

## A Death in the Family

“Elvis had a heart attack, because he got too bleedin fat. He weighed nearly half a ton, looked more like a pregnant mum”. So sang British punk band Peter and the Test Tube Babies about one of the key events of 1977, the death of the King. Look back at pictures of the time and everything looked so dated – it was another era. It’s hard to believe that 1977 was also the first year of production of what was destined to become Vespa’s last, big-engined, manually-g geared, two-stroke scooter, the PX. For any mass-produced vehicle to last 10 years largely unchanged in today’s rapidly changing vehicle market is probably enough to consider it a classic. To last 30 years? What can you say?

But all good things must come to an end, and the European pollution prefects have decreed that they can no longer allow the PX’s big-pot 2-stroke engine to continue producing it’s corpulent emissions. So whether it’s too much oil in the exhaust, or fat in the cheeseburgers, the ultimate prognosis was unfortunately always going to be terminal.

And so, for the first time since 1946, the supply of geared 2-stroke Vespa’s has become finite. And finite means they’ll become rarer, and rarer means that they’ll get more collectable, and we all know what happens to the value of things collectable. Which is why, of the last shipment that we received, there is an Optic White PX200 with my name very firmly stamped upon it.

Of course, that’s not why I want one, it’s just why I want one now. But before you start thinking that since you are a keen scooterist then maybe you should get one too, you’ll be relieved to know that geared scooters really aren’t for everyone. So here’s some advice that might help you decide whether to rush out and buy your own little piece of scooter history while the last of the PX’s are still on the shelf, or sit back contented that your decision not to buy is equally a good one.

DO buy a geared scooter if you like to tinker. These are great scooters on which to learn about the internal combustion engine because they are so bloody simple. And once you’ve mastered the basic skills, there are plenty of opportunities to tweak here and there, embellish and bling. (Scooter Dictionary Term 1: “To Bling – to add additional, non-essential chromework to your scooter”). Your pleasure won’t be restricted to just riding it, you’ve bought yourself a project which can last a lifetime. It’s also one of the few scooters where you’ll want a hammer in your toolkit.

DON’T buy a geared scooter if you don’t know one end of a spanner from another. Without a doubt you will be getting your hands dirty somewhere along the line, so don’t embarrass yourself at the repair-shop because you don’t know how to adjust the brakes or the clutch cable. Ok, so like all scooters, everything is tucked away out of sight, but those side cowlings are designed to be removed

without any tools whatsoever for a very good reason. And the reason is, you'll need to! If dirty nails aren't your thing, stay away.

DON'T buy because you think they're cute. Cute they ain't. These are tough little buggers, hewn by hand from pig-iron by Thor himself. Every one rides slightly differently. To operate the rear brake effectively you've got to keep your right foot on the central ridge, and you need to compensate for the weight of the engine and disk brake on the right hand of the scooter. You'll get the idea as soon as you push one of the main stand - the machine sort of wobbles around like a jelly so much that you think that it really can't be roadworthy. Of course everything tightens up when it's up and running, but for first timers, it can be a bit of a surprise. Don't be fooled by the look. These buggers have competed in the ultra-grueling Paris-Dakkar rally. Cute? Don't kid yourself, this is hardcore.

DO buy one if you like an active ride. Changing gears is fun people! You need to plan your corners more thoughtfully, but you can drop the clutch and tear off at the traffic lights, which you can't do with a CVT. Feel how it handles when you brake hard, and prepare to adjust your reaction response accordingly. And if you like the butch manliness of kick-starting (which you can actually do astride your pet monster), then just check out the girder attached to the engine. It's a proper kick-start lever, not an ornamental add-on. Oh, and don't forget to reset the choke once you've warmed up, otherwise you'll be cutting out because your mixture is too rich. Lots more to think about, lots more to do. As one of our customers correctly surmised, "You won't get a PX to adapt to how you ride, you have to adapt to it."

DON'T buy one as a shopping trolley. Lift up the saddle and you'll find nothing but the fuel tank. Sure there's a glove box big enough for a ream of A4, but your helmet storage is a couple of hooks under the seat. Fortunately you can stick racks on the front as well as the back, and no-one will be entirely offended if you bungee a milk crate on the back rack as your storage device. Remember these were designed as transport for the masses - it's only recently that Vespa's have achieved luxury status. I mean stick anything other than a bona fide colour matched Vespa topbox on a GTS and you'll look a right pillock, but the PX is built like a tractor, so it can be dressed like one too.

DO buy one if you want to be different. Half the fun of geared scooters is that they can be easily customized. Whether that's standard chrome bars and racks, new side covers, a paint job, customized chrome work - the opportunities are endless. And if that's too hard, the internet can find you stickers specifically designed for the PX - kind of like temporary tattoos. Geared scooter riders are inordinately proud of their vehicles, partly I think, because they're kind of like a wild mustang that they've broken in. You build up a special bond, an empathy that goes deeper than other vehicles. The number of blokes who come into the shop telling me about the Vespa or Lambretta that they had to leave behind when they came to Aus, how they really wished they'd brought it with them, and

how much they missed them. It can be absolutely tragic – you'd think that a relative had passed away.

DON'T buy one because you like the retro look. These aren't retro-looking, they are retro. Totally and completely. Retro-look is a copy of these scooters, but without the gears, and the metal, and the big 2-stroke engine. It's 50's technology with a 70's facelift. A bit like Jane Fonda.

DO buy if you love the smell of two-stroke oil in the morning. Mmmmm. Breathe in those fumes. And the pop-pop-pop of the engine idling. Nothing else quite hits the spot.

DON'T buy one from Asia, unless you really, really know what you are up to. There is a burgeoning industry rebuilding the multitude of Vespa's and Lambretta's sent to Vietnam and Indonesia in the 60s. Original chassis for sure, but how much of the rest is original and how much is locally artisan produced? And does the beautiful paintwork skillfully cover up a multitude of welds? That's not to say that all are bad – indeed the likelihood is that some are excellent (quite possibly better than the originals with some companies putting in a 12v wiring loom and 10" wheels to replace the genuine 8"). But without photographic evidence of the vehicle through its entire build process, it will still be regarded as a cheap Asian knock-off, with a potentially limited resale value. And if it is a bang-together job, then prepare to look at rather large labour bills to fix the various failing engine components, and the hard to get 6v electrical parts. Bargepoles were invented to keep you away from these vehicles.

DON'T buy one if you haven't got internet access. Firstly, you will want to share your passion with like-minded individuals. Secondly, those very same people will be your first port of call when your scooter isn't behaving itself. Thirdly, you'll be scouring the web for those hard to locate components (particularly if you have a vintage model where they changed the model oh so subtly every year). Prepare to get clicky with it.

DO buy one if you like clubs. Much of the joy of geared scooters is in sharing. Your joys, your nightmares, your glory, your beer. There are plenty of clubs around, though you might need to dig around to find them. Sure, you might have to hang out with a few middle-aged Poms who first got into scooters in the first great revival of the late 70s, and are still reliving their youth. I guarantee that they'll give a bit of stick, but they'll take it too. Of course their crew-cuts these days are no longer a fashion statement, but a practical cut for those of us where the hair is receding faster than polar ice-cap. But it can be a great scene, with a bunch of people who ultimately just like a bit of fun and generally don't take it all too seriously. But beware - some geared scooter riders consider themselves better than the rest, indeed they often don't consider twist-and-go scooters as real scooters at all. "You ride a twisty" they'll sneer, though the fact of the matter

is that scooters have been around for over 100 years, with the first CVT introduced not long after! And they didn't originally come from Italy at all.

Yup – the geared scooters made most famous by Lambretta and Vespa is in fact an evolutionary side branch, which tragically appears to have come to the point of extinction. Rumours abound that Vespa have got plans for its replacement, but given the climate (both political and environmental) it seems almost impossible that we will see the same vital combination of gears and a two-stroke engine ever again. The sight, the feel, the sound, the smell – even the taste. They really are a sensory feast. Fortunately Piaggio, the makers of Vespa, had seen the writing on the wall, and have come back with even better products which again are redefining the scooter world – the new breed of Vespa's, the now ubiquitous Quasar engine, the MP3's and Fuoco's, and soon a hybrid engine to not only tick the environmental box, but to go to the top of the class. The scooter world has never been so exciting and vibrant, and whilst there is a tinge of sadness about the passing of the PX, the future is not only good, it's brilliant.

We started our funeral with a song, we've had the eulogy, and now its time to close the service with our procession. So I've chosen something which seems to best fit the mood of the occasion. Something from REM – "It's the End of the World as we know it".

But I feel fine.

*January 2008 marked the final production run of the PX from Vespa. A special 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary model PX125 was produced in a limited run, with special dispensation from the European authorities. This article was written to mark that occasion, as it highlights the end of an era for the classic geared, 2-stroke Italian scooters.*

*With the rise of automatic scooters, riders now have a genuine choice of the kind of scooter they want to ride. I wanted to give people a flavour of the pro's and con's of the classic geared scooter, because they are definitely NOT for everyone. But if people are interested, they need to get their skates on, because new PX 200s aren't going to be around for ever!*

*The good news is that the passing of this legend occurs when the scooter market is in the healthiest state that it has ever been, with Vespa back in the driving seat as the undisputed leading brand. The king is dead, long live the king!*