



EAST SIDE WEST SIDE

SCOOTING IN NEW YORK

By Karryll Nason
Photos by Jonathan Perkel, New York Scooter Club

Once upon a time, I used to get to New York several times a year. But that was a while back, before I had become interested in (some would say obsessed with) scooters. Then I knew nothing about the Big Apple scooter scene. But I was recently introduced to Allison Watters, one of the founders of the New York Scooter Club, the largest and most diverse scooter club in the New York metropolitan area.

"If you have a scooter, you're in the Club"

Established in 2005, the New York Scooter Club was a natural outgrowth of the Wednesday Night Meetup at the Brass Monkey in the city's trendy meat packing district, which attracts 20 to 40 scooterists every week. It's an ideal way to meet new people and make connections with others who share your interests, especially if you are new to New York. The website couldn't be more welcoming, as it trumpets the club motto: "If you have a Scooter, you're in the Club!"

This is a club with a loose organization, few requirements and no rules. There is no hierarchy of officers, simply a group of "organizers" who keep things running. When asked how many members are in the Club, Allison replies, "That's hard to say, and it depends on what kind of membership you're talking about." There are members who only participate online, in the Club Forum, others who don't ever go online and just show up for Wednesday evenings and other events, and those who do both. The Club website (www.nyscooterclub.com) is very nicely done and is a good resource for newcomers to New York and its scooter scene.

The Club's rather casual organization is deliberate, since one of the reasons the Club was formed was to provide an easier, more inclusive alternative to the many existing scooter clubs in the area that focus on one type of scooter (vintage vs. modern or one particular marque) and may be joined by invitation only. The original seven organizers of the New York Scooter Club wanted a group where everyone—and every scooter—was welcome. Allison waxes enthusiastic about the absolutely diverse make-up of not only the Club but the scooter community in general—all ages, all socio-economic groups, all ethnicities, all bound by a common love of scooters.

The state of scooting in New York City

First, a bit of history. There have always been scooters in NYC, but before 2001, they were pretty much all vintage scooters maintained and ridden by close-knit groups of aficionados. When Vespa/Piaggio re-entered the US market in 2001, with other makers shortly following suit, the scooter community began to broaden as modern scooters appeared on the streets of the city. For a time, there was some resistance on the part of the vintage scooterists, who looked upon the shiny new "twist and go" scoots as posing arrivistes. As time went on, the two groups discovered they had more similarities than differences. According to Allison, many scooterists begin with a modern scooter, then switch to a vintage model. She herself began with a Vespa but now rides a modern Stella—legal in New York and a popular choice for those who want a vintage look and feel with more reliability.

Among the modern scooters, Vespas—particularly GT and GTS models—are in the forefront, thanks to Piaggio's aggressive marketing. Other makes, including Genuine's red hot Buddy, are proliferating, but apparently maxi-scooters have not taken New York by storm. At least, not yet.

Parking and other perplexities

Allison was quick to point out that in New York, unlike San Francisco, a scooter is not generally considered an alternative to a car, or even in most cases to public transportation (which is much more pervasive and efficient in New York than in San Francisco). Although some scooterists do commute by scoot, parking is a major concern, since dedicated motorcycle/scooter parking is very scarce. In fact, the parking situation is probably the biggest hesitation a would-be scooterist in New York confronts. To call attention to and help ease the parking problem, Piaggio subsidized parking at a number of garages and locations throughout the city last summer. Some garages do offer monthly parking to bikes, but by and large, "secret" parking spots, once discovered, are jealously guarded by New York scooterists. Street parking between cars is relatively easy to find but dangerous, as scooters are often knocked over or dented by cars whose owners "park by feel." As in San Francisco, it is illegal in New York to park on the sidewalk, but it sounds as though New York's meter minders are far more zealous about ticketing offenders. Many scooterists do it anyway and avoid tickets by removing their license plates.

One member of the New York Scooter Club referred to parking as "a rogue activity."

The current big issue in the two-wheel community is the proposed "congestion pricing" plan, an idea borrowed from London, whereby vehicles entering Manhattan from 86th Street southward would be charged \$8. So far, two-wheeled vehicles (other than bicycles) are not exempt from this charge. This seems unfair to motorcycle and scooter riders, since their two-wheeled vehicles help to cut down on traffic congestion as well as pollution. A study conducted by Vespa/Piaggio found that if 20% of the cars in Manhattan were replaced with scooters, every driver in Manhattan would save 100 hours a year that are currently lost in traffic. Vespa reports that sales have doubled in the past two years, with increasing numbers of people choosing scooters to make multiple, quick trips around town, particularly those in such occupations as real estate, event planning, even wine merchants who deliver. Some brave souls ride year 'round and in inclement weather, though for many scooterists, riding is a seasonal pastime.

The good ol' summertime

Scooters come out to play on warm summer evenings and attendance at the Wednesday Night Meetup balloons, as scooters become a major source of socializing. Weekend excursions ride from the city to less congested areas, such as Piermont, along the Hudson River and the home of the neighboring Rockland Scooter Club, as well as rallies in Niagara and Philadelphia. Fall rides to the apple orchards are a tradition. New York Scooter

Club and Rockland Scooter Club in Piermont sponsor the Scooter Block Party NYC, held this year on May 31st and June 1st. The free event welcomes everyone, with food, beer, patches, T-shirts, live music, a raffle, slow races and rides to Piermont, Greenwich Village, Brooklyn, New Jersey and Times Square at night. Brooklynbretta, a favorite local scooter shop hosts a BBQ. If you want to see what scooter riding in New York looks like, check out the video from last year's Block Party at <http://nyscooterclub.com/scooter-blockparty-nyc-2008>.

As in San Francisco, New York scooterists have their favorite shops, though interestingly, they are not directly in Manhattan. One favorite is Brooklynbretta, in Brooklyn, which services and sells vintage Lambrettas and Vespas, as well as modern scoots, including Genuine's Buddy and Stella and SYM models. Like SF Scooter Centre, it's something of a hang out, with summertime BBQs and music fests. Another favorite is Scooters Originali, in Orange, New Jersey. One of the oldest scooter shops in the US, this shop owned by Gene Merideth specializes in vintage and new Vespa and Lambrettas and is known for its meticulous restorations. There are also shops dedicated to vintage scooters, as well as two Vespa shops in SoHo and Queens.

If any Bay Area scooterists find themselves in New York, they're invited to the Wednesday Night Meetup, 7 pm at the Brass Monkey (55 Little West 12th Street in the Meat Packing District). You won't feel like a stranger for long. ●