

motorbike or donorbike?

The Chief Executive explains why he rides a bike

My house is between five and six miles from the College (depending on the route I take), but unfortunately it is on the opposite side of the city. The most direct route involves crossing 12 sets of traffic lights. Early one morning, when the schools were on holiday (which in Edinburgh makes a huge difference to traffic), I achieved a door-to-door journey time of just over 13 minutes. I did not break the speed limit (well, perhaps marginally) or any other law. That's why I ride a bike.

I have been riding bikes since I was 16. My first foray was on a 50cc moped that was lent to me by a friend who had gone off to boarding school. In my mind this immediately put me in the 'Easy Rider' league, and I have never looked back. Next was my trusty Honda CB 125 – I couldn't afford anything else. In total I commuted nearly 25,000 miles on that bike in different places all over the country. Perhaps the most fun I had was on an old Suzuki 90 that I drove for 12 months whilst stationed in Singapore. When it rained I would stop the bike, take off all my clothes (well nearly all), put them in a waterproof pannier and carry on riding. The only disadvantage was that I ended up with shoes full of water. By anybody's standards the bike was long past its sell-by date, so what could I do with it when it came to leave? Well, there was a long fuelling jetty stretching out into the Singapore Strait from Sembawang shipyard. I accelerated



along the jetty, fuelled by Singapore Slings, and flew off the end at 55 miles an hour. It was a really very silly thing to do, but good fun. That's why I ride a bike.

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I now ride a Honda CB 500 twin, which I think is probably the best commuter bike going today. It has a bit of power (acceleration is most important), a bit of speed, it's reliable and it's economical and has good looks. A donor bike? I have had a lot of professional instruction, which I advocate as an essential for any rider. A recent birthday present from my wife was two days with a police instructor. I ride cautiously and have learned never to be aggressive and rarely fast – there is no need. I always wear armoured leathers – if you are going to scrape skin then make sure it is someone else's. The biggest hazards are thoughtless or inexperienced drivers, shiny drain covers, sharp left-hand curves, ice (get the bus) and ego – never be tempted to take on a boy racer! And never drink and bike.

Sometimes it does some good to test the extremes (your's and the bike's). The fastest I have been is 137 mph on a friend's BMW 1100, but that was in good conditions, on a clear morning and on a clear road that I knew very well. It was exhilarating. On a summer day, on an open road, travelling on a bike is fun. It's a fairground ride. You are wide-awake, alert – like riding a very fast horse.

What are the problems? Gear. People are sometimes taken aback when you walk into an important meeting in your leathers, but nobody has yet invented a lightweight, armoured coverall that you can wear over a suit without getting too hot and sweaty. Cold is rarely a problem – you can overcome that. I think manufacturers should now give much more thought to us hardy commuters. Most new bikes seem to be geared (literally) towards racing or that loathsome noisy band of Sunday screamers in designer gear who are intent on taking the engine to the top of the tacho. I want a low-slung commuter bike with weather protective fairing, a pannier that can take a helmet and a simple means of clipping on a laptop and a briefcase.

Have I ever fallen off? Yes, twice. No serious injury other than to my ego and the bike. When will I stop? When I can no longer get my leg over!



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