

NEW YORK'S SCOOTER SCENE

TWO-WHEELED TRIBES

Text and Photography: John Flores

New York, New York. So nice they had to name it twice. The Big Apple. Gotham, the city that never sleeps, is an unlikely place to find two-wheeled communion, plagued as it is with manic cabbies, potholes that swallow small children, and suburban sprawl that pushes any scenic back roads well beyond the city limits. But like dandelions growing in sidewalk cracks, a thriving two-wheeled community sprouts in the quieter, lesser-known corners of the metropolis.

🔊 *Twist-and-Go rides are a booming part of the scooter market.*

On Monday nights, the local racing crowd gathers at Bar Matchless in Brooklyn to talk speed. They come to bench race and talk about their heroes. On Tuesday nights, motorcyclists park up at the Ear Inn in the West Village. They've been gathering here for years, an eclectic crew of folks that range from those who have ridden all over the world to the guy who just bought a brand-new Ducati. And on Wednesday nights, at the edge of the Meatpacking District (the hottest neighborhood in the

city), the proponents of a new tradition, scooterists of all persuasions, gather at the Brass Monkey on Little West 12th Street for a drink, a hang, and a ride.

I've barely taken my helmet off when I am approached by one of them. A NYC cop whose on-the-job training has included scooters and Harleys, he's clearly been bitten by the bug. He's bought his own scooter and become a regular at these Wednesday night meets. We talk scoots for a while and then part ways. Almost instantly, it happens again. Another friendly bystander wants to hold another amicable, incidental chat. And then it happens again. And again. And again.

This is aberrant behavior for typical New Yorkers, routinely depicted as reticent ciphers more apt to look through you not at you on a crowded subway. By no means are all New Yorkers unfriendly, but there are so many of them, over eight million at last count, that making eye contact and starting up random conversations, with so many strangers about, could become a full-time job and doubtless make the annual task of sending out holiday cards much more onerous than it already is.

All in all, New Yorkers are very social people. They eat out a lot, due to the postage-stamp kitchens in their thank-you-note apartments and the cornucopia of



*The view from
Liberty State Park.*





👁 A bug-eyed view of the “scene” at the Brass Monkey.

wonderful restaurants for eating, drinking and being merry in. Many of them also come in large numbers from somewhere else, from towns and cities around the country and the world. Giving New York an unmatched diversity and vibrancy, its citizens naturally seek out people with similar interests and aspirations. One rider characterizes it this way: You come to New York to meet people and scooters are a great way to do that. And if the vibe from my first five minutes outside the Brass Monkey is any indication, he’s right. Over and above their style and practicality, scooters fairly ooze approachability, helping this set of New Yorkers to find other like-minded souls among the huddled masses.

Wednesday nights at the Brass Monkey are organized by the New

York Scooter Club, one of the newest scooter associations in the city. Founded last fall, the group has already grown by leaps and bounds, building upon the momentum of scooter sales fueled by new enthusiasts attracted to the low-maintenance, 4-stroke, automatic scooter – the twist and goes (TNGs). The club isn’t just for riders of new scooters though. Embracing all members of the scooting community, experienced riders and new, the club’s motto simply states, “If you have a scooter, you’re in the club!” Their Web site (<http://www.nyscooterclub.com>) features a lively message board anyone can use for technical advice, planning trips, and generally hanging out. It’s an interesting and very diverse group of people – a cyberspace microcosm of the Big Apple itself.

However, the NY Scooter Club is not, by any means, the only flavor in town. The scooter scene is peppered with colorful characters and equally colorful clubs, as in the Mini-Mart Muchachos, the Checkered Demons, the Donne Velocis, the Jedi Knights, the Skull F***ers, the Screamin Mimis and others. Some focus on vintage scoots, others are for women only, and others are predicated on, um...handlebar mustaches. Many of these clubs have been around for years, inscribing a lasting impression on the local and national scooter scene. In many ways some of these clubs’ longstanding devotion to vintage scooters helped convince Piaggio to return to the U.S. market with the Vespa brand in 2000, laying the foundation for the current boom (Piaggio USA sales were up 15





percent in 2005 and NYC Vespa sales rose 160 percent in the first four months of 2006). Links to these clubs may be found on the IScootNY site: <http://www.iscootny.com>.

When interviewed, Paolo Timoni, President of Piaggio USA, outlined the company's efforts to boost the current boom with marketing programs emphasizing education for new riders and the benefits that accrue to the individual and community from scooter ownership. With gas prices hovering around the price of one grande vanilla skim latte per gallon and the cost of filling a scooter tank requiring only a fistful of coins not a home equity loan, the individual benefits of owning a 60-to-100 MPG scooter seem pretty clear.

And in the community at large, especially in those countries still "addicted to oil," Piaggio stresses the significance of carbon emission reductions. In an open letter to U.S. mayors published in the *New York Times*, Timoni asserts that if people embraced scooter usage, they could reduce fuel consumption by 58 percent, carbon monoxide emissions by 90 percent, and carbon dioxide emissions by 80 percent. While Timoni has yet to engage New York Mayor Bloomberg in this conversation, he has spoken with other mayors and initiated a dialogue with the Department of Transportation and other authorities. Timoni will continue to push the agenda, working with city planners to create scooter-friendly urban environments and, specifically, to address the challenge of parking.

Parking is a big issue in Manhattan. You might think Manhattan is ideal scooter territory, knowing that nothing is better at getting from point A to point B in a cityscape predisposed to gridlock. But if your point B is in Midtown Manhattan, then be prepared to spend a lot of the travel time you just saved pondering where to park when you've arrived. Parking between cars is a common practice but fraught with the risk of the scooter being knocked over and crushed beneath an SUV's hulking prow or junk in the trunk. Guerilla parking tactics are employed by others who use the sidewalks – illegally. To prevent ticketing, they often detach and re-attach their licenses with Velcro. As things stand now, the only legal and safe alternatives are paying dearly for off-street parking, or finding scarce space (good luck) in a pathetic smattering of motorcycle/scooter lots. Noting

👤 *New York Scooter Club Block Party participants get ready for a group ride.*



the growing disparity between the problem and the paucity of solutions, more members of the scooter community are taking political action, organizing under the ParkingNOW! banner, in the hope of creating enough noise around the issue to wake up City Hall. So far, there is little progress to report in the people's case of "Scooter vs. Goliath."

June, parking is the last thing on riders' minds. The New York Scooter Club is holding its first ever Block Party



📍 *The Brass Monkey sits on the edge of the Meatpacking District.*

at the Brass Monkey. The street's been closed off to non two-wheeled traffic for the club's two-day coming-out party. Group rides, group meals, a scavenger hunt, and other fun events ensue, with the DJ spinning sixties R&B and Soul and all manner of scooter parked against the curb – new TNGs, impeccably restored vintage scoots, interspersed with dollops of Asian makes, including the zoomy Yamaha Morphous (which looks like the lovechild of a Honda Goldwing and the Space Shuttle), and

even a couple of motorcycles. People stroll, strike up conversations, ogle each other's rides, and bump into old friends. For the moment the parking issues and the potholes and the SUVs and the cabs and the limos and the buses and the mean streets of New York are shunted aside and all is right with the world.

I join the ride heading to Liberty State Park and trail a dozen scoots heading for the Holland Tunnel. As we work our way through traffic, bystanders turn and smile at our impromptu parade. Had we been on loud sportbikes or cruisers, we might be seen as a nuisance, a miniature version of Brando's Wild Ones. But because we sit on these small, stylish, two-wheeled wasps, we lower, for one passing moment, the defensive masks that New Yorkers use for survival. We are forgiven the minor traffic violations committed (after all, when has anyone ever fined the circus for putting too many clowns in a Volkswagen?). And as we disappear into the tunnel, I'm thinking about the people we passed – stuck in sedans, slow-burning again in a torpid tangle of traffic – who probably said to themselves, "They look like they're having fun. I ought to get a scooter..." **RR**



📍 *New York Scooter Club founders confer.*

📍 *These kids are alright.*

