

Maddog Unleashed

Four Wheels Bad, Two Wheels Good: For Now, Anyway

“Scratch any cynic and you’ll find a disappointed idealist.” —the late, great George Carlin



BY PATRICK O'GRADY

During my half-hour run this morning I saw six bicycle commuters, a lone Smart car, one motorcyclist, no scooterists and about a bazillion automobiles. Gas prices are trying to tell us something, but we don't seem to be listening.

I'm doing my bit to drive down demand, leaving the car at curbside as often as possible and either cycling or walking. I'm less dogmatic about it than I was last time Bike Month rolled around, though. Three weeks into June I've spared the Subaru 78.6 miles of urban motoring, which works out to about 3.4 gallons of gas, worth \$13.29 at current rates.

Last year I logged 103.3 “commuter” miles in the same period, but I was determined to drive nowhere, barring one trip to Pueblo for a dentist appointment. I had to make that drive again this year, and *VeloNews* summoned me to the mothership for a vigorous probing, so renouncing all motorized traffic was a losing proposition from the get-go.

Big deal. That's the problem with trying to change one's behavior, thinking in terms of all or nothing. So this June the bike is my primary mode of transportation, but I drive when driving makes sense. A hair shirt makes a lousy jersey.

Meanwhile, Back at the Scooters. The two or three of you who don't squeeze your eyelids shut and turn the page at the sight of my mugshot may recall that I went scooter shopping last month. I'd still kind of like to have one, in a casual, lower-primate/shiny-object sort of way. But what I'd really like to have is a scooter dealership, because apparently it's like owning the only liquor store in an Irish neighborhood.

The 49cc Hondas and Yamahas are gone, sold out. A few pricier Vespas, Kymcos and Genuines remain, but they're mostly two-stroke scoots, which in terms of greenhouse-gas emissions is the equivalent of owning a herd of elephants and feeding them nothing but Coors Light, Fritos and bean dip.

Doesn't matter. SUV owners who have seen the light (the red one indicating they're about to run out of gas) are snapping up these fuel-efficient little two-wheelers the way they once did suburban battle cruisers. The numbers aren't huge—The Associated Press pegs last year's sales at around 131,000 scoots. But in the first quarter of this year, despite some less-than-optimal weather that may have depressed your own business, sales shot up 24 percent, according to the Motorcycle Industry Council.

Unhappy Motoring. Nevertheless, I'm not convinced that we're seeing a dramatic change in Americans' motoring habits. When I drove to Boulder last week I noted the usual thundering herd of F-150s, Suburbans and Escalades galloping along at 20 mph over the posted limit, and the roadside campgrounds were packed to bursting with RVs.

If the price of gas keeps hovering instead of skyrocketing, I suspect these scooters are going to start turning up in the classifieds, the way Christmas exercise equipment does every February. Your average toy-crazed yuppie is going to find a scooter's cargo capacity a bit wanting when it comes to carrying golf clubs, gym bags and recyclable hemp sacks of free-range arugula. So I'm looking forward to a screamin' deal on a lightly used Yamaha in a month or two.

Unless some bright boy comes up with a nifty rack for these things, and maybe an enclosed cockpit, with remote keyless entry, climate control and MP3 player. Then I'm gonna think long and hard about launching *Scooter Retailer and Industry News*.