

Yasien 'Yassie' Mohamed has built up a cult following in South Africa and on Facebook with his big heart and the improbable mileage of his Softail®. But the road has not always been an easy one...

Text: Olivia Hanks/Angelique Dermit

FREEDOM TO ROLL



There are some people in the world whose boundless optimism always shines through; whose energy and zest for life rub off on those around them; who make friends wherever they go. Yasien Mohamed, better known as Yassie, is one of those people.

A Harley rider since only 2013, he is already famous in his native South Africa for riding the length and breadth of the country to attend almost every H.O.G.® event.

These rides are documented in Yassie's thousands of photos, which he takes on the road and at events and posts on his popular Facebook page – he has friends on social media from all over the world, including many H.O.G. members he has



never met but hopes eventually to visit.

"Some people prefer to get straight on to the destination," he explains, "but not me. I love to look. I don't stop only when I need to fill up – I like to stop and admire the view."

Yassie, who came to love Harley-Davidson® bikes for "the engine, the sound, and the old-school feeling", recently passed the milestone of 100,000km ridden on his 2010 Softail® CVO Convertible. But huge distances have never been an obstacle for him.

"I now live in Pretoria, but I'm divorced and my daughters still live in Cape Town, where I'm originally from. When they were young, I used to get on my motorbike on a Friday afternoon and ride the 1,400km to Cape Town >

Profile

for the weekend, and be back in Pretoria on Monday morning. I did it out of necessity. I couldn't book a plane ticket, so I'd just get on my bike and go."

Yassie's two daughters, now 21 and 19, got a taste for the world of motorbikes from riding around the block on the back of their dad's bike during those visits and, he says, they have ridden many miles together.

It has been a long road for Yassie to reach the free and adventurous H.O.G.® way of life he has today. Growing up in a deprived community in the Cape Flats, the sprawling area that became home to non-white people forced out of central Cape Town under apartheid, did he ever imagine his life would turn out like this?

"Never. Most of us didn't even expect to reach adulthood. It was a terribly poor and extremely violent area. I am Cape Malay – the name for the descendants of Javanese people enslaved by the Dutch in the 1600s and brought to Cape Town. So we are the slaves of the Dutch of those times, then we were the slaves of the English. That's why for me, freedom is so important; I'm so glad I am no longer a slave."

H.O.G., then, has a greater significance for Yassie than just a social activity. "I love to meet people and make new friends – but one of the things I like about H.O.G. is that the people are all so charitable.

"We are distributing 2,000 presents at the moment for children in poverty all over South Africa. Whenever there is a charity to support, I am happy to be able to support it."

So despite what the endless stream of photos might suggest, Yassie's life is not just one long party. "Don't just invite me for a drinking session. That's nice, but there's more to life than partying. I always try to keep the perspective there. That's why I do outreach now to the whole of southern Africa. It's to tell them: 'Let our bond be more than the social drinking sessions.' It needs to go deeper than that, because we do have challenges in this world. If our bond is based upon supporting the needy, we won't ever have a disagreement, because we all know what our goal is."

It appears that this kind of unshakeable bond is what spurs Yassie on to keep broadening his horizons and meeting new people. "Being a biker makes it easier for



me to go amongst people; all we do is share stories, exchange advice. Luckily, I have a lot of stories to tell!

"It's taken me a while to build it up like this, but now I can move among all the bikers in our country and feel comfortable. My dream is that one day there will be unity among everybody. But someone's got to take the step: to go to an unknown culture, immerse yourself in it and not be afraid of losing your own identity.

"That's very important to me. I have got beyond the difficult circumstances I grew up in, but I have never lost my identity. I still speak with the same accent and I'm proud of where I come from. So I tell everyone from those communities, trust that life can get better, don't give up on your dreams."

It is typical of Yassie's love of people that when I ask him about his most memorable ride, he instead responds with memories of a dear friend, Kim Yates, who was killed in an accident last year. "I have many

memories of riding with Kim. We did thousands of kilometres together on our Harley® bikes. He used to visit a lot of interesting places in his job as a fire investigator, so later we would ride there and he would show me. We understood each other perfectly. So in terms of memories, I miss riding with my friend."

After so many kilometres, Yassie's knowledge of riding in South Africa is second to none. What ride would he most recommend to H.O.G. members visiting the Rainbow Nation?

"Land in Johannesburg and take a ride down to Cape Town on the east coast, and come back on the west coast, if you have time. That would be an awesome ride."

As for Yassie, although he reels off a long list of countries he would love to visit, he has other priorities: "My dream is to ride the world. But before I go to any other country in this world, I want to know my own country and all the biker groups here.

"If people in other countries are saying 'you must come and visit', I try to explain to them. I don't even know my own land and all the bikers – how can I come to you when I don't know my own people?"

Besides, a round-the-world trip isn't as easy as all that. "I'm not rich, I don't have the kind of money that means I can do whatever I want. I have to live within my means. One day if I've got the money to travel the world, believe me, I'd love to. But I'm happy where I am." ■