



By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

Harley-Davidson is, beyond any doubt, one of the most popular motorcycle brands in the whole wide world. Ask any biker or motorcycle collector to name just one bike they would definitely want to ride, or have in their collection, and they'd come right up and answer: Harley-Davidson.

The immense popularity of Harley-Davidson worldwide might be puzzling to some. At first glance, it seems that these heavyweight bikes are not particularly known for their blistering speed, unlike the Japanese Suzukis and Hondas; nor are they famous for smoothly climbing rocks and dunes, unlike trail or cross-country bikes; even their maneuverability in a race, or on the streets, is not comparable to that of some other bikes.

Nevertheless, Harley-Davidsons offer a collection of all these features. These mighty bikes come with an unparalleled mixture of speed and power. Besides, the unique design of their engine, combined with a large fuel tank and big tires, makes them an appealing vehicle for road trips – no more will you be stranded on the side of the road, waiting for a kind stranger to pull over and give you a few drops of gas.

They also have the upper hand in terms of safety, acting like a tank in the face of almost any obstacle. Harley-Davidsons are created in a way that their riders – given they are not utterly unlucky – would not come to any harm heading on.

Still, none of these could account for such vogue and charm. What sets Harley-Davidsons apart from the rest is their widely recognized elegance. The awesomeness associated with riding one of these bikes – with their long handlebars, prominent wheels, curved, single seats, and a terrifying, resonant sound comparable to the roaring of a lion – stems from an aura of grandeur going hand in hand with the biker.

Perhaps what further expanded the vast acclaim for Harley-Davidsons are those scenes from popular – or cult – Hollywood movies etched upon our memories, in which superstars ride these ferocious vehicles: Jack Nicholson in 1969 cult classic 'Easy Rider' and, of course, Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1991 blockbuster 'Terminator 2: Judgment Day' – the latter arguably one of the most

watched chase scenes of all time. There's no surprise then, that despite many technological advances, and in spite of Harley-Davidson directors sticking to their traditional designs and technologies (about 120 years after the inception of the company), there's still no competitor in the market for them. The stature and popularity of this mammoth of a bike still reigns unchecked.

Harley-Davidsons in Iran

Harley-Davidsons were brought to Iran back in the day mainly as vehicles for the law enforcement organizations. They were even operational up until the late 1980s, but problems arose in supplying their spare parts, especially for the engines, and they were gradually phased out and replaced by other brands. Subsequently, many of these bikes and their spare parts were sold in auctions.

In comes Yousef Shekarandaz, who owns a collection of classic motorcycles in the basement of his shop near Jomhuri Street. He is one of those who have bought containers of Harley-Davidson parts. Through his enthusiasm and knowledge of motorcycle maintenance, he was able to assemble those parts to build himself a collection of majestic motorbikes.

The dimly lit, old stairs of his basement lead to a stylish, breathtaking collection of motorbikes, some of which are more than a century old. In addition to Harley-Davidsons, Yousef owns other motorcycles produced by Triumph, Zündapp, Hercules, Vespa, and BSA, whose rubber horns or manual gears are telltale signs of their relic status.

The gathering of those classic motorbikes in that cozy, quiet corner of the basement, compared to the hustle and bustle of the crowd up there on Jomhuri Street, was reminiscent of the 1995 movie 'Underground', which narrates the lives of some partisans who, in the midst of World War II, escape the Nazis and take refuge in the basement of a house, only to reemerge 20 years later to find out that the war is over and everything has changed.

Certainly, none of the unsuspecting crowd passing by the front of the shop upstairs could have the slightest idea that such a collection of the most valuable, classic, antique motorcycles are gathering dust here.

"For 30 years or so, my main job was to sell antiques in a shop on Naderi Street, at the Istanbul Intersection in downtown Tehran," says Yousef,



adding with an air of unease, "But it's a few years now that, because of my former partners' decisions, I was forced to change lanes. Now I sell audio equipment in this shop, which I'm not interested in at all."

Like many children his age, Yousef was an avid lover of motorbikes. He fondly remembers the old motorcycle shop in front of their downtown house on Salsabil Street, where he used to longingly goggle at its bikes every day without fail.

"When I came of age, I started buying motorbikes for myself. From Suzuki AX 100 to Kawasaki Z1300."

The first classic bike he bought, however, was a German Zündapp about 19 years ago. He placed it like a statue in one of the rooms of his house to be revered along with other antiques he had collected.

"But it stood above the rest. Everyone who saw it was immediately drawn to it."

The pride and joy he felt upon seeing the reaction of his visitors prompted him to buy a couple more classic motorcycles. Then, he ended up at the inevitable crossroad.

"I said to myself that now I have to have a Harley-Davidson."

Only, there was a big problem. You could not find more than a few dozen of those mighty bikes in Iran, and the ones for sale at the time were only scrap. Therefore, Yousef came up with the idea of getting his hands on some of those auctioned off Harley-Davidson parts and accessories. He sold his car and borrowed some money to buy two 20-foot containers of what he desired.

"When I finally bought those pieces, everyone who saw them said, 'What good are they?'"

Little did they suspect that this antique dealer, motorcycle enthusiast knew exactly what they were worth. "All these parts were manufactured and packaged in the original Milwaukee facility, which has now turned into a museum. They are all produced by hand, whereas the parts produced after the 80s are completely machine-made."

At that point, Yousef employed the services of a mechanic and started to assemble the bikes. Being a sculptor himself, Yousef managed the work, designing the process, and they assembled whole motorcycles, with complete chassis and everything.

"In the end, from

those pieces, more than 40 Harley-Davidsons were obtained, all of which are as dear as sculptures to me."

When his collection was shaping up to be bigger than what he expected, he panicked a little bit.

"I thought, what if the authorities come and think they are smuggled or are obtained in illegal ways? Which they did, and asked me, 'Where did you get these bikes?' And I showed them the papers and told them I bought them from you, indeed."

At that point, Yousef decided to create a safe haven for his beloved bikes, arranging them in order to be revered by visitors of his shop.

"But this time, municipality officials came and objected to the structures and dismantled them. After that, I sold some of the bikes and the rest of them are just as you can see here."

The collector believes that he shouldn't have been discouraged, but rather appreciated and encouraged. "These bikes are a part of our history, they are our cultural heritage and a big capital for our country. You may be surprised to know that not even one of the likes of these motorcycles are kept in the traffic police museum."

Yousef's collection is undoubtedly unparalleled in Iran, and perhaps could give some of other collections abroad a run for their money. He now owns a total of 15 Harley-Davidsons, plus some 30 other classic motorbikes manufactured by other world-famous brands.

"The first Harley-Davidson bikes were imported to Iran in around 1940, but the oldest one I got is a 1200cc bike from 1942. The rest of them are manufactured in later years, up to 1979, which was the last year that Harley-Davidsons were molded and manufactured by hand."

Yousef has at some point espoused the idea of turning his invaluable collection into a museum of some sort instead of letting them gather dust in the basement. Yet, he does not believe that such a deed is possible without official support from relevant authorities.

"But at the end of the day, I don't believe that they would value such a collection."

In addition to the currently assembled motorcycles, he has approximately 38,000 spare parts, out of which "about 30 more bikes could be assembled." Yet, each of these new 30 Harley-Davidsons would lack some minor parts.

"I have about 95 percent of the parts needed for each new bike, with some of them in need of a bolt or a cylinder here or there."

Since other brands' spare parts do not fit Harley-Davidsons, and due to sanctions, Yousef is not able to finish what he has started. Nonetheless, he is sure of the treasure he sits on.

"Some foreigners are struggling to get their hands on some of these pieces, because someone who owns an old Harley-Davidson is not willing to put new spare parts on it, and definitely wants something original."

"Therefore, if a regular spare part costs ten dollars, an original one costs a hundred."

Hidden collection of majestic motorbikes in Tehran | **Sleeping Giants**