

# YOU LOOKIN' AT ME?

*Joe St. Romain's unusual XL*



## IT TAKES A CERTAIN KIND OF MAN TO RIDE WITH A SIDECAR. YOU KNOW, THE GRIZZLED ROAD TRAMP CAPTAINING SOME RATTLETRAP CROSS-COUNTRY WITH HIS

equally grizzled dog in the bucket, both sporting WW II bomber goggles. I'm pleased to report Joe St. Romain is not such a man. In place of the dog is Joe's lovely wife, Deborah, and in place of the rattletrap is the gorgeous orange Sportster you see here. That's right, I said Sportster. Never heard of a Sportster with a sidecar? Well, neither had Joe, but that comes later.

To get the full picture, you've got to go way back to 1968, when a 15-year-old Joe found himself the proud owner of a Honda Super 90 after a friend had abandoned it

for a whoppin' 150cc. The law at the time allowed a young, up-and-coming troublemaker to get a motorcycle license at 15 — no insurance needed! Car licenses were still your standard 16; I guess the philosophy was "Heck, boy, on a bike you're only going to nail yourself." Joe kitted that 90 out with straight pipes and a set of ape-hangers pulled off his banana-seat bicycle. Sure, those apes looked like the business, but they had a pesky way of fouling up the throttle cable and getting it stuck on full twist. "If you wanted to go fast, you had to sort of ease into it and wait about 10 or 15 minutes," Joe remembers. "But if you just gunned it real quick, well, it would stick, so you had to reach down, unscrew the carburetor, and jiggle the line to bring it around." Fast being a "blistering 43 mph," Joe wasn't ever in too much danger, but the bike sure had a certain character.

Much fun was had during those formative years, but when Uncle Sam came calling in the early '70s, Joe had to put away his open-road dreams for military service in Vietnam. No one likes having to go to war, but at least Joe was assigned the task of being an electrical aircraft engineer, which would prove useful in later years. After returning from the war, Joe's two-wheeled hankering was put on hold once more when he was drafted yet again — this time into marriage. Luckily for him, it was with a wonderful woman, and four children followed which pretty much ate up the rest of the '70s, '80s, and '90s.

Now, don't get the wrong idea. Plenty of wrenching was done in that span of time, mostly on old muscle cars and the like, but it wasn't until 2001 that Joe and Deborah let out a gargantuan sigh of relief upon realizing that the kids were grown and the time had come. So what did Joe do with all that pent-up desire for mega-horsepower freedom? He went down

to the local Harley dealership and bought a green 883 Sportster. Okay, not exactly the money shot one would imagine, but it had been 30 years, and his last bike was a mere 90. The Sporty was almost an 800cc improvement, and that's when things got interesting.

While milling around the dealership, Joe overheard some guys talking. "I heard two words that didn't go together — Sportster and sidecar," Joe recalls. So he struck up a conversation. Turns out there was a small company by the name of Liberty Sidecar in Seattle that manufactured such a thing, and one of the guys knew someone who had one he was itching to get rid of sitting in his barn. Before long, Joe was riding around on a green Sportster with a maroon sidecar. Clearly, something had to be done. Drawing upon his engineering background, and his 30-year-old goal of a really cool bike, Joe started crafting.



PHOTOS BY MITCH ST. ROMAN

## READER'S RIDE

One thing he noticed right off was that the bike looked kind of scrawny next to that nice wide sidecar. The solution was another thing you rarely see on a Sportster: hardbags. "Without the bags," Joe believes, "I think people would look at me and say, 'Hey, look at that bobsled trying to pass that motorcycle.' Now it looks more like a single unit." That said, the addition of the bags presented the annoying problem of having to dismantle the rear tail-lights anytime he wanted to remove the bags. Joe corrected this by mounting the lights on a hidden bracket underneath the license plate. The result is a bike that can be converted to have three distinct looks in a short amount of time. It only takes 20 minutes to pull the sidecar, and another 10 to lose the bags.

Joe also believes in continuity. Once he and Deborah agreed on that eye-popping orange hue, he set out to cover every logical inch of the bike with it. One particularly clever detail is that all of the recessed lettering on the control, gas, and oil caps is orange as well. He achieved this by painting the entire surface of each item, waiting until they got tacky, then gently wiping them down with



paint thinner, leaving only the recessed part orange. It makes for an interesting look.

Other modifications include a high-flow air cleaner, Thunder Jet kit, Screamin' Eagle exhaust, custom orange seat (cut and shaved by Joe, and stitched by Deborah, a seamstress by trade), dual front brakes, and a lowered Progressive Suspension upgraded front end (complemented with a White Brothers rear). He also added dual discs on the XL's bow, and a single disc from a Dyna to the sidecar to prevent its tendency to pull the bike's back end out upon braking. "Now, even with the sidecar, the

thing will stop on a dime, and even give you some change," quips our man. The final touch, however, to further distance himself from his old Honda 90, was for Joe to convert the engine to a 1200 with ported and polished heads, hot cams, and ignition. "It goes real good. It's got some unctio to function, that's for sure. Whenever my youngest son, Mitch, comes back he always has a big smile saying, 'Man! This thing is pissed off.'"

Yeah, there's no doubt it takes a certain kind of man to ride with a sidecar. Eventually, I asked the inevitable question: "Why a sidecar?" Joe's response was typical Joe. "Well, my wife loves it. And I'll put it like this. You know when you're in a boat and your going 30 and it feels like 60? Well, in that sidecar when you're going 60, it feels like 120. Everybody that gets in it feels like they just came back from Six Flags. And you know, I'm different, and I like my machine to be different, too." You can't argue with that. Thank God they never made a sidecar for a Honda Super 90. **AIM**

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