

# RETRO TOURS

# REDNECK

# GYRO

Five Italian classics hit the back roads of West Virginia – It may not be Italy, but the bikes and the roads are *bellissimo!*

Story and photos by Richard Backus

**G**ritting my teeth against the cold mountain air, I hug the tank of the 1979 Moto Morini 500 Strada I'm riding, trying hard to make my body small and conserve heat.

We're at almost 4,000 feet elevation, winding our way through the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia on state Route 72. Although it's mid-April it sure feels like winter, and I won't be surprised if it starts snowing any moment.

Forty-eight hours earlier, I was sitting comfortably in a Boeing 737, winging my way from Kansas City to Philadelphia to meet up with Joel Samick, a former philosophy and electrical engineering major whose life was irrevocably altered many years ago when someone gave him a Honda CL450.

That Honda led to a life fully saturated in motorcycles, starting with a summer exploring Europe on a then-new 1969 Norton Commando, followed by a short stint sorting steel-toed boots at Yankee Motorcycles in Schenectady, N.Y., and then as partner with his wife, Lynn, in Powersports East, a highly successful multi-line motorcycle dealership in Bear, Del. Along the way, Joel became a series-winning racer and a certified Honda

Last day: Tour leaders Doug Snyder and Joel Samick (from back, left to right) and tour participants Keith Silfee, George Brown, Richard Backus, Ilya Kriveshko and Bill Wells, get ready to ride out after two days plying the back roads of West Virginia on classic Italian iron.

BRIDGETTE MCMARION



Ground zero: Riders pack their gear and suit up as the tour gets ready to head out from Retro Tours headquarters in Kennett Square, Pa.



technician, acquiring considerable skills with a wrench.

While running the dealership was financially rewarding, it was also physically and psychologically tiring. "I was stressed, angry and 50 pounds overweight. I had to stop," Joel says. He retired from the dealership in 1998 (Lynn continues to oversee the operation today), and turned his attention to feeding his love of motorcycles.

A collection of motorcycles ensued, most of them big twins of the kind Joel had ridden and loved in the 1970s. Driven by a belief that motorcycles should be ridden, not stored, Joel organized a trip with a half-dozen or so of his friends, all riding bikes from his collection.

That first ride evolved into a series of tours, as Joel experimented with varying group sizes and distances. Along the way, he learned what it takes to plan and execute a successful tour, and about five years ago he decided to turn his hobby into a business. Retro Tours was born.

#### Toto, I don't think we're in Italy

Retro rides cover varying themes. Some follow trails laced with particular gastronomical points of interest while others trace unique geologic formations. Yet others, as in this tour, celebrate particular types of motorcycles. In choosing their routes, Joel and Retro Tours partner Doug Snyder (whose

official title is "Vice-chairman of Recreational Activities") favor twisty, lightly traveled county highways leading to obscure, off the beaten track locales. With rural West Virginia beckoning just a few hours west of tour headquarters in Kennett Square, Pa., there's an abundance of both.

As a tongue-in-cheek play on Italy's famous *Motogiro d'Italia*, "The Redneck Gyro" is a celebration of Italian motorcycles. The bikes assembled for our smallish, five-member group include a 1971 Moto Guzzi 750 Ambassador, a 1972 Laverda 750SF, a 1974 Benelli Tornado 650S, a 1975 Ducati 860GT, and a 1979 Moto Morini 500 Strada.

Joining me on this tour (along with Joel riding support on his 1977 BMW R100S/EML sidecar outfit and Doug leading the tour on a 1974 BMW R90/6) are four avid and experienced riders with backgrounds as varied as the machines we're riding.

Some members of our group, including software engineer Ilya Kriveshko and garden nursery owner Bill Wells, have ridden with Joel before. They already know what the rest of us,



Fearless leader Joel with his BMW sidecar rig (left) and in his garage at Retro Tours, home to his collection of 20 classic bikes.



Above from left: Shift pattern and fuel tap position is marked on all the bikes — because they're all different! This is the Benelli, which has a one-up/four-down shift pattern; Lunch stop in Thurmont, Md.



including retired school teacher George Brown and banker Keith Silfee, are about to learn — this isn't a regular tour, it's a Retro Tour.

#### The road calls

The rules of our tour are simple: Ride every bike, ride safely and ride fully aware that the machine you're piloting is decidedly not a brand new Suzuki V-Strom. It's an old bike, and that carries some particular baggage, a fact Joel makes humorously — but seriously — clear in Retro Tours' 31-point waiver. These include must-initial items such as Line 3, which states, "I know that motorcycling is a dangerous activity, and I further realize that the trip I am about to leave on is at the lunatic fringe of motorcycling." Or Line 23, which says, "Thirty-year-old gas tanks sometimes leak, and high-tension wires sometimes arc. There is a potential for on board fire, while under way, and no extinguisher." And most importantly for our ride, Line 12, which states, "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."

Before leaving, Joel makes each rider give his chosen mount a thorough safety inspection. We'll be stewards of our machines for the next few days, so it's critical we understand the eccentricities of the bikes we'll be riding and that we're satisfied they're road worthy. And since we'll be switching bikes frequently, we're also responsible for briefing the next rider about "our" bike's peculiarities. With air pressures checked, fluids topped off and controls verified, we're ready to roll.

My first leg of the tour starts on Joel's 1972 Laverda 750SF. An unrestored original showing just over 34,000 miles on the clock, it has, like all of Joel's machines, what we now lovingly call "patina." First impressions are of a slightly scruffy bike, but like all of Joel's bikes it's in perfect operating condition, and returns in performance what it might lack in presentation. Choke on, I thumb the starter and it fires instantly, a satisfying bark emitting from its twin pipes.

Leaving Retro Tours headquarters on a sunny Friday morning, we're all equipped with detailed route sheets in case of separation. Although we ride together, Joel encourages riders not to be afraid to relax and work at their own pace. While we'll find ourselves hustling along nicely on our classic rides, this is a tour,



East Hardy, W.Va., softball team checks out Vincent Black Prince (above). Backus takes in a view of the Potomac at the West Virginia border (below).



DOUG SNYDER



Leaving Moorefield, W.Va. (left), and checking out the wind farm at the top of Mt. Storm, W.Va., which has 132 units (right).



not a race, and Joel wants to keep it that way. To keep riders from getting lost, the rules dictate always knowing if someone's behind you, and to stop and wait at a route change if so.

The first part of our tour is a relaxed ride through Pennsylvania dairy country. The landscape is dotted with blue-capped dairy silos, and the air is thick with the pungent odor of manure. It's postcard perfect, the farms punctuated by cherry and red bud trees approaching full bloom.

This is also Amish territory, a point well reminded as we pass a young Amish girl turning across the road in her horse-drawn buggy. Her horse is clearly accustomed to the sounds of internal combustion engines, as our old and decidedly talkative Italian machines leave the horse unimpressed as it pulls its mistress down the road.

Stopping for gas at the prescribed 100-mile interval (fixed to accommodate small gas tanks and encourage constant shuffling between bikes), I switch from the Laverda to the 1975 Ducati 860GT. Although both Italian, they couldn't be more different. Where the Laverda requires real effort to tame, with a legendarily stiff clutch and a wooden front brake, the Ducati is almost effortless. The Duc's twin disc front is almost a revelation in contrast to the Lav's drum, and its clutch is like butter, smooth and linear.

The Duc surprises with its handling, shrugging off its longish wheelbase as you lean it over and crank through a never-ending series of turns on the Pennsylvania back roads. Although the Lav will dive into turns faster and exit quicker, the Duc is still supremely stable. And while it feels slightly down on power compared to the Lav, the Duc still has ample power to drive out of turns with authority.

The next 100 miles roll smoothly by, and my time on the Duc draws all too quickly to a close. Following a brief foray into Maryland we cross into West Virginia and stop for gas again. A few miles later a torrential downpour has us ducking for cover as straight-line winds make further progress pointless. As the rain subsides Joel shows us the finer art of cutting doughnuts with a sidecar on the slick gas station lot, and with the rain over we mount up and head off for our final stop of the day.

I'm riding the 1974 Benelli Tornado now, and compared to the Ducati it feels almost Lilliputian. Most of that is due to its almost five-inch shorter wheelbase than the Duc. The Duc also weighs almost 40 pounds more fully fueled and, while that may not seem like much, you feel the difference when you're throwing the Benelli through the corners, of which there are

more and more as we ride deeper into West Virginia.

Heading out earlier in the day, I wondered about Joel and Doug's fascination with West Virginia, but as we roll farther into the state it's abundantly clear why we're here. The roads are simply incredible, unraveling before us, curve after curve and mile after mile of perfect two-lane blacktop. West Virginia may be a poor state, but when it comes to motorcycle touring its roads are among the richest in the country.

#### Moving on

Headquarters for the next two days is "The Homestead," a 200-year-old log cabin Joel's rented on a ridge top outside Berkeley Springs, W.Va. Settling in, we finally have an opportunity to get to know one another a little better, which we do over BBO at the Troubadour restaurant. Buried deep in the surrounding hills, the Troubadour shares acreage with the West Virginia Country Music Hall of Fame (Patsy Cline was from these parts), which is located in an old mobile home next door. We're guided there by Ed George, an ex-CIA agent and our landlord for the next two days. At 85 years old, Ed's still game to ride there in Joel's sidecar.

Saturday is a full day in the saddle, and I start with the 1971 Moto Guzzi Ambassador. Big as it looks, it's actually a tad lighter and shorter than the Ducati. Although they may not be particularly fleet of foot (a point one could argue after riding behind Keith Silfee, who was hard to match when he was on

the Guzzi), these old Guzzis have a strong heart. With 87,000-plus miles on the clock, it's the mileage king of Joel's fleet, and it's still on its original rings and valves.

The Guzzi's shifting is, in my opinion, the worst of the bunch, but that's mainly because it requires a slower pace through the gears. Take your time and it all works fine, and the V-twin's ample torque means you don't have to shift as much as the Benelli, whose short stroke and light flywheel require keeping the engine revs up for good useable power. Where the Benelli is slightly frenetic, the Guzzi is relaxed and unhurried, encouraging you to take your time.

On these great roads, however, taking my time's not exactly what I'm in the mood for, so I'm happy for the opportunity to switch to the 1979 Moto Morini when we stop for gas in Moorefield. Waiting for us there is Vincent fanatic Justin Mackay-Smith, who also just happens to be a direct descendent of Thomas Jefferson. Checking out Justin's 1955 Vincent Black Prince (complete with full original fiberglass bodywork

“ While we treated our bikes with respect, nobody restrained themselves from riding them hard, giving each bike a full head of steam whenever conditions allowed. ”



How could you not? Drive-thru liquor store somewhere en route (left) and Homestead host and ex-CIA man Ed George (right).



complemented by a beautiful set of custom-made hard bags), we're joined by the East Hardy Lady Cougars, the local high school girl's fast pitch soft ball team. Joel talks the Cougars into a group photo, and finally fueled up we all file into place behind Justin, who's going to lead us through the Monongahela National Forest and the coldest part of our ride.

Riding behind Justin, it's hard to believe I'm following the oldest bike in our group as Justin simply disappears down the mountain roads, leaning his Vincent deep into the curves. I'm straining to keep up, discovering that for all its sexy Italian good looks the Morini is the slowest of the group. Given that it also has the smallest, least powerful engine of the bunch (478cc and an estimated 28.5hp) I shouldn't be surprised. Yet I am just a little, as I struggle to hold a steady 70mph against a strong headwind. It's about then that Joel, now riding the R90/6, comes up beside me, an absolutely enormous grin clearly visible behind his face shield. Cold be damned, Joel's having a spectacular time.

I am too, of course, because even if the Morini disappoints in power, it more than makes up for it in handling. Light and flickable it's an absolute blast in the twisties, and as I whip the Morini through a series of what I swear are the most perfect corners anywhere in the world, I don't want it to ever end.

#### Heading home

Like every good adventure, however, this one, too, must end. A long day in the saddle finds us back at The Homestead, and the next morning, after giving the bikes another thorough inspection, it's time to saddle up

and ride back home.

Returning to Retro Tours central, a quick look at our odometers shows we've covered approximately 840 miles in just over two days. Not bad for a group of bikes where the youngest was 31 and the oldest almost 40. More impressive yet, aside from a mild case of carburetor flooding with the Morini and a loose tail light fuse on the Benelli, we haven't suffered a single mechanical issue. No breakdowns, no flats, nothing. While we treated our bikes with respect, nobody restrained themselves from riding them hard, giving each bike a full head of steam whenever conditions allowed.

The performance of our bikes was nothing short of impressive. Average mileage was in the low-40s, with the Morini returning close to 54mpg on one tank, and oil consumption was confined to a quarter quart for the Benelli and the Lav. Remember, these aren't perfectly restored machines, just well maintained originals; our experience underscores how good they really can be when properly maintained and, just as importantly, properly used.

It was, of course, precisely the desire to really use his bikes that prompted Joel to launch Retro Tours in the first place. After a week-end riding and living the Retro Tours vision, there's no question Joel's onto something unique.

If you're looking to be cosseted and kept, this probably isn't the tour for you. But if your idea of the perfect tour combines great bikes with great roads and interesting people to share it all with, it's hard to imagine a better way to spend a weekend than blasting across West Virginia on a classic Italian hardware. *Bellissimo!* **MC**

### Resource

Retro Tours  
www.RetroTours.com



A break for lunch — at an Italian restaurant, naturally — in Fairmont, W.Va., sees "our" bikes glorifying in the sun. Perfect.