

REBEL FOR A DAY



BY MISTI HURST

LIFE ON THE
FAST TRACK

“You’ve got to respect the power that these things have,” said Rainer Stepputat, owner of Vancouver Coast Chopper Tours, as we stood staring at his gorgeous fleet. It was a beautiful morning in March, sun shining down and spreading sparkling diamonds on the chrome and candy paint of his five Ultra California Choppers. Each one has a 113ci (110 hp) S&S engine, a 250-rear tire and a custom paint job, and are, as his flyer explains “full blown machines!”

Started in July of 2005, Vancouver Coast Chopper Tours Inc. (www.vancouvercoastchopper.com) offers guided tours in BC to Whistler, Victoria, Harrison Hot Springs, Gulf and Salt Spring Islands, downtown Vancouver, as well as night rides. Customized tours or special events can be handled by request. Show up with a motorcycle license, at least one-year experience with a heavy bike, and off you go, riding your very own \$40,000+ custom machine for a day.

So there I was, standing in Rainer’s driveway in a lovely suburban neighbourhood of Pitt Meadows, BC, getting ready to mount one of his stunning bikes and start our excursion. Looking around the area, it seemed strange to have 5 meticulously designed, painted, and polished choppers parked in front of a beautiful two-storey home on a quiet residential street. Rainer’s two and a half year old son maneuvered his tricycle in between the bikes, us and out onto the street, then back through the yard. I looked through my own pile of riding gear and the helmets that they provide for the tours, trying to decide what to wear. I wanted to look the part, and yet suddenly there didn’t seem to be a “part” at all.

My own stereotypical views of the chopper world was that riders of such machines were always big, burly, mean looking men, with facial hair, tattoos and black leather jackets. They are rebellious lawbreakers who are unwelcoming of ‘other kinds of

riders', especially those 'sport-bike yahoos'. And yet, here was clean shaven Rainer, a father of five, wearing shiny blue sneakers, jeans and a dark blue Vancouver Coast Chopper Tours hoodie. He is unassuming, humble and looking inquisitively at me as I tell him about my silly and ignorant views of this totally new-to-me chopper scene. He tilts his head to one side and simply says "really?"

The other two riders with us, my partner Paul and Rainer's friend Randy, are anxious to get going. I opted for a beanie helmet instead of my full face, and a leather jacket over top of my own hoodie. Rainer and Randy both scoffed at Paul and I for wearing jackets on such a fine sunny day. As I stood in front of one of the bikes, I had to admit, I was a little intimidated at first. Looking at it, all nine feet of it, with the super fat tire and long reach to the handlebars, was really unusual for someone like me, who at 5'2" is used to climbing aboard nimble little sportbikes. I sat down on one, stretched my arms out, and couldn't reach the handlebars. The guys laughed. "Try that one," said Rainer, pointing to an amazing looking silver one with a purple flame paint scheme. That time I reached.

Before we took off he went over a few little points, "use mostly the rear brake, slow down for corners as the bikes don't lean like sportbikes and they don't have much ground clearance, and respect the machine. For a 640lb bike it's got a lot of ponies behind it, approximately 110 horsepower. These bikes get up and go."

Starting them up in the driveway

produced a thunderous roar that got louder and louder, and as I looked around at the quiet and serene community, I wondered what the neighbours must think. As we started out through the residential area enroute to Harrison Hot Springs I felt rebellious all of a sudden, like I was cool and a bit mean. A "look at me" attitude descended upon me from out of nowhere. As we rumbled down the side streets we set off three car alarms and I giggled to myself and felt even meaner. At the first intersection I ran wide and almost rode onto the gravel shoulder as I tried to get used to steering a nine-foot long motorcycle, and then I nearly rear-ended Paul, as I didn't really allow for the extended length of the front fork. I was a bit uncomfortable at first, nervous and uncertain as I had no real idea of what to expect in terms of handling and performance from such a bike, and because it was such an unusual seating position for me.

As we tore down the main street I noticed that people everywhere were looking at us, from the street, from the storefronts, from the other vehicles, people just stopped and stared, further pumping up my "look at me" attitude. Kids leaned out of car windows trying to get a glimpse, then looked a bit stunned when we all waved at them. We were getting more looks on these choppers than I had ever had when riding a sportbike, no matter how trick or unique or racy, there was something even more outstanding about these wacky looking machines, and I liked it.



As we motored along, I marveled at the smoothness of the ride and the overall stability. I felt planted and solid and, despite my notions that it would be like riding a pogo stick, I found it to be quite cushy. Except for a few jarring bumps and an underlying vibration that, after extended periods, made my eyeballs feel a bit jingly and my feet slip off the foot pegs once or twice, the overall ride was very smooth. Rainer was right about the power too, there was a heck of a lot of it and it demanded respect. One tiny twist of the throttle propelled the bike forward at an astonishing speed and the V-twin rumble of the loud pipe was comforting in a strange way, it seemed to envelop me in a little bubble. I found myself riding in my own private world.

The throttle grip however was much wider than I was used to and my little hand tired easily and struggled to be smooth, while the grunt and bite of the burly V-twin motor tried to rip the bars out of my hands on several occasions. The clutch pull was so stiff and hard that after about 15 minutes of stop and start in traffic my left hand refused to listen to my brain and was barely able to pull in the clutch. Not to mention the fact that it was freezing cold, despite the sunshine, and my hands had gone completely numb. I motioned to the guys to pull over and we did a quick left,

right, left again and pulled into a Tim Horton's.

At this point in time we all rushed inside to grab coffees and I started to have a sneaking suspicion that both Rainer and Randy were a bit cold wearing only t-shirts and hoodies. "So, you still think wearing a jacket was not necessary?" said Paul with a snicker as we chatted about the bikes and the beautiful day we lucked-out with. We watched dozens of people stop by to stare and take photos of the machines, and even to stoop so far down in order to get a closer look at the details of the chrome and the paint that it appeared as if they were sniffing the bikes. After a casual and leisurely rest stop we strolled out to the bikes and talked to a few of the lookie-loos before heading out on the road again.

Riding a chopper is more about the bike and the look than the actual ride so there was not the usual hurriedness or rush to get back on the road or the feeling of wasting precious riding time. It felt calm, relaxed and peaceful.

As we moved through the rural farmland and past trees, rivers and mountains, the mean and rebellious attitude I had first experienced seemed to melt away and I felt like I was more in nature than riding through it. It was a real Zen-like experience where I could smell the road and the crisp fresh air and almost

taste the water in the rivers and feel the sting of the bugs as they bounced off my face. It wasn't muted like it is on a sportbike when you are encased in a full helmet that blocks out most of these smells and sounds and perceived tastes. I melted into the bike as I gazed at the gorgeous landscape and appreciated the ride for the scenery it offered. I noticed things about the route that I would have normally just blasted by. I understood the appeal for the first time of riding such a bike.

I also got really cold, my fingers went completely numb and I started shivering uncontrollably, wishing we were already at our destination. As we got closer to Harrison it got colder and by the time we pulled into the small town I could barely muster enough life out of my hands to pull in the brake, hoping we could stop the bikes at the local pub for some hot grub.

This time we didn't have to be suspicious that Rainer and Randy were cold as they were off their bikes and inside the cozy pub ordering coffees and hot chocolates before I could thaw my frozen fingers enough to unsnap my helmet.

Over lunch (it was now a little after 4pm) I asked Rainer how he got into choppers in the first place. Having ridden a wide variety of bikes all his life, he explained, "Well, I wanted one for myself really badly, you know, I wanted something that looked good and I just ended up getting a smoking deal on one of them. Then I was just looking around and I found a deal on another. I was actually

thinking that I might just sell it but the response I got when riding them around was really cool. I was at a gas station one day filling up and CBC or Global news were there filming something else and my buddy bumped me, when I looked over I noticed that they had stopped their interview and they were now filming us. That's when I started wondering if people would rent these things from me to ride. Then I went all out and bought three more choppers, purchased a brand new trailer, got t-shirts and brochures made and just started doing tours. If you don't try it, then you never know, right?"

Exactly, if you don't try it, then you never know, and that's what I was thinking as we sat there over lunch. If I hadn't met Rainer and had the opportunity to ride one of his bikes as part of his extremely unique tour company, then I would never have experienced what it would have been like. Most people may not be able to buy one, or aren't sure if they even want to buy one. It's like a dream vacation, rent a chopper for a minimal cost, try it out and at the end of the day you give it back.

I had a blast; I went home that night, after a terribly frigid ride back from Harrison, with a grin a mile wide and told everyone in sight, "I got to ride a chopper today!" **MMM**

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