

Throwback with sidecar is a party on wheels

- Susan Carpenter, Los Angeles Times - Saturday, October 21, 2006

If you want to get friends on your good side, just take them for a spin in a sidecar. They won't stop smiling no matter how long they're in there, and after you park, they won't stop talking about it.

That is how I spent the past week: solidifying friendships as I whipped through the streets of Los Angeles on a 2006 Ural Gear-Up with a rotating cast of giggling passengers.

When it comes to modern city riding, it would be hard to find a brand-new bike with fewer practical amenities. Sure, L.A. streets are a battlefield, but the machine-gun mount is a bit excessive. And who needs a cigarette lighter when smoking can get you a ticket faster than speeding?

As for the shovel and spotlight on this 745 cc military throwback, I'd take GPS and ABS over them any day if the Gear-Up was my daily driver. But that would be missing the point. The Gear-Up isn't about practical. It's about fun.

A long time ago, in a land far, far away, there was actually a purpose to the bells and whistles that come standard issue on the Gear-Up. It was war. Specifically, World War II, when, Ural legend has it, the Russians got their hands on the Germans' BMW R71 flat twin and reverse-engineered it. In 64 years, Ural's burgled design -- with shaft drive and reverse -- has not only evolved, but it has spawned multiple models and upgrades. Until 2001, when the company nearly closed its city-size factory in Siberia's Ural Mountains, almost everything, from the bolts and pistons to the tires and paint, was made in Russia. Since the company restructured five years ago, the Russian twin carburetors have been swapped for Japanese Keihins, the front brake has evolved from a drum to an Italian Brembo disc, and the alternator is a Denso, also Japanese. That still does not make the Gear-Up a modern ride. It just makes this air-cooled four-stroke a little less likely to break down in the middle of nowhere, forcing you to swap a wrecked wheel with the 19-inch, steel-spoked spare that's strapped to the sidecar, or to wrench parts with the toolkit that fits in a compartment on the tank.

Despite the recent improvements, handling the Gear-Up is still a workout. Even keeping it in a straight line is a challenge, because the three wheels are lopsided. The motorcycle's rear wheel and the sidecar's are not on the same axle. They are not directly aligned, and only the rear wheel of the motorcycle has power. So, when accelerating, the Gear-Up pulls slightly to the right because of the inertia and drag of the sidecar.

Likewise, rolling off the throttle pulls the bike slightly to the left. The result is a bike that does not play well with traffic. I might have been moving forward, but I also looked like I had been pounding shots of Stolli, weaving around in my lane as I up- and down-shifted. On two wheels, I make a practice of protecting my lane and riding in the middle, but do that on a three-wheel bike, and you're straddling the next lane over. At 5 feet, 7 inches across, the Gear-Up is almost as wide as a car and harder to handle. Cornering, I had more than a few cars nipping at my mud flaps as I heeded the warning sticker that "left-hand and right-hand turns may be dangerous ... at excessive speeds" and steered my way through like a granny.

There is no counter steering on a sidecar bike like there is on a traditional two-wheeled motorcycle. Turning is a matter of muscling the bars in the direction you want to go. Left-hand turns are easier than right. Take a right turn too fast, and you'll "fly the chair," i.e., lift the sidecar's wheel off the ground, because centrifugal force pushes the weight of the sidecar toward the bike, rather than leaning it right. That's why newbies to Ural's lopsided three-wheeler are counseled to put a 100-pound ballast in the sidecar. My ballasts were a bit heavier. They also tended to laugh a lot.

Usually, there was only one. But one chilly night, I had two gigglers on board -- one to my right and one out back. Riding a bike has never felt so much like a party. Together, the three of us added about 480 pounds to the Gear-Up's 739. According to Ural, our three-wheeled ride could have taken on at least another 260. I just couldn't find anyone game for a ride in the 2.9-cubic-foot trunk.

As far as who can hitch a ride in the sidecar, the same laws apply to passengers of sidecars as to passengers of motorcycles. Although there is no age, height or weight restriction, the California Vehicle Code requires each passenger to wear a properly fitting, Department of Transportation-approved helmet.

The code also requires that child passengers under 6 years of age or 60 pounds be seated in an approved child seat. Because child seats must be secured with a seat belt, and the Ural sidecar does not have one, children under 6 years or 60 pounds are not allowed.

As for who can operate a sidecar motorcycle, a motorcycle license is not required. The Governor's crash proved that earlier this year. A standard driver's license (class C) is all you need.

Bolted to the motorcycle's steel frame at four points, the Gear-Up sidecar is detachable, but if you want a Ural without a sidecar, you can buy a Wolf and save yourself the \$4,500 and hassle of removing it.

The motorcycle part of the Gear-Up is not meant to be on its own. There is no kick- or center-stand, and the leading-link fork, which reduces trail and improves steering and stability for three-wheeled riding, has the reverse effect with two wheels. Besides, the sidecar is the reason most people buy a Ural. It certainly is not the horsepower (40 at 5,600 rpm) or maximum recommended speed (63 mph). Coupled with the bike's old-time look and feel, it is the little pony cart to the right that has made Urals one of the best-selling sidecar motorcycles in the United States.

Last year, the company sold 550 units in North America -- a 70 percent increase over 2004. This year, it is on track to sell 750.

Compared with the Japanese manufacturers and Harley-Davidson, that is not even peanuts, it's shells. But the Ural's rarity -- and novelty -- is a large part of the bike's charm.

And it is why it gets so much attention. In the week I spent riding the Gear-Up, the camouflage paint did nothing to help me blend in. From the moment I got on, I was

experiencing what the company calls UDF, or Ural Delay Factor -- the extra time it takes to get anywhere because of all the questions.

The first time I pulled out of my driveway, two neighbors who had never shown any interest in the fact that I was alive suddenly appeared, paparazzi style, wielding cameras. At nearly every stoplight from that point on, I was peppered with questions.

"What is that?"

"Are you in the military?"

"Can I have a ride?"

2006 URAL GEAR-UP

Price, as tested: \$10,595

Power train: OHV air-cooled, four-stroke, flat twin-cylinder; four speeds, plus reverse

Displacement: 745 cc

Bore and stroke: 78 mm by 78 mm

Seat height: 30.9 inches

Dry weight: 739 pounds