





California

KICK-START

Instant torque,
zero emissions, no gas bill: Pinch me,
I'm California dreamin'

By *Masa Takei*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK DOHERTY

We're going from Zero to Zero in 10 days. That is, we're starting at Zero Motorcycles, makers of cutting-edge electric bikes just outside Santa Cruz, California, and ending with visits to vintage custom bike builders in L.A. such as Shinya Kimura, originator of "Zero-style." We'll see what the future of motorcycling looks like while paying homage to revisions of its past. We'll also take a 2,000-kilometre core sample of California in between, arcing inland to the desert and down the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada. Motorcycling, after all, is *the* way to see California, and not just because it's still 30°C in mid-October, but because it's part of the lore that feeds California's magic – its myths, its movies.

I've just picked up Mark, photographer

and good friend, in San Francisco. Now our 500 kilograms of man, machine and personal effects are thrumming along the 101 heading south, dodging traffic. We're new to this bike – learning on the job and, in our hurry, trying not to meet the Sausage Creature, as Hunter S. Thompson put it in his 1995 review of the blinding-fast Ducati 900ss/sp. Our burly BMW R 1200 GS Adventure is wasp-like, aggressive looking and as solid as a tank. It also has a robotic manga/anime-like quality to it. When we pull into Zero's lot and park in the shade, I half-expect it to unfold like a Transformer and clomp away.

Inside, Zero's offices feel like a combination Silicon Valley startup and aerospace factory. Upstairs is a hive of cubicles and men in chinos, desks littered with aluminum motorcycle chasses and design mockups. Downstairs, tattooed forearms turn wrenches, but there's a noticeable lack of oil spills and no *blat* of engines being tuned in the belly of what has become the darling of North America's burgeoning electric motorbike industry. The Governorator himself pulled a photo-op on one of Zero's 270-pound dynamos – the other end of the spectrum from the 1990 Harley-Davidson Fat Boy Schwarzenegger

WINDING THROUGH THE ALABAMA Hills, location for dozens of TV shows and films, from the *Lone Ranger* and *Gunga Din* to *Gladiator* and *Tremors* (top); (l-r) Fifth-generation Bishopite Matt Schober rides past Owen's Valley basalt columns. Best eats: fish tacos with mango chutney at Tioga Gas Mart & Whoa Nellie Deli.





straddled in *Terminator 2*.

In its first year of production, Zero Motorcycles sold just a few dozen bikes, half of which went to green-conscious Canada, mostly to B.C.ers. In the two years since it has added 54 employees and surpassed the 1,000-motorcycle mark. According to director of marketing Scot Harden, it also has serious venture capital backing and sales projections look like a hockey stick. "They're not just evolutionary," he brags of Zero's electro-rockets, "they're revolutionary."

That's not marketing bravado from an eco-prosthelytizer, either. It comes from a man, now in his mid-'50s, who has jockeyed fossil-fuel-burning engines professionally for almost 40 years. An American Motorcycle Association (AMA) Hall of Famer, Harden won his share of Baja 500s and Baja 1000s before going on to manage factory race teams for KTM and BMW/Husqvarna. And from his

moustache down to his cowboy boots, he's still that desert rider who has covered almost half a million km off-road, racing and touring all over Africa and North and South America. To have a die-hard from the old guard hitch his wagon to electric is an incredible vote of confidence. "It's the future," he asserts. "Somewhere down the line, every other bike on the road will be electric."

Waiting for our test drive, the talk drifts from motorcycles to movies. The film script Steve McQueen was working on when he died is being revived, and Zero Motorcycles may have a cameo. Harden remembers being 14, bumping along the Nevada desert on his dirt bike to catch Bruce Brown's 1971 classic, *On Any Sunday*. The documentary filmmaker, already famous for his 1966 surfer ode *Endless Summer*, had applied his same gentle touch to the burgeoning subculture of motorcycling. His co-producer: Hollywood leading man and avid rider Steve McQueen. The coolest man alive influenced a whole generation of new motorcyclists. And transfixed by what he saw on the screen, Harden was one of those kids, hiding in the theatre bathroom to watch back-to-back screenings. "Yeah, that movie," he says, "changed my life."

We're soon accelerating into the forested



hills for a spin, Zero's street-legal bikes all twist-and-go, no gear-shifting necessary, the power delivery even and sprightly. The only noise is the wind through my helmet and gentle whirr of moving parts. Though we've just stepped off a 110-horsepower BMW touring bike, these electric mounts don't feel like they lack for guts, either. Flying along sun-dappled laneways, the sensation is of a free ride – propelled without any exertion or discernible form of combustion. The fun factor is ridiculous. "That's the proof right there," says

THE MAJESTIC SWEEP OF YOSEMITE Valley (top) and view of Half-Dome make it tough to keep eyes on the road. (right) Zero Motorcycles HQ; no engine noise to talk over; there's a gas-pump symbol on the instrument panel, but that's a battery, not an engine block. (far right) Zero Motorcycle's legendary Scot Harden, then and now.



terrorized townies than portrayed in the movie): a rowdy Gypsy Tour the American Motorcycle Association organized over the 1947 Independence Day weekend to bring together motorcycle clubs. But magnified by the media, including a staged photo in *Life* magazine of a biker double-fisting atop his 'cycle – crankcase deep in beer bottles – and a fictionalized account of the event in *Harper's*, the rally swiftly rose to the level of legend.

Today there is nothing much to see in Hollister, but the drive up from the coast makes it more about the journey than the destination. Hwy. 152 yields some sinuous track into the hills, and we exchange salutes with other riders winding it out back down to sea level. In town we hit a *taqueria*, then wander through Johnny's Bar, peering up at black-and-white photos of that bonafide motorcycle club the Boozefighters (led by founder Wino Willie Forkner), before heading back down for another run through the S-curves.

As Bruce Brown narrates in *On Any Sunday*, "the most fun in all of motorcycling is to load up your bike in a pickup and head out into the country," which, two days later, is what we do. Our buddy Matt Schober has trail bikes for us, and we load the three vintage Hondas onto a trailer and fill the truck bed with gear and supplies. Mark and Matt jump in the cab. I ride escort on the GS. Then we're off, with no set plan.

There's something unmistakably dramatic about the land this side of the Sierra Range. Impossibly delicate desert hues rise into mountains, the softness of pointillism mixed with the strong lines of a wood-block print. Days are spent going from familiar loops Matt knows well to poking around the edges of the map, places he's always wanted to explore. At night we make camp amongst the sage at 2,100 metres and wake to frost on our sleeping bags. One night we grab an open-air tub site at Benton Hot Springs and soak for as long as humanly possible while a rare rain shower passes, leaving a sky bright with clouds of stars.

We climb old packhorse trails, built to service mines up in the hills, and bounce the bikes through whoop-de-whoops and

streambeds, up steep banks and down tracks rolling with melon-sized rocks. Riding sweeping single track high on Glass Mountain, we gain wide-open views of the desert floor and the White Mountains across the valley. Up here, colours achieve extra degrees of vibrancy. Stands of trembling aspen, orange and mint-green, shimmer in the wind. We find graffiti carved by shepherds into the trees' white trunks, dated "1916," and – riding a ridge – come across pines hundreds of years old, trunks gnarled into bonsai twists. The grain of the silver wood, blast-polished by sun and wind, forms bold, swirling patterns as if hammered from precious metals by Issey Miyake. A raptor circles in a sky so saturated in colour it's a midnight blue.

For two days we see no one else, save for a hand waving from a lone passing truck. Down low we roam volcanic tablelands, encountering Paiute petroglyphs in slot canyons, and poke our heads into abandoned mineshafts shored up by rickety timbers. Tracks turn to red volcanic pumice, hemmed in with bitterbrush and sage.

A single cloud puff hovers off a peak like an exclamation point as we drop back to the valley and past salt flats and fresh desert springs, oases vibrant with life. After a week on the bikes, wearing all our armour in all this heat, we walk bowlegged like cowboys and smell like bags of hockey equipment. We strip down and jump into a slough to cool off.

With three days of Sierra Nevada mountain and desert riding behind us, it's time to head south. We sadly part ways with Matt before stopping for an obligatory burrito at the Big Pine Chevron – then, back on the BMW, head

for L.A., past motels advertising "Clean N'Quiet," "Cable & HBO." Convenience stores announce simply, "Gasoline. Beer." Hook-and-bullet shops bear such classic neon signs as a fish on a line arcing out of the water, in western boardwalk towns from the era of Norman Rockwell. Always to our right, the bleached-bone pinnacles of the Sierra Nevada, to our left, Death Valley. And now, just to the west, the highest point in the contiguous U.S., Mount Whitney; 160 kilometres east is the lowest – Badwater Basin.



Harden, pointing to my Cheshire cat grin.

The next morning, Mark and I are back on the BMW for the pilgrimage to Hollister – "Birthplace of the American Biker," about 80 kilometres south. The town of 37,000 was the quiet backdrop of the first biker movie ever made: *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando on – not a Harley as one might expect for this American film classic, but some British iron, the screen legend's own 1950 Triumph Thunderbird. The film was inspired by a real-life event (featuring fewer

Our entry into the morass that is L.A. comes past dusk, the worst possible time to be driving into an unfamiliar city. We struggle to keep with the flow of a six-lane freeway – its surface rough and strewn with detritus (“Jeez Louise, is that a couch?”) – and strain to read exit signs before they smear past. An ominous shroud of smog cloaks the city, the Sausage Creature lurks in the shadows. But we arrive just fine and on time to meet Mark’s parents, on their way home to Europe. His father had been a “ton-up” boy, one of the café racers who roared around London’s ring roads, a blur of black leather on a Norton. His mother also rode; their honeymoon was a

Now in his late forties, he also moved from the systematic production of his signature Zero-style bikes – characterized by a rigid gooseneck frame, pre-’84 Harley engine, springer forks and spoked wheels – to one-offs he doesn’t even sketch before building.

Kimura’s Zero bikes have been featured in the likes of 2008’s Hollywood blockbuster *Iron Man*, but his latest creations are more likely to appear in a Terry Gilliam film or Jeunet & Caro’s *The City of Lost Children* – even more probably in a museum of modern art or Chelsea gallery. He named his first company “Zero” to signify the beginning. Now, 17 years later, he has progressed to a whole

are set, movies such as *The World’s Fastest Indian* are filmed and that iconic motorcycle the Triumph Bonneville derives its name.

As much as building bikes, Kimura loves to ride. He recently completed the U.S. motorcycle gumball race, a coast-to-coast challenge on pre-1916 bikes – in Kimura’s case, a 1915 Indian. It’s sitting there next to us, not much more than an old-style bicycle frame with an engine strapped to it. Nothing is cushioning the metal of its single-saddle seat except well-worn leather. My ass hurts just looking at it. Except for two days spent repairing the bike after it broke down midway, Kimura raced it cross-country for 16 days straight.



motorcycle tour through Yugoslavia. And though those riding days are long gone, we can tell by the spark in their eyes they wouldn’t mind a go on the Beemer.

Early the next morning finds us back on the freeways, working like a rally-car team. Mark yelling navigation in my ear, we head for a suburb with a Japanese-sounding name.

In Azusa we prowl past a languid strip of car-parts dealers and nondescript garages, interspersed with the odd tattoo parlour and, this we know for sure, at least one design studio: Shinya Kimura’s Chabott Engineering. We spot bikes in various states of completeness or deconstruction spilling out from a doorway and figure we’ve found it. And once sun-blinded eyes adjust to the dimness within, there’s definitely the sense that this is not your regular garage. In the back and up some stairs is a loft appointed with antique furniture and design books, a gallery of black-and-white photos and a few of Kimura’s masterpieces.

One of the world’s more distinctive bike builders, Kimura left the motorcycle company he helped found in Japan, Zero Engineering, to establish himself in 2006 in L.A.

CHABOTT ENGINEERING OWNER AND sole builder Shinya Kimura (far left), with author and work in progress – and (middle) testing a client commission based on a ‘47 Harley engine. Ian Barry and his second bike (far right), the award-winning Kestrel – a 1970 Triumph Bonneville reimagined and painstakingly implemented.

other plane. Producing just two or three bikes a year, he works like a sculptor, taking inspiration from materials at hand to “grow” each bike organically and produce designs at once retro and futuristic, reverent and iconoclastic: sophisticated steam-punk.

Parts are welded from sheet metal, hammered out with a mallet, then ground down. Salvaged materials – burnished with age and use – and his custom parts blend harmoniously. The bikes embody a *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, rough but elegant. They’re built to be ridden but something makes me reluctant to touch them. Not because the surfaces and lines are so austere, but because they’re works of art – to handle them seems disrespectful. Kimura’s buyers have no such compunction, of course; the bikes are as much about function as form. He has raced them at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah where speed records

He leads us out on a backyard test track, mounted on his latest project. Why he has chosen this non-descript locale to open a workshop becomes suddenly clear when, barely five minutes in, we’re hauling up a mountain road off a lush reservoir valley in Angeles National Forest. Kimura’s riding a recent commission based on a 1947 Harley-Davidson design: swept-forward, restrained, ape-hanger-style handle bars, balloon tires and what looks like a miniature diving helmet housing the front light that is secured by brass rivets to the top of the gas tank. The rear light is a bulbous brushed-steel-and-brass unit fronted by a red Cyclops-eye. With its sinuous brace arms, the bike is somehow reminiscent of the killer bots in the *Matrix* – a jockey shifter located under the rider’s left thigh necessitating a little hitch over to one side to switch gears. Meanwhile, Mark and I ride two-up on the latest in computerized German engineering to hit the hardtop, swaddled in ballistic nylon, plastic body armour and boots. Kimura wears a thin leather racing jacket over blue Dickies and low-cut Chuck Taylors. We’re side by side, but travelling in two different movies.

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California Cycle

Continued from page 40

OUR LAST STOP IS ACROSS TOWN AT THE STUDIO of one of Kimura's contemporaries, a designer with a similar bent, if significantly different style. We cross the dry L.A. River and dead end in another industrial district – where amid high chain-link fences topped with barbed wire and rusting corrugated metal is a structure unusually polished for a warehouse, neatly painted in an understated grey, with a charcoal rollup gate and red accent door. Clean-cut and in his late thirties, Ian Barry comes out front to meet us.

Barry founded Falcon Motorcycles about eight years after quitting his job as a programmer and setting up a tent in a friend's driveway (that was his workshop; he lived in another tent in the backyard). Since then, his custom bikes have met with enough success that he is now housed in this appropriately epic warehouse space in east L.A. Stepping off the street and inside is like stepping into the pages of *Dwell* magazine.

Where Kimura's workshop is a dark, organic warren of bike parts, tools and machinery, Barry's is bright with high ceilings and two-and-a-half metre windows that

pivot to access breeze and garden, an oasis of greenery in a savannah of concrete. Inspiration lines the walls, from art deco posters to line drawings of plants. But it's quickly apparent that real work goes on here. As with Kimura's garage, there are bikes in various states of production and, on the wide slats of a wood-floor section, several finished works.


We start with the first in Barry's Concept 10 collection, The Bullet – a glossy board-track racer representing thousands of hours of labour, almost every part custom fabricated or reworked. Snapped up by film and TV actor Jason Lee (star of *My Name Is Earl*), the bike launched Barry's career as a builder by winning the Custom Award at the 2008 Legend of the Motorcycle Concours in Half Moon Bay. The Bullet's frame and engine are from a 1950 Triumph Thunderbird, the same model and year as Marlon Brando's bike in *The Wild One*, which gets us talking about where Mark and I started 10 days ago.

As it turns out, Barry grew up in Santa Cruz and is familiar with Zero Motorcycles. To my surprise, for someone so obsessed with bikes created before he was born, he's also keen to get out and test drive an electric model. "I like what they're doing. I think it's great," he

says. "Anybody who has a problem with the idea of an electric bike is just wrapped up in nostalgia. It's a giant leap if it creates a better-performing, better-handling machine."

I ask if he'd drop an electric engine into one of his vintage frames, like musician Neil Young putting an electric engine into his 1959 Lincoln Continental. "I wouldn't do it," he says, shaking his head. But he does explain what he is hoping to do with electric power. With his Concept 10 collection, he's making one each of the major British marks (Velocette, Ariel, Norton, AJS, BSA, Rudge, Brough, Vincent and the two Triumphs he's already built) in order to learn everything he can about traditional fabrication techniques. Hopefully, "that will then get carried forward into developing a chassis around an electric engine. But I won't use an old bike," he says, "I'll start from scratch."

We thought we were making a one-way trip by motorcycle through California. In the end, it seems, we've made a loop. ■

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Dead Man Walking

Crossing the road is a two-way street

by Ian MacNeill

THINK PEDESTRIANS have the right of way in traffic? Think again.

Pedestrians have rights. But they also have legal responsibilities that require not putting lives at risk. For example, pedestrians can't suddenly walk out onto a road – even in a marked crosswalk – and expect traffic to suddenly stop. If they do, and they're struck, they could find that the law and the courts are less than sympathetic when it comes to establishing blame and compensation.

Traffic safety experts agree there are three main areas of concern. First, many British Columbians are unaware of the basic laws governing pedestrian safety. Second, pedestrians are often distracted and have a false sense of security when using marked – and even unmarked – crosswalks. Third, motorists are failing to yield to pedestrians, even when the latter have right of way. The result: 2,600 pedestrians are injured annually on B.C. roads, according to ICBC, some seriously. In 2007, no fewer than 72 lost their lives, with six pedestrians on average killed annually in Vancouver alone and nine pedestrian fatalities in the first seven months of 2011.

To address such issues, Vancouver police have launched a campaign that includes both education and enforcement. "We don't want to unfairly target any one group," says Shayne Apostoliuk, acting inspector for the city's police traffic division. "But we're ramping up enforcement and, where warranted, writing tickets for both pedestrians and drivers.

Education-wise, the campaign encourages pedestrians to use common sense and street smarts, and to respect their inherent vulnerability by walking *defensively*. Refrain from jay-walking, for example – crossing a street less than a block from a crosswalk. And even when crossing a street legally, avoid stepping into a crosswalk suddenly. Don't rely on walk signals or the "magical" presence of two white lines painted on a road, either. Look first and, if possible, establish eye contact before setting out. Keep looking, too: left and right and for motorists rushing around corners. Note also that roads with multiple lanes are particularly dangerous. Just because drivers in three lanes have stopped doesn't mean the one in the fourth lane will.

Finally, says Apostoliuk, remember that crossing a street where one has 100 per cent legal right of way can still translate into 100 per cent legally dead if one is hit by a distracted driver. This is particularly relevant at night or in the rain when pedestrians in dark clothing fade into the streetscape like polar bears on ice floes.

As for motorists, the campaign urges the reduction of distractions, slowing down, exercising caution (particularly in urban areas) and reading up on traffic regulations. Apostoliuk notes, for instance, how many motorists are unaware that almost all intersections are considered "unmarked crosswalks." This means drivers have an obligation to stop for anyone trying to cross a roadway if traffic flow allows doing so safely. ▣

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SAFER STREETS

The safety of older pedestrians is definitely a "hot topic" in the traffic engineering community, says UBC engineering professor and road safety expert Gord Lovegrove – and for good reason. Of the 74 pedestrians killed in B.C. in 2007, 42 per cent were aged 61 and older. Long-term, cities "need to be engineered to reduce conflict between traffic and pedestrians of all ages," says Lovegrove. Short-term solutions include lengthening walk times at controlled intersections in areas where seniors live or congregate. □

School Zone HARMONY

AS TRAFFIC SAFETY officer for the central Okanagan school district, retired police officer **Dave Gibson** has some pertinent thoughts to share with drivers, and parents in particular, as another school year gets underway.

WW What are the key issues you're facing when promoting traffic safety around B.C. schools?

DG: During rush hours, almost one quarter of all drivers are on their way to or from school with kids, which leads to an enormous amount of congestion as all those moms and dads jostle for position and parking. The irony is that we drive our kids because we want them to be safe. But then we behave in ways that puts other kids at risk.

WW Risky behaviours such as?

DG: Speeding and not obeying parking regulations are the two big ones. We don't lower speed limits and restrict parking around schools to inconvenience parents, but to promote the safety of their children. For example, we often set up Speed Watch programs around schools – to raise motorist awareness before they enter school zones.

WW What other elements make up a school's traffic safety program?

DG: It's important to have a traffic safety officer on the ground educating kids and their parents about traffic safety, and you need both parking and speed enforcement by police to back that up.



WW What advice do you have for drivers as the school year begins?

DG: Keep your head on a swivel and stay alert. In September, kids are still full of the exuberance of summer. They're often thinking more about finding their old friends than traffic safety. Also, respect the school patrol squads; these children are in a vulnerable position and they're protecting your kids as well. □



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