

Tempo Giusto: In Praise of the

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Most motorcyclists ride quickly – life on two wheels corrupts any regard for speed limits. But why do we hurry so, when the rewards for slowing are manifold?

WW Ride

The little road off the highway leading to the rally campground was two miles of *Slow to 35* corners, the kind that make you gear down, speed up, and focus on the apex. It's a hard-wired response, genetically encoded. Humankind was made to zoom through the twisties, right?

Joe said, "Coming up the road to the campsite I was going about 40, just looking around. I loved the way the trees formed a canopy overhead."

Canopy? What canopy? I remembered the dip and the sweet right-hander, but no trees. I vaguely recalled a green

background.

Next time I slowed down instead of speeding up, ambled in third gear. Damned if Joe wasn't right. Canopy. Monumental cedars. Amazing.

Joe rode a Harley Springer that was so shiny I had to put my sunglasses back on, but he'd been to Alaska three times on it. He said, "On my last trip I met these guys who invited me to ride with them, and after about 20 minutes they stopped and said, 'You've got to ride faster. We go about 85.' I said, 'Well I ride 65 so you better go ahead.' Here in

By Ted Bishop / Illustration by Douglas Fraser



Oregon I ride *fifty-five*”— he spread his hands in a gesture of satisfaction with the wise state legislators—“because I can. The driving is my sightseeing.”

He wants to take the Cassiar Highway into the Yukon. I thought you had to have a dual-sport to ride that road, but Joe said, “You can go pretty much anywhere on a motorcycle as long as you take it slow.”

2

We were at the Tynda rally in Eugene, Oregon, an event that attracts serious adventure touring bikes with well-scarred skid plates and decals from diverse continents. Dave Smith was going round the world on a 1967 Ducati 250. Where Joe’s bike sparkled (“Like



they say, you don’t have enough chrome until the garage floor cracks”) Dave’s bike dripped. It was an assortment of bits, with a spring-loaded single seat off an Enfield, a fuel filter hanging out in the breeze, and panniers that looked like ice buckets, loaded with tools.

“It breaks down pretty well every day,” he said, “But I can fix the simple stuff.” That would give him a chance to take in his surroundings.

When Dave’s previous Ducati blew up in Australia he travelled to India and bought a Royal Enfield. “The 350 cc,” he said. “I figured the 500 would be too high strung.” On the group ride, chest to the tank, left arm tucked in, Dave hit 79 mph. “Call it 80,” I said. I’d been riding behind him, enjoying the sound of the mighty 250 booming through the Conti pipe. “Really?” he said. “The speedo waggles all over above 40 so I never know.”

He was as pleased as if he’d broken a record on the Bonneville Salt Flats. On a K1200S you’d have to hit 300 km/h to match the thrill.

3

Easy Rider featured endless takes of Captain America and Billy loping across the American Southwest. These were the images that enthralled audiences in Europe and captured a generation at home. In Canada we had no buttes or mesas but it didn’t matter. This was a landscape of the mind, and we savoured it. Speed wasn’t part of it.

In *The Wild One* Brando looks placid and unruffled (as well he might, since most of the motorcycle sequences were back-screen projection). He may be wild, but his riding is almost meditative.

In *Lawrence of Arabia* Peter O’Toole chuffs along on his Brough, moving briskly but not blasting down the country road. Though we know Lawrence is about to die, it is a sequence that makes us want to ride. A friend who was ride captain of his BMW club told me, “It was that scene that made me a motorcyclist.”

4

We’ve all heard (or said), “Yeah, I went to Vegas straight down the freeway, 160 km/h all the way.”

Or, “I rode to Mexico City in three days.”

Or, “I rode back from Winnipeg in one day.” (Why does no-one ever say, “I rode to Winnipeg in one day”?)

I admire, I sympathize. It’s the country we live in. But these ride

stories can take on the character of what my friend Steve calls “dick measuring”—My Odometer’s Bigger than Your Odometer. What you never hear is, “Yep, I put together ten 300-kilometre days!”

Yet there are millions out there who live to ramble, not to race. This too is motorcycling.

5

It’s about pleasure.

Italy, land of fast motorcycles, is also home to the Slow Food movement, started in the late ’80s by Carlo Petrini, who was outraged by McDonalds setting up one of their fast food outlets by the Spanish Steps in Rome. The aim is to linger.

In Milan Kundera’s novella *Slowness* the aristocratic French mistress says, “When we are too ardent, we are less subtle. When we rush to sensual pleasure, we blur all the delights along the way.”

That’s it: we crave speed but we risk blurring other delights. Uwe Klieint of the *Tempo Giusto* movement (it’s pronounced “JUICE-toe” and means “just right”), dedicated to slowing down classical music, says, “It is stupid to drink a glass of wine quickly. And it is stupid to play Mozart too fast.” Sometimes you do just want to knock back a shot of tequila or play AC DC but there are other pleasures you want to take more slowly.

A Dairy Queen Blizzard is swell, but a tiramisu, with Belgian chocolate grated over the lady fingers laid, sodden with espresso and marsala, on creamy mascarpone cheese with the folded-in egg whites you whipped 100 strokes in a cold bowl ... that you’ll remember.

There are roads like that.

There are special highway guides to find them, with video links

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that show riders slicing apexes like samurais, dispatching one, moving on to the next. That's great. All I'm saying is there's another thrill. Ride the same road slowly. It's like tantric sex as opposed to a whambamthankyoumam in the stairwell at your cousin's wedding reception.

That freeway to Vegas is the equivalent of a Big Mac—empty calories, a taste more like cardboard than cow, and if you do it too often you will wind up fat and pasty.

6

The conversation spread—my friend Dave Radford, here at his first rally before setting off for Europe and the Middle East, said, "This is great! It's like a bunch of alcoholics getting together to talk about their favourite booze!"

Soon everyone was telling me about someone who makes a policy of plonking along. "I've got a new Enfield at home that's perfect at 100 km/h. . . . I know a guy in Germany who has 250,000 kilometres on his Beemer and never goes over 110. . . . Have you seen Zdenek's Ural?"

He had driven down from Vancouver in a new green Ural sidecar rig, "It's slow," he said simply. Doris Maron, who spent two years riding round the world, left her ST1300 in camp to ride to dinner in the sidecar. She looked happy.

Rally organizer Eric Haws, who has worn out motorcycles crossing Siberia (he told me the R100 GS was not reliable; his wife Gail told me there were no roads) said, "I ride at 65."

7

There are models for the long slow ride: *Jupiter's Travels*, *Long Way Round*, or, best of all, *One Man Caravan*. The challenge arises when you don't have a year off, when you want to pack as much as you can into a long weekend, and part of the challenge is the bike. Every motorcycle, like every piece of music, has its own inherent pace, its own *tempo giusto*, the speed that is just right. For many motorcycles the just-right speed is twice the legal limit.

The last time I talked to Herb Harris, the Vincent collector in Texas, he was driving some turbo-charged Japanese bike. "Wickedly fast," he said. "A friend sold it to me because he said it was too fast. That makes no sense. If you want to drive it slower, just drive it slower."

"Yes," I said, but his friend was right. Riding my Ducati Monster at exactly 100 km/h is like dealing with a four-year-old at the mall: it's always trying to take off.

My first inkling that there might be another way came years ago when talking to a Cagiva dealer who rode a Harley. He saw my disappointment (I was young; I'd come lusting after Italian exotics), "I lost my licence three times driving Cagivas and Ducatis," he said. "The Harley is the only bike I could enjoy riding at legal speed limits."

My friend Pasquale is just back from 10 days puttering through B.C. on his 1974 Moto Guzzi 850T. He also owns a black Laverda Corsa that looks like Darth Vader, doesn't like to turn, and shakes the fillings out of your teeth at anything under 160. It sits in his garage. "I want something with the zen of my Volkswagen van, a machine I can drive happily slowly for hours."

8

Instances of slow have been seeping into the motoring press—a story of a guy touring on a Honda Ruckus; rave reviews by knee-



scraping journalists of the little 125 Honda; road tests that question the press launch as an exercise that makes the crotch rocket the standard of measurement. Ignoring the *tempo giusto*.

Still, there's a prejudice against slowing down, says Canadian writer Carl Honoree in his book *In Praise of Slow*: "Saying no to speed takes courage." Slow can be downright dangerous—Joe says when he rides the speed limit people behind him get angry, ride his bumper, offer him the finger when they flick past.

And it's not easy being slow. Like hatha yoga, the first few times are excruciating.

Yet as your speed comes down your vision swings outward. Your shoulders relax. You stop thinking about speed traps. You don't think you're thinking about cops, because over the years you've trained your neural net to respond to radar waves, and you instinctively slow on the hill that hides the radar gun. But if you ride the speed limit a slight pressure, one you didn't even know existed, releases.

9

Coming out of the concert hall up on the mountain in Banff, where young musicians had been performing Beethoven's 7th, I thought, maybe a long ride should be like a symphony. If it's all *allegro* it becomes like those crazy bluegrass sessions where the picking starts fast and just gets faster. An *andante* movement defines the fast; you feel how much pleasure can be wrung from a single note, a single turn. At the end both movements resonate within you.

I presented this theory to my partner Hsing, a classical musician, thinking she'd be impressed. She said, "This is just an excuse to buy another motorcycle. I know you."

I feigned aggrieved innocence. Did she know that before the concert I'd heard the throb of an old Guzzi Eldorado coming up the hill?

I dropped the topic, but this winter I'm going to be scanning the classifieds for an old thumper, a mile-muncher, not a road-burner. There's a new breed of rebel out there, and they're riding any damn speed they like. I'm going to tattoo "Born to Burble" across my chest and join them. <<

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