



Family can't help but smile about rickshaw

Oddest of Autos Saves Gas, Inspires Laughs

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'All right," Tracy Ross McLaughlin hollers to her daughter from inside a comically small red vehicle. Her primary mode of transport looks like the love child of a golf cart and a lawnmower, with a Vespa hiding somewhere in its family tree — and, as McLaughlin will tell you, she long ago broke the belt that sends it into reverse.

"Give me some Fred Flintstone!"

Hope, 11, obliges, gripping the front of the car's windowless frame as her flip-flops push hard against the ground. It rolls fast after a second or two, and Hope leaps inside as her mother gives it gas.

Their not-so-typical ride, called an auto-rickshaw, features a scooter's engine, handlebars, a covered top, and cushioned front and back seats that can easily hold about five adults. It's a standard means of getting around India, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world — or in the McLaughlin family's case, the Park Cities.

Tracy, Hope, and Ike, 14, have had theirs for about five years, and weather permitting, they use it for grocery shopping, rides to school, and most in-town errands. Onlookers tend to stop them at lights, take photographs,



STAFF PHOTOS: CHRIS MCGATHEY

Ever wondered who owns that weird little vehicle often seen on Mockingbird Lane? It belongs to Tracy Ross McLaughlin and her kids, Hope and Ike.

wave, stare, ogle, and generally crack up when the rickshaw chugs by — and with bumper stickers like "Willie Nelson For President," it's hard not to break a smile.

"You can't drive it if you're in a bad mood," McLaughlin said. "It's the greatest thing, because it forces you to talk to people. Being a snobby rickshaw driver won't work ...

and once they realize they're laughing *with* me, it's cool."

In ideal conditions with zero drag, the rickshaw tops out at about 40 miles per hour.

"Originally, we were going to make everyone wear helmets, but it was so comical that my vanity prevailed," said McLaughlin — who calls herself a "safety freak"

and says she doubts she'll ever let the kids drive the rickshaw, even when they're old enough for a motorcycle license.

McLaughlin's one-time stunts include cramming it full of seven adults, and, sans passengers, puttering all the way from her home on Mockingbird Lane to Interstate 635.

"But that wasn't real smart," she said. "I had it on the access road at 75 just because my mom told me I couldn't."

Because of changing emissions and import laws, replacement parts for the little vehicles are increasingly difficult to find, said Oliver Sitrin, operations manager at University Scooters, where

McLaughlin bought hers.

The store no longer carries the rickshaws produced by the Indian company Bajaj, but it does service them and still gets inquiries about the brand a few times a month, said Sitrin, adding that the only other local model he knows of belongs to a Carrollton-area customer McLaughlin calls "Rickshaw Ralph," whose streaming white ponytail is often seen catching air on Greenville Avenue.

Owning such an odd vehicle has its healing powers, said McLaughlin, who underwent a rough divorce last year.

"It's made me feel connected," she said. "The rickshaw has been a great way to get back into life a little."

Granted, she joked, "It hasn't really been a date-grabber."

But it takes only a gallon of gas, needs refueling just once a week, and — save for the whole "reverse" issue — has been virtually problem free, said McLaughlin, who also has a vintage Corvette, a rare Mercedes-Benz G500 with "an engine that'll rock your world," and a Chevy Tahoe that she seems loathe to look at directly.

"See, no one knows who I am in this thing," McLaughlin clucked, nodding toward the SUV's tinted windows. "It's for bad-mood days."

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