



On Motorcycling

A 6,000-mile ride from California to Alaska and back proves that motorcycles are the only way to go

by JOHN D. PETTIGREW

WE had always regarded motorcycles with a mixture of scorn, cynicism, and awe. Amongst our circle of mountaineering friends the subject of motorcycles always aroused laughter, and despite the memorable words of Brian, an incorrigible cyclist ("You miss it all in a car."), most of us were happy to miss out on the experiences he had enjoyed, like his collision with a kangaroo and his manhandling of the bike over ice-covered roads.

However, Rona and I now know that motorcycles are the only way to go. On a mad impulse one summer we bought a couple of Honda 350's and rode them the 6,000-odd miles from California to Alaska and back.

Day 1

Berkeley, California, to Crater Lake, Oregon

We rise before dawn with the idea of avoiding some of the freeway traffic, but it is 7 o'clock before we manage to attach the huge mountain of food and gear onto the poor Hondas. We have heard that food is very expensive in Alaska, so we take 80 pounds of our favorite delicacies with us.

Crowned with crampons, each mass looks pretty formidable at 65 mph when we eventually get onto the freeway north. Motorists are fascinated and truckies surprisingly friendly, especially when they get close enough to see the long hair and pretty face under Rona's helmet.

From the beginning it is a complete sensory trip. All sensations are present in a broader and more unusual way, but the biggest treat of all is for our noses; we actually smell our way across thousands of miles of varying countryside.

The first few hundred miles are through the rich vegetable bowl of California, the central valley of San Joaquin. Here the hot, dusty, pollen-laden air from the grain fields contrasts alternately with the cool, verdant smell of the clover and alfalfa fields where there are sprinklers for air-conditioning.

In the afternoon we are into the cooler, forested foothills of the great volcanoes of the Pacific Northwest. The bikes, playing up a bit in the extreme heat of the valley, love the cooler mountain air and fly faultlessly along the steepening, windy, winding road. The resinous scent of cedar and pine hangs coolly in corridors cut through the conifer forests, while in the open the sun coaxes many unidentifiable perfumes from the fields and bushes of wildflowers. In these open patches we have views of Mt. Shasta, the southernmost of the great volcanic chain.

Near the Oregon border a wet, humuslike scent announces a swamp, and we find ourselves flying side by side with the brilliant blackbirds which nest there. One species is a gleaming black and yellow while the other has vivid red epaulettes as well.

In Oregon the farmers are making good use of the volcanic soil, and there are myriad vegetable smells interspersed with the smells of death — rotting prairie dogs (victims of passing cars) — and the pervading burnt sawdust belched from the wigwams attached to the many timber mills of this heavily forested region. At our first "gas up" in Oregon we notice an easy-going attitude on the part of the service station manager-and-wife, unlike the typically hustling garage attendants further south. This trend continues as we get further north into less populated regions and among the free-and-easy Canadians, who are most like the "mad hill tribes" of our Australian acquaintances back home.

We camp in dense conifers 400 miles from our morning's start, and after a mutual massage of the tired muscles that bikies must know so well are soon asleep.

Day 2

Crater Lake to Yakima, Washington

Another 400 miles — which begins with a pleasant side excursion to spectacular Crater Lake. The road winds through 30-foot banks of snow and emerges on the rim of a

deep, water-filled crater about four miles across. An exhilarating flight around the snow-covered rim leads to a steady descent through forest to Bend, Oregon, and our first oil change. At the bike shop we meet many kindred spirits and chat about the great touring life while we do the change. Hondas get a unanimous vote for reliability, but there is some argument about whether they should be "chopped" or not. I am surprised to find that "choppers" are built more for comfort than for style. Chopping and extending the front forks and the addition of footbars allow one to sit back out of the wind in a comfortable easy-chair position. While our big loads make comfortable backrests, it would be nice to be a little lower out of the wind, and we decide we should ride a chopper just to see how much more unsteady it is made by the extended front fork. For the time being, the only custom modification we make is to add new vaned grips to the handlebars. On the previous day our right arms had become very sore from holding the vibrating small-diameter grip at $\frac{3}{4}$ throttle all day.

The afternoon is hot and gusty, and we cross the vast plains of lava, interrupted occasionally by abrupt gorges with columnar sides. The last of these, that of the Columbia, marks the Washington border, and darkness finds us winding up the gorge of one of its tributaries, looking for a place to stop. The absence of most of the visual cues makes the drive an unearthly and scary float, with only a bright patch of road ahead as the reference point. It is a great relief to get off the road and down to the river for a swim and camp.

Day 3

Yakima to Vancouver, British Columbia

This is an easy 300 miles, heading west toward Seattle and across the Canadian border. The pass across the Cascade Range is quite high, with scattered snowcaps about it, and we put on our windproofs for the first time in the cold, damp air being blown up from the Pacific Coast. The descent to Seattle introduces us to the dark forests of Sitka spruce, which we would see all the way to Alaska whenever we were on the coast. On the green shores of Puget Sound, Rona points out an otter skipping from one waterway to another. Canada reminds us of home, but we could do without the mad Sydney-like traffic of Vancouver, which we strike at peak hour.

The memorable smell of the Pacific Northwest is the aroma of overcooked cabbage that is belched from the pulp mills.



Day 4

Vancouver to Lytton, B.C.

Scorching heat. Have to use chain lube every 100 miles. Frequent stops for swims and to cool off poor laboring bikes. Scenery wild, uncompromising gorges (Fraser River). We find we're the only comfortable travelers (except for truckies in refrigerated semis). We meet two young Adonises on 10-speeds bicycling across Canada. Very effective warnings carried by them: 10-foot fiberglass fishing rods tied to back of bike with day-glo orange flap on top. We can see them easily half a mile away. These fellows are making 100 miles a day. They reckon on better than 200 miles a day across the plains with a tail wind. (Makes us feel slightly decadent with our motors.)

Day 5

Lytton to Prince George, B.C.

Another day for shorts and open-neck shirts. Bikes getting out of tune and missing a lot. Arrive in town for oil change to find drain plugs stuck. Can't budge them with our own spanners (too short for leverage) — so try to borrow one in town, with no luck at all. Honda shop is closed (Sunday), and all service stations carry only British (inches) spanners, while we need a 19-mm metric one. In desperation I try everything and only succeed in burring the nut. Profuse sweat and swearing. Forced to stay overnight to wait for Honda shop to open.

Day 6

Prince George to Prince Rupert, B.C.

Bike shop closed! Luckily manage to rouse someone by phone. Oil change accomplished as well as a complete tune-up. Rona's bike now running perfectly, mine so-so. We practice the tuning on my bike first and so do a better second job on Rona's. We're sufficiently skilled to do it ourselves next time (which will be soon, since the bikes seem to get out of tune every 1,000 miles, the way we ride them.) Buy myself a long 19-mm spanner.

Very late afternoon start, but have a magnificent ride westward into the sun through fields of flowers (daisies, lupines, and buttercups) and green forest, and beside lakes, with the mountains getting steeper and more snowy the further west we get. We're still getting thrills at every new turn in the road. We drive until dark — about 200 miles. Weather still scorching — wearing practically nothing but helmet and faceshield at 50-60 mph.

Days 7 and 8

Prince Rupert to Haines, Alaska; Haines to Lake Kathleen, Yukon

A 30-hour ferry ride through a spectacular section of the Inside Passage saves us from 800 miles of nasty gravel road. We drive past scores of waiting cars and giant campers, all "on standby" at the dock — no trouble in booking without notice on such a



popular cruise if one has a bike, which can be squeezed in anywhere on the car deck. Luxuriating on the sundeck after a 25-cent shower and a beautiful seafood meal from the restaurant, we take in the mighty peaks looming out of the water. These same peaks feed glaciers which reach the sea, and one ice field (the Mendenhall near Juneau) is actually producing baby icebergs as we pass.

Once off the ferry at Haines we have 40 miles of exquisite riding on paved road through forest, beside a vigorous river, with the wild snowcaps of the Chilkat Range as a backdrop. Then the gravel road begins abruptly at the Alaskan-Canadian border. At this point, the gravel is hard packed, and we take advantage of the long daylight to put as much of it behind us as possible. At 11 p.m. we are still pushing on into the strange light of the sunset to the north. All around us is the eerie taiga or boreal forest — tiny stunted hemlock and spruce, like poor excuses for Christmas trees, golden ground cover, milky blue tarns, distant snow caps. Rabbits everywhere on the road with great, ungainly feet — apparently an advantage on the snow in winter, when their coats turn white to match.

Day 9

Lake Kathleen to the Alaskan border

Retrieve our food from the rucksack hanging high in an aspen, where we had strung it the night before to foil the camp bear. We had been warned of the bear by two other motorcycle tourers on Harley-Davidsons, whose deep-throated revving had been used to scare the offending animal at 3 a.m.

Set off on the least enjoyable day of the whole trip, the principal enemies being dust, semis, and road construction crews. The Canadians maintain what they call the "best gravel highway in the world," steadfastly refusing to accept the American offer to pave the horror because it might mean an end to the bountiful road taxes earned from the armies of trucks moving to and from

Alaska. The maintenance involved is a constant replacement of piles of loose gravel to the center of the road. From here it is quickly redistributed by the wheels of the cargo-laden behemoths and accumulates in loose ridges on the edges — a nasty trap for the unsuspecting cyclist.

For the thousandth time I bend my head and grit my teeth. The huge cone of dust spearheaded by a relentless semi bears on past. My paranoia has increased after being battered with rocks so many times that I could swear that not only did it not slow down, but it had actually accelerated past me.

I stop on the sward and look into the receding cloud of dust for the red and white figure of Rona to appear. Two minutes pass. What the hell has happened to her? After another two minutes I break under the tension. Go, Jacko! Almighty skid around, watch that pile of rocks, painful sigh, acrid dust, thrashing through the gears, fishtail



around the first bend, no sight of her, 60 in the gravel — you're crazy, Jack.

She must have had trouble in the loose rocks near the lake edge — or could it have been that bloody semi? Horror!

An old man struggling to upright her bike in a pile of gravel on the next bend. Skid up, struggle with helmet so I can hear — his mouth opening and closing and his face is trying to tell me something. Can't get my helmet off. Her bike's lights and muffler are smashed up. Panic. "What have you done with her?" He leads me around behind his parked van. Oh, God!

Rona sits calmly applying antiseptic through the great rent in her pants to the graze on her knee. She gives me a wan but reassuring smile, and I turn to set about replacing the broken gear and clutch levers and straighten out the tailpiece on her bike.

We eventually made it to Fairbanks and did a mighty trip on foot in the far north

among the Dall sheep and caribou of Brooks Range tundra. That's another story.

In conclusion, let me say a little about the emotional trip which capped things off on the 3,000-mile ride back to California again.

Because we were fairly new to motorcycles at the start of the trip, we hardly trusted ourselves or each other to ride side by side down the highway. I was usually in front, sometimes irritated when Rona lagged, and she was sometimes unhappy when I appeared not to want to go at her speed. We often lost one another on the freeways of the large cities, and the combination of my aggressive riding through the mess and Rona's sane defensiveness meant the gap often lengthened until we were on the open road again.

On the way home we decided to ride side by side. At 65 mph this required complete trust and knowledge of the other's riding and gave a wonderful reward — a glowing feeling of solidarity. Our two bright headlamps, on at all times so we would be easily seen, presented an unequivocal signal to oncoming traffic to keep out of our lane. We could sense one another's joy and exhilaration with a quick sidelong glance, and communication added immeasurably to the already present fulfillment of the ride. I would indicate the red hawk swooping on a mouse in a field that she might otherwise have missed, while a mile further on she would point out an interesting side road we could take for fun. Isn't that cloud a beauty? Yes, and look at the sun shining off the water down there. All of that and your love by your side, an ever changing fragrance in your nostrils, a zooming panoramic view, a 60-mph cool whistle in your clothes, and a 6,000-rpm tickle in your ass. □

