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## Winter Destination - Death Valley

By Alan Smutz



If you are like me, winter can be a bit of a drag. One way we (my wife Katy and me) have found to break the winter blues is to take a winter riding trip. One of our favorite winter destinations is Death Valley.

Winter can be a great time to visit Death Valley. Like any trip to a new place, a little preparation and knowledge can go a long way to insure a great trip.

We took our first trip to Death Valley between Christmas and New Year of 2009/2010. We like to take winter riding vacations and have been to Moab, Utah and Arizona in past years. The hardest part for us is figuring out where to go.

For our Death Valley trip we have to give credit to Tom, aka DesertDog for the idea. Unfortunately, Tom was not able to go on the trip with us, but once we had a destination in mind, the rest was history. We did a little research before the trip which helped a lot, but once we got there, found out we still had a lot to learn. The purpose of this article is not only to share information about our trip, but to assist you in planning your own winter time riding trip to Death Valley.

**Planning your trip.** A good place to start is with the [National Park Death Valley Web Site](#) [1]. It is full of information about Death Valley. One other thing I recommend is getting a copy of the Death Valley Backcountry Road map. This is different than the regular park map you get when you pay your park access fee. You have to specifically ask for the backcountry map. Unlike the regular map, it shows all of the legal roads and also gives a description of many of the roads. You can also view a copy of the map at [Backcountry Map](#) [2]. One other source of information is the book, Death Valley SUV Trails, by Roger Mitchell. It was written with 4 wheel drives in mind, but will still give you things to see and look for and a good idea of what the roads are like. We didn't buy our copy until the first day we arrived at Death Valley at the gift shop at Scotty's Castle. Having the book ahead of time would have been useful for planning each day's ride.

**Some important decisions before going.** What bikes do you take? Bikes must be street legal to ride any roads in the park. Any good smaller dual sport with a 200 mile fuel range should work well for any of the routes we rode. Many of the backcountry roads are level 3 with a few level 4 spots thrown in. However, you will also have to ride a fair amount of pavement if you want to make any large loops like we did. Our bikes consisted of my BMW 650



X Challenge and Katy's KTM 640 E. They served us well. A DRZ with a large fuel tank or similar bike should also work well.

The second decision is where to stay. Camping or motels are two options. Camping is available in the park at Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells. Motels are also available at those two locations; however, the cost (in my opinion) is way too high to be practical for most of us. Reasonably priced motels are available in nearby Beatty, Nevada. If you choose to tent camp, remember that although it gets warm during the day, it can and does get down to below freezing at night. We chose to stay at the Phoenix Inn in Beatty. It worked well for us. Unless you really want to camp, I would recommend Beatty as the prices are reasonable and it is close enough to the good riding.



One other thing I recommend is a good GPS and getting ahold of some good tracks. Many of the backcountry roads are not marked that well. For example, without our GPS and tracks, we would have never found the Manson hideout as it was not marked at all. All of my Death Valley tracks are available.



**Day 1:** Our first day at Death Valley we arrived at midday. Since we came in from the north, it was not too far out of our way to stop at Scotty's Castle. We wanted to see it and felt it was worth the visit. If you are interested in those types of things and have a few extra hours to spare, it is worth seeing. By the time we got to our motel in Beatty, it was late in the day so we only did a very short ride to the nearby ghost town of Rhyolite. Be sure to see the "bottle house."

**Day 2:** Titus Canyon was our first ride of the day. Much of the road is one way from east to west. The road takes off near Beatty, so we rode directly from the motel. This was the only day we rode from the motel. Titus Canyon is a good first backcountry road to ride in Death Valley. I would recommend anyone that has not ridden Death Valley to start with Titus Canyon.



It is only moderately difficult at best, but will give you a little taste of riding in Death Valley without getting in over your head. After Titus Canyon, we then rode to the Emigrant Canyon/Wild Rose road and explored many sites in that area. Due to poor planning on my part, we ended up ridding and back tracking on a lot more pavement than I would have liked. That night in the motel room, I carefully studied the maps and GPS tracks I had and put together better loops for the rest of the week.

**Day3:** The day's ride would be approximately 200 miles and would visit the last hideout of Charles Manson and his group. To save time and fuel range on the bikes, we trucked the bikes into the park and staged from a small parking area near the intersection of Furnace Creek, Stovepipe Wells and Scotty's Castle. On all days except the day we rode Titus Canyon, we staged from somewhere in the park along the planned route. This saved us a lot of pavement riding and allowed us to ride in the comfort of the truck during the very cool early morning hours. It also saved us daylight riding time as we were there during the shortest days of the year and we could drive the truck in the dark and park and unload and



get on the bikes at sunrise. It was a good thing we got an early start as it was nearly dark by the time we got back to the truck. We could also start our loops with full fuel tanks, which is very important in Death Valley. Even with trucking the bikes, we still had nearly 50 miles of pavement at the start of our loop. Our plan was to ride to Panamint Springs and top off our fuel tanks before hitting the dirt portion of the ride. Get to Panamint Springs and find the only gas station is out of gasoline.

**Most Important Lesson for Death Valley.** Don't count on being able to buy fuel or anything else you may want or need. Although fuel is supposed to be available at Panamint Springs and a few other locations, it is not always available as we found out. In my opinion, the safest way is to just bring it yourself. Had we known there was no fuel at Panamint Springs, we could have taken a better route to the dirt. Lesson learned; we will never count on getting fuel at Panamint Springs again.

Soon after leaving Panamint springs, we said goodbye to pavement and took Indian Ranch road to the ghost town of Ballarat. Ballarat is worth taking the time to look around and buy a cold drink from the local store. From Ballarat we rode to Goler Wash. In Goler wash, take an unmarked road to the Manson hideout (also known as the Barker Ranch.) I was glad I had the GPS and tracks to show me the way. The actual house the Manson group lived in has burned, but you can still see lots of the hideout.

After leaving the Manson hideout, we reach Mengel Pass, one of the level 4 sections of road. As usual, Katy made it look easy. On the other side of Mengel Pass we passed several public use cabins. Most were occupied, but we were able to stop and see the stone Geologists Cabin. The cabins are available for public use on a first come basis. Most have a flag and if you are occupying a cabin you need to fly the flag which is the signal the cabin is occupied. After the cabins, we passed Stripped Butte on the way to Warm Springs camp where we looked at many old buildings. From there we dropped down in the actual valley of Death Valley. We took the west side road, which is dirt as opposed to the paved main road through the valley. At one point along this road, my GPS said the



elevation was 286

feet **below** sea level. After that, it was a few miles of pavement and back to the truck. We reached the truck just as the sun was setting and our fuel tanks were nearly empty.



**Day 4:** This day ride started with Echo Canyon. Echo canyon is rated as one of the more difficult roads in Death Valley. Sections of the road are level 4. We staged at the Borax Works near Furnace creek as it looked like a safe place to leave the truck and was close to the start of Echo canyon. Beyond Echo Canyon is Lee's Camp and then we rode a sand road that took us nearly back to Beatty. Had I planned things better, we could have ridden Titus Canyon



and then Echo Canyon in one loop instead of the way we did. As it was, we then explored around the Chloride Cliffs before riding back down into the valley and to the truck. Since it was a short day, we drove into Pahrump for supplies and a great dinner at one of the casino buffets.



**Day 5:** We staged at Ubehebe Crater not far from Scotty's Castle. As usual, we arrived just at sunrise and needed every minute of daylight we had. Our first stop was Teakettle Junction. From there we rode by the Racetrack where from the tracks they leave, it appears rocks move along the ground on their own. From there we rode to the Lippincott Mine and then to Lippincott Pass. While not as difficult as Echo Pass, it is still a level 3 to 4 road. Beyond Lippincott Pass is in the Saline valley. Across the Saline valley we turned onto an unmarked road that lead us to the Warm Springs area. (Again, I was thankful for

the GPS and the tracks I had.) The Warm Springs area consists of Lower Warm Springs and a couple miles further is Palm Springs. Both areas are semi developed in that there are several soaking pools. Clothing is optional at both places, and from what we observed, most chose to forgo clothing while soaking in the hot spring pools. After Warm Springs we rode to Steel Pass. Near Steel Pass is Marble Bathtub.



Some interesting folklore about Marble bathtub is that the 1913 Ballarat quadrangle map and 1957 Dry mountain topo map showed a feature named Marble Bath. Many people searched for the land mark and were unable to locate it. After becoming frustrated, Wendell Moyer, who knew Saline valley very well, hauled an old claw foot tub to the place on the maps marked as Marble Bath and filled it with hundreds of blue marbles. Thus, those looking for the landmark could find it.

Unfortunately, the National Parks did not share his humor

and removed it. No one knows who provided the replacement. We then rode down Dedeckera Canyon that leads to Eureka Dunes, the highest dunes in California. Beyond Eureka Dunes we rode to Crankshaft Crossing. It was several miles of fast dirt road back to the truck. As it was nearly sunset, we raced the last several miles as fast as we could. We arrived back at the truck when it was nearly dark. The day's loop was approximately 140





miles, and less than 10 miles of it was pavement. All the days in Death Valley had been good, but this day was by far the best.



**Day 6:** We staged at a radar site near the town of Ballarat. We chose that spot as it was paved most of the way from the motel and still close to Ballarat. We rode through Ballarat and then turned up a steep canyon a few miles south of Ballarat. We stopped and looked at the Stone Cabin at Briggs Camp. We passed several more of the public use cabins today. Past Briggs camp, we rode an old hand built wagon road to South Park where we saw several wild burros. We then rode over Rogers Pass and down into Pleasant Canyon. We rode by Clair's camp and then back down to Ballarat. This was the shortest loop of the trip, but was also the most technical. We had more riding planned for the day, but were both tired from all the days riding and decided to call it a day. It was our last day riding in Death Valley for that

trip. A more complete write up of our Death Valley trip can be seen at: [Steep and Rocky's Death Valley Trip](#) [3]

Death Valley is a big place and is also very remote. Except for the few popular touristy areas, we saw very few people while riding. Make sure both you and your bikes are well prepared. Help can be hard to contact and can take a long time to arrive. I strongly recommend never riding alone in this area. We experienced no bike breakdowns or other issues, but we were prepared and had means to fix flat tires and other common breakdowns. We carried extra water and some food, which you will likely need. We always started with full fuel tanks and had a 200 mile fuel range. It is quite cold in the mornings, but by midday, it was very warm and we were shedding most of our warm clothes. Dress appropriately. Just be prepared for any conditions and enjoy. Death Valley is a great place for a winter riding trip.

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*Editor's Note: Alan and Katy Smutz's GPS tracks for this ride are available for download from the Route Library on our club website ([motoidaho.org](http://motoidaho.org)). If you want to download the GPS, right click on it first and then save it to your computer where you can open it up into a Garmin or other compatible GPS mapping program or device.*

*Following is a photo of their GPS tracks uploaded into Google Earth.*



## Gold Mining Ghost Towns near Boise

*by Craig O. Olsen*

Two common themes running through most of the 2012 IAMC Challenge Sites are ghost towns and mountain lookouts as reflected in the selection of the majority of the sites. The Idaho forest fires this summer have taken a devastating toll on central Idaho, and have put a significant damper on our usual riding spots this year. In fact our annual club ride based out of Challis to be held over Labor Day weekend was cancelled due to the fires. Many of the challenge sites for this year are now behind fire lines or closed forest and BLM roads because of the fires. As a result, many in our club, myself included, may not get a chance to visit most of those sites this year. Only those who had the foresight to get an early start this year before the fires started will have a chance to visit most, if not all, of the challenge sites for this year. In the spirit of my last IAMC Newsletter article about the 2012 Southern Challenge Sites (Issue # 4, August, 2012), this article deals with two ghost towns close to Boise, the story of which many may not be familiar.

Gold was first discovered in the Boise Basin (centered about 24 miles north of Boise) along Grimes Creek in 1862 by George Grimes, Moses Splawn and an accompanying party of men. Within a few years the basin changed from a wilderness area inhabited mainly by Native Americans to the thriving mining towns of Idaho City, Centerville, Pioneerville, Placerville, and Quartzburg, supporting a composite population of 30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants. Of these five initial mining communities, Quartzburg is the only one today that is not inhabited. [1]

Placer gold was discovered along Granite Creek about 2-3 miles west of Placerville in 1863. In that same year the lode source responsible for the placer gold was discovered and ultimately became the Gold Hill Mine, which became one of the oldest and largest producing gold mines in Idaho. This mine was worked almost continuously from 1863 until 1938. Production from this mine exceeded \$8,000,000 by 1938. The mine was closed by a significant forest fire in 1931 that destroyed the plant. It was rebuilt in 1938, but it was closed in 1938. [2]



*Streets of Quartzburg in 1899 (Idaho State Historical Society; [Photo # 65-134-1]; copyright)*



This mine was developed with 1,246 foot vertical shaft in three compartments with nine intermediate levels totaling more than 40,000 of workings. Several other mines were developed in the immediate surrounding area, but none were as large or productive as the Gold Hill mine.

The town of **Quartzburg (Site #-2)**, which lies about 2.5 miles due west of Placerville and 11 miles east of Horseshoe Bend, sprang up near the confluence of Confederate Gulch and Granite Creek just below the Gold Hill mine the following year, 1864. The townsite was laid out by David E. Coughanour, who later bought the Gold Hill mine in 1867, and James H. Hawley, who worked for Coughanour at the Gold Hill mine and later became mayor of Boise (1903-1905) and then governor of Idaho (1911-1905). Hawley married Mary E. Bullock on July 4, 1875 in Quartzburg and lived there until he moved to Idaho City in 1878. Coughanour remained in Quartzburg until his death from cancer in 1904. [3]



*Quartzburg Hotel in 1890 (Idaho State Historical Society; [Photo # Si 62-20-28300b]; copyright)*



*Remains of Gold Hill Mine Mill (Reference [2])*

By 1890 Quartzburg supported several businesses including hotels, a boarding house, one or more saloons, a store, a dance hall, a school and a stage stop. In addition, there were many homes including at least one mansion. Census records show that the population of Quartzburg varied between 91 and 128 from 1870 through 1910. By 1920 the population was 152. A fire in August 1929 destroyed most of Quartzburg, but the census population one year later was 181. The fire of 1931, which consumed the Gold Hill Mine mill, also burned every building in Quartzburg except the post office and store that still stand today. There are no 1940 census records for Quartzburg.



Today, Quartzburg and the Gold Hill Mine sit on 289 acres of private property purchased in 2005 by Don and Candy Miller, a Boise North End couple, who in turn sold it to Gold Hill Reclamation and Mining Company that began processing the estimated 180,000 tons of ore dug from the mine prior to its 1938 closure and left untouched in the intervening 71 years. Initially, it was estimated that \$50 million worth of gold would be recovered from processing the ore. That remains to be seen since some of the processed ore contained no gold at all. The company is processing tailings from some of the mines adjacent to the Gold Hill Mine, and it wants to handle the tailings from the Belshazzar Mine located on US Forest Service land and 1.5 southwest of Quartzburg on Granite Creek Road. [4]



*Boarding House at Belshazzar Mine (Reference [5])*

The road to this private property on which Quartzburg and the Gold Hill Mine sits is gated, but Granite Creek Road from Placerville to the Belshazzar Mine remains open.

**Pearl (Site #-3)**, which is located about 7 miles to the southwest of Horseshoe Bend and 9 miles to the east of Emmett, had a little later start and did not last as long as Quartzburg. Placer gold was discovered along Willow Creek, the future site of Pearl, as early as 1867, however the findings were rather meager and mining activities in the area were largely inactive until the panic of 1893. In 1894 the Pearl mining camp consisted of one cabin under a grove of cottonwood trees. It was occupied by cowboys as a summer cattle range headquarters.



That same year, Dan Levan discovered a richer vane of ore that he began working on his own. He sold the claim to Colonel E. H. Dewey who began commercially to develop a mining operation. Pearl gold mines produced \$30,000 in 1894 and \$80,000 in 1896. [1]





As the mining camp grew, a post office was established in November 1895 and a two story boarding house followed a year later. By 1900 the US Census showed that 243 people lived in Pearl with single men outnumbering single women 75 to 8. There was also a variety of businesses to support the fledgling community (mercantile, drug store, livery stable, barber shop, shoemaker, butcher shop, saloon, stage and freight, and three hotels). In addition there were miners, millwrights, engineers, machinists, laborers, carpenters, farmers, wash-man and stenographer. In April 1903 Pearl received electricity from the power plant north of Pearl on the Payette River. The Checkmate Mine was the major producer in the area shipping ore and bullion via stage and freight to Emmett and then by rail to Nampa. Most mining production came from 1894 to 1908 resulting in about \$2 million.



*Pearl in 1991 (Reference [3])*

Pearl along the Pearl Road that follows North Fork Willow Creek, you will come to the remains of the Gem State Mine with a rusted out half buried auto body above the fenced mine entrance. A grove of trees stands near where the remaining buildings were razed in 2004, and tailings from some of the old mines in the area can be seen on the surrounding hillsides. The townsite of Pearl and old mines all lie on private property.

Andrew Mentzer, one of our club members, reporting on outdoor adventure spots wrote an article for the Boise Weekly about Pearl that appeared April 12, 2011. [4]

*Gem State Mine Shaft (about 0.3 miles west of Pearl)*

By 1910 Pearl's population had declined by roughly half and much of the occupational diversity was gone. Gem County was formed in May 1915, including portions of Boise and Canyon counties, moving Pearl into the new county. In January 1920 the census showed on 40 people living in Pearl, and by 1940 there were only 21 listed in six households on the census records. [2,3]

Today, the ghost town of Pearl no longer exists, with the last remaining buildings being razed in the spring of 2004. Nevertheless, it is still an enjoyable afternoon ride not far from downtown Boise (about 18 miles north northeast). Just before you get to old townsite of





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## Cycles & Scenery: A motorcycle adventure around Idaho

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROGER PHILLIPS —  
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We accelerated onto the Interstate and looked over at the Boise Foothills cloaked in smoke as thick as coastal fog. Wildfires were burning throughout the state like Roman candles randomly placed on an Idaho map, but we weren't too concerned.

We had planned our motorcycle ride months ago and scheduled time off from work, and we weren't going to abort our trip over a few wildfires. Through them, around them, beside them or in front of them, we didn't care. We were on motorcycles that could go nearly anywhere.

Our trio, brothers Dave and Mike Heimer of Boise and myself, had a simple plan: ride the Magruder Corridor — a 100-miles-of-dirt-and-gravel road in Montana and Idaho that divides the Selway/Bitterroot and Frank Church wildernesses.

The secondary goal was to avoid pavement as much as possible getting to the Magruder Corridor on what became a 960-mile odyssey through Idaho's backcountry.



*Adventure riding is like backpacking by motorcycle on backroads instead of trails.*

### COME ALONG FOR THE RIDE

Finding dirt and gravel roads in Idaho isn't a challenge. Navigating them and keeping your bike and body intact is another matter.

The pavement dissipated about 20 miles from Boise on Blacks Creek Road as we rolled toward Prairie. It was the first reel in a seemingly endless loop of postcard scenery as we dropped into the rugged black-rock canyon of the South Fork of the Boise River.

We stopped in Prairie for a quick break and hit our first road block. The road to Pine was closed because of the Trinity Ridge Fire.



Fire detours were not unexpected, so out came the map. We replotted our route back into the South Fork canyon, across Anderson Ranch Dam, up to U.S. 20 and on to Fairfield.

You have to be careful whipping out a map in a parking lot in Fairfield, or any other small town in Idaho. It attracts helpful people like a bear to a dumpster full of donuts.

A gal in a Jeep insisted on leading us north of Fairfield toward Couch Summit, where we would tie into our original route on back roads into Ketchum.

## RUN WITH WHAT YOU BRUNG

It's an old saying that applies to adventure motorcycle riding. Your bike is your transportation and pack animal. It's a tricky balance between bringing enough to be safe and comfortable and not being overloaded, which makes your bike harder to handle.

Adventure bikes are big and heavy. Our stable included a KTM 990 Adventure, a Triumph 800 Tiger XC and a venerable Kawasaki KLR 650. They weighed in around 500 pounds unloaded, give or take 50 depending on the bike.

Add a week's worth of camping gear, clothes, food, tools and spare parts and they gain weight quicker than a 4-H hog before the county fair. One minute you're riding them, and the next you're wrestling them.

There's also the matter of terrain. Idaho's backcountry is steep, rugged and unpredictable. Back roads can vary from graded and smooth to cobblestone rough. Even if you know your route, which we didn't, things are constantly changing because of weather, traffic, falling rocks, downed timber and other hazards.

## OVER THE HILLS AND INTO SUN VALLEY

We crossed out of the Boise River drainage and into the Wood River drainage. Our trip was guided by landscapes as much as roads. We were constantly crossing out of one river system and into the next, or bouncing in and out of a major drainage, such as the Salmon River.

The landscape wasn't dramatically different between the Boise River and Wood River drainages, but we could tell we were getting close to Ketchum. The faded, peeled, shot-up, or completely missing Forest Service road signs suddenly looked like they came straight out of a craftsman's workshop.

We followed Warm Springs Creek past the million-dollar cabins to Ketchum and Sun Valley. It took us most of the day to get there, and we were dusty and sweaty as we topped off our tanks and stopped at a deli in Sun Valley for a drink.

Among the pressed shorts, designer shades and polo shirts, it looked like the ruffians had arrived.

Sun Valley used to make me feel weird. It just seemed to cater to a crowd to which I didn't belong.

But people there have always been friendly, so I think the hang-up lies within. I still feel a little out of place there, but not unwelcome, if that makes any sense.



## ANOTHER SUMMIT BEFORE CAMP

I jokingly asked if we could skip camping that night, stay at Sun Valley Lodge, take in an ice skating show, eat at a fancy restaurant and cap it off with a nice bottle of wine. It didn't get much traction. That's not how the ruffians roll.

We left Sun Valley and headed north over Trail Creek Summit. Even swathed with smoke, it was beautiful. The broad, U-shaped valley with a meandering, willow-lined creek in the bottom made it hard to keep my eyes on the steep, winding road.

I'd never traveled over Trail Creek Summit, and it was the first of many scenic surprises.

I was the unofficial ring leader because I had plotted our trip with the caveat that detours were allowed in any direction for any reason.

We were heading for Copper Basin, but Mike took us on a detour into nearby Wild Horse Creek.

Dave and Mike's dad, John Heimer of Boise, has been traveling around Idaho for decades, and he describes Wild Horse Creek as one the most beautiful places in Idaho, but it was shrouded in a smoky haze when we arrived.

In the morning, the sky cleared and the creek swirled and tumbled beneath the slate-gray Pioneer Mountains looming in the background. It was tough to argue with Papa Heimer.

## BEAR RACING AND OTHER ADVENTURES

I'm not sure if the term "adventure riding" was borne by motorcycle adventurers or Madison Avenue types who came up with a clever way to sell expensive motorcycles.

Every person has his or her definition of an adventure, but to me it simply means you can expect plenty of surprises, you must constantly adapt, and there's a reasonable chance the trip will fail to end well.

We checked off the "plenty of surprises" box when a black bear rose from the sagebrush and ran parallel to Dave's motorcycle on the loop around Copper Basin.

I was in the lead and oblivious to Dave's honking and flashing lights trying to get my attention.

Dave stopped his bike and snapped a photo before the bruin disappeared into a draw.

Any debate of Wild Horse Creek being the most beautiful place in Idaho had to be reconsidered after traveling through Copper Basin.

A pair of cowboys and several dogs herded cattle with a panorama of mountain peaks surrounding them like a over-exaggerated theater set.

This went beyond scenery. It was the story of the West brought to life, and it was as moving as the finale of a cowboy movie.

"They're riding horses, we're riding iron horses," Dave said.

We left Copper Basin and headed toward Mackay. I got ahead of the Heimers and took a break at the top of a ridge separating Copper Basin from Mackay.



This was road-runner country. You could see a plume of dust kicked up by a rider from a mile away, but the air was clear, and no dust rose from the road that undulated across the rolling sagebrush terrain that stretched for miles.

I have as much patience as a Labrador retriever sitting in a duck blind waiting for shooting hours to start on opening morning, but aside from that, waiting gets my mind wandering and worrying.

Our internal clocks know roughly how long it takes for a variety of common stops, including readjusting cargo on the bikes, shedding or adding a layer of clothing, taking a photo, watering a sagebrush, watching a critter, etc.

This break was taking longer than all the above, which made me nervous. I ran down the mental checklist of reasons to stop, and got hung up on a breakdown or a crash.

I slowly rode back so we didn't meet on a blind corner, and eventually reconnected with Dave and Mike.

Mike had "lawn darted" into a ditch at about 35 miles per hour. Mike and the bike survived, but he was hobbling, and his foot was swelling like the federal deficit.

## CROSSING A GOAT TRAIL ON ONE LEG

We dropped into Mackay and had one of many fine meals in small-town Idaho. Either the food is better there, or miles and hours on dusty roads make a guy hungrier. Either way, they were welcome rest and refuel stops.

Mike gobbled Ibuprofen and gave his foot a rest. He could still ride, though somewhat painfully. We didn't know the extent of his injury, but he wanted to keep riding.

We continued toward our next camp, but another set of mountains stood between us and there.

Part of the fun of adventure riding is picking a squiggly line on the map and going for it.

Between my map reading and Dave's GPS, we went west from Mackay and ended up on a goat trail. Not sure of its real name, it was a Jeep road that followed a creek, then crossed the creek, then went up and down steep hills with lots of loose dirt, chunky rocks, cow pies, ruts and other trail gremlins.

Then it repeated that sequence numerous times.

Dave and I struggled to keep our bikes upright and pointed in the right direction.

Mike didn't have the luxury of standing on the foot pegs because of his sore, swollen foot. He got up close and personal with the sagebrush a couple times.

We felt bad for Mike and helped him pick up his bike after each crash, but that was all we could do.

The map showed and the GPS confirmed the goat trail went where we wanted to go, but they didn't show what condition the road was in.

Would it get worse or better the farther we went? Once you're committed to a goat trail, it's a tough call. Turning around is brutal because you have to go back through the rough parts you just endured, and after that, you still have to find another route.

It's easier to convince yourself the better road lies ahead. The devil you don't know always seems a little more angelic.



Mike persevered, but not without some pain, sweat and cursing.

Goat trail, crashes, heat stress, and fear of the unknown, more boxes checked off the adventure checklist.

## MORE SMOKE AND SCENERY

We mostly had a reprieve from the smoke on the second day, but as we descended into the East Fork of the Salmon River, it covered the valley like a low-hanging orange cloud.

I glanced over and a cow moose trotted along the creek the road followed. It easily could have turned and ran away, but it kept its pace. What's with these wild animals trying to race us?

It felt like were riding into the flames as we descended into the heat of East Fork of the Salmon River near Clayton. We tried to ride with our face shields up, but our eyes stung even while wearing sunglasses. After stopping, we saw gray snowflakes settling on our motorcycles and realized ash was getting in our eyes, not just smoke.

We settled for the night in a campground near the Salmon River, and after about 8 hours in the saddle, it felt good to be on a picnic table bench instead of a motorcycle seat.

We got up the next morning and Mike's foot was still sore and swollen, but he could ride.

Dave and I assured him there were no goat trails ahead. I didn't know for sure, but the squiggly lines on the map looked considerably bolder.

We got out of camp early. I'm a morning slacker. Dave is a Marine, which means he sits still about as well as a squirrel that just raided a Starbucks dumpster.

Nobody wanted to be the guy holding up progress, so it was a silent race to see who could break camp and load his bike the quickest.

Sometimes we were too quick for our own good. Mornings in the mountains are chilly, even in August.

I had to layer on more clothes, and I was close to wearing all the layers I had as we cruised up the Salmon River toward Sunbeam.

I eagerly awaited Goldilocks time when I could ride without getting chilled or sweating.

But with temperatures swinging 30 or 40 degrees between morning and afternoon, Goldilocks time was usually temporary and fleeting.

Our third day was through more amazing backcountry starting at Sunbeam and proceeding down the Custer Motorway to Challis.

The motorway is a drive-by history lesson of the Custer mining community complete with restored buildings and lots of artifacts from the mining days.

There's also a series of interpretive signs along the route that are actually interesting and lack the usual horror stories about someone getting massacred at that spot 150 years ago.



Note to the folks who make the road-side signs along highways. What's with the buzz kills? Would it hurt to put a sign at a picturesque place that says something like "In 1968, a newlywed couple camped at this spot in a VW bus, drank a bottle of wine and conceived the first of many happy children."

Just a suggestion.

The Custer Motorway wound through the timber and emerged into the red-rock country of Challis.

The transition was swift and the contrast abrupt. Timber, sagebrush, red rock. From there, it was a quick buzz up the U.S. 93 to Morgan Creek Road, over Morgan Creek Summit and down into Panther Creek.

The road follows Panther Creek, and we could see the canyon walls close in. They got steeper, rockier and more rugged and the water wilder as it tumbled through rapids.

The sky also got dark with smoke until everything took on an creepy orange hue. If this were Hells Canyon, instead of Panther Creek, I would have turned around out of a fear a red guy with a pitchfork would step out.



Dave was out front as we rode down Panther Creek, and he skidded to a stop in the middle of the road, jumped off his bike and ran down the road with his camera in hand.

It could mean only one thing: Bighorns. They were crossing the road after drinking in the creek.

"They're the toughest animal in North America to hunt, and I almost took out a herd of them with my motorcycle," he said.

Fortunately, a collision was avoided, and we watched the sheep graze on the hillside.

We arrived where Panther Creek meets the Salmon River canyon; the heat, smoke and dust took its toll. I was ready for a rest.

*Bighorn sheep were a highlight of the trip. The wildlife list also included fox, coyote, deer and moose.*

We stopped at the Shoup Store for a drink. Our choices? Beer or iced tea. Since we still had some miles ahead, we opted for the iced tea.

The owner grabbed a giant glass jar off the rail in front of the store and filled three plastic glasses.

Tea never tasted so good. In fact, if you want the best iced tea in Idaho, I recommend the Shoup Store.

The fires hadn't just socked in the canyon with smoke, it had blocked the next leg of our route up Spring Creek and into Montana.





## ADVENTURE LODGING

Instead of going up Spring Creek, we continued up the Salmon River to North Fork and stopped for dinner.

One of the beauties of motorcycles is they can cover miles of backcountry road remarkably fast. When you start to get hungry, the next town is usually a twist of the throttle and minutes away.

We ate dinner at North Fork General Store and Cafe and stared out at smoke so thick it made the afternoon look like dusk. We'd been on the bikes all morning and afternoon, and the next camp was still a ways down the road.

We asked the waitress about the motel that adjoined the restaurant and got a room with four bunk beds for \$75 a night, which included breakfast.

Part of adventure riding is dealing with unexpected situations and adapting, even if that means chicken-fried steak smothered in gravy, a hot shower, clean sheets and breakfast.

## AND THEN THERE WERE TWO

After two days and a handful of Ibuprofen, the swelling in Mike's foot showed no sign of subsiding, and it was taking on an ugly purple hue.

The whole Magruder Corridor was still ahead, and Mike made the "heartbreaking" decision to turn back. He called ahead for someone to meet him with a pickup halfway and headed south while we rode north.

Montana's blue skies and green trees never looked so good. The sky was as clear as a spring day as we cleared Lost Trail Summit on U.S. 93.

We took advantage of smooth pavement and Montana's liberal attitude toward speed limits. Since I can't remember what the speed limit was on that stretch of highway, I can neither confirm nor deny exceeding it.

But I will say, Dave was out front the whole time, and his time on sport bikes, aka crotch rockets, definitely showed on the twisty mountain road.

Crossing Lost Trail Summit at an altitude of 7,000 feet made me once again re-examine my definition of summer weather. Adding the wind chill from riding at highway speeds, and it was downright cold.

## SCENERY OVERLOAD

The Magruder Corridor was the focal point of our trip, and it only took us 500 miles and four days to get there.

We left the highway at Conner, Mont. and headed west onto the start of the corridor, and to our surprise, the pavement continued another 25 miles.

At this rate, we would be through the corridor by lunch. So this was the notorious Magruder Corridor?

Not to worry, we were soon under a canopy of pines and firs with the road so narrow, brush branches in the barrow pit wanted to high-five us at every corner.

We passed the Magruder Ranger Station and crossed Deep Creek, which is a tributary of the Selway, and rode up to the ridges. There we found long stretches of backroads that seemed to be built with recycled bowling balls.



I stood on the foot pegs, aimed for the line of least resistance, bumped the throttle to gain a little momentum and bounced through the worst of it. Then I relaxed my tense muscles for a moment before attacking the next bony section.

Ahh, so this is the notorious Magruder Corridor.

We crested a rise and saw distant wisps of smoke rising from the forest, and we knew they weren't campfires. The ones to our left and right weren't an issue. But our handlebars and front tires pointed like gun sights toward another one.

## BURNT KNOB LOOKOUT

If the Magruder Corridor was our destination, Burnt Knob lookout was a destination within our destination.

Dave had seen photos of it on an ADV Rider, an adventure riding Internet forum, and wanted to take a short detour to check it out.

Visiting lookouts has long been one of my hobbies. I've yet to see one that didn't have a spectacular view.

But somehow, the lookout was elusive. It wasn't at Burnt Knob Creek, and it wasn't at Dry Saddle, which had phenomenal, 360-degree views.

Ironically, it was the fire that led us to the fire lookout. We followed the brown dirt road snaking across the timbered ridge toward a plume of smoke, and there was a sign saying "Burnt Knob Lookout 1.5 miles."

We headed up, and the rocky and deeply-rutted road was a greater challenge than expected.

Dave crashed in the first 200 yards, and I squeezed by him and found a flat place to park and help him pick up his bike.

The impact popped the pannier off his bike and broke the latch that attached it to the frame. He used a strap to reattach it, and we continued uphill.

If the Magruder Corridor lived up to its reputation as a rough road, the leg up to Burnt Knob exceeded it.

It pushed our limits. We clawed up the hill, and rounding the last bend, my pannier caught a rock and I bit the dust. My front brake lever snapped like a twig, and my panniers were comically or horribly contorted by the crash.

When we got to the lookout, we realized it was unmanned, which explained the brutal road. We also discovered that from the fire lookout, we got a really good view of trees erupting into flames.

A little too good, in fact. The fire was making its afternoon run; we roughly calculated the direction it was traveling and decided it was too close for comfort.

We were now limping on two injured bikes and wounded egos, and we still had to get down the same nasty road that caused us both to crash. There were no guarantees we wouldn't repeat our performance.

## OVER AND OUT

Going down proved easier than going up, but I was now without my front brake because I forgot to bring spare levers.



It was a stupid and inexcusable error on my part. Had I fallen on my left side instead of my right, I would have broken the clutch lever, and my ride would likely have ended there.

It won't happen again, and I learned the value of those handlebar guards I had earlier written off as too expensive.

Whether it was the previous days of epic scenery, not having Mike along, the crashes, or just eventual fatigue of long days in the saddle, we wanted off the Magruder.

The plastic timer popped; we were cooked.

We continued to Red River, which is the official end of the corridor.

The road is a fantastic, rugged, backcountry trip that lives up to its adventurous reputation.

We rolled into a restaurant/grocery store in Elk City for dinner.

Dave called Mike to check his status. Despite the difficult decision to abort the trip, it was the right one. He'd broken his leg in the crash; X-rays showed a cracked fibula.

We later learned the name of where he crashed was Burma Road.

## DECLARING VICTORY AND PARTING WAYS

Dave and I camped beneath tall pines along Crooked River between Elk City and Grangeville. We had traveled more than 200 miles since we left North Fork, and much of it was on rough road.

We celebrated by turning in early and getting a good night's sleep.

The next morning, we rolled into Grangeville for breakfast. It was the largest town we passed through on our trip, and it seemed like a metropolis after places like Prairie, Fairfield, Clayton, Mackay, Shoup, North Fork and Elk City.

We turned south on U.S. 95 and got back onto gravel at Whitebird. There was still country left to explore.

But scenery overload took its toll, especially after a cool morning gave way to a sweltering afternoon.

We dropped off the ridge that separates the Salmon River drainage from Hells Canyon and descended down Cow Creek back to U.S. 95 and Riggins.

I planned to spend an extra day there, so Dave and I split company, and he headed back to Boise.

The 150 miles of pavement between Riggins and Boise was anticlimactic for each of us, but that wasn't a bad thing.

We rode more than 800 miles to get to Riggins — about 700 miles on dirt and gravel. We set out six days earlier looking for a backcountry adventure, and we found one.

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