

Traffic

BACK IN THE June issue of *Car and Driver* Brock Yates asked the shocking question of whether driving a car for pleasure was still possible.

Having just returned from a trip around the perimeter of the Golden State in my Miata (what I drive when my wife insists on more comfort than two wheels can provide), I knew it was still possible. As the Miata is the 600cc sportbike of automobiles, I'd chosen roads just like I would for a motorcycle ride to make the driving fun—easy because I already knew many of them. But it got me thinking that motorcyclists have much in common with real car enthusiasts—guys who drive, as Yates says, “for the sheer hell of it,” not sit on the freeway cocooned in a three-ton SUV with a phone grafted to their ears. Just like motorcycling locally, it's now a deliberate trip off the beaten path to find roads to drive enjoyably. (In recognition of that fact, we're starting a new monthly feature on “Great Destinations,” and the roads to get you there. We hope you'll like it.)

While that thought rattled around in my head, I came across the May 28 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, with a big feature on “American Gridlock.”

Of course, we don't need to read about other people's commutes to know how bad it's getting. We all have our own stories. However, some of the statistics hit like a brick: Traffic congestion costs a whopping \$78 billion yearly in wasted fuel and lost time, up 39% since 1990. Traffic accidents kill 42,000 people annually, and high blood pressure, sleep deprivation and depression are linked to commuting stress. The average American now spends the equivalent of a whole work week stuck in traffic every year, up 236% since 1982. The length of the combined morning-evening “rush hour” has doubled to almost six hours since 1982.

Of course, “expert” traffic planners have plenty of solutions: Computer-generated traffic advisories: to tell you where the slow-downs are. Nineteenth-century town planning: so some people can shop and work within walking distance of home. More public transportation: ridership is at its highest level in 40 years, up 21% since 1995. The favorite answer of the past, more roads, is now the least favored alternative, as urban sprawl always uses every mile of new road to support new development.

The romantic “freedom” granted by the automobile and America's “love affair” with the car may soon become anachronisms. The problem is so bad, it threatens to revolutionize political thinking. As we become more like bees climbing over one another's backs, the person who must depend



on his/her personal car will soon be seen as the one left behind by governmental efforts to improve the situation.

But do you ever hear the experts say that motorcycle ridership should be encouraged? No. Too many of these bureaucratic types still see motorcyclists as a lunatic fringe. Would they suggest that their sons and daughters join the Hare Krishnas to alleviate traffic problems, much less the biker gang?

One answer is to make motorcycling more attractive to the commuter. Why should lane sharing only be an option in California? Just because L.A. has the worst traffic delays in the nation? Maybe. But we should harangue our elected officials with the efficiency of such a solution. The ancient cities of Europe wouldn't be able to move if inner city traffic didn't allow motorcyclists to share lane space with the car traffic. Part of Europe's tolerance for motorcycles stems from the fact that so many citizens worked their way up from bikes, to mopeds, to motorcycles, to cars in a natural progression. Once the commuter learns that a scooter or motorcycle will get them to work with less stress, and even a bit of fun, we'll have more allies on our side. And once the bureaucrats see motorcyclists as “us” instead of “them,” we'll be a lot better off.

Traffic studies have shown that congestion and the number of cars on the road have a non-linear relationship, so that increasing numbers of cars can be handled with little slowdown until a critical point is reached. Despite that fact, a few ninnyes in Washington are asking for a return to Nixon's 55 mph speed limit to “save fuel.” We won't save much fuel if we're all crawling along

at five mph on the freeway. I say raise the speed limits and make it illegal for slow cars to hog the fast lane (like it is in England). Simple mathematics will show that you'll spend less time on the freeway at a higher speed, and make room for more traffic.

Another of my favorite European traffic solutions is the roundabout, so popular in England. Any kind of motor vehicle gets exactly zero miles per gallon when waiting at traffic lights. Traffic circles keep 'em moving, and can be very entertaining when the traffic is light. What if every intersection was a circular skidpad? You get the idea.

And how about synchronized stop lights? Tell me, if we can send a man to the moon, why can't we maximize traffic flow through these artificial gates? Reduced stress, less air pollution and greater productivity on a grand scale should certainly be worth the money it would cost.

And, while we're at it, let's ban cell phone use while driving. Statistics show that a driver talking on the phone has nearly the same accident risk as a drunk, and that's illegal. Is it because our politicians are on the phone all the time when they drive?

The next time somebody asks for your vote, ask them what they drive. Some clever reporter checked the politicos parking spaces in Sacramento and found a majority drove big fat SUVs. But ask for a sound bite, and these same people will say they want to clean up the environment.

Minorities make powerful voting blocs when they get together. Let's join with the hard-core car guys to make some big numbers, elect some like-minded comrades to office and watch the climate change.

We need a catchy acronym for an umbrella group of enthusiasts who will press for creative solutions to our overcrowded roads without destroying our individual freedoms. How about this one: FEAR: Fellow Enthusiasts Against Restrictions. Or for the Golden State: CURVES—California's Under-Represented Vehicle Enthusiasts Society. Slogans? “Take the bus and leave the roads to those who know how to enjoy them” or “We won't take the freeway if you won't take the back roads.”

In politics, as in mechanics, it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. Consider your complaining a grain of sand in the bearing of collective discourse. Let's make a difference before it's too late.

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