

The Third Wheel

Russian Sidecar Motorcycle Offers a Really Retro Ride

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Between a two-wheeled motorcycle and a four-wheel car rides the sidecar motorcycle.

A sidecar "rig" is attached to the right side of a regular two-wheeled motorcycle and is supported by a third wheel. Russia's Ural is one of very few manufacturers to sell sidecar motorcycles, which offer vastly more passenger and cargo space than a typical motorcycle.



Motorcycle makers are going retro. To a regular motorcyclist, a ride on Ural's Patrol 750 model is a very different experience. Instead of leaning into turns, the Patrol has to be muscled around by the handlebars. On left turns the sidecar acts as a stabilizer, but on right turns centrifugal force can pull the sidecar up in the air -- a white-knuckled experience for beginners.

Ural's Patrol 750, \$9,795, features old-fashioned styling and technology.

The Patrol, priced at \$9,795, is suited for relaxed rides around town thanks to its retro styling and extra space. On a Sunday morning test drive, other drivers and pedestrians offered thumbs up as the Patrol, clad in dark green paint, passed by.

Driving a sidecar motorcycle feels more like driving a car than a two-wheeler, though its unusual physics leads the Patrol to wiggle around the road. The third wheel comes in handy when stopping for traffic lights -- no need to put a foot down for stability -- and parking is much easier.

Sidecar passengers get a soft seat with plenty of legroom and a windshield that eases windblast. Because the seat height is similar to a car, riding in the sidecar feels more like being in a convertible than a motorcycle.

The Patrol's retro styling is more than skin deep. Ural's models are based on a BMW design from the 1930s. In the run-up to World War II, Soviet engineers disassembled and copied the design of the BMW R71 to create a battle-ready vehicle, according to the company.

Ural, which produces the bike in its factory on the edge of Siberia, has made some updates, but the Patrol is still powered by a pushrod engine that produces 40 horsepower, around half of what most modern motorcycles have.

With its modest power, a four-speed gearbox -- most modern motorcycles have at least five gears and six is becoming commonplace -- and hefty curb weight of 739 pounds, the Patrol is rather slow. It will keep up with traffic on local roads, but the company says the maximum speed is only 62 miles an hour, far below typical speeds on U.S. highways. Ural says fuel economy is between 26 and 33 miles per gallon.

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Besides the extra storage space provided by the sidecar's trunk, the Patrol has a number of clever features that further differentiate it from two-wheelers, including a reverse gear and a parking brake. Another part of its retro design is a kick starter, once standard on motorcycles, but rare now that electric starters are reliable.

The Patrol has the ability to power the third wheel when off-road or in slippery conditions, similar to four-wheel-drive in a Jeep. Along with Ural's Gear Up model, which features camouflage green paint, the Patrol is being marketed as a "sport-utility motorcycle" that can handle backwoods riding for hunters and outdoor enthusiasts.

The Patrol's off-road ability is further evident at low speeds, where the third wheel gives it an incredibly tight turning circle – the bike feels like it can almost pivot in place.

Ural (www.ural.com) sold just over 500 motorcycles in the U.S. last year and just more than 2,000 world-wide, according to Madina Merzhoyeva, vice president of marketing and sales for the company's U.S. unit. During the communist era the factory produced as many as 130,000 bikes a year and Urals provided reliable transportation for families in the the Soviet Union, she said.

In the U.S., Ms. Merzhoyeva says Ural has been working to overcome poor quality that plagued its models in the 1990s. Urals now come with a two-year warranty and she says the company has made many changes to improve fit and finish in recent years. It also plans to introduce new features, including a fuel-injected engine.

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