

## Paging Pee-wee Herman — Riding the Velosolex

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document.write(day + " " + month + " " + myweekday + ", " + year); Monday, December 15, 2008

Paging Pee-wee Herman &mdash; Riding the Velosolex

By Daniel McDermon

When gas prices hit their peak earlier this year, you could hardly glance at the news without seeing a report about the growing shift toward two-wheeled transportation. This media trend embraced scooters, motorcycles and bicycles. (More examples [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

More recently, when gas prices dropped, many consumers jumped back in line for guzzlers (at the special industry-on-the-precipice discount). Which led to another round of seemingly interchangeable stories.

But what about those of us who make our choices for other reasons? What if you want a certain car because it looks vaguely old-fashioned? What if you want a motorcycle because it looks like a mint-condition version of something from Mad Max? What if you want a ridiculous-looking bicycle, to effectively say, you don't care what people say because you think it's cool?

If you wanted something like that, something that's not quite a motorcycle, not quite a bike, but something that's kind of &hellip; in between, you might be delighted with the Velosolex.

The Velosolex is a French-built moped, essentially a single-gear bicycle with a two-stroke engine mounted above the front wheel. The unique design allows the rider to use the engine for assistance while pedaling, or to putter along on engine power alone. Proceeding by pedal power alone is possible, but a bit impractical, as the bike weighs 68 pounds, two or three times as much as a regular bicycle.

Velosolex S4800. (Daniel McDermon/The New York Times)

The Velosolex is classically styled (read: hardly updated since its original design 60 years ago), and it is sold as an ultra-cheap mode of basic transportation. The S4800 model that I tested retails for \$1,795 on the Velosolex America site.

Its 49cc engine yields a reported 0.8 horsepower, meaning it can travel pretty far on a full tank (1.3 quarts) of fuel (gasoline and two-stroke oil, which must be mixed before fueling). It starts on the go, with the rider pedaling the bike forward before engaging the engine with a hand control mounted aft of the handlebars. It's a bit like push-starting a car.

Once engaged, the engine helps propel the rider up to about 20 miles an hour, which is the machine's effective

speed limit. Further pedaling is impractical due to the single gear available, and the engine-driven speed is limited in order to meet legal requirements for mopeds. Braking is handled by drum brakes front and rear, with hand levers, as on many new scooters.

For me, getting around on the Velosolex was a mixture of fun and frustration. Once up to speed, the bike will chug along happily with little pedaling necessary. But the stops and starts of city traffic make it necessary to disengage the engine regularly, an operation that requires removing one hand from the handlebars. The bike can be halted without disengaging the engine, but it requires a bit more braking effort and leads the rider to worry about killing the engine, which must then be restarted upon takeoff. After a bit of experience, the whole process gets a bit smoother, but it would be nice to be able to disengage the engine without taking a hand off the bars.

The suspension system is &hellip; simple. (Daniel McDermon/The New York Times)

Maneuverability is more challenging on the Velosolex than on a similarly sized bicycle, and the weight of the engine on the front wheels makes sharp turns a bit tougher than on a scooter. But the bike will easily twist around the occasional pothole.

On crowded roads, the problem is figuring out where the bike fits in &mdash; it can't keep up with more powerful vehicles, so riding along the shoulder or in bicycle lanes is the best solution (though bicyclists might give an untoward glance or two). Its diminutive size and power make it unsuitable for the busiest roads, and highways are off-limits.

The biggest utilitarian advantage of the Velosolex is its dainty fuel consumption. The company claims fuel economy of 160 to 200 miles a gallon, and in a couple of weeks of riding around Brooklyn, I didn't quite empty the tank.

No special motorcycle or scooter license is required to ride a Velosolex in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut; a regular driver's license will suffice. A special moped-only permit is also available in New Jersey for drivers aged 15 and older. Registration requirements vary.

So in the quest for a distinctive way to get around, the Velosolex is a viable and defensible choice &mdash; just not the most practical one.

But practicality is not its purpose. In fact, I never discovered exactly what its purpose is. But there's no point in carping about its awkward layout, its lack of some important features (mirrors should be standard) and its oddball looks. The thing is unique. It makes the rider stand out.

And that's its true appeal. After all, Steve McQueen rode one, as a company brochure (pdf) points out. So did Brigitte Bardot. And, um, Rowan Atkinson.

## Comments

1. December 11, 2008 9:06 am [Link](#)

We brought one of these back to North Vancouver, where we then lived, in after a trip to France back in 1975. It cost less than \$200 and seemed like the two-wheeled equivalent of the ubiquitous Citroen 2CV. I was quite a freaky teenager, and this moped, apparently the first one in BC, made me more so when I rode it to high school.

Our Solex looked a lot like the one in the photo, except that it had front caliper brakes, no engine guard (that was added later) and the brake handles were attached to ends of the handlebars (i.e. backwards). Installing a couple of saddlebags made the moped more practical and attractive.

Contrary to the article, I never found the need to disengage the engine in traffic—as I recall, grabbing the front brake released the throttle and vice-versa.

The Solex was lots of fun for a while, but the hills of Vancouver were too much for it, and the piston sleeve got bent out of shape.

— Ken

2. December 12, 2008 9:39 am [Link](#)

need to bring one in Bermuda?

Velosolex was the weapon of a famous singer in France:

(Mike Brant) on most of his songs he is with the Velosolex on the back .

we all had a Solex , some 2,800 some 3,800 some even older 2,000.

so let me have some information to get a color full one for me>

best regards,

J-C

— Jean-Claude Garzia

3. December 12, 2008 1:59 pm [Link](#)

I thought two-stroke engines were much more polluting than four-stroke engines (like on an automobile)?

— Inconvenient Truth

4. December 13, 2008 9:28 am [Link](#)

Actually, a correctly tuned two-stroke engine using a synthetic lubricant can be as clean burning a clean burning four-stroke engine and can also use a catalytic converter.

— Laurent

5. December 14, 2008 8:08 pm [Link](#)

Puh-leeze, if you want to ride a motor vehicle, take your lumps with the other motor vehicles and stay out of the bike lanes.

— Evan Marks

