

Becoming a Cliché - Riding the Chrome Horse.



Pat Folliard - BBG

All right, I admit it. I have become a cliché, an object of occasional derision and humour, some of it well aimed, some not, maybe also the odd trace of envy. I am having my mid life crisis. I wear Jeans and black t-shirts with outlandish logos, boots and gloves. I am the archetypal middle aged RUB (rich urban biker), though go easy on the rich.

I RIDE A HARLEY – there, not so hard to come clean out with it. I am a biker, a member of an often misunderstood group, but then I became one a long time ago, before I could afford to buy a car. I have some credentials. I rode motorbikes then for fun and transportation, occasionally impressing girls who should have known better but chose not to, but not their parents, or mine. I don't beat up old ladies or sweep round curves at impossible lean angles (any more) – after all I ride a Harley now, not one of the incredibly competent and fast bikes from Ducati or Honda or some other manufacturer. A Harley, the archetypal cruiser, the bike that invented the genre. And cruising is different from riding a fast bike.

Firstly, you sit upright, lean back even, not crouching over low handlebars or clip-ons, feet forward, hands held about shoulder height. Believe me, it is much easier on the back. Secondly, you cruise along at reasonable speeds, not at the insane rates so easily possible in about 5 seconds from a standing start on other bikes. Not that acceleration is slow by normal car standards – even a Porsche or a Ferrari would struggle to keep up to, say 100 kph, with my bike.

Speed tends to be limited to 100 or 120 kph, not because the bike can't go faster, of course it can, it has an engine bigger than many of my early cars (it's 1340 cc), but because it is so much more comfortable, enjoyable and not least of all safe at slower speeds. You can enjoy the scenery, smell the desert (round here) - relax. It is a pleasure hard to convey to non-bikers, that of riding a big machine such as a Harley. The low revving, tree stump pulling torque and relaxed power delivery. No music, unless you equip yourself with a Walkman or suchlike, no phone, usually no-one on the back (although my long suffering wife and kids seem to enjoy occasionally coming out with me) and the occasional company of other Harley's if a group ride happens. And for poseurs, which we all to some measure are, there is nothing finer than cruising slowly but noisily down a city street in a stream of beautiful, gleaming bikes, turning heads faster than a spooked cat, each checking to see what is going on.

And Harley's are beautiful machines. The quality problems of the 80's AMC and pre-eras have been ironed out since the reversion back to Harley Davidson as an independent company, also reflected in rise and rise of the stock price. The colours of tanks and fenders are well chosen, deep and lustrous, the abundant chrome gleams in the sun. If you are interested. it has a V-twin push rod engine of old original design (the first Harley was built in 1904) a belt drive, conventional suspension and doesn't leak oil. If you look after your bike, and most do, you could keep it looking like new almost indefinitely. Even if you do not like bikes, you would have to be a pretty Luddite character to deny that current Harleys are wonderful looking pieces of machinery. Check

the HD web site to get the flavour.

We are fortunate here in Jeddah to have a fully equipped dealership with parts and servicing available. And new bikes for sale, in case you might be tempted. If you have any inclinations with respect to biking, enter the shop at your wallet's peril, for you will be tempted. Five seconds after going in the shop for the first time it was, for me, a matter of 'when' not 'if'. The 2003 models are especially attractive, this being the centenary year of Harley Davidson they have made a special effort.

Riding in the environs of Jeddah, or further afield, can be motorcycling nirvana, provided you choose the time and place with a little care. Riding up the Madinah Road at 5.30 or 6.00 pm in Ramadan would not be a smart thing to do, but then neither would riding back up the M4 to London on a Sunday evening. Friday mornings are best, when the roads are almost deserted. Head out on the Usfan road past Jeddah airport as I have many times, kick back and relax and enjoy the scenery and smells. Pass a camel in a car and you see the animal but nothing else. On a bike you can often smell camels before you see them, and it is not an unpleasant smell.

Take the curvy, grippy road past Moon Mountain towards Kamil or the Madrakkah road further south and, on a hot morning, it is sublime. I usually make for a small oasis to have a break in the shade, some breakfast and a drink before returning to Jeddah, around 250 km in all. Check the scenery as you go. People pay money to ship their bikes to ride in places like this! Wave to a solitary shepherd in the middle of nowhere and you almost always get a friendly wave back. If you go further afield, it gets better. I twice did a 2 day, 950 km, trip with another Harley rider, heading south after Mecca towards Al Lith then turning up the escarpment road to Baha, around 2,000 metres above the sea, along the top road to Taif then back to Jeddah. We rode, camped out, cooked, rode some more and generally had a ball on what have to be some of the best riding roads anywhere. An intrepid group rode from Riyadh to Jeddah and back about 3 years ago. 'Desert thunder' was the name given to the ride and the obligatory commemorative t-shirt which must, by now, be a collectors item.

The original plan, in some ways my justification for buying the Harley, was to ride it back to England before we leave the Kingdom. It is planned as a solo trip, camping out initially but later staying in hotels. Hours have been spent enjoyably reading up on the route, acquiring various bits of stuff that may be needed, general planning. I will have four bags on the bike, two saddlebags sitting either side of the rear wheel, a touring bag that fits over the sissy bar (pillion backrest) and sits on the rear seat, thus doubling as a backrest to lean on and a roll bag behind the sissy bar. Plenty of room for a spare pair of jeans and a sleeping bag.

The route, subject to political conditions in the region Thisr, is planned to encompass Jordan, Syria, the Mediterranean coast of Turkey after which, cheating a little, a ferry to Athens, Greece, another ferry, Italy, France and back to blighty. Three weeks should do it – eat, sleep ride, repeat. I can't wait.