

TALES OF A WINTER RIDER

By Victor Wanchena

There was a time when I really hated the winter. It meant one thing, no riding. On the right days when the sun and the weather align, I might slip out on a short little ride but it was never enough to satisfy the itch. I had ridden in the winter before but had never attempted to ride consistently through the winter. The desire to try had been building for some time, but was until this last year that I finally turned my desire into a Rainman-like obsession to make it happen. After some searching and serious evaluation of finances versus ideal machine I found the right bike (see *Sidehacked MMM issue #71*). What I've collected here is some of the lessons I've learned over the past winter.

The first step to riding through the winter is to find the right machine. Winter weather ravages a motorcycle in so many ways. The brutal cold adds extra wear on the engine at startup. Salt will work its way into every crevice and corrode everything it can. The ideal machine would be simple with 1 or 2 cylinder with, low compression and easily serviceable. A kick-start supplementing the electric start is a real plus for the really cold days. But everything is a trade off. You must pick the best of what is available. Below zero a kick-starter can actually rotate the motor faster than an electric starter with the added benefit of allowing you to rotate the motor a couple of times to distribute some oil before switching on the ignition. If your machine lacks a kick-starter I would carry a supplemental battery or at minimum a set of jumper cables. Starting fluid can be used in emergencies but only sparingly as it is very tough on your motor. I would also carry a full tool kit including a full set of fresh sparkplugs, pre-gapped. If you ever flood your motor these are vital to getting it started. That tip comes from hard won experience.

For me the best choice was a new Ural Tourist sidecar rig. It was the right balance of all the factors I was weighing. First, it is a purpose built sidecar rig, no more fear of ice and snow. The low compression 750cc boxer twin really seemed to thrive in the cold. The kick and electric start were both useful and the ease of maintenance was very welcome. The relatively low cost of the Ural also meant I was not going to be heart broken as a corrosive cocoon of salt formed over the entire machine and the Russian pedigree of the Ural seemed a good fit for the wind swept tundra of Minnesota.

I purchased the Tourist in the early summer and made sure that it was fully broken-in before the snowflakes began to fall. This is very important, whether a bike is new or just new to you; it needs to be in top running order before you consider riding it in the winter. A cold November night in the garage is the wrong time to start chasing down an electrical gremlin or idle problem. Small problems in the summer are amplified greatly in the winter. Your motor will benefit from some cold weather adjustments. Larger idle jets or opening the idle mixture screws will help starting and warm-up. If you are not sure how to do this, leave it to a qualified mechanic.

I chose a sidecar rig for the obvious benefit of it being a very stable platform on ice and snow. You can use two-wheels during the winter if you limit yourself to nicer days or simply plan to crash a couple of times. Falling and keeping a stockpile of clutch levers and turn signals on hand wasn't appealing to me, so for me the only

option was a sidecar. A sidecar can be mounted to many modern bikes without too much effort. For me the turnkey benefit of the Ural made it an easy choice.

On the bike, weather protection of some sort is a must. The addition of a windshield is the bare minimum. Get as large a shield as will fit on your bike. That cold blast of air is your biggest obstacle to staying warm. The more you can divert the wind the better. On the Ural I had a windshield, leg lowers and bar mitts. The leg lowers were nice at diverting cold air and road spray from blasting my lower half directly. The bar mitts are an item taken from the ATV world. They consist of large covers that simply fit over the handgrips and controls and are held on by a Velcro strap that wraps around the bars. They were by far the best \$22 dollars I spent all year. I was rather concerned about keeping my hands warm, but the bar mitts kept my hands warm and dry all winter long; a winter riding must.

Your choice of cold weather gear is as important as your choice of machine. I was actually rather surprised how easy it was to keep warm in the deep cold of winter. The versatility of the gear I used was amazing considering the wide range of temperatures I endured. Using my summer gear as a base, the Aerostich Darien jacket and pants, I added a couple of additional layers underneath. Under my riding pants I wore a pair of 300 weight synthetic fleece pants and on those truly arctic mornings a pair of basic polypropylene long johns. Under the Darien jacket I wore the Aerostich TL-Tec 2 jacket liner with wind block. This was all I needed down to freezing. Once the mercury fell below that I added a wool commando style sweater. Only when it got below -10F I need to go sissy and use my electrically heated jacket liner. One trick I learned was that riding pants with knee pads keep you warmer than ones without. The pads insulate the knees and add to the layering around one area that always seems to get cold.

My helmet was just a basic Shoei full-face model and it worked well. It kept my head plenty warm without the need for any further layers over my head like a balaclava. My helmet did fog up some so I just rode with the shield cracked open a touch but sub-zero temps made that a chore. If I was going to do it right I would probably buy a snowmobile helmet as they come with better anti-fog systems like the Bombardier BV2S (see *Gear World MMM #72*). Good boots are a must and I never got that one completely nailed down. I mainly wore regular logging style boots with a good pair of wool socks. That

worked most of the time. For the deep freeze I broke out a pair of heavy winter boots that worked great but were cumbersome. Something in between those two would have been great but never was really an issue.

Maintenance of the bike through the winter is ongoing as well as keeping it as clean as was practical. The Ural was stored in a garage that was insulated but not heated. That helped a lot, but it survived sitting outside for hours at a time. The bottom line is the warmer you can keep it, the easier it is to start. You will need to run different oil than what is specified for summer use. Check with the manufacturer of your bike for their recommendation. Failing that, the rule of thumb seems to be to run a winter weight that's half of the summer recommendation. For instance if 20w-50 were the summer oil 10w-40 would be a good winter choice. Once warmth returns to air, temps staying above freezing, switch back to the standard weight oil.

The corrosion from salt was not nearly as bad as I thought. Visions of the Ural dissolving into a puddle after a salty ride worried me at first. I did see some corrosion but most of the problems were in electrical connections. The addition of dielectric grease cured those problems. I also used a product called Boesheid, which is like a hardening form of

photo by Tammy Wanchena

Every day is a good day to ride.

WD40. It displaces water, then forms a coating which protects from further corrosion. For areas like my wheels which are chrome rims with spokes I was at a loss until a fellow Ural rider suggested spraying them with PAM cooking spray. Genius! It does protect the wheels from corrosion and sticks just well enough to stay on for a while but it still washes off without much scrubbing and it's cheap to boot. My Ural now has a delicious buttery flavor. I washed the bike whenever the salt build up got thick, especially on the engine fins, about once every other week and it looks not much worse for wear. Resist the temptation to blast off the crud at a car wash with the high pressure sprayers. That will only inject water in to places that won't dry until spring. High pressure sprays are simply bad news for motorcycles, a bucket and a rag work best.

Am I crazy for doing this? Probably, but if you've read this far there's a fighting chance you considered this yourself. The challenges of riding through the winter are not insurmountable and breaking the cold barrier is very satisfying in and of itself. I am through the looking glass now and it would be tough to resort to car use in the winter again. In the end I only had to grudgingly use my vehicle for one two-day stretch because of a mechanical problem. Crazy, yes. But the way I see it crazy, has gotten me farther than smart most times.

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