



ASSIGNMENT IN SEATTLE



FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

MOTO - EURO ON ASSIGNMENT

05:58 It's still dark and a persistent drizzle oozes from the heavy sky. I pull the Moskvich to a halt at the border checkpoint and roll down the window.

"Papers." I hand over the folded parchment and pray that Slava's handiwork is good.

"Purpose of your visit?" "I go to visit my grandmother." It's a lie, but I've practiced it a hundred times. The guard reaches inside his overcoat for a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and steps into the dim yellow light of a tiny wooden hut. On the small desk, he inks a stamp and brings it down on Slava's paper. >

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"Proceed." The iron barrier creaks as it swings upward. I crunch the Moskvich into first gear and roll forward.

07:39 I have to collect Larionov at the airport at 09:15 and I've made good time from the border. But now I'm stuck in a huge traffic jam in a place called Everett. Perhaps a military convoy ahead

09:18 Another barrier, but this time at the airport parking lot. It's in a town called Sea-Tac, which isn't shown on my map. Larionov is waiting with two heavy suitcases. We say nothing until we're inside the Moskvich. "Ilya and Dmitri are ready for us," says Larionov. "They have our transportation."

09:55 I'm lost. Larionov is drumming his fingers nervously on the Moskvich's dashboard. I pull over and wind down the window to ask the way to Redmond. "Billville?" says the passerby. "Take the 520 to the end." What's Billville,* I wonder..?

10:07 Ilya and Dmitri are waiting. Their cover is a motorcycle import business. We load our photographic equipment into a Ural Gear-Up sidecar unit. "Why the military camouflage?" I ask Larionov. "Double bluff," he says. The steel roll-door rattles upward revealing a heavy gray Seattle sky. Our mission is underway!

11:47 We're waiting to board the ferry to Bainbridge Island. Our mission is to photograph the Space Needle-a suspected missile installation. Larionov is riding the Gear-Up. I'm following on a Ural Russian Wolf. "What kind of Harley is that?" shouts a man from a pickup truck. An elderly gentleman is staring at the Gear-Up. "I was in Africa in 1943," he says. "I remember these." But our Gear-Up was built only in 2003.

13:09 The cloud cover has broken and the sun appears. Larionov and I are on the vehicle deck pretending to take pictures of the bikes while shooting the Seattle skyline to update our maps. The ferry pulls into the harbor. "Time for Starbucks," says Larionov

Gearing Up

OK-here's the real story. "Larionov" Williams phones me from Moto-Euro's Phoenix gulag and asks me if I'm going to the Seattle Motorcycle Show. Yes I am. "Want to test a couple of Urals?" he asks. Does a Russian bear poop in the woods?

Most of the rest is true. I did cross a border. We did meet Ilya and Dmitri at Ural's head office in Redmond. We did ride a Gear-Up and a Russian Wolf. We took the Bainbridge Island Ferry. And we went to Starbucks, too.

Ilya is Ilya Khait, General Manager of IMZ-Ural in Irbit, Russia, and President of IMWA Inc, the company's US subsidiary. Dmitri Slobodin is Vice-President, CFO and CIO. We also meet Gary Kelsey who runs the sales side in the US.

The two Urals in question are a Russian Wolf, a cruiser-style version of Ural's solo machine with a longer rake, forward controls (as well as regular-a nice touch) and a lower seat. The Gear Up is Ural's top-of-the-line sidecar rig with leading link forks, engage-able sidecar drive (making it a 3 x 2?) and reverse gear. It comes in a Jackson Pollock paint job with lots of neat extras like a spotlight, jerry can, sand shovel, spare wheel, air pump and machine-gun mount. The last item might help sell the Gear-Up in the Ozarks, and it makes a statement in the city, too.

Until recently, an independent importer handled Ural distribution in the US. But in May 2003, the parent company, IMZ-Ural announced the setting up of subsidiary Irbit MotorWorks of America Inc, to



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handle distribution. Long time Uralist Derek Smith, who helped write some of the maintenance documentation sees a big impact on customer service and quality control.

"When Ilya says we've got a problem, he picks up the phone and chews them out at the factory," says Smith. "Ilya has direct control over the whole process. He spends half his time here, half at the factory."

One of the fascinating aspects of the Ural is its passionate following-enthusiasts like Smith who donate their time and expertise to spreading the Russian word. The Ural booth at the Seattle show is "staffed" mainly by volunteers, all equally obsessive. It's there I meet Fredda Cole, who set land speed records on a Ural at Bonneville Salt Flats. Fredda took the titles for 650cc pushrod engines, both fuel and gas, with and without sidecar. The blueprinted 650 was pushed to 117mph solo and 110 with a sidecar frame bolted on. The sidecar record still stands.

So what's a Ural, then?

As sharp Moto-Euro readers will have noticed, the Ural engine bears a strong resemblance to a pre-Spandau Beemer lump. This is no coincidence. In 1939, impressed by how rapidly the German forces were able to deploy fighting power with their machine gun-equipped BMW and Zundapp outfits, the Russian defense ministry secretly purchased five R71s in Sweden and had them reverse engineered. As WWII alliances shifted and realizing they were Hitler's next target, the Russians moved the motorcycle factory out of Luftwaffe range to Irbit, just east of the Ural Mountains in Siberia-where it remains. After hostilities, they picked up much of the Munich maker's tooling as well.

The modern Ural range is made up of two solo machines and five combinations. In fact, Ural makes the only factory sidecar outfit you can buy in North America. Essentially, there's one engine with two frame and two fork combinations. Both frames have pivoted rear swingarms, but vary in the way the shocks are mounted. The sidecar bikes use a conventional pivoted spring/damper unit, while the solos, Wolf and Retro, use what looks like a modified plunger frame. All sidecar units (except Troyka and Retro) use a leading-link front fork-much the best design for three-wheeling-while the solos get telescopic by Paioli. The Wolf gets Brembo disc brakes front and rear, while all others get a Brembo front and IMZ's own mechanical or hydraulic rear drum.

The engine is a 750cc horizontally opposed air-cooled OHV flat twin driving through an engine-speed clutch and four-

speed box. Sidecar units and the Retro get reverse as well. The Patrol and Gear-Up sidecar rigs come with selectable two-wheel drive for mountain-goat tractability.

What's it like to ride, then?

Riding the Russian Wolf is both strange and familiar. The cruiser style ergonomics, switchgear and controls are all in the usual place and work as expected. There's an air of solidity and over-engineering everywhere, from the massive frame to the beefy mufflers. The electronically ignited, Keihin-carbed engine fires up easily on the electric leg and, when warm, settles to a steady putt-putting idle. Blipping the throttle makes the bike rock as the flywheel tries to catch up with the pistons, but you don't notice it when rolling.

And it's when rolling that the bike becomes less familiar. Those of us who regularly ride sportbikes are used to clutchless snicking gearshifts and instant throttle response. The Ural demands you dance to its rhythm. Upshifts require you to wait for the flywheels to slow, then apply considerable force to the shifter. This is rewarded by a crunch from the cogs as they mesh. When you get used to it, it's fine. One curiosity is the neutral finder (reverse/neutral finder on reverse-gear equipped machine), a small chrome lever on the right side of the transmission. There's no conventional neutral in the gear pattern; pushing down firmly on the chrome lever disengages the tranny.

Though the cruiser geometry means tippy slow-speed handling, the Wolf feels much like a good sixties British bike at higher speeds: tidy, predictable and solid. The power band is smooth, and the big flywheels mean easy standing starts. The bike is quite highway capable, bowling along easily at 60-70 mph. Which is faster than I'd feel comfortable on the Gear-Up .

Sidecar rigs are different, of course. The weird steering, handling and braking all take some getting used to, but the Ural makes a pretty much ideal tug: torquey with lots of flywheel effect to get you off the line, and those beefy leading link forks, which flex much less than telescopics under a combo's severe side loads. After a day at the helm, "Larionov" is throwing the rig around like a pro, though having buddy Chris's bulk in the chair helps a lot on right-handers.

Want to get noticed? Forget the \$30,000 custom cruiser. The Gear Up turns heads wherever it goes, from gaping teenagers to misty-eyed veterans. It could also be the perfect urban assault vehicle, the two-wheel drive, slogging torque and reverse gear taking it places no SUV and few ATVs would consider. In any case, a few dings in the bodywork would add to its street cred, which it already has in spades.

And it's only this year that Ural has played its trump card. The Retro is a retro bike that isn't: the fifties styling cues-single seats, "plunger" frame, headlight nacelle-are all standard features. All Ural has done is dress them up with fishtail mufflers, an unsprung front fender and period pinstriping. The piece de resistance is mounting the neutral finder lever on the gas tank, like a hand shifter. Accessories include a chrome pancake air filter and blackout headlight cover with more goodies in the pipeline.

Summing up: These are machines built to last. They may be unsophisticated, but they do the right things right. I especially like the all-hydraulic brakes and clutch, shaft drive, the excellent Brembo disc brakes and the overall sense of durability. I suspect a Ural will still be plodding along when most of its glitzier contemporaries are being overseen by the proverbial junkyard dog.



^ (top) Post-modern Ural features hydraulic Brembo disc and rear drum. (middle) Gear Up cargo area holds tire pump, Jerry can and a trenching tool. A transfer case powers sidecar wheel at the push of a lever. (bottom) 750cc Wolf honors the "Night Wolves" (Russia's version of the Hells Angels) motorcycle club with 18" front and 16" rear wheels, Paioli extended forks, and kick or electric start.