

The Prince of Denmark

The Nimbus is a fascinating mixture of eccentricities, but with bulletproof reliability, if it's treated kindly

by Paul Duchene

Multi-cylinder motorcycles date back more than 100 years, but common engine options have been narrowed today to vertical twins, V-twins, V-fours, cross-frame fours, and horizontally-opposed boxers.

Other variations have been tried and dismissed, including V8s (Curtiss and Morbidelli); cross-frame sixes (Honda CBX and Kawasaki KZ1300), triples (Triumph Trident, Suzuki GT750), even rotary (Suzuki RE5 and Van Veen). Auto-engined projects belong in a different category but include the Chevrolet V8 Boss Hog and the flat-four VW-powered Amazonas. All but the triples were enormous.

The most promising configuration to have been abandoned is probably the slim inline 4-cylinder, which disappeared before WWII. Surviving inline fours are expensive, with early 1900s examples like Peerless and FN as high as \$160,000 and pre-WWII Hendersons, Clevelands, and Indians ranging from \$40,000 to \$75,000.

However, a creative collector can sidestep these expensive veterans and find a reliable 4-cylinder that was made almost without change from 1934 to 1959. It's the Nimbus, Denmark's only significant motorcycle, and good ones can be found for \$12,000 to \$15,000, judging from recent Mid-America Auction results.

Nimbus owners join an exclusive club

Nimbus owners join a pretty exclusive club in the U.S.; fewer than 100 of the 14,215 manufactured have made it over here. The good news, however, is that two-thirds of Nimbuses made still exist worldwide, and about 4,500 are currently licensed. Factory manuals and 95% of spare parts are available through Internet suppliers—there are five Nimbus dealers in Denmark—though some 1930s electrical parts can be expensive.

So what do you get? The Nimbus is a fascinating mixture of eccentricities, but with bulletproof reliability if it's treated kindly, according to Nimbus expert Allan Kløve Nyborg. Nyborg edits the Nimbus Tidende magazine for the 1,915 members of the largest association.

Nimbus was launched in 1919 by Fisker & Nielsen, which began manufacturing electric motors in 1906 and switched to vacuum cleaners in 1910. Peder Fisker thought he could improve on the 4-cylinder Belgian FN, and his son Anders followed in his footsteps. Their ideas were creative and simple—the strip-steel frame was riveted, so pieces could be replaced, and even the handlebars were made of boxed plate. Nimbus developed telescopic forks in 1933 and introduced hydraulic damping in 1939.

The rarest Nimbuses are the Models A and B “Stovepipes,” named for the six-inch-diameter backbone spine that also held the fuel. Between 1919 and 1927, just 1,252 were made. About 250 survive, but a good one will set you back \$25,000–\$28,000. These models had hand-shift gear changes and front and rear springs, but with no shock absorbers, the ride was rather like a mountain goat.

The majority of surviving Nimbuses are the Model



C, which was made from 1934 to 1959. The engine is an OHC inline 4-cylinder of 746 cc, generating a leisurely 22 hp, and known as a “bumblebee” from its exhaust note. Valve gear was exposed until the very latest models, which is not as messy as you might expect, says Nyborg. It's nothing like a Norton International, which required the rider wear oilcloth pants.

A fixture of Danish culture

The Nimbus gearshift is a foot-operated 3-speed; final drive is by a shaft leading to the unsprung rear wheel, which meant

the shaft drive didn't need a U-joint. By the 1950s, the Nimbus was obsolete, and the motorcycle combination was being replaced as a workhorse by small cars and vans. However, the Danish Army and the Post Office kept ordering bikes.

By this time Anders Fisker was paralyzed with multiple sclerosis, but he was still working on several intriguing prototypes, including a rotary-valve model that never went into production. He died in 1964.

Nimbus owners have traveled around the world, but most likely in a leisurely manner. Top speed is around 65 mph (55 mph with a sidecar), but the two-bearing crankshaft has white metal poured bearings, so engine abuse is not tolerated for long. However, cranks and rods can be rebuilt in Denmark—a job that costs about \$500, plus freight.

The Nimbus has been a fixture in Danish culture since before WWII. Nazi troops confiscated Nimbuses and sent them off to service in Norway and Sweden, freeing up the more rugged BMWs and Zundapps for the Eastern Front.

Nyborg says anybody returning to Denmark with a Nimbus for one of the huge rallies had better get used to spending a lot of time talking to old men.

“The stories will invariably be about the man himself being a dispatch rider in the Danish army,” says Nyborg. “If all these stories are true, the entire male population between 60 and 85 were dispatch riders...”

Military models tend to be rode hard and put away wet, says Nyborg, so civilian bikes are a better bet. One red flag to watch for is the substitution of a VW 6-volt relay for the correct Nimbus item. The Nimbus dynamo is 70 watts but the VW is set for a 270-watt dynamo. If the battery fails, the VW regulator constantly charges at the rate of 45 amps instead of the prescribed eleven, and the dynamo melts down.

The Holy Grail for Nimbus collectors is probably the MC-100 engine with covered valve gear, a revised chain-driven camshaft and the dynamo at the front. The engine is supposed to be lost, but Nyborg is hopeful he can find it and fit it in his 1956 prototype, which has rear suspension.

From the Danish club's web site, the rallies look to be large jolly affairs with a cast of eccentric characters. Plan to add Copenhagen to your holiday plans if you buy your own “bumblebee.” ♦

Perfect Nimbus owner: Can order spares in Danish

Rating (★★★★★ is best):

Fun to ride: ★★★★★

Ease of maintenance: ★★

Appreciation potential: ★★★

Attention getter: ★★★★★

Years produced: 1934–59

Number produced: 12,715

(14,215 all models)

Original list price: 2,070 DKK (\$517.50)
in 1934, 8,600 DKK (\$2,150) in 1959

SCM Valuation: \$3,000–\$15,000

Tune-up: Around \$200 DIY, once you
line up parts

Engine: 746-cc, four-stroke, air-cooled,
inline 4-cylinder

Transmission: 3-speed

Weight: 374 lb

Engine #: Left side engine block under
carburetor

Frame #: 1934–47, round plate by
tank; 1947–59, square plate at left
rear of frame; 1956–59, also on
headstock

Colors: Black, red, green blue, ivory,
yellow, lavender, gray

Club: Danmarks Nimbus Touring,
Box 284, 9900 Frederikshavn, DNK;
Phone—98 42 66 65.

More: www.nimbus.dk; in the U.S. www.nimbusclub.com

SCM Investment Grade: C+