

Scooter Mecca

By: Bryan Brah

Maybe you've seen them zipping around town; they're cute, agile, stingy on gas, fun to ride and easy to park. They're scooters, and a unique set of conditions exists that is making them the fastest growing form of transportation in Austin. With 300 days of sun, a citizenry concerned with protecting the environment, and gas prices hovering at or above the \$3 mark, it's a sure bet that you'll be seeing more scooters in the months and years to come.

Once viewed only as a niche vehicle or even a toy, scooters are quickly gaining popularity with a broad range of consumers. "Sales are up big time. We're selling twice as many scooters as we sold last year," said Dean Morehead of Woods Fun Center, a dealer of Honda, Yamaha and Suzuki scooters. "There is a huge difference between scooter people and motorcycle people. Motorcyclists almost fit a certain type, but the people buying scooters aren't as easily classified."

Zach Hennard from Austin Vespa added: "Scooters are perfect for running around Austin. They're a lot more appropriate than motorcycles, they're more practical, they're easier to drive, they're lighter and they're cheaper to operate. We sell scooters to commuting professionals, to students, to the young, to the old and to people looking to recapture something from their youth."

This sentiment was echoed by Brian Bybee of American Scooter Center, an Austin shop that sells and services vintage Italian scooters: "Where we used to just deal with hardcore scooterists, now we've got people from all walks of life coming in."

Bybee attributed the popularity of scooters to three reasons: "We get a lot of people who are attracted by the nostalgia, some Anglophiles who see the scooter as an

emblem of underground culture, but now we're seeing a lot more people who like the idea of saving money on gas while looking cool and having fun."

Whatever it is that motivates someone to buy a scooter, there is a model to suit that need. Buyers can choose from different body styles, transmission types, engine sizes and types as well as a wide range of prices.

According to various manufacturers and dealers, new 49 cc scooters start around \$1,600 while some big touring scooters can set you back almost \$9,000, but most new scooters in the 150 cc range cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000.

There are new vintage-style scooters like the Vespa PX, Bajaj Chetak, and Genuine Scooter Company Stella. These are all metal, usually have manual transmissions, and may use two-cycle engines. They are basically old designs manufactured today.

Buyers can also choose retro-styled scooters like the Honda Metropolitan, Yamaha Vino, TN'G Venice, and Vespa LX. These scooters have lines that evoke the 1950s or 1960s, but take advantage of modern materials and manufacturing techniques to produce scooters that are reliable, easy to ride and easy to maintain.

Next there are thoroughly modern scooters whose looks range from the stripped down Honda Ruckus, which looks like a prop from a Mad Max movie, to fighter-jet styled racing scooters like Aprilia's SR 50 and luxury touring models that look almost like their motorcycle counterparts.

"I bought a new Kymco 150 because I really liked all the amenities. It's an automatic, it's got a water-cooled four-cycle engine, it gets about 80 miles per tank (1.3 gallon tank), it's very quick, and it cost about \$1,200 less than a comparable Vespa," said

Whitney Ayers, of Austin. "I've been riding scooters for about six years now, and I don't even own a car, if I have to go out of town or something, I make my girlfriend drive."

Many buyers are purchasing vintage scooters like 1940s through 1970s Vespas or Lambrettas. These scooters, depending on the model and condition, range from \$2,000 for a decent daily rider to \$10,000 for a perfect unrestored original.

Bruce Dye, a local scooter mechanic and enthusiast, prefers vintage scooters. "There's no way I'd ride anything but a classic Italian scooter. They're just like classic cars, they may be temperamental, but there's something really cool about driving a rare and unique vehicle. I mean, how many Honda Civics are there in the world?"

American Scooter Center's Bybee cautions: "Vintage scooters aren't for everyone. Some people see an old scooter on the road and just decide that they want one, not realizing that there's a lot of service and maintenance involved in owning a 30 or 40-year-old machine. It's a commitment and a totally different mentality than the throwaway consumerist culture most Americans are used to. When these things break, you can't just buy another one."

Even though scooter owners can and do argue for hours about which model is best, everyone agrees with Ayers' sentiment when he says: "I hate cars and I wish I could ride my scooter everywhere."

References and Sources

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Brian Bybee Retail Parts Manager of American Scooter Center	512.989.3116
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Manufacturer's Websites

<http://www.apriliausa.com/>

<http://www.bajajusa.com/>

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