

Reborn.

It's a car. It's a bike.
It's the classic Morgan 3 Wheeler,
brought back for its centennial.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY LARRY EDSALL



Motorcycles have two wheels. Cars have four wheels. But what's a vehicle with three wheels?

While the Morgan 3 Wheeler drives like a car—you sit in it, not on it, and you steer with a wheel, not handlebars, and shifting is done via a car-style clutch pedal and shift lever—it is licensed as a motorcycle and, depending on your state's regulations, that may mean you need to wear a helmet.

But as Jeff Gille points out, wearing a helmet can be a good thing, because instead of a windshield the 3 Wheeler has only a pair of small clear wind deflectors, known as flyscreens in Britain, in front of the driver and passenger seats, and those bugs and the occasional rock that splatters or even shatters the windshield of your car could splatter or even shatter your face, especially when you're traveling at Interstate speeds, of which is the Morgan 3 Wheeler is very capable.

Gille is sales manager at Brighton Motorsports, a classic car sales and restoration business in Scottsdale, and also one of 12 Morgan dealerships in the US.

History lesson: the Morgan Motor Company was founded in England in 1910 by Henry Frederick Stanley Morgan, son and grandson of vicars, who didn't follow in their footsteps but instead worked as an engineering apprentice for a British railroad and then opened his own garage, where he and an engineering instructor built a three-wheeled vehicle—a "cyclecar"—around a V-twin motorcycle engine.

When sales were limited because there was room only for a driver, Morgan widened his cockpit so two people could sit side by side. Eventually, he added a back seat so four people could travel together.

In the mid-1930s, Morgan produced more conventional four-wheeler cars, as well as its three-wheelers. Production halted during World War II. Afterward, Morgan used leftover parts to assemble another dozen three-wheelers, but then focused on four-wheeled sports cars until, as part of the company's centennial, it showed a concept for a new three-wheeler.

Reaction was positive, especially from baby boomer motorcycle enthusiasts who loved the open-air experience but whose aging bodies couldn't quite handle long trips in the saddle.

Thus the new Morgan 3 Wheeler, a new dealership network and our recent test drive, err, test ride in the Brighton Motorsports demo car, err, bike.

"The future of road transport in the 21st century has two big issues," Morgan's website notes, "the conservation of precious resources and the protection of our beautiful natural environment. Downsizing and a philosophy of simplicity are ways of dealing with these problems. The Morgan 3 Wheeler is a proven answer to these problems... a fusion of modern technology into a classic design."

That modern technology includes an American-built V-twin engine and that five-speed Mazda Miata gear-box, a tubular frame with a rollover bar behind each

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seat, and an "aerodynamic bullet" aluminum hull. But the classic design includes the three-wheel configuration, the engine mounted way up front, exposed wheels and front suspension, and an open-air driving/riding experience. Before our test drive, Gille talked a little about the people who have placed orders for the new Morgan. Among those buyers is a fellow from New Mexico who is a long-time Harley-Davidson rider but is getting old enough that having a third wheel on the ground has become attractive. Plus, Gille added, the man is looking forward to having his wife sitting next to him instead of behind him as on a motorcycle.

At left, the Brighton Motorsports showroom has a beautiful example of the inspiration for today's Morgan 3 Wheeler: an original vintage 1936 model.



Around town, the Morgan isn't so loud that you can't have a normal conversation between the driver and passenger, and for those times when you're traveling fast enough that the wind would blow your words away before they're heard, there's an onboard intercom so you can plug in your two-way helmet-to-helmet audio system (or your favorite digital music storage system) so you can listen through the speakers in your helmet.

The car/bike/cyclecar weighs only 1100 pounds. Its 2.0-liter engine provides 115 horsepower and 140 pound-feet of torque, enough to sprint from a standing start to 60 miles per hour in 4.5 seconds, on the way to a top speed of 125 miles per hour.

The engine is produced in Wisconsin by S&S, a company that has been producing high-performance motorcycle engines for more than 50 years. The company was founded in Illinois by George Smith Sr., who wanted his bikes to go faster, couldn't find the parts he thought he needed, and decided to manufacture them himself, which he did in partnership with a friend, Stanley Stankos, whom Smith and his wife—motorcycle racer, office manager and even helping hand in the shop Marge Smith—eventually bought out of the business, which they moved to Wisconsin.

To drive the Morgan 3 Wheeler, you climb in, being careful not to step on one of the two leather seats. The driver's entry and exit are aided by the fact that the steering wheel can be removed as in a race car, and then popped back in place once you're seated or have exited the car, err, bike, err, whatever it is.

The driver has the typical three foot pedals as in any car with a manual transmission. Both driver and occupant have a three-point safety belt/shoulder harness.

Gauges appear to be only the basic speedo and tach. However, there's a digital multi-function trip computer and voltmeter within the speedometer and a digital fuel gauge within the tachometer. The speedo also has an oil pressure warning light, and a high-beam and parking brake indicator.

There's a horn button, a switch for the lights—including a rear fog lamp—another for the emergency flashers, and a turn signal stalk.

To start the engine, you turn an ignition key and then press the starter button on a beautifully machine-tooled metallic dashboard set against a leather-covered cowl.

There's a quick-release Le Mans-style parking brake just to the right and ahead of the shift lever. Release the brake, engage first gear and get ready for the ride.

Oh, one other thing before you head out onto the road. Well, actually, two things, Gille notes.

One is that you need to remember that, unlike the typical four-wheeled vehicle, your drive wheel isn't on either side in the back but in the middle of the tail section, so when you encounter debris on the road, you may not want to simply straddle it but find a way to drive around it.

A second thing: since this really is a motorcycle, you need to be what Gille calls "situationally aware."

You must, he says, "put your motorcycle head on," and for emphasis he explains that means having a "swivel" head. In other words, you need to be aware of where all vehicles are, around or approaching you, because folks in cars may not be aware of the three-wheeler pattering alongside. And because the V-twin

doesn't have the very loud rumble of a Harley engine, drivers may not hear your approach.

Our test drive started with Gille driving, so I could get used to the way the Morgan feels. From the passenger seat, it feels pretty much like a small roadster with the top down, a flyspeck of a windshield and cycle-style fenders. There's plenty of legroom for the passenger, though your feet also feel a good deal of vibration, which is more from the air-cooled engine than feedback from the road. The car/bike is pretty comfortable.

It wasn't long before Gille pulled into a parking area where I could take some photos, and then it was my turn to take the steering wheel.

The Morgan shifts as smoothly as a Miata, which means it shifts easily with a very forgiving clutch and short-throw shifter. You'd be surprised how responsive 115 horsepower can be, and although we didn't venture out on the freeway, I have no reason to doubt that the Morgan can run up into triple figures.

Gille had mentioned keeping both hands on the steering wheel, a good idea when driving any vehicle but perhaps even moreso because the skinny front tires can be susceptible to bump steer when they encounter a sunken manhole cover or other object that might go unnoticed while driving a big, cushy sedan. We encountered no problems. In fact, with the left front wheel so exposed, the driver can be very precise in where he or she places the car in the lane, and I quickly realized why three-wheeled Morgans were so popular among vintage racers: they're like driving an open-wheeler, well, except for that well-hidden rear wheel.

I drove the 3 Wheeler on both straight and nicely curving streets and, while exposed to the elements, I never felt fearfully overexposed to vehicle traffic.

The Morgan website notes that one of the three-wheelers recently completed the Gumball 3000 coast-to-coast rally across America to prove the vehicle worthy of such a road trip. I'm not sure I'd want to do quite that long a drive in one sitting, but I think the three-wheeler would be a terrific way to do a weekend trip and would make for an enjoyable commute on days when it's neither raining nor snowing.

When it does rain, you're going to get wet, but then that's part of the experience of riding a motorcycle (or driving a three-wheeler). And the Morgan comes with a tonneau cover, so you can cover the passenger's seat while you drive, or the entire cockpit when you park.

The base price for the Morgan 3 Wheeler is 26,500 British pounds (about \$40,000), but that doesn't include shipping costs from England to an American port or from that port to your dealership, and there are taxes and licensing fees on top of that.

Buyers can select from eight exterior colors (or the optional color of their choosing); black or tan (or as many as 67 optional) leathers for the seats, dash and interior side panels; and there are additional available options such as polished engine, cowl and rollover hoops.

For more information, visit morgan3wheeler.co.uk or brightonmotorsports.com. ■