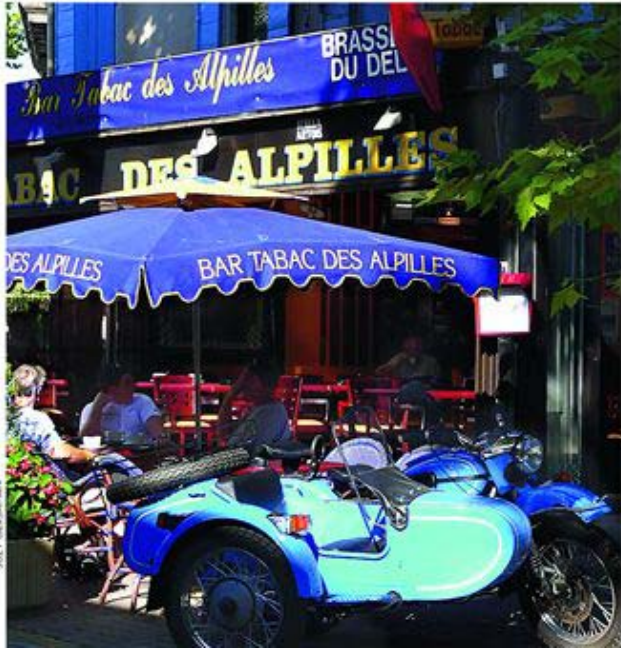




PHOTO: ANTOINETTE



SUZY GERMAIN



PHOTO: PROVENCEALE



**DISCOVER PROVENCE** (this page): The cliffs of Cassis and France's "Blue Coast" (right) are all part of the experience at Moto Provencale's Sidecar School, which uses the Ural, a Russian brand of cycle with sidecar (far right).

**CAFÉ LIFE** (opposite page): Classmates explore fishing ports and dine in outdoor cafés along the way.



# Two For the Road

## MAKE MINE A SIDECAR

By SUZY GERSHMAN

I am pulling my weight on a drive through Provence. This does not mean I am at the steering wheel. I am the passenger. In fact, I am the ballast in a sidecar.

It's not that the sidecar would tip over without me in it, but, well, we all have our jobs to do and mine is to eat for France. The more I weigh, the safer the sidecar. Actually, the sidecar is quite safe as it is, but I am very conscientious. Furthermore, there have been no sidecar accidents in France by any of the students of Moto Provencale's Sidecar School, where I am enrolled.

A friend from college has surprised me with the announcement that my services are needed. He has a U.S. motorcycle license – a

requirement for driving and renting a sidecar – but needs a partner who knows the area, speaks French and, uh, has a heavy rear end. Since I live in Provence, about an hour from St. Remy de Provence – where school is in session 11 months of the year – and meet the other requirements, I am invited along.

Sidecar School is not conducted in French. It is run, in fact, by an Englishman named David Griffiths who at age 45 bailed out of real life, moved to France and set up a series of inter-related ventures dealing with motorcycles, sidecars and tours. He is, among other things, the representative for Ural, a Russian brand of sidecar, which he sells and rents.





COURTESY OF SUZY GERSHMAN



SUZY GERSHMAN

**ROUNDABOUT:** Suzy Gershman, the author (left). Moto Provencale is run by Englishman David Griffiths, who chats with the wait staff at a local cafe (top). Opposite page (clockwise): The school's electric blue sidecars draw attention wherever they go, from the small village of Eygalières to the Hotel Le Golfe in Cassis and the road outside of St. Remy.

**I IMAGINE THAT SOON I WILL BE GRACE KELLY IN A SIDECAR, HAIR BLOWING. CAN I WEAR SUNGLASSES WITH A CRASH HELMET? (YES).**

While it is possible to attach a sidecar to most bikes, Ural is the only firm that makes the whole thing as one unit. These cars are no leftovers from World War II movies, but new, electric blue and topped off with Cyrillic scrawl, truly as cute as a Bug. Actually, much cuter.

The customers at Moto Provencale tend to be upper income, middle-aged sophisticates who want the sidecar for either a spouse or a grandchild, although they soon learn during Sidecar School that younger grandchildren do not make good ballast. Many go on to shell out about \$10,000 for a Ural unit, which can be ordered for U.S. delivery.

### SERIOUS STUFF

If I was afraid of speed, I soon learn that sidecars don't go fast – perhaps 45 miles per hour. There seems to be very little to fear, even the fact that the sidecar only has one wheel (it's attached to the bike by an axle). The sidecar whispers a serenade of romance and adventure, without bumpy roads ahead.

"They are designed for out and about," explains Griffiths, "for taking the high road and enjoying life."

School itself is more serious than you might expect, complete with drawings and discussions of the apex of the curve. Physics, and the laws of gravity, turn out to be very important in driv-

ing a sidecar, which, according to Griffiths, is opposite from driving a motorcycle and therefore requires specific training. There are significant hands on training and a lot of "let's do that again." We wear helmets. I feel like Darth Vader and wonder if I am talking too loudly, the same as when I have had one extra glass of wine. At first, I suffer the chugga-chugga feeling of a novice at the wheel. As the passenger, there is little I can do. Soon, the driver has the hang of it – we are doing roundabouts with glee. That done, it's off with David for more advanced training, like using dead weight to get around corners. I try not to be offended at the term "dead weight."

I head into town to have my hair done. I imagine that soon I will be Grace Kelly in a sidecar, hair blowing. Can I wear sunglasses with a crash helmet? (Yes).

### MOVEABLE FEAST

While David's tour firm offers hotels and total packages, I book us into the Hostellerie de Vallon de Valrugues, where I have been staying for years of visits to St. Remy. The four-star property is the fanciest in the area and also has the most famous chef. I book demi-pension to be certain I am up to my half of the deal. When a six-course meals arrives, I know I have made the right choice.



## WANT TO RIDE?

• **CONTACT:** David Griffiths Sidecar School, Moto Provencale, (011-33-4) 32-60-15-66, 14 Ave. Albin Gilles, St. Remy de Provence; [www.moto-provencale.com](http://www.moto-provencale.com). The two-day course is \$750. Most students book the school for the weekend and then join a full tour. Rental for Ural sidecar, when not included in a tour, is about \$120 a day. There is a \$2,000 security deposit put on a credit card; you are urged to make certain your travel and health insurance covers large-capacity motorcycles.

• **WHERE TO STAY:** The Hostellerie du Vallon de Valrugues, Chemin de Cigalo, St. Remy de Provence, (011-33-4) 90-92-04-40; [www.vallon-devalrugues.com](http://www.vallon-devalrugues.com). Offers 37 bedrooms in a villa setting. Rates start at \$192 for room only; demi-pension (breakfast and one meal) is about \$100 per person more. Breakfast alone is \$28 per person.

• **ON THE ROAD:** You can buy a six-night, multi-hotel package coordinated with the school so you can attend classes and then travel by sidecar throughout Provence, staying in a series of hotels as charming and luxurious as the Vallon de Valrugues. From around \$600 for six nights. Info: [www.prestige-hotel-provence.com](http://www.prestige-hotel-provence.com). The hotels are Auberge de Cassagne; (011-33-4) 90-31-04-18; Hotel les Roches; (011-33-4) 94-71-05-07 and Hotel les Bories; (011-33-4) 90-72-00-51.



SUZY GERSHMAN



MOTO PROVENCALE





PHOTO PROVENCALLE



PHOTO PROVENCALLE

**CRUISING:** Stopping for a bite in Rousillon (left), famous for its ochre cliffs. The Ural Retro (top), leather seats and a real '50s look in a brand new model that is top of the line.



Indeed, there is a fair amount of eating involved in Sidecar School. Lessons begin over croissants and coffee at the Moto Provencale garage at the edge of town. During the first day's lunch break at a local cafe, Le Bar Tabac des Alpilles, where salads are piled as high as the Alps, we have little time to discuss shopping or Van Gogh as the placemats are quickly marked up with squiggles and X's to demonstrate the best way to take a mountain road, lest it take you. David talks a good bit about "minimizing the carry forward" and I am lost. I eat dessert. I murmur that I thought The Pistons were a basketball team and vow to shut up.

Day Two of the school is not so important for the passenger, so I go shopping in St. Remy. This includes visits to Joel Durand's chocolate factory, Le Petit Duc cookie factory and Lalimard fruits confits establishment, where fresh fruits are dried and then embalmed in sugar. I also look at the menus in various restaurants to make certain that I am being fed enough at Vallon de Valruges (I am, I am).

## TOUJOURS PROVENCE

Day Two does include a lunch feast at Chez Bru in Eygalieres, a small village not far from St. Remy famous for its visual perfection. If

Peter Mayle drove a sidecar, he'd be eating lunch with us, sipping cool wine at curbside and ogling the adorable wait-staff girls as they sidle up to the sidecar. For the final exam, we head up the treacherous roads to Les Baux, a medieval perched village carved from stone. Everyone we pass stops to wave or gawk or both.

Although we have officially graduated from sidecar school and can now rent the bike and head off into the sunset, we instead sign up for a group tour to Loumarin for the Friday market. While Loumarin is the Luberon district's most well known village of dreams and fairy tales, going to market in a sidecar loses its glamour when you realize your shopping style has been cramped by a lack of space. Sure the village streets and alleys are filled with vendors selling baskets and boutis (French bed quilts) and flowers and foodstuffs and dried lavender and homemade honey and ceramics galore along with wispy linen dresses perfect for a summer in Provence. Alas, the boot of the sidecar and the floor space at my feet are both limited.

After lunch in town, before we head home over Mount Ventoux, I remind myself to never go to Isle sur la Sorgue, the town of 1,000 flea-market vendors, in a sidecar. Then I look down at the pistons and smile.