



For the love of machines

There's no denying the allure of a Harley, and many men (and women) dream of owning one. Jon Phillips speaks to a collector who possesses four rare beauties

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Previous page: The brown 1942 Model U, rebuilt by Pieter de Klerk; the green 1942 Model U with sidecar. Below: A 1947 Model U bought in Durban

'GET YOUR MOTOR RUNNING, HEAD OUT on the highway, looking for adventure...' are the opening words of the Steppenwolf classic and, in a few short lines, they epitomise the joys of motorcycling in general – and sitting back riding a Hog (a big Harley V-twin) in particular.

Harleys are a special breed; you either get them or you don't. The riders of Japanese pocket rockets who wish to scream around at 300 km/h, scraping their foot pegs on every corner, don't understand us – and we don't understand them. For those of us who ride Harleys, even the new sports models, the pleasure of sitting there, feet up on forward pegs at 120 km/h, with the unique sound of a Milwaukee engine throbbing and

resonating through a set of Screaming Eagle pipes, is unsurpassed. Unlike the Japanese racers, the public love us. Yes, they do. As you ride through the countryside, you'll see small children wave from their cars while their parents look wistfully at you as you thunder along. For Harley drivers are the last vestiges of freedom.

To share the passion that they evoke, I went to see a collector of the original Harleys in South Africa.

The 58-year-old James Smith* bought his first Harley-Davidson while at university in 1971. At the time he was riding Hondas, which were at the cutting-edge of bike technology, but he thought it would be far cooler to ride to university on a rare bike. So he splashed out R500 on a Model U and a passion was born.

FROM CUTTING-EDGE TO CLASSIC

'At the time Harleys weren't imported into South Africa. The only Harleys available were the Second World War army surplus bikes, which were used for despatch riders and were supplied to the Allied forces,' he said, adding, 'They weren't used by the American army itself and, to this day, are hardly known of within the US. They were given the special designation "U" and differed from the US army models in that they had 1200 cc engines rather than the 750s run by the Americans. They are known as 10/12s in South Africa. No one seems to know quite why, but urban legend has it that the designation refers to the fact that they were stored in Hangar 10/12.'

After the end of hostilities, the South African army sold off its remaining stock at knock-down prices to South Africans. While some were doubtless ridden, many were bought by farmers and put to a multitude of tasks, including ploughing and use as engines to drive water pumps. Many remain in barns to this day, the farmers resolutely refusing to sell them and declaring that they are going to restore them one day.

It was this genre of bikes that really interested James. Although he had by now bought a Heritage Softail, it was the unique old military bikes that were his passion. So, as funds permitted, he



began to search for the ex-army Harleys and acquire them when he could.

'In 1997 I attended a sale of old bikes at Villiersdorp in the Western Cape with a friend. Unfortunately, arriving a day after the sale began, only two bikes were left and they were due to be exported. Most of the bikes in the sale had been exported,' he remarked, wistfully.

Deciding that it would be a tragedy for South Africa to lose this part of its history, he persuaded the owner to cancel the sale and let him and his friend buy the bikes, agreeing to the condition that they'd be restored and remain in South Africa.

They agreed and James took home a 1942 Model U with sidecar.

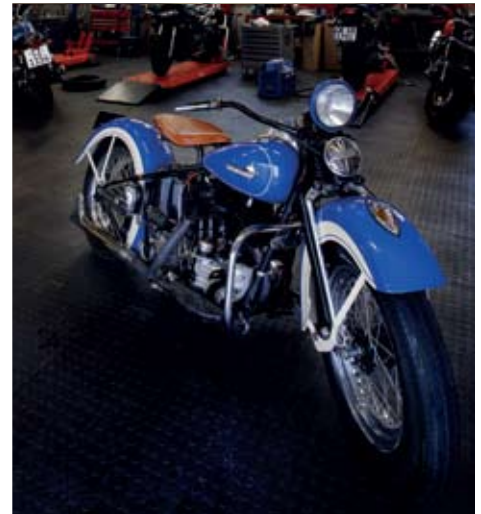
He now has a collection of no less than four vintage Harleys. They are all 1200 cc Model Us with the distinctive Flathead motor of the time. Some are being restored to their former glory (as they would have looked had they been civilian 750 cc bikes sold in the US) while others are being kept the way they were appearance-wise, but have all had their engines restored.

They're currently kept in his garage, but his plans include building a dedicated showroom on his property where he will have the space to add to his collection. This will also mean more bikes to loan out for the regular charity runs and events he supports.

THE COLLECTION

The first of the bikes is that very 1942 Model U with sidecar. 'Though having engine work done, it has been deliberately kept in its original "army" condition,' James said. 'It looks a trifle worn – as indeed it should – but it sees service every year during the annual charity Toy Run, at which time the sidecar is filled with toys for disadvantaged kids.'

The second bike is a stunner. Also a Model U, it was rebuilt by former South African racing driver Pieter de Klerk over a period of six years. It has been internally balanced and runs like a modern bike. As testimony to the love and attention lavished upon it, it has won numerous Concours d'Elegance competitions on the Harley-Davidson rally circuit.



Clockwise from top left: The 1942 Model U bought in 1997; a selection of helmets in the owner's workshop; the 1942 Model U that had been sitting in a Harley-themed bar

'It looks a trifle worn – as indeed it should – but it sees service every year during the annual charity Toy Run'

The third Model U, vintage 1947, was bought in 1995 from a Durban stockbroker. In 2006 James was asked to participate in an 'Oldies' race in the David Piper Race Series for classic cars and bikes. The Harley was stripped to its bare essentials – frame, tank, motor and wheels – and raced around Cape Town's Killarney track.

The fourth and last of the Model Us was restored in Lichtenburg in 1994 and had been sitting in a special Harley-themed bar in a private home. 'It hadn't been ridden for more than a decade and was taken as part payment of a debt. It has now been repainted and will shortly be hitting the road again,' says James.

'All the bikes in the collection are loved and are going to be used. I hope to get together the tiny number of Model Us, and the smaller 750 cc 5/7s still running and persuade owners to get together annually for a local nostalgia run,' he says.

And that seems to be the common passion inspired by those who ride American; whether it be vintage bikes lovingly restored or today's super-fast V-Rod Muscle bike. With the wind in your face and a growling V-twin throbbing between your legs, you are today's knight in shining armour. You are, in short, master of your universe. ①

**James Smith is a pseudonym. The owner wishes to protect his privacy.*