

The Scooter Man

Last month Saigon Scooter Centre celebrated its 17-year anniversary. Word talks to founder and self-styled scooter man, **Pat Joynt**, about the classic bike industry then and now

What brought you to Vietnam? What enticed you to stay? I'd been travelling after finishing work in Hong Kong and got caught up in the coup in Cambodia in early 1997. The airport got destroyed so I couldn't make a return flight to Bangkok. When things heated up I headed to the bus station and the last bus leaving was going to Saigon. I arrived with no visa and got an emergency visa on entry and then spent the night in an expensive police hotel. The next day I was accompanied to immigration to get a tourist visa. A couple of days later I was having a coffee downtown and offered a guy US\$200 (VND42 million) for a nice Lambretta sx200. He sold it to me. I was only joking, but that was the start.

When you first arrived, what was the Vespa and Lambretta scene like here? How easy was it to buy bikes and what kind of prices were you paying? There was no real scooter scene here. There were a few shops on Nguyen Van Cu that were 'restoring' for foreigners but there was no local market. At the time they were seen as a poor man's Honda and there was amazement that foreigners were actually buying them when they couldn't be given away. I could easily pick up 50 scooters a day if I wanted them, and prices were from VND2 million. Even for the real collectable models like the Vespa GS and Lambretta 200 models, prices were VND4 to 5 million.

Back in the late 1990s what was the local perception of old bikes? Why do you think that changed? What are the most noticeable changes you've seen? I think they were looked on as the choice of transport for people who couldn't afford a Honda Dream. "Every body dreams of a Honda Dream" was a common saying. Also due to years of neglect they were unreliable,

uneconomical and generally in need of extensive repairs. This was the same for the whole range of classic models from Honda Cubs and ss50s through to Vespas and vintage classic bikes. The scene has changed dramatically over the past 10 years.

The appreciation of classic bikes and scooters has really gained in popularity. The classic bike club scene has attracted a lot of younger Vietnamese who now see them as a cool, unique mode of transport and something that they can economically customize. They're not common sights on the streets any more, so they're gaining a cult following.

How difficult was it and still is it to export bikes overseas? When did the Vespas and Lambrettas start to run out?

The de-registration process has always been difficult. This has to be completed by the registered owner and involves four different papers that need to be submitted to the local traffic police in the area where the bike is registered. A part of this is that the current ownership paper has to match with the original import papers. In over 1,000 scooters we have exported, I have only ever had one bike that didn't have the original import docs on file. Unfortunately it's not getting any easier to arrange this. In fact if anything it's getting more difficult.

By about 2002 many people saw the Vespa business as an 'easy' way to make money and thousands of cheap sub-standard scooters were being shipped out every month. Over the next five years the market quickly dried up. These days we're lucky to pick up three or four nice scooters a month.

As the scooters for restoration and export began to run out, how did you change your operations? A large part of the SSC business has been in



Photos by Alexandre Gareil

the manufacturing of after-market parts and accessories. We currently produce over 1,000 parts for the export market. We also have a large rental bike stock mainly dealing with short-term, long-distance rentals for tourists making Saigon to Hanoi trips. We also import many European motorcycle products including a wide range of Italian helmets.

This year is your 17th anniversary of Saigon Scooter Centre. What have been your best moments? What have been your biggest challenges?

I think one of my favourite moments was the Charity Scooter Event we organized in 2011 when we supported an orphanage in Dong Nai. We anticipated a turn out of about 250 riders and on the day there were over 500.

The challenge is like in any business — adapting with the times. One of the most difficult projects was the design of the Vtronic electric scooter conversions. This has been a five-year project made even more difficult as the technology of EVs is changing so rapidly.

What are your plans for the future?

At the moment we've just moved into a new workshop and set up our offices and showroom under one roof. We're also looking into opening a new shop in Phu My Hung and the plan for the 'Scootacafe' is still on the cards.

For more information go to saigonscootercentre.com 