

How would you like to see America on a motorcycle you've always dreamed of owning? There's a very good chance you can

The Retro Issue



Have you ever discovered something that has you asking yourself why someone hasn't done this before?

That was my reaction when I came across Joel Samick and his Northeast USA-based Retro Tours operation a couple of years ago – and I'm still asking it after spending two days with Joel and his wife Lynn and riding a selection of their motorcycles. With their semi-rural house comes a large garage and workshop space to house the 23 twin-cylinder motorcycles, plus two fours, a 1976 Honda Gold Wing and a 1983 Suzuki GS550 ES – all except the last built during the 1970s.

HEAVY DRAWS



RETRO TOURS



Comprising both Joel's collection of 1970s big twins and the Retro Tours rental fleet, they run from 1970 examples of Bonneville 650 and T100C Triumphs, via a 1971 Rickman Interceptor, 1973 Norton Commando Fastback 750, a hens-teeth 1973 Yamaha TX750, 1975 Suzuki T500 Titan – there's other two-strokes besides that one – a 1976 Moto Guzzi 850T3, 1977 Harley Davidson XLCR and many more up to that GS550. It's a veritable time warp collection that Joel has available for customers to choose from.

"It's important to stress that these are not perfectly restored, low-mileage collector's items," says late 60-something Joel, a true child of the era when motorcycles got used as everyday transport. "These are working motorcycles which are carefully maintained, but are not concours show ponies.

"I don't want to modernise them too much, and I don't want to fix them up to be better than they really were – okay, I do put on better shocks, and better lights, and a better horn and stuff like that, and blinkers, too, if they didn't have them as stock. But I want people to experience them warts and all, and most customers appreciate that coming on one of our tours is going to add to their motorcycle knowledge, simply because in a given day they can end up riding up to half a dozen different motorcycles in succession. On a group tour, we make it a policy to stop every 50 to 75 miles or so, to refuel, stretch our legs and swap bikes."

A native of Boston, Samick had not just one but two life-changing two-wheeled experiences which set him on the path to a lifetime career on bikes.

"I was 16 with a summer job washing dishes one night and at about 11pm my friend Steve, who had a Lambretta 200 scooter, came in and said, 'I'm leaving tonight for Montreal to visit a friend, do you want to come?' So at midnight when I got off-shift, we got on the Lambretta and headed north, riding the 300 miles (480km) to Montreal.

"I had never ridden a motorcycle at that point, and only ever been on one ride as a passenger but we rode until 3am or so, and then Steve got tired so he showed me how to operate the clutch



"SO AT MIDNIGHT I GOT OFF-SHIFT, WE GOT ON A LAMBRETTA AND RODE 480KM TO MONTREAL"

and the throttle and take a turn riding it. I called my mum from the Canadian border and said I'll be back in a couple of weeks. She was not at all happy and told me to come home right away.

"I stayed and had a great time running around Canada on this scooter, which got us home again, too. That was really my first Retro Tour!"

But Joel's real epiphany came at college.

"I had a double major, electrical engineering and philosophy, but quite soon I philosophised that I didn't really want to be in college, I'd



1. Who wants to take the train when you can ride?
2. Amish and Handy...
3. In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, there is a town called Bird in Hand. There really is
4. But there aren't that many Benelli Tornados
5. And there is only one Cathcart, English...
6. A powerful attraction, classic bikes and the time to ride them
7. Now *that* is responsible social distancing
8. The bikes may be old but those smiles sure look to be current



rather work on motorcycles. Someone had given me a Honda CL450 and I got such a thrill out of tinkering with that and learning how to do stuff, I knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

"So I dropped out and went to the local Honda shop, but they wouldn't hire me because I didn't know anything. So I just picked up a broom and started sweeping the shop up for free, until the moment they needed an extra pair of hands and I got hired!"

That Honda led to a life entirely dedicated to motorcycles, including the summer of 1969 spent exploring Europe.

"I was one of scores of young Americans who bought a Norton Commando at Elite Motors in London to see Europe on," recalls Joel with a smile. "One hundred days later, I had seen most of Europe and a bit of Asia, too, so I took more than that Norton home with me that summer. I also took home the realisation that motorcycles and touring would always be a part of my life."

Moving back to Boston where the winters are milder, Joel got a job at the local Honda dealer, then began teaching an adult education course on motorcycle maintenance in his spare time.

"Lynn took the course, so that was how we met. She already had a motorcycle and wanted to learn





1 how to work on it herself.”
By then, Joel Samick had taken up road racing, with the same intensity of purpose that’s marked each chapter of his lifetime on two wheels. He started out on one of the then-new Yamaha RD400s, before swapping this for a Suzuki GS550. On that he won the Alphabet Club’s Middleweight Production championship.

“But I had my eye on the Formula 1 Open class, where a guy named Dwight Roy was champion on a nicely developed Yoshimura replica Suzuki GS1000. I got my boss to buy that bike as my raise, and he also let me use the company van as well as go through the store to get drive chains, lubricants and stuff.

“I was able to win in 1981 and then in 1982 I moved to AMA Superbike and ran all four East Coast races – the Daytona 200, plus Talladega, Pocono and Loudon. I did okay, and it was an eye-opening experience, but I was already into my 30s and it was very expensive, plus I couldn’t really do anything else in my life.

Lynn and I were together by then, so when she got a job down here at the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF), I retired from racing, and we moved here to south of Philadelphia.”

After a four-year spell working for American Honda as a technical instructor, a dealership opportunity came up and Joel partnered Lynn to found Powersports East, a successful multi-



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- Joel Samick and some of his bikes
 - Sir Al gets familiar with a Rickman
 - There’s always some work to do (and a helping hand)
 - At the end of the day, some good company and some decent vino
 - Who *doesn’t* want to try out an older BMW?
 - ... or a Kawasaki 650 W-3?

brand outlet in Bear, Delaware, which the couple still own.

“I told Lynn I can only do retail for five years,” he recalls. “I’d already done it for 18 years and got out, but after five years, we’d had some other partners that we bought out, and it wouldn’t have been practical for me to leave, so I wound up staying for 13 years. And over the course of that time I turned into an ogre – I was stressed, angry and 50 pounds overweight, so I had to stop.”

Lynn still manages the dealership, but Joel retired from it in 1998 and turned his attention to fettling a growing collection of motorcycles.

“I was tinkering at home with about 15-18 bikes that I’d accumulated over the years,” he continues. “I was having trouble keeping them all in operational condition through not getting ridden enough, so I started to invite some friends from Boston to come and do these unstructured four- or five-, even six-day trips, usually heading south to West Virginia.

“We had some truly excellent adventures without anything being planned – we’d never make reservations, just start riding and when we got tired, we’d look for a place to stay. But I realised I couldn’t continue to do this anymore for free, because it was expensive. And it all came from there.”

Retro Tours has officially existed since 2000, and has grown exponentially since then, mostly however by word of mouth.

“I wouldn’t advise anyone to try this business to make money!” says Joel. “But if you love meeting people of a like mind, and doing adventurous rides on 40-year-old motorcycles away from US Highways with cookie-cutter rest stops and McDonalds, this is for you. Every ride



THE LINE-UP!

Wrap your peeping holes around these!

- 1970 Triumph T100C
- 1970 Triumph Bonneville 650
- 1971 Rickman RE Interceptor 750
- 1971 BSA A65 Lightning 650
- 1972 Laverda 750SF
- 1973 Norton Commando Fastback 750
- 1973 Yamaha TX750
- 1974 Benelli Tornado 650S
- 1974 Kawasaki 650 W-3
- 1974 BMW R90/6 (Black)
- 1975 Suzuki T500 Titan
- 1975 Ducati 860 GT
- 1976 Honda CB500T
- 1976 Honda GL1000
- 1976 Moto Guzzi 850T3
- 1976 Kawasaki KZ750B1
- 1976 Yamaha RD400C
- 1977 BMW R100/S + EML sidecar
- 1977 Yamaha XS650D
- 1977 Harley Davidson XLCR
- 1977 Yamaha XS750
- 1978 Honda CX500
- 1979 Moto Morini 500 Strada
- 1979 Moto Guzzi V50
- 1983 Suzuki GS550ES



“I WAS TINKERING AT HOME WITH ABOUT 15-18 BIKES SO I STARTED TO INVITE SOME FRIENDS TO COME DO SOME RIDES”





THIRTY-YEAR-OLD GAS TANKS SOMETIMES LEAK AND HIGH TENSION WIRES CAN ARC

Retro Tours itineraries can be structured around any number of themes – gastronomic, cultural, scenic or just plain fun roads.

“We’ll always look for the road less travelled, shunning highways completely, seeking the smallest and wiggliest lines on the map,” Joel says of his mantra.

“We try very hard to find routes that put us intimately in touch with the countryside we’re riding through. When the ‘map distance’ is 100 miles, we allow 175!”

A hint of the ethos underpinning the Retro Tours operation is to be found in the 31-item waiver form. How about the third item which states: “I know that motorcycling is a dangerous activity, and I further realise that the trip I am about to leave on is at the lunatic fringe of motorcycling.”

Or Item 23, which says: “Thirty-year-old gas tanks sometimes leak and high-tension wires sometimes arc. There is a potential for onboard fire, while under way, and no extinguisher.”

And underscoring the adaptability required to swap mounts all through the tour, Item 12 states that, “I will be switching bikes frequently, and there is no uniformity of control locations. Therefore, I will never really be familiar with the ‘feel’ of the bike I am riding, putting me in a very high-risk situation even when nothing obvious is going wrong.”

Driven by a belief that motorcycles should be ridden, not stored, Joel Samick has created a unique product, which I’m not aware of anyone else having matched anywhere in the world. Over the past two decades he’s learned what it takes to plan and execute a successful tour, in turning his hobby into a business.

“I’ve come to realise the best part of Retro Tours is meeting and getting to know other enthusiasts,” says Joel, who these days is very far from the ogre he insists he became a quarter-century ago.

Today, he’s an engaging and entertaining companion, and a great conversationalist over dinner at the end of a ‘short’ 250km day.

“Making new friends out of those who come together to meet the challenges that are inherent in what we do on our Retro Tours trips is a rewarding experience, which makes everything worthwhile.”

1. Not quite a barn-raising; it’s an oast house
2. Samick is living the dream of, we suspect, quite a few people
3. Battle of the twins; Yamaha’s brave TX and Kawa’s conventional W-3

GET IN TOUCH

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