

Ready to RIDE

Local Vespa Club brings motor-scooter enthusiasts together

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Believe it or not, Vespa riders get plenty of love from Harley-Davidson riders.

Just ask Roger Vandever, president of the Vespa Club of Monterey, who recently went on a ride with fellow Vespa and scooter owners to the Fourth of July bike rally in Hollister.

"There's a fun kind of attraction between Harley guys and Vespas," said Vandever, noting that whenever he shows up to a bike rally on his Vespa, he is usually besieged by one or two Harley riders. "Sports-bike guys, not so much."

The Italian-made motor scooters were originally built after World War II, when the Piaggio warplane factories were bombed out.

A strong need existed for transportation and for the country to get back on its feet — and on the road. The Vespa engine was the original airplane starter motor and the small wheels were aircraft landing gear.

Vespas range in price from \$3,199 for the LX 50 model to as much as \$7,299 for the limited edition GT 60. Locals can purchase the bikes at Vespa Monterey in the Seaside Auto Mall.

On the Peninsula, Vespa club riders can be seen cruising to Diva Dulce near Fisherman's Wharf, or parked outside the Starbucks at Stone Creek Center off Highway 68, sipping lattes rather than pounding a few cold ones.

"A lot of scooter clubs drink a lot, that's a part of the culture," Jones said. "What kind of keeps our group together is that we don't (drink). We like to ride our scooters and drink coffee. We keep it safe and sane."

"(We're) cafe racers," Vandever said.

The bikes have enjoyed a spike in popularity in the U.S. since the start of the 21st century. Nowadays, with gas prices fluctuating between too expensive and way too expensive, fuel-efficient Vespas that average 70 miles per gallon are a popular alternative.

"That's all the benefits we enjoy, but I just like to ride them. I just like the way they look. I like the way they sound. I like the way they feel," said Vandever, who along with another Peninsula resident, Ken Jones, founded the club in 2006.

"I was looking for some people to ride with," said Vandever. "I couldn't find anyone, until I met Ken, who was just as serious as I was."

Riding in eco-friendly style, the Vespa crew is content to do things their way. While certainly not road kings, their shiny vessels do carry a regal charm.

"I'm just as happy going 45 to 55 miles per hour than going 75," said Vandever. That's because even the most powerful Vespa engines top out at 70 mph. Then again, practicality is as much as part of the Vespa aesthetic as speed is to your average racing bike owner.

The club meets several times a month, regularly on Tuesdays at Diva Dulce in Monterey. Weekend rides are also part of the club's routine, with trips down the coast to Big Sur as well as bike rallies in Hollister and San Jose.

Mark Dostal, a club member, rides his GTS 250 IE to work every day at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Leery of the parking hassles, Dostal bought his Vespa and hasn't dealt with parking troubles since.

The club has reached out to the Transportation Agency of Monterey County and the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments to get more road room and parking for scooters.

"I'd like to see bike lanes converted for commuters with scooters," said Vandever. "If we can somehow persuade them to do that, it would take a lot of big cars off the highway."

In the meantime, the club has been making the rounds elsewhere in the community. They were a part of the Pacific Grove Good Old Days Festival in April. They will be on display this week at the Concours d'Elegance.

For Jones, it's all about good times and good riding with friends. "There's so much love for these things," said Jones. "It's communal. It's a camaraderie."

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