

# Ural right



A new generation of capitalists is reviving a relic of Soviet state socialism. A complete sidecar combo for \$11,000? It might just work

By Bruce Reeve

As motorcycles go, the Ural makes one hell of a history lesson. With the throttle wide open, the Boxer twin feels frozen in time, like some kind of lethargic utility engine; there's a great deal of gear noise and mechanical chuffing, but not much acceleration. Each upshift, no matter how careful, produces a crunching noise of reluctantly meshing gears, but there are only three upshifts to make before I'm tapped out in top gear at around 100 km/h, with the speedo needle sweeping back and forth like a wiper blade. This might not sound very fast, perhaps, but I can't imagine anyone wanting to push this Ural combo to a greater velocity—it's already scary enough.

Through a sweeping corner, the effort required at the handlebar seems startling, an experience further spiced by a dash of road camber that requires a sudden adjustment to keep tracking in my own lane...Is it supposed to be this difficult? Then again, what do you expect from a machine that stands as one of the few enduring legacies of a pact made between Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin before the Second World War?

Actually, the official Soviet account of how the Ural motorcycle came to be built suggests that five BMW R71 motorcycles were smuggled into Russia, disassembled and the design simply copied. Describing its origins in terms of a straightforward theft is considered the most positive way to spin the story. A more likely scenario, however, according to another account, is that the Germans willingly provided construction details and casting moulds of an obsolete R71 design—Germany used R75 motorcycles during the war. This co-operation was part of the notorious Molotov/Ribbentrop pact that existed between Hitler and Stalin until the Nazis decided to invade Russia anyway. The Soviets first built bikes in Moscow but later moved the factory out of bombing range to the Ural Mountains, a location that gave the machines their name. (A separate factory in the Ukraine produces the Dnepr, a similar flat-twin design.)

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ural factory was privatized in '92, and then taken over by new owners in '99, spurring an effort to make sales in export

On this Ural model, it's possible to throw a lever to engage a shaft to the sidecar wheel. With the tractor-like engine pulling, it'll get you out of a mudhole.



markets. Although the basic design of the Ural has scarcely changed, the factory says that modern production techniques and metallurgical advances have created a more durable motorcycle. Ironically, the central appeal of the Ural in a sophisticated Western market remains its inherent obsolescence; the inefficiencies of Soviet state socialism have created a strong brand identity, now being promoted by a new genera-

a Canadian distributor with Irbit Motor-Works of America, based in Redmond, Washington, which is owned by the Ural factory.

Mike says he's had more fun selling these Urals than anything else he's done during a long career in the motorcycle business. He has no illusions about the capabilities of the Ural, but the quirkiness of the design has attracted an eccentric clientele without nor-

drifts if necessary. Mike says the shop has eight of these in stock, with a list price of \$11,000. Although to my eye the production quality appears rustic, Mike tells me the improvement over the past decade has been considerable. "I had a look at a '95 model," says Mike. "Man, what a crude piece that was." The latest models use Denso alternators, addressing a frequent source of failure in the past, modern electronic igni-



Rated at 45 hp, the 745 cc Ural combo offers four gears and a reverse, with top speed of about 100 km/h. That seems plenty fast enough.

tion of capitalists.

Walking up to the Ural for a closer look, this paradox jumps out at you. It's a new vehicle, not a restored vintage machine, yet the finish and design have an antiquated aura. You're tempted to call it agricultural-looking, but that would be disparaging to manufacturers of current agricultural vehicles. More than anything, the Ural is simply a historical and economic aberration.

My opportunity to ride a Ural combo came after an invitation from Mike Matthews, the manager at Peterborough Cycle Salvage, where the owners are Scott Fallis and Gerry Young. The partners bought a collection of the machines from the previous Canadian importer, Tries Distributing, a Montreal firm that abandoned the business last year. Since then they have signed on as

mal expectations regarding a vehicle. "Our customers are 45 and up," says Mike. "They already have a Harley or a sport bike in the garage and are looking for something completely different."

My experience with sidecars has been limited, and I admit to a persistent lack of enthusiasm for them over the years. Yet I can still understand the appeal; a sidecar rig forces you to step outside of the conventional and challenges you to learn a new set of skills governing a mechanical device. (And perhaps it appeals to a Nietzschean temperament—that which does not kill us, makes us stronger.)

This particular Ural model is called a Northern Cruiser, built to a spec especially for Canada, with a conventional fork but two-wheel-drive capability for blitzing snow

tions, Brembo brakes, contemporary Italian switchgear and generally more sophisticated finish quality. Occasional failures aren't unknown, says Mike, but parts are inexpensive and easily available.

When I climb aboard and drop onto the solo seat, it seems I've been transported to a different era. The key fits loosely in a crude ignition switch, and a large petcock needs to be turned to start the fuel flowing to a pair of Keihin carburetors, one of the contemporary design updates. Amazingly, though, the Ural factory provides two separate choke controls, one for each carb. Mike has adapted a single choke control after tiring of this nuisance. There's a kickstart lever, but only as a backup to the electric starting, and the 745 cc flat-twin comes to life easily, settling down to a whirring, clicking idle.

The factory rates the engine at 40 hp, and with a claimed dry weight of 335 kg (739 lb), the Ural is clearly more of a tortoise than a hare. By its nature, a sidecar combo isn't something you can easily wheel about in parking manoeuvres, but on the other hand it won't ever fall over, and a hand lever that engages a reverse gear helps while turning around in a tight spot. Clutch effort on the Ural proves modest, but the gearbox

are so many different and unfamiliar sensations: the uneven road surface tugs on the handlebar, and the steering effort and sensations completely change your perspective of what it means to ride a motorcycle. Even a straight road can be entertaining—or at least an exercise in steering corrections.

This Ural model features a relatively current Brembo disc and caliper at the front wheel, but braking power still feels well

takes over for a turn, within a couple of minutes he's entertaining himself by turning circles with the sidecar wheel hoisted in the air.) I'd half-expected the Ural combo to feel like a bucket of bolts, but the ride quality is actually quite acceptable over a bumpy backroad.

One of the curiosities of the Ural combo is the availability of two-wheel drive. A lever engages a drive shaft to the sidecar wheel, which can prove useful while driving yourself out of a mudhole, sand or snow. There's no differential, however, and with two wheels driving the steering becomes almost unworkable—it's definitely not something to be engaged for normal conditions. In theory, the rig should be capable of working through some very tough terrain, but you'd need a perverse sense of fun to choose this over a dirt bike or an ATV for off-road use.

A certain amount of perversity might seem the defining characteristic of a typical Ural customer, but in at least one sense a Ural combo can be considered a highly practical purchase—it's a straightforward and relatively inexpensive means of obtaining a sidecar. Adapting an accessory sidecar to a more current motorcycle might still be a more sensible approach, but the Ural offers the practical benefits of a reverse gear and two-wheel drive. That being said, you're still left with a relatively crude, low-powered vehicle, but it's a ready-made outfit for \$11,000. Currently Ural offers six different models, five of which are sidecar combos, divided into family-recreation or sport-utility categories, the latter with a driven sidecar wheel and a leading-link fork. A solo model, called the Wolf, is a cruiser that was developed with the assistance of the Night Wolves club in Russia, but it has the dubious distinction of making an R1200C look downright handsome.

According to the factory, more than three million Ural motorcycles have been produced since 1941—so don't buy one of these expecting it to be a collector's item. Through a fluke of history, however, this most ordinary of motorcycles has developed into an extraordinary presence. Josef Stalin once remarked that "Gaiety is the chief characteristic of the Soviet Union." Of course, anyone who disagreed was likely to be shot. Fifty years after Uncle Joe's passing, without a gun being held to my head, I will freely assert that the Ural can raise a smile. Sometimes that's all that really matters. **cc**

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Where else are you going to find a motorcycle and sidecar for \$11,000? The windscreen is an accessory.

demands a slow and deliberate shifting style, which is still no guarantee against crunching gearbox noises. Even the modest acceleration the Ural produces causes the rig to hunt toward the right, while rolling off the throttle tends to produce some modest handlebar shake and a nod to the left. The inertia of the sidecar inevitably produces an effect on the handling, something experienced riders learn to accommodate, but an unusual amount of stress on the front end is a given. Several Ural models come with a sturdier leading-link or Earles-type fork, but the model we're sampling has a lighter and flexier Paoli fork.

Mike has quite sensibly suggested staying out of fast traffic flow, advice I'm happy to follow, instead turning onto a sideroad to spend a few hours exploring the concession and sideroads through the pretty hill country west of the shop. The sheer novelty of the Ural combo can be enough to provoke a smile, if not a hysterical giddiness. There

short of what you'd expect on a solo machine. On the other hand, I don't think any more bite would be an improvement, as a hard squeeze makes the rig nod strongly to the left. Given the low speed potential of the Ural and the greater amount of rolling resistance, stopping distances with the assistance of the rear drum brakes seem acceptable enough.

From my perspective, everything about the Ural suggests a heightened sense of caution: although U-turns are a snap while turning to the left, a sharp right turn lifts the sidecar wheel readily. Navigating an off-camber road beside a farmer's field, the impossibility of keeping vertical in a straight line feels alarming—exactly how far will this thing lean to the left before it flips over? That's something you could establish with practice and experience, but on this day I'd rather not find out. Either a sandbag or a passenger would provide a useful counterweight. (Mind you, when Neil Graham