

RIDING AROUND

An Ode to the Moped A vintage resurgence?



The author with Dad on his new Motomarina Sebring moped, circa 1986.

What's left to be said about old mopeds that hasn't been said already? Painfully slow, abysmally outdated and hopelessly primitive smoke belchers? Sure, they're all that. It seems most everyone has something negative to say about mopeds – until they ride one. Ride a moped, and you won't be able to wipe the big, silly grin off your face for hours afterward. There are plenty of delightfully irrational reasons for this.

My own recently resurfaced moped obsession began at age 11, when my dad brought home a shiny new 1986 Motomarina Sebring. It had a 49cc Franco Morini motor, full fenders, mag wheels and a “top tank” design that resembled a

traditional motorcycle's silhouette. Dad used it to commute to work a few times before the novelty of barely breaking 30 mph wore off. One day, it would be mine! I remember polishing it lovingly every weekend, saving every penny I could earn mowing lawns in order to buy a helmet and accessories. In New Jersey, a moped license was obtainable at 15 years old, and the wait was excruciating. I breathlessly counted down the seconds. The night before my hallowed 15th birthday, I set up camp at the DMV so I could be first in line. I aced my test with a perfect score, got my paperwork, and set out to explore on my own for the very first time.

Motorcyclists talk of the sense of freedom that riding



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Two pristine 1980 Puch Maxi mopeds spotted on the way home from a tour of New England (September 2020).



provides, but in truth, that feeling pales exponentially in comparison to my first day ripping around the neighborhood solo on my Motomarina moped. At 15, the norm is to be wholly reliant on parents or older friends to be able to get anywhere, and becoming one of the select few to be liberated from adults at that age was true independence. I soon found other like-minded riders, and together we spent every second of each day riding or wrenching on our mopeds. We learned through trial

and error how to modify them to reach highway speeds, shrieking like a pack of hostile bionic mosquitos down the local roads. Our lives became solely about increasing displacement, perfecting the jetting in the carburetors, changing the sprockets to find the ideal balance between acceleration and top speed, adjusting the timing and endlessly experimenting with a myriad of other hop-up parts. We had no responsibilities, the boundless enthusiasm of youth, and the spare time to put it to work.

All of this came to the fore last week, as I was returning home from a glorious weeklong tour of New England on my BMW R 1200 RT. I was 50 miles from home when I spied a woman on a Puch Maxi ready to pull out in front of me. I hadn't seen one of those since I was a kid! Unbridled excitement trumped my usually cautious judgment as I pulled alongside her and wildly motioned for her to stop. She complied and I proceeded to wax lyrical about how I grew up with mopeds, and hadn't seen one up close in



The author and his new 2017 Tomos Flexer moped, October 2020.

decades. In an unexpected twist, she asked me to follow her home for a “surprise.” She pedal-started the Puch and set off, with me following obediently behind, breathing in the sweet plume of burnt two-stroke Castrol oil that defined my mid-teens. We pulled into her driveway, dismounted, and she called for her husband to wheel out his own Maxi...they had matching silver Maxis from 40 years ago! I started blubbering like a lunatic about my teenage memories, when finally the perplexed husband interjected, “Buddy, it looks to me like you just got back from a big trip on a \$20,000 BMW motorcycle, and you’re wearing a lot of fancy gear. You look like a serious motorcyclist. Why the heck are you so excited about a couple of old mopeds?”

“If you have to ask, you wouldn’t understand,” I replied. All of those fond memories from my teens, buried dormant for 30 years, instantly rocketed to the front of my middle-aged cerebral cortex. I began intensively investigating all things moped. Thankfully, I found a vibrant community of local riders, fo-

rums full of enthusiasts, and a small network of shops that stock all the necessary parts for maintenance. All of this is going to expand, no doubt, by what the Wall Street Journal called the “Vintage Moped Resurgence.” Nostalgia, as it turns out, is quite a powerful force to reckon with. I’m on the hunt for the perfect ‘ped, and hope to pick her up in a few days. So the next time you see me with a big, silly grin on my face, now you’ll know why! 📍