

Visitors get a taste of American culture along the 'Mother Road'

By JENNIFER GARCIA County Reporter

There's an old saying that goes, "a journey begins with a single step." This statement is especially true for a group of five people from Prague, Czech Republic, and their four Velorex vehicles.

However, instead of their journey beginning with a single step, it started with the group shipping their cars to the U.S. in preparation for their 2,450-mile trip along the "Mother Road."

The Velorex vehicles were invented by a couple of Czech brothers, Frantisek Stransky and Mojmir Stransky, in 1936. The vehicles were based on a tubular construction covered with a thin dural layer, similar to leather.

The vehicle's mechanics were borrowed from the motorcycle. It is said that the vehicles were originally manufactured for use by disabled veterans after World War I, however, they soon had a cult following and people without requisite physical limitations were soon snapping the tiny cars up before the vets could purchase them. The vehicles go a maximum speed of 60 mph, but the usual driving speed for the group has been between 45 and 50 mph.

Verka (Vera) Synovcova, her husband Pepa (Josef) Synovec and three friends named Tomas (Tomas Hanus, Tomas Jaron and Tomas Klener) are no strangers to exploring in the Velorex vehicles.

In fact, they have been on trips to Norway and Tunisia in their mini cars. The group got together to plot their next adventure and decided to dismantle the cars and ship them to the United States because their vehicles, and four of the group's members, had never been to the U.S.

The group decided to take a trip along America's most traveled and famous highway, Route 66. Vera is no stranger to America.

"In 1992, I went to Oklahoma as an exchange student, then returned to the states again in 1999 when I attended a summer camp in Arizona," she said.

The group saw the Velorex vehicles off in the Czech Republic, and then hopped on a plane bound for Chicago.

The cars were sent via ship to Norfolk, Va., and then they were transported by train to Cicero, Chicago, where the group in preparation for their cross-country trip, reassembled them. While in Chicago, the group was greeted by Glen Bukac, who is also a Velorex owner.

Bukac arranged a welcome party for the travelers at Klas Restaurant in Cicero. While in the Windy City, the group stayed in an apartment above the restaurant. When they were ready to begin their journey, they were joined by three other Velorex owners for the first 70-80 miles of their trip.

The group has stopped at many tourist spots along the way, soaking in the historic culture of America's highway. Route 66 stretches from Chicago to California, which is where the group is headed. During their trek, Vera said they've had positive feedback from curious onlookers along the way.

"People will wave and honk and ask to take pictures," she said. "The most common question they ask is, 'how fast do they go?'"

During their trip, they were diverted to White Rock, where they visited with Petr Jandacek and his family. Jandacek hosted the travelers and showed them around the area.

“We would like to thank Petr Jandacek and his wife Luise for a very warm welcome and the hospitality they are giving us during our stay at their house,” Vera said. “Petr has been a wonderful guide through this beautiful region during our stay here and we are very lucky we got to meet them and spend a day at their house.”

After their departure from New Mexico, the group will travel west to Arizona, where they hope to see the Grand Canyon.

Once they get to California, they will visit Santa Monica and meet with Boba Chudoba, a friend of theirs who will host the group.

“We want to go to Universal Studios,” Vera said. The group plans to be in California by Sept. 30. “My husband and I have a 2-year-old daughter who is being cared for by my parents, so we are anxious to get back home,” Vera said.

Once they reach California, the group will disassemble two of the vehicles and ship them back to the Czech Republic, unless they are able to sell them beforehand. They have secured buyers for two of the vehicles already. Vera said that they are selling the two remaining vehicles for \$9,000.

“That’s what they would sell for in the Czech Republic,” she said.

The group’s trip is being documented on their Web site, <http://velorex66.tym.cz>. They have posted pictures of their trip along the way, as well as general information and their itinerary. Both Czech and English versions are available.