making its way to Shamokin in the heart of Central PA coal country. There are sharp curves, lush forested valleys below, and elevation changes that give your gut a momentary zero gravity rush. Alas, there is a bit of extra adventure in store today. Marion is taking a turn in the 'chair'. She had never ridden in a sidecar before and wanted to see what it was like. I am doing my best to show her what a well set up rig is all about, having a ball through the turns, but when I try to downshift to set up for the next turn the shift pedal moves normally, but without any click. Thinking I just missed a shift, I

try shifting down again and again, then try shifting up. Nothing! I pretty much know what is going on right away and my heart drops. BMW airhead 5-speed transmissions have a three-dollar spring inside that maintains engagement of the internal shift linkage. Sometimes the spring breaks, leaving the transmission stuck in whatever gear it happens to be in, in this case top gear. We are not that far from the day's destination; maybe I can make it there. I soldier on for 8 or ten miles, wondering if Marion realizes that there is an issue. I manage to maintain enough momentum to keep going but eventually, there is a steep grade with sharp curves and there is no way the old R100S is going to pull me, the sidecar, my passenger and 8 people's worth of luggage in top gear. I can see no reason to burn out the clutch trying, so I pull over. Everyone bunches up behind me and I can almost hear them muttering, "What the F***" inside their helmets as I do a U-turn and coast down the grade, stopping on a dirt road turn at the apex of a curve, next to a small house where the resident couple are doing yard work.

I call an appropriately socially distanced huddle and explain what has happened. The sidecar rig is DONE for the weekend. I do not have a 'Plan B' ready and ask for ideas. In times of duress, it is always fascinating to me to see how a group can come together to solve problems. Within 10 minutes, a U-Haul agency has been located just 1.5 miles away, and they have a truck available big enough to swallow the sidecar rig. A plan is formulated. Richard and I ride 2-up to fetch the truck. By the time we return with it, the group has made friends with the local couple. It turns out the woman is from the same area of Long Island that Lauraine is from.

It is fortunate that this connection is made, because getting the rig into the truck is not going to be easy. The loading ramp is not wide enough for both tracks and this machine is no lightweight. The gentleman who lives here insists that I can drive the truck onto his yard and line up with a natural "loading dock:" formed by the gradient of his property. Now we just need a way to ramp the sidecar wheel into the truck bed. Andy spots a discarded section of garage door and we soon have lashed up the perfect ramp next to the U-haul ramp and the sidecar machine is rolled up and into the truck easily. But how will we tie it down? Again, our new friends come through big time by donating three or four Harbor Freight ratcheting straps to our cause. Through the kindness of strangers and plain old dumb luck we are rolling again in less than 90 minutes. Lynn and I lead the group now in the giant U-haul box truck, following main roads to Lewisburg where we locate our luxury vacation home just a few miles outside of town.





Nothing to do but enjoy the perfect weather while waiting for Richard and Joel to return with the truck.

Thank goodness for the kindness of strangers. I want to shake hands after thanking this kind gentleman, but we don't do that anymore, do we? OK, I guess an elbow bump will have to do.

We settle into our luxurious home for the night, choosing bedrooms and then relaxing for a few hours. We covered about 180 miles today. The question is, how will we finish the ride? We have this truck to deal with now. We also have 7 PM reservations to eat inside a restaurant; something none of us has done for 10 weeks or longer.



The restaurants in this county have just been given the go ahead for limited capacity indoor seating yesterday. We call Uber to arrange a way to get 6 of us to the restaurant, in historic downtown Lewisburg and back. That way we don't have to drag the bikes along, and anyone who wants to drink may do so safely. Uber *also* has seating restrictions, so it requires a few trips back and forth, while Lynn and I drive there in the truck. We wear masks until seated and the wait person wears a mask as well. The food is outstanding and the atmosphere in the sparse dining room is cordial. The restaurant employees are just as happy to see us as we are pleased to be eating out for the first time in months. We feel safe, the risk managed. Life is good!

At 8:30 I say goodbye to everyone and jump in the truck to drive 160 miles straight back to Kennett Square. I arrive at 11:30 and grab 6 hours of sleep before rising with the sun, jumping onto the CX500 which was prepared as a back-up bike, and cruise back to Lewisburg to join the group for breakfast at the house at 8:30. The CX500, in typical Honda fashion is so competent as to be borderline boring. It is also the perfect bike for making a mad dawn-dash north. I tuck under the paint, set the tach to 7500 rpm and cruise at 75 mph non-stop. I am buzzing with 'white-line fever' and shivering slightly while everyone else is yawning and just waking up. We enjoy a decent breakfast and take advantage of the 3-stall garage to load up for today's ride home. Without the sidecar's huge trunk, we need to carry all our baggage on the luggage racks. Luckily, there are plenty of bungee cords and nets. We are getting loaded for real.



Throughout the trip, riders and passengers switch bikes every 50 or 75 miles. This gives our backsides alternate pressure points. This morning, we initially ride just 5 miles into historic downtown Lewisburg, home of Bucknell University.

The Bucknell Campus: undoubtedly worth every bit of the \$60,000/year tuition.



A different Campus, undoubtedly worth every bit of the \$12/movie admission

These two pictures evoke the Lewisburg vibe: relaxed, historic, picturesque, country.

But we're not here for learning *or* for the cinema. This morning we are in Lewisburg to SHOP, so we park up at Roller Mills, one of America's largest antique and collectible malls, housed in a restored mill big enough for more than 400 antique dealers. It promises to be a unique shopping experience.

After a relaxing breakfast, ready to roll on day 2. The sidecar rig is home, the CX500 is ever ready.



*Inside
Roller
Mills*



One of the great advantages of taking Lynn shopping when we are travelling by motorcycle is that she can only buy things that are small enough to carry.



Lynn finds a cute pair of wobbly head dolls. I often kid her that she is like a dog that marks its territory: she is **compelled** buy SOMETHING.

It's better than peeing I suppose.

We agree to meet back at the bikes in an hour and its off to the races. Normally, at 10AM opening on a Sunday morning this place is jammed. Today, thanks to the pandemic, we have all 4 floors nearly to ourselves. As a result, everything is on sale. There is just so much stuff in this place that we are somewhat overwhelmed. For me, it's more fun to look than to buy. After an hour we are all itching to get back out into the picture perfect weather and explore some more back roads. It's time to ride!



From Roller Mills we take back roads through the villages of New Berlin and Middleburg to pick up Route 104 which meanders through the countryside until we stop for a not-so-quick bite at the Cruisers Café: a motorcycle friendly outdoor eatery. On this day, no one is in a rush.



Finally, 104 dumps us out onto Route 15, a busy divided roadway that we follow for just a few miles. It takes a few tries, but we eventually locate the Ferryboat Campground which is normally the launch point for the Millersburg Ferry, a paddle wheel boat that crosses the one-mile-wide Susquehanna River.

Unfortunately, the virus has delayed getting the boat into the water for the season, and we are forced to detour 10 miles north to cross on a bridge before returning 10 miles south on the east side of the river. At least we can use the campground as a rest stop, enjoying the splendid views of the Susquehanna from the shore.



There's the ferry boat ramp but no ferry boat. Millersburg is just across the river, one mile away by boat. We are forced to get there over land which requires 20 miles. From Millersburg we take Route 225 up and over the divide, crossing the Appalachian Trail, then turn east to follow the DeHart Reservoir through State Forest Lands. This is a 35 miles stretch with no turns, and no development. It follows a heavily forested ridge that teases us with glimpses of the large reservoir to our right. The road ends at Tower City where we fill our empty tanks.



The **DeHart Dam** is considered high-hazard, and high-risk. The State Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) said it could possibly breach during the next major, tropical storm. Feb 3, 2020

Next is Gold Mine Road, 6 miles of steep upgrade twisties. At the top we turn left onto 443 which takes us east, back to Pine Grove. Route 501 plunges back downward, crossing the Appalachian trail for at least the third or fourth time on this trip, and taking us into Lititz, voted the “coolest small town in America”. This town was founded by members of the Moravian Church in 1756, and for 100 years only Moravians were allowed to live here. Now it is an Amish hub and we pull into the little park in the center of town for a short rest stop before picking up Route 772. which takes us south and east, passing through the Amish village of Intercourse on the way to Route 30 AKA The Amish Highway. There are horse drawn buggies everywhere with folks heading home from Sunday afternoon post prayer-meeting socializing. The weather has remained fantastic all weekend and it’s just another 30 miles to home.



Rest stop in Lititz

The women head inside to rustle up some dinner while the men unload, unpack, and discuss how we might get the sidecar rig out of the U-Haul truck without a second ramp. We wind up backing the truck up to a retaining wall and running over some hosta bushes to avoid having to lift. The bushes are hardy and will recover, probably before the BMW transmission is repaired. That done, we head inside for adult beverages, appetizers, and yes, Motrin; I'll have three please. It has been a fantastic weekend. Even the BMW breakdown did not dampen our spirits. The roads were lovely, the bikes were fun. We had some great food at the restaurant, and again at dinner back home. The weather was the second-best thing of all. The first bestest thing was getting out of the freakin' house after isolation, especially in the company of these great couples. We did it safely: no one got sick and no one made anyone else sick. ***LIFE GOES ON!***





Marion, Lynn, Liz, and Lauraine. Note wine and booze in foreground. They earned it!



Left to right: Liz, Ed, Richard, Lynn, Marion, Andy.