

Catching the Panther

by Thorsten Heitzmann

IN my teens, I fell in love. Unlike worldlier affairs then, this one proved to last — though even I didn't know until recently.

In 1987, I had seen the two prettiest motorcycles ever, a Harley-Davidson Knucklehead and a rigid-frame Panther. If you're like most people, you will have seen the former, but the latter will probably bring a blank stare. At the time, my transport was a Yamaha XT 500 single — essentially a British bike born-again in Japan. But here was the real thing, the ultimate single! Please judge for yourself on the next page.

But the years went on, and while the image of the Panther had burnt itself into my visual cortex, the rest of my brain decided, being an intelligent brain, that riding an old British bike as a daily commuter is a recipe for disaster. However, another side-effect of getting older is that your habits change. In my twenties, I'd have laughed at everyone doing less than 10,000km per year on his / her bike. Nowadays I am happy to do more than 500...

In light of this, and remembering the Knucklehead, I bought a Harley-Davidson Fat Boy some time ago. An old dream fulfilled, the bike and me riding into the sunset happily ever after, at least those few kilometers per year.

And then another issue started nagging at me. I'd never say a bad word against the Harley, but Harley riders can be a horrible nuisance. Great pretenders often — with their "skull cap" helmets, their stick-on tattoos and the compulsory bad-ass stare when being on the road — I couldn't help realizing that this isn't the merry bunch Harley drivers used to be, mostly it's guys pretending to be Wyatt from *Easy Rider* when they are Woody from *Wild Hogs*.¹

At this point I started thinking about those beautiful Panthers again. Like Hercule Poirot, I believe in "order and method", so the first thing I did was joining the Panther Owners Club² (POC) a few years ago. I figured that sooner or later a good bike would show up for me to buy. But then, most Panthers are either in good condition (and in good hands) or come as parts and bits in boxes. The former aren't sold and only an idiot would buy the latter. So the waiting dragged on, but I was kept well amused by the POC's impressive monthly (!) journal *Sloper* and a general good feeling about buying one of these reliable bikes one day.

¹ Readers of *Vidya* excluded, of course!

² www.pantherownersclub.com

6 **MOTOR CYCLING** September 13, 1951.

THE PANTHER MODEL 100



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1951 ad for a Panther M 100, in its most beautiful version – rigid frame and single seat. If your eyes don't water at this sight, you should probably take an eye exam.

A short historical interlude is in order now, I think, to tell you what makes the Panthers so special. Well, apart from their sheer beauty, the company's slogan "The perfected motorcycle" gives an indication. The engine had evolved from previous "sloper" (i.e. forward leaning) engines in the 1920s and from then on was built (and refined) for forty years. The engine looks massive – and needs to be so as it was designed to be part of the frame, about 60 years before the competition realized the advantages of such a construction. Having never been in the racing camp really, Panther had a market niche as upscale reliable sidecar bike before and after World War II when other British brands focused on being fastest, mainly. Ironically, focusing elsewhere did, in the end, not help Phelon & Moore (the company was not called "Panther") – while the slicker British bikes got out-slicked by the advent of Japanese bikes in the 60s, the Panthers faded away, as did most of the sidecars, too, with the approach of the affordable car. People always talk about how it was the mediocre quality which killed British bikes, I think it's rather that they missed the part where motorbiking went from serious to fun.

Finding the Beast

Anyway, having made up my mind, I now started looking out for one. Eventually I saw an advert in the POC journal, a beautiful bike, restored some 10 years ago, at not exactly a discount price. The seller's credentials being good (he was a club member, after all), he had a good reason to sell the bike and his praise about the bike ringing in my ears, the decision was made. I would fly to the UK, take a critical look at the bike and then, if everything was fine, I'd buy it and ride it home.

Now you might find this delusional on several levels:

- First, what was my plan in case the bike turned out to be a lemon? Simple. There was no plan. If the bike's no good, I'm stranded. Of course, this was a strong incentive to buy the bike, to say the least.
- Second, just sitting on a 50 year old bike and riding it home through half of Europe seemed a nutty idea to some. I mean, I am by no means a mechanic — I once serviced my bike and forgot to re-attach the brake calipers (makes for swift riding)! But then, being without tools or experience, that might not have made a change anyway.
- Third, due to heavy snowfall I had postponed getting the bike in October, now it was start of November and while the forecast was good (for a November) my wife just rolled her eyes.
- Fourth, only after all those plans were made, tickets bought, etc, I realized what I seemed to have overlooked so far. All those Panther driver experiences written about in *Sloper*, where people went to rallies all over Europe on their extremely reliable perfected motorcycles, I now read them all without the rose-colored glasses. Yes, most bikes reached their destination, most came back home again, but those articles were full of sentences starting with
 - As soon as I had left my town, I heard that strange noise...
 - Turned out, I had to take off the head again.....
 - Once X's engine was running again, we lost another hour, due to...
 - It was only a small matter and after 2 hours we were back on the road...

How had I overlooked this? I mean, did I really expect an uneventful journey? Was I really mad, was my wife right? Well, it couldn't be helped, and on November 9th, accordingly, I flew to Luton and got picked up there by the Panther's owner who happened to drive back from Wales that day. Half way to Harwich his car's gearbox started making trouble, but the human mind can bend in all directions and instead of taking this as some sort of bad sign, I took the eventual arrival at John's home to be a good omen. We took a look at the Panther, I was sold immediately and a few minutes later the Panther followed.



John fixing the lights

Still, we decided to go for a little ride, only then we learned that something was wrong with the headlight. Oh well. Having this fixed after some time, we started. British bikes had their gear lever on the right side, usually, but what I didn't know is that (not unexpectedly in hindsight) of course the Brits used two different systems, either the usual "First down, rest up" or, as in the Panther "First up, rest down". That takes a little getting used to and I suggest that going through a city center is not the ideal way of getting used to it. But I survived unscathed, as did the woman on the pedestrian crossing. Good thing the Panther makes quite a noise, forewarned is forearmed.

Later that night, after a delicious dinner, I boarded the ferry to Hoek van Holland, luckily the Panther resided only a few miles from the harbor.

Arriving in Holland the next morning the Panther fired up on first kick³, and we (the Panther & I) hit the road for those 800km back home to Switzerland. 800km (500 miles) are not a lot. In theory. If the bike does 70mph at times, but is more comfortable at 60mph, 800km can be a bit of a stretch, though.

The first 200km went quietly, the bike literally missing a beat only once, near Eindhoven. Filling up in Germany, fuel consumption was noted to be moderate (not when you consider the 23bhp, but compared to, say, a Dodge Viper, the 36mpg weren't bad). I had heard that Panthers were rather heavy on oil, so while checking was quite unnecessary after 200km, I still did it. Hmm, dry dipstick — guess they are heavier on oil than expected. I made a mental note of making

³ Yeah, so it's a lie — what do you want to hear? That I kicked for ten minutes in full riding gear, sweating profusely? No way I'll admit that...

future stops for refilling oil and checking on gas, like in the old joke.⁴ Still, no harm done, the bike running nicely we continued. Naturally, it had to start raining then, it became quite cold (5 °C, 40 °F) and the fog became immensely thick. I was really glad we had repaired that light the night before! So on we plodded, less fast than before (I worried a bit because of the oil) and at our next stop it took me an hour before I felt I could brave the elements again. By that time, mid-afternoon already for reasons unfathomable, I had given up on the idea of riding home in one go. Another two hours saw me in Heidelberg, where I stayed for the night with a friend.

Warm and dry clothes the next morning, no rain, clear skies. Very convenient riding for 50km, then the rain set on again. At least there was no fog. But home felt close now, another stop at a filling station where I indulged in the ultimate luxury - changing into a spare set of dry clothes. It



At the harbor

raised a few eyebrows, but mostly people were pitying me. The rain gods must have noted my fresh clothes, too, and did their best to make it up for a while – but too late. Having sniffed Swiss air I was elated, the bike decided to challenge the 70mph after all, and we flew home. Switzerland being one of the countries with highest quality of living,⁵ even the rain had stopped and a hot bath was waiting.

What an intelligent guy would have done: Rent a van, drive up to Rotterdam, hop over to the UK, collect the bike, get back, put the bike into the van and drive home. But where's the adventure in that?

⁴ The POC forum later informed me that filling up to the maximum does encourage high oil consumption.

⁵ according to some statistics