

# Vespa GTV Navy 125



## *Jeremy Clarkson*

Recently, various newspapers ran a photograph of me on a small motorcycle. They all pointed out that I hate motorbikes and that by riding one I had exposed myself as a hypocrite who should commit suicide immediately.

Hmmm. Had I been photographed riding the local postmistress, then, yes, I'd have been shamed into making some kind of apology. But it was a motorcycle. And I don't think it even remotely peculiar that a motoring journalist should ride such a thing. Not when there is a problem with the economy and many people are wondering if they should make a switch from four wheels to two.

Unfortunately, you cannot make this switch on a whim, because this is Britain and there are rules. Which means that before climbing on board you must go to a car park, put on a high-visibility jacket and spend the morning driving round some cones while a man called Dave — all motorcycle instructors are called Dave — explains which lever does what.

Afterwards, you will be taken on the road, where you will drive about for several hours in a state of abject fear and misery, and then you will go home and vow never to get on a motorcycle ever again.

This is called compulsory basic training and it allows you to ride any bike up to 125cc. If you want to ride something bigger, you must take a proper test. But, of course, being human, you will not want a bigger bike, because then you will be killed immediately while wearing clothing from the Ann Summers "Dungeon" range.

Right, first things first. The motorbike is not like a car. It will not stand up when left to its own devices. So, when you are not riding it, it must be leant against a wall or a fence. I'm told some bikes come with footstools which can be lowered to keep them upright. But then you have to lift the bike onto this footstool, and that's like trying to lift up an American.

Next: the controls. Unlike with a car, there seems to be no standardisation in the world of motorcycling. Some have gearlevers on the steering wheel. Some have them on the floor, which means you have to shift with your feet — how stupid is that? — and some are automatic.

Then we get to the brakes. Because bikes are designed by bikers — and bikers, as we all know, are extremely dim — they haven't worked out how the front and back brake can be applied at the same time. So, to stop the front wheel, you pull a lever on the steering wheel, and to stop the one at the back, you press on a lever with one of your feet.

A word of warning, though. If you use only the front brake, you will fly over the steering wheel and be killed. If you try to use the back one, you will use the wrong foot and change into third gear instead of stopping. So you'll hit the obstacle you were trying to avoid, and you'll be killed.

Then there is the steering. The steering wheel comes in the shape of what can only be described as handlebars, but if you turn them — even slightly — while riding along, you will fall off and be killed. What you have to do is lean into the corner, fix your gaze on the course you wish to follow, and then you will fall off and be killed.

As far as the minor controls are concerned, well . . . you get a horn and lights and indicators, all of which are operated by various switches and buttons on the steering wheel, but if you look down to see which one does what, a truck will hit you and you will be killed. Oh, and for some extraordinary reason, the indicators do not self-cancel, which means you will drive with one of them on permanently, which will lead following traffic to think you are turning right. It will then undertake just as you turn left, and you will be killed.

What I'm trying to say here is that, yes, bikes and cars are both forms of transport, but they have nothing in common. Imagining that you can ride a bike because you can drive a car is like imagining you can swallow-dive off a 90ft cliff because you can play table tennis.

However, many people are making the switch because they imagine that having a small motorcycle will be cheap. It isn't. Sure, the 125cc Vespa I tried can be bought for £3,499, but then you will need a helmet (£300), a jacket

(£500), some Freddie Mercury trousers (£100), shoes (£130), a pair of Kevlar gloves (£90), a coffin (£1,000), a headstone (£750), a cremation (£380) and flowers in the church (£200).

In other words, your small 125cc motorcycle, which has no boot, no electric windows, no stereo and no bloody heater even, will end up costing more than a Volkswagen Golf. That said, a bike is much cheaper to run than a car. In fact, it takes only half a litre of fuel to get from your house to the scene of your first fatal accident. Which means that the lifetime cost of running your new bike is just 50p.

So, once you have decided that you would like a bike, the next problem is choosing which one. And the simple answer is that, whatever you select, you will be a laughing stock. Motorbiking has always been a hobby rather than an alternative to proper transport, and as with all hobbies, the people who partake are extremely knowledgeable. It often amazes me that in their short lives bikers manage to learn as much about biking as people who angle, or those who watch trains pull into railway stations.

Whatever. Because they are so knowledgeable, they will know precisely why the bike you select is rubbish and why theirs is superb. Mostly, this has something to do with "getting your knee down", which is a practice undertaken by bikers moments before the crash that ends their life.

You, of course, being normal, will not be interested in getting your knee down; only in getting to work and most of the way home again before you die. That's why I chose to test the Vespa, which is much loathed by trainspotting bikers because they say it is a scooter. This is racism. Picking on a machine because it has no crossbar is like picking on a person because he has slitty eyes or brown skin. Frankly, I liked the idea of a bike that has no crossbar, because you can simply walk up to the seat and sit down. Useful if you are Scottish and go about your daily business in a skirt.

I also liked the idea of a Vespa because most bikes are Japanese. This means they are extremely reliable so you cannot avoid a fatal crash by simply breaking down. This is entirely possible on a Vespa because it is made in Italy.

Mind you, there are some drawbacks you might like to consider. The Vespa is not driven by a chain. Instead, the engine is mounted to the side of the rear wheel for reasons that are lost in the mists of time and unimportant anyway. However, it means the bike is wider and fitted with bodywork like a car, to shroud the moving hot bits. That makes it extremely heavy. Trying to pick it up after you've fallen off it is impossible.

What's more, because the heavy engine is on the right, the bike likes turning right much more than it likes turning left. This means that in all left-handed bends, you will be killed.

Unless you've been blown off by the sheer speed of the thing. At one point I hit 40mph and it was as though my chest was being battered by a freezing-cold hurricane. It was all I could do to keep a grip on the steering wheel with my frostbitten fingers.

I therefore hated my experience of motorcycling and would not recommend it to anyone.

#### **The Clarksometer**

If you like misery, climb aboard



**ENGINE** 124cc, one cylinder

**POWER** 14bhp @ 9500rpm

**TORQUE** 8.5 lb ft @ 8500rpm

**TRANSMISSION** Automatic

**FUEL TANK CAPACITY** 9.5 litres

**TOP SPEED** 63.4mph