

The Joy of Biking

*A passage from The Trouble with Germany
By Justin Roberts.*

Away from the theatre of the café and many miles down the road the cloud above thinned enough to fool the optimistic that it was likely to be a sunny day. Alas though, this never quite happened, the people of central France were once again to be denied the heat of a full sun at the height of summer as is usually their due. On the positive side it was another day of perfect riding conditions, dry roads, excellent visibility and no glare either directly from our local star or its reflection from the tarmac beneath, giving a lift to the spirit and reaffirming the worthiness of being alive. It was a day of bonding with the bike, a feeling of sharing the miles rather than suffering them and it was, to me, what makes motorcycling such a fulfilling experience. Over the years I have acquired the licence to drive most things on the road and yet not one other vehicle I have driven has given me the joy or satisfaction of a bike. The question is often asked by non riders as to what the appeal is, why put yourself out there away from the comfort of a cabin and beyond the reassurance of stability that at least a third wheel brings? It is a fair question and one that each of us bikers have a different answer to. The usual default reply is the sense of freedom it brings, but it is not often explained as to what the chains that we seek to escape actually are, nor why we would wish to be at liberty from such bonds. In fact, I don't think that many of us really analyse the reasons behind our delight in riding but a delight there is and 'freedom' is just the most convenient word available to describe the emotions encountered when on two wheels.

Tootling along in these near perfect conditions I tried to put together some sort of reasoning as to why biking can be such a life affirming exercise, what it is that draws and retains people to the activity when there is probably no need to be bothered by it much at all, we nearly all have cars after all. This question can also be asked of any pastime or sport yet it seldom is. Rarely are eyebrows raised when mountaineers or divers confess to their foibles nor are footballers or horse riders damned for their sport, but mention to a non rider that you are a motorcyclist and suddenly they will have an opinion. Thankfully such opinion is not always negative but when it is the strength of the condemnation can at times be awe inspiring and at other times quite frightening. Do divers have people threaten to smash their regulators or mountaineers their ropes cut? Not that I have heard of, yet there are those who would want to kick bikes over on sight of one of these infernal machines. If this sort of reaction can be provoked amongst mere friends and acquaintances then the family is a whole new minefield with most bikers having stories of parental disapproval, including myself, yet we are still attracted to this mode of movement and it can no longer be just a matter of cost, bikes can be dearer to run than cars.

The usual justification for such condemnation is one of safety and it is amazing how many people launch into a tale of death, doom and destruction brought upon some

poor person they know simply because they dare to throw a leg over a bike. It is also amazing just how often it turns out that well, they didn't actually the unfortunate rider themselves, but they have a friend who did, or they remember reading about it in the paper last week, or was it last year and so on. This is not to say that one can afford to be complacent, the absolute opposite is true, but it does throw a particular light upon human nature and our desire to communicate the worst possible news when we believe that we have an appreciative audience. Funnily enough though, bikers being eagerly enlightened as to the unfortunate demise of one of their colleagues are not always the most ardent of listeners which is something that often needs pointing out to their bright eyed informants. People die in car accidents on a daily basis yet we are not regaled with the gory details with anything like the enthusiasm that accompanies a downed biker. We all like to delight a little in having our prejudices confirmed, and the more gruesome the details the better, but bikers have feelings to y'know.

Yet new bikes are sold and ridden, they provide employment for dealers and mechanics, extra income for oil barons and the taxman whilst journalists and photographers can glean a living from supplying the many magazines with the material that keeps us buying the wide variety of publications on offer. So why do we do it? 'Because it's there' is an insufficient answer, there are millions of bikes but only one Everest. It's a cheap form of transport is another reply, but you will to confine yourself to one of 500cc or less if any savings are to be made over a small car. Unfortunately there are only two redeeming features about a modern sports bike when it comes to running costs and they are a) It's cheaper to tax and b) it's usually a lot less expensive to take on a ferry than a four wheeler. The downsides are numerous, fuel consumption is likely to be as great as the average saloon and the tyre bill can make car drivers wince. Helmets and other protective gear can be expensive and require regular replacement whilst they motorcycles do require more maintenance. No, there must be something more and the real delight in riding was revealing itself on these beautiful roads as they took me on this glorious adventure across France.

There comes a time on a trip when the tension of the day's riding flees your person, and make no mistake, there is always some worry at the start of the day, are the tyre pressures right, did I leave anything behind, is that squeak the first sign of a bearing failing, will I stay on the right side of the road and so on. This happy state of comfort will not normally arrive until the first hour or so has passed, when you realise, with some relief, that the dreaded gremlins have failed to materialise, and when it does you will find yourself relaxed and content with the bike. It's not simply a question of comfort either; all the little luxuries that may be added to a machine will not ease the concerns associated with starting off on the days run, it is more a question of connection, of being part of the environment yet not steadfastly anchored to it. You and the bike reach an agreement, a state where you feel at ease and trust yourself to take charge of the machine and so can enjoy its performance and handling whilst the bike willingly responds to your input and happily submits to your governance. These are the peak moments of any ride, where quiet confidence in both the machine and your own abilities allows a serenity to infuse the soul and bring on a state of quiet bliss. The hold on the bars, the grip of your knees, the measured input via a twist of the grip, the touch of the clutch, brake or gear and not least the gentle

positioning of both body and mind so as to wring the very last drop of sensual pleasure from the experience, these are basics of biking mania but by no means are they the conclusive set. Others will list the sensation of speed, the mastering of bike, road and elements, the knowledge that you hold your own destiny in your hands and that life, injury or even death is just a flick of the handle bars or a missed gear away as being the components of the attraction to them.

Somewhere along that road to Chartres, I'm not sure where, I took a left hand sweep and then a right bend, slightly sharper this time, to find myself in a slight valley, wooded on it's southern slope, with a rather grand viaduct carrying a railway across its breadth. A house of stone nestled just yards from one of its piers whilst a sudden burst of bird song punctured the air, resonating as clearly and loudly within my head as if I had not been wearing a helmet at all. The image of that moment, the sense of being present in that place and at that time, the sights and the sound, not just of the bird but also the rising pitch of the engine as I surged out from the last corner, levelling off towards the arch ahead, the tyre holding the tarmac with an unyielding grip and total resolution in this objective. It is these minutiae of the moment where the very spirit of biking is distilled into a few brief seconds of élan, which raise the mortal biker up to sit with the gods, these are the seconds we live for. I recall quite distinctly the weight shifting from the fore end of the bike and moving to the rear, the acceleration smoothly transferring it, causing the drive wheel to squat ever so slightly as she pulled her way up to ever greater velocities, the ego within, forced from my body and clutching on to my back giggling hysterically all the while as we shared the thrill of movement and self determination. That was the fraction of existence that made it all worthwhile, myself, the bike, the road and of course one's soul, all beating to the same rhythm and moulded together with one purpose. Would this be the rapture? In a way one hope's not for I didn't quite feel ready to meet my lord (or anyone else's) in the air, or, and more likely in my case, be left behind on an apocalyptic earth, yet as total fulfilment and sublime joy goes it was pretty much on a par.