



Ulysses Bikers

They redefine biker gangs while reliving their youth and growing old disgracefully | Story and photography by Tim Cuff

Every Saturday morning, a jovial crowd of mickey-takers gathers around the tables of the Saltwater Café on Wakefield Quay in Nelson. The chatter over the coffee is of traffic cops, the cold weather and the last rally. And there’s a lot of talk about motorcycles. For some, the greying hair and leather jackets growing a little tighter each year belie a past life of crazy speeds and hell-raising.

Ulysses is a club for the older motorbike enthusiast. It was founded in Australia in the early 1980s, aimed at the over 50s, with a ‘junior’ membership option for those over 40. Within five years, 500 riders had joined from this side of the Tasman and branches started up in New Zealand. Their motto, Growing Old Disgracefully, doesn’t so much reflect the members’ present day activities as their attitudes to life.

“As a young girl growing up near Invercargill, I used to ride with the Arctic Angels,” says Lorraine Lindsay, the effervescent coordinator of the Nelson branch. “We used to hoon up and down the beach – anyone could do that. We’d watch Burt Munro practising on his Indian. I thought he was amazing. That bike, my God! He’d get on it and wobble down the beach and then he’d be gone; an incredible noise!”

The NMIT beauty therapy tutor is one of the figureheads of the local, and national, bike scene. She joined Ulysses in 1990. “It’s different from other bike clubs because there’s no ‘cliqueness’ regarding the type of bike you ride, or who you are or what you do. We’re just motorcyclists.”

In her 20s, Lorraine spent five years in the UK working hard to fund regular jaunts across Europe on her Honda 400, and since 2000 she’s made six biking trips in and around India. However, her sense of adventure and love of travel landed her in trouble just this year, high in the mountainous region of Kashmir.

“During a ride in one of the remote valleys near the Pakistani border, I dislocated my hip,” says the spirited 61 year old. “I have two fake hips after years of high-impact sports like high jump, hockey and teaching aerobics. I was bending over, just doing up the velcro at my ankle, when my hip popped out and wouldn’t go back in. I lay on the roadside for seven hours.”

With no means of communication, a member of her tour party drove for two hours to reach a phone. “The helicopter was going to cost \$18,000, but it couldn’t come because of bad weather. By this time,

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they'd dragged me on a board into a little guesthouse."

Lorraine has a talent for making a disaster sound like fun. "In the morning, they got me into a car and we drove for two days to an orthopaedic hospital in Dharamashala. Thankfully, the surgeon knew what to do to get my leg back in. It only took about five minutes apparently; I was out of it at the time. I then had to fly back to Delhi and catch another flight to Leh to rejoin, and complete, the tour." She's clearly not a quitter.

At a spry 68, Barry Hamilton's still got staying power too. His 750cc BMW proudly carries the badge NZ3, signifying he was the third member to join when Ulysses finally kick-started in New Zealand in 1988. With NZ1 riding in heaven and NZ2 unheard of for years, Barry is the national grandfather of the club.

"In the 50s and 60s in Dunedin, we used to be called the milk-bar cowboys," says Barry, sporting an outstanding waterfall of a white beard. "It was just like Happy Days with The Fonz. Our milk bar was called The Beaumont, and it had the jukebox and the cubicles where you sat; it was all milkshakes and sodas back then. We had 20 motorbikes lined up outside and we'd all roar away together and shatter the peace!"

The name 'Ulysses' was chosen to reflect motorcyclists' mid-life wanderlust (the Ulysses of Tennyson's poem was middle-aged and set on adventure). True to the ethos, Barry and his wife Chris sold their Dunedin house 18 months ago and now live permanently in a beautiful blue-and-silver Leyland bus. Clearly nomads at heart, there's just a hint of the grass growing around the tyres as they've settled in Motueka, where Chris works in nursing and Barry drives a winery tour bus.

However, the BMW bike is still used most days, adding to the 111,000km Barry's put on the clock since taking delivery 19 years ago. Riding since the age of 14, his first bike was a Heinkel scooter and he estimates having had 40 bikes since then.

Despite his cuddly-bear demeanour, Barry has a few shady secrets. "We used to love getting the police to chase us," he says with a cheeky grin. "They had motorbikes that weren't as fast as ours, and we'd all peel off and go down different streets. They never caught me!" He's ridden around the South Island in less than 24 hours, as part of a Gumball-style challenge, but the necessary 100kph average speed means it's not a practical (or legal) option now.

At the age of 19, he suffered a bad crash that took him off the road for months. "A car turned in front of me when I was going down a hill. I took the front of the car off with my right leg, breaking it in 57 places. Ten years after that I had my femur taken out and replaced with a metal one. And with the cold weather and riding motorcycles, I've had to have both knees replaced."

He pulls up his trouser legs to reveal the foot-long scars down through his kneecaps. Without the flexibility in his legs, he's had the bike's stand adapted to make it easier to push down.

Older bikers may enjoy spinning tales of freewheeling fun but most also carry the memories of fallen friends. "I've lost two or three close mates over the years," Barry remembers. One of his riding buddies from Auckland died when he simply ran off the road. "He had a new crash helmet, and the coroner found that the seal was so good he didn't get enough oxygen into the helmet. It was like putting your head into a plastic bag. He just passed out."

Ministry of Transport figures state that 25 years ago the average age of motorcyclists involved in crashes was 22. By 2007, that figure had risen to 35 – reflecting a trend away from motorcycling by the young. But there's been another trend too. The older riders are rediscovering their passion for the road, and for big bikes.

Riding instructor Karel Pavich is not a typical Ulyssian. In 2006, she became the New Zealand 250GP National Champion after a hard season competing against the best of the men, and remains the only woman to win a national motorcycle title in this country.

At the age of 47, she still races. Her Atawhai basement has been converted to a workshop where husband (and chief mechanic) Lester tweaks her trio of colourful 250cc Yamaha race bikes. She'll be racing a classic bike this season, and perched on a platform is a shiny Manx Norton patiently waiting for track time.

Her business, Pro Rider motorcycle training, is aimed at teaching riders of all levels the skills to be more competent, and consequently safer, on the road.

"Statistics show that there is a high incident rate among 'returning' riders, as the modern bikes of today are far different machines to those of 20 or 30 years ago," says Karel, a third-generation Kiwi of Yugoslav descent. "Even experienced riders will get some benefits from revisiting the fundamentals of riding."

She brings a racing glamour and her instructor skills to Ulysses, and she's keen to return the support the club showed her when she first arrived in Nelson in 2004.

"I was looking for some help to get funding to go back and race in Australia. I wasn't even a member then but they got behind me with a donation and assisted with some fundraising. I really appreciate that; it epitomises how generous the club is and what it stands for. One of the things I'm now hoping to help members with is rider training."

Karel will also be doing some voluntary work through Tasman District Council with school children

and their scooters. "If you can help the kids get into good habits from day one, they won't need to go through the 'school of hard knocks' like a lot of us did."

"I did have a few crashes when I was young. I was officially known for a time as 'Crash Karel', but the injuries were nothing serious; the odd collar bone or wrist," she says with a track racer's nonchalance.

At the age of 18, she was riding a 1,000cc Suzuki and the big bikes have loomed large ever since. The smallest bikes she's owned remain her 250cc – and 250kph – race bikes.

Bob Bassford was thinking big when he decided to attach the front of a Honda motorbike to the rear end of a Volkswagen car. Little did he realise that, years later, it would save both his life and that of his wife, Ann.

For 18 months, the Manakau Council truck mechanic beavered away in his spare time at the workshop building his trike. He'd never done anything like it before, but to a man skilled with his hands it seemed like a good challenge.

Now living in Motueka, the gently-spoken 63 year old recalls, "The front forks and handlebars are from a Honda VF750S. I fabricated a frame to include the rear axle from a VW Variant that I picked up for \$400. I also used the rear suspension, engine and transmission from the VW."

A Yamaha speedo and tank, a pair of Holden rear wheels and Webber twin carbs that came off a Ferrari completed the hardware. A cosy rear passenger seat and smart wooden storage box at the back were the finishing touches. The resulting combo is now officially registered as a VW Trike Auto Bob-B.

After 13 years, Bob's now mastered the Bob-B's idiosyncrasies, but it wasn't all plain riding. "When I finished it, I had a tootle around the yard but just didn't like it. If you know how to ride a bike, then this is nothing like it. I stuck at it, and in two days I got to know what it liked and what it didn't like."

Seven years ago, however, the three-wheeler proved to be their saviour. Riding the trike at around 120kph near Cambridge, Bob passed out – luckily on a straight piece of road. "I said to myself, 'I feel dizzy,' but it was too late."

Ann takes up the story, "I was on the back when he slumped over. It looked like he was scratching his leg, but when he didn't come back up I thought, 'Oh no, he's dead!'"

"We were still doing a hundred or so. I tried to pull him up but couldn't, so I had to reach over him to get hold of the handlebars. Then, holding him with one arm and steering with the other, I took it onto the grass verge at the side of the road. As it slowed down, he started to stir again. It was all over in less than a minute."

If they'd been riding a two-wheeled bike, the resulting crash could have proved fatal.

"I stopped driving for seven months after that," says Bob. "It cost me \$2,500 in medical fees and they couldn't find anything wrong." Thankfully, he's not suffered any more blackouts since returning to the roads, and the incident was put down to work-related stress.

Despite the traffic, the accidents, the cold and the speed cameras, motorcycling remains an ultimate freedom. "Riding a motorcycle is a beautiful, completely independent thing," reflects Barry Hamilton. "A lot of bikes now have two-way intercoms for the rider's partner or wife on the back. I won't have that; you get enough talking at home!"

Lorraine Lindsay even rekindled the love of bikes in her husband. "Willy was a lapsed biker until he met me. I told him, 'This is what I do and I don't take pillions. You either stay at home or you get your own bike.' So he got his own bike!"

"I realised from a young age – not long after I learned to walk – that boys have much better toys than girls. So I decided that boys' toys would be my toys too!"