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Vespa Parades the Practicality of Urban Scootering



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Image appears courtesy of Kadshah "Kaj" Nagibe

By Mary S. Butler
ForbesAutos.com

NEW YORK — Spotting a scooter in midtown Manhattan traffic in the middle of a workday is unusual; seeing 32 of them parade through Times Square is unreal.

On Tuesday tourists queuing up outside Radio City Music Hall, as well as office workers taking a lunchtime stroll through Union Square, witnessed the Vespa LX Parade, which was organized by Piaggio USA, maker of the iconic scooter. The procession was one of several events held in New York City earlier this week to promote the introduction of the Vespa LX. The model's roman numerals are a nod to the nearly 60 years the scooter has been in production.

First introduced in post-war Europe in 1946, the Vespa became an instant success and has since sold more than 16 million units in five continents. But more than its enduring popularity, the scooter's appeal was in the freedom it gave to riders. A Vespa can reach speeds of up to 65 miles per hour and cost between \$1,000 to \$6,000.

Parade organizer Anne Green reached out to the Vespa Club of New York, enthusiast sites such as IScootNY.com and lists like

Yahoo! Group's NewYorkScooters in order to reach the city's scooter community. Her mission was to tap into the enthusiasm that Vespa owners have for their scooters.

"Vespa is a brand and a lifestyle. There is such a passion behind this," Green said. With the introduction of the LX, "we thought this would be a good time to give more voice to the people who have been keeping the brand alive in the U.S.," she explained.

One way Piaggio is giving Vespa owners more voice is through Vespa Blogs. The company is recruiting volunteers for two blogs – one celebrating the "urban mobile lifestyle" and the other will focus on what the company representatives call the "the journey we call life." They are hoping these bloggers will become brand evangelists, said Federico Musi, VP of marketing and business development for Piaggio USA.



This coat came from a collection designed by Satya Kulkowitz and was one of several designed by students in the Fashion Design program as part of a Parsons Design Lab collaboration with Piaggio USA.

In addition to engaging current customers, Piaggio is looking to attract future buyers by tapping into the youth market, said Deborah Spence Helman, a PR representative for the company. One such effort is in its partnership with the Parsons School of Design. Piaggio challenged the students to reimagine the Vespa scooter — traditionally an icon of modern Italian style — and update it for a 21st-century America. Students in the Fashion Design, Product Design and Design and Technology programs created new concepts for a lifestyle collection, ranging from wearable technologies, accessories and features for the scooter. The designs were unveiled at Monday evening's Parsons Benefit and Fashion Show at Chelsea Piers in New York.

Who rides on a Vespa? Read our profiles of a dozen riders, including the [Too-Hot Helmeteers](#), [High Roller](#), [Small Wheels](#) and the [Modern Rocker](#).

The Making of an Icon

The motor scooter was pioneered in post-World War II Italy by Enrico Piaggio and Corradino D'Ascanio. Piaggio, the son of company founder Rinaldo Piaggio, was responsible for overseeing the rebuilding of the company's demolished aeronautical plants in Pontedera and Pisa. He decided that the best way to get production going in these plants was to develop a modern and affordable transportation, Musi explained.

A prototype motor scooter, the MP5, was produced in 1945 — its design was based on a small motorcycle intended for parachutists. Piaggio wasn't pleased with this first iteration and asked D'Ascanio, an aeronautical designer who had overseen the design of the first modern helicopter, to redesign it. D'Ascanio found motorcycles uncomfortable and impractical: The drivetrain made riders dirty. To make the experience smoother for riders, he put a gear level on the handlebar. He

also designed the method for changing the scooter's tires, by employing a supporting arm similar to that of an aircraft carriage, according to company archives.



1953 Vespa 125 U

D'Ascanio's version of the motor scooter, the MP6 prototype, was first produced in April 1946 and got its name from Piaggio, who looked at the MP6 with its wide seating area and narrow "waist" and proclaimed "sembra una vespa!" ("it looks like a wasp" in Italian), Musi said. The 98-cc vehicle went on

sale later that year as the Vespa 98.

The first time that Americans spotted a Vespa was in 1953's "Roman Holiday" when Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn rode the scooter around the Colosseum; it was also the same year the vehicle was introduced into the U.S. market. In 1960 the two-wheeler played a bit part in Federico Fellini's "La Dolce Vita" in the now famous scene where the smoldering Marcello Mastroianni rescues a curvalicious Anita Ekberg, who is trying to flee the paparazzi, by giving her a lift on a Vespa.

In the early 60s scooters, especially Italian makes like Vespa and Lambretta, were the transportation of choice for a British subculture known as Modernists, or Mods for short. Mods were urban, wore sharp suits under parkas, listened to ska and rhythm and blues, and



1961 Vespa ad

tricked out their rides with chrome accessories, multiple headlights and mirrors. Mods were disdained by Rockers, who sported black leather biker gear, drove motorcycles, listened to Elvis and Gene Vincent: They were the last of the Teddy Boys. The two groups famously clashed in May 1964 during a bank holiday weekend at several resorts on the south coast of England. The worst violence was at Brighton with more than 1,000 teenagers involved, the BBC reported at the time. In Margate there were battles between police and up to 400 youths. The enmity between the two groups and their Brighton beach clash is featured in 1979's "Quadrophenia," which was based on the 1973 double album by The Who. The popularity of both the Jam, a punk-influenced band with a Mod following, and the film helped spur a Mod revival in 1979.

Scooters were starting to enter the mainstream by the time Piaggio pulled Vespa out of the U.S. market in 1985, when more stringent exhaust emission standards went into effect. It would be 15 years before Vespas would be sold stateside again.

Fashion Forward

The Italian scooter made its U.S. return in 2000 in the form of two models – the 50-cc ET2 and 150-cc ET4. In 2004 Piaggio sold almost 8,000 scooters in the United States, a 22.6 percent increase from the previous year, according to Ben Billingsley, a PR representative for the company.

Rising gas prices, gridlock and tight parking in congested cities are some of the reasons that Musi attributes to renewed American interest in scooters. "In many U.S. cities the

infrastructure is not growing as fast as traffic is increasing. Alternative means of transportation, including bikes, motorcycles and scooters, are being promoted as alternatives to cars," he said.

Kadshah "Kaj" Nagibe, one of the participants in Tuesday's Vespa parade, said he bought a scooter "out of desperation." He was tired of waiting for the subway. "I needed a quick way to get around town."

Though riders like Nagibe find the two-wheel transportation the best way to get around the city, those who are considering a scooter purchase should be aware of potentially stringent parking restrictions in their area. Municipal and many privately owned Manhattan parking garages do not allow scooters. Groups such as the ParkingNOW! Coalition are campaigning for designated on-street and off-street parking in New York City for the powered two-wheel vehicles.

This Year's Model

The new LX 50 and LX 150 go on sale this summer. The LX series has a larger front wheel than the ET, which it is replacing. It has an automatic transmission and is available with either a 50-cc (\$3,199) or 150-cc (\$4,199) sport four-stroke engine. For more product information, or to locate a dealer, go to VespaUSA.com.

All Vespa rider interviews conducted by Alisha Trimble and Cat Rivera; all photographs (unless credited otherwise) by Cat Rivera and Alisha Trimble.