

Common(?) Courtesy

I DON'T MEAN ANY OFFENSE that in his report on touring in New Zealand, Steve Lerner noted his amazement at how courteous the drivers were in that country, and how aware they seemed to be of motorcycles in their midst. That really struck home with me, because I have just returned from an 11-day ride around southern Brazil, and came back with much the same impressions. Now, someone might easily claim that the traffic in New Zealand is sparse enough to account for a more relaxed attitude among drivers, but besides the time I spent in the less-traveled areas of Brazil, I also spent at least four days doing with traffic in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. São Paulo, for those of you who might not know, is the third largest city in the entire world—about three times the size of Los Angeles, and with traffic enough to rival any major metropolitan area. Yet despite the volume of traffic, I found that making my way through the city was not only easier than back here in Southern California, but considerably less stressful. With more traffic, narrower and less-improved roads (in general), and much less stringent traffic regulations and enforcement, you'd think the opposite would be true. Why it isn't is a subject that you could argue interminably, but I have a few thoughts of my own that may or may not be worthy of consideration.

First of all, there are just a whole lot more motorcycles in the traffic mix in Brazil. My friend Mauricio Fernandes (world-class endurance rider and 1/2th place finisher in the famed Dakar Rally), a São Paulo native, tells me that 47,000 motorcycles are sold in Brazil each month. I have no reason to doubt him, so during my stay there I would estimate that motorcycles consistently make up about 30%–40% of the traffic mix, no matter where I was. With that many bikes around you, it's pretty hard not to be aware of their presence, and I believe that other drivers' awareness level concerning bikes plays a big part in how they react to them.

Secondly, Brazil has practically no middle class, compared to the US. What that means is that very few young people have the financial resources needed to purchase and maintain an automobile. In general, most people in Brazil can't afford a car until they are in their late 20s or early 30s. They can, however, afford a motorcycle. A quick look around some dealerships showed me that I could buy a nice grand-tour year-old motorcycle for about \$1,000 US, while a comparable used automobile might be 10 times that amount. Factor in the difference in licensing fees and insurance, and the fact that motorcycles are allowed to bypass the



many toll booths on Brazil's highways, and you can see why motorcycles are so prevalent. So, practically everyone starts out their adult, working life as a motorcyclist, saving their money for the day when they can buy a car. The bottom line here is that probably 90% of the people driving cars were once motorcyclists, and of course, former riders have much more awareness of, and sympathy for, the plight of bikers in traffic. Because of this, as a rider, you find nearly everyone in four-wheelers "making room" for you, and even waving or nodding you through when an opening presents itself. In addition, it means they don't get pissed off, like so many North American drivers, when you split lanes, ride down the shoulder, or jump to the head of the pack at a stoplight.

And my third observation is that Brazilians don't share the North American penchant for giant-sized vehicles. Gas-guzzling SUVs are virtually unheard-of, and even their normal passenger cars are mostly what we here in the US would call compact, or even sub-compact models. This, of course, opens up a lot more space for motorcycles, and also means that the drivers can see us better, as they are, for the most part, down at the same level as motorcycle riders, and not eight feet over our heads.

Other contributing factors are that nearly all the motorcycles in Brazilian are small, narrow, lightweight models, that easily slip through traffic. I would say fully 90% of the bikes in Brazil are 125-175cc, primarily Honda Troncs and Twinsters. This also means that they are not nearly as loud, obnoxious or intimidating as the average bike found in our own country. Adding to that non-intimidating image is the fact that riding gear, other than helmets, seems to be unknown in Brazil. Virtually everyone rides in normal street clothes. And while

this might not seem like a good thing from a safety standpoint, it means their riders don't look like some kind of armored steel warriors or armadillos. They look just like the automobile drivers. Psychologically, it is much easier to decide to be prejudiced against someone who looks or dresses differently than you.

And yet, despite all these seemingly logical explanations, I couldn't help but come away from Brazil with the distinct feeling that all my rationalizations were superficial, and that the overriding reason I felt safe and more at ease in Brazilian traffic was due to plain old common courtesy. Everywhere I went, whether on the bike or off, in big cities or tiny farming communities, I never once experienced any reaction from a Brazilian that was less than openly friendly, helpful and courteous. What was most noticeable about was the North American attitude of "me first—save you," or, "I'm much too busy to be bothered with you." And out on the highways, even though they wanted to drive very fast, when you came up behind someone, before you could even think you blinks to let them know you wanted by, they were either pulling over or waving you through. Even strangers, they would often look out the side window as you went by, and give you a smile and a wave.

Yesterday, Dave Smith and I rode up the Omega Highway to have lunch at the Lock-out Roadhouse. The Omega is 30 miles of great, twisting two-lane mountain highway, with paved pullouts about every two miles. In between the pullouts are signs that say, "State Law—Slower traffic must use pullout to allow passing." On the way up, I came up behind slow-moving vehicles no less than four times. No one ever used a pullout to let me through. Not once. And when I flashed my lights at one guy a couple of times to let him know I wanted to pass, he gave me the finger. Another guy, who I passed on a short open stretch when I could see far enough ahead (after he had already passed two pullouts), actually moved into my lane as I was going by, in effort to try to stop me from passing, or just to try to frighten me. Ask anyone who rides the Omega regularly, and they'll tell you my experiences the day were fairly average.

I was in Brazil.

—Fred Kim
Senior Editor