

New! Harley Tour of Southern Utah

A New Twist on Adventure By Greg Aitkenhead
Photos by Gary Alan Kalpakoff

Hog heaven...Monument Valley I was about to lead my first six-day motorcycle trip, and I was scared. Our October weather forecast looked shaky, I didn't know most of the riders, and what I did know made me nervous. One rider had less than a year's experience, and another had just renewed his motorcycle endorsement after a thirty-year hiatus. As a backcountry guide I'd led almost one hundred and fifty multi-day hiking and mountain biking tours, so it wasn't the guiding part that had me worried. I worried about the motorcycle part. The itinerary made me nervous, too. Beside motorcycle riding, we planned to hike, canyoneer, and float part of the San Juan River. Nuts, huh? Hiking bikers? Leather-clad canyoneers? Rafting riders? But Outdoor Utah's infamous Señor Rojo had a group in mind and our local Harley dealership, Zion Harley-Davidson, had the bikes. Southern Utah's "Grand Circle" and some of the West's greatest highways waited just "round the corner. All we had to do was twist the throttle.

So, what was the problem? The friendly and helpful staff at Zion Harley had us covered with a fleet of brand new "07 rentals, the weather looked great, and the riders were psyched. We dined that first night at one of St. George's finer restaurants, the Painted Pony. The food rocked, wine flowed with bacchanalian abandon, conversation and jest and laughter mixed at the table like cigar smoke and cool night air. This was going to be a piece of cake, right?

Welcome to the Washing Machine

We all met the next morning at Zion Harley. Most in the group have earned black belts in shopping and eagerly plied the aisles loaded with really cool clothing and gear while the staff rolled out the hardware. The team consisted of Señor Rojo and Madre Karina, riding two up on a rented Road King, Jack and Bonnie, who brought their own Harleys from Salt Lake City, Billy on his oddball Beemer (not that there's anything wrong with Beemers), his son Steve and the Boys (Brian, Frank, and Nick), all on rent-a-hogs, Gary the photographer on his rented Dyna Wide Glide, and my wife Christa on her own Sportster. I ended up on Harley's big tourer, an Electra Glide Classic. Amy, owner of Flavours Catering, ran the all important sag wagon. No matter where you journey the rush of onset always mellows into the flow of experience. Our morning at Zion Harley had some brief moments of mayhem, but the leg from the shop to Fredonia felt like a parade. On the road, you expect a wave from a fellow biker, but even people in cars were reaching out their windows and waving at us. By the time we reached our first lunch with Amy at Jacob Lake near the Grand Canyon's North Rim, everyone was buzzing. But so were the weather-band radios; flash flood warnings. "What? There's no way today's turning into wash-out," I thought. I couldn't imagine getting smacked right off the bat, or the possibility of bad weather affecting us for the rest of the six-day trip. Despite darkening skies, the group decided to chance it and ride the 90 miles from Jacob Lake to the rim and back instead of running straight for our first night's lodging in Marble Canyon. Two hours later we were running from the rim like thunderstruck deer. On the way back we wallowed through the same grey cloud cover that had obliterated the canyon view and, although we were all prepared with rain gear (well, Steve's nylon slacks might not qualify him as "prepared"), none of us enjoyed the pelting. Flurries of hail and snow, rain that stung, as Nick said, "like diamonds hitting your face," and blinding fog, slowed our dizzy pack down to sub-RV speed. The storm hounded us all the way back to Jacob Lake Lodge. Our day's ride ended in a strange calm. The highway had dried below the Kaibab Plateau, but the ephemeral drainages of the Vermilion Cliffs, normally the serene haunts of jackrabbits and scorpions, now rushed with salmon colored silt. The valley air, purified by the storm's passing, acted like a lens, bringing stone and soil and the desert's mundane features into sharp focus as we rode quickly by. We drove toward clouds on the horizon the color of a bruise and pulled into the gravel parking lot at Marble Canyon Lodge like triumphant heroes. That evening I wrote in my notebook, "Its peaceful inside my full face helmet. Whirlwind with aspen leaves."

Gettin' Freaky

On day two we rode to the put-in at Lee's Ferry, crossed the Colorado River at Navajo Bridge, and then ran through Page to a lunch with Amy at a vacant jewelry stand pull-out near Kaibito. Later we hiked a half-mile to an overlook of the Betatakin cliff dwelling at Navajo National Monument. Early afternoon we checked into our comfortable rooms at historic Goulding's Lodge with time left to tour Monument Valley Tribal Park before repairing to Goulding's family style dining room. Afterward, from our patios, we silently viewed a spectacular full moonrise over the Monument Valley monoliths. Day two was a motorcycle rider's dream.

Day three was just plain freaky. It was all Rojo's idea, and although I trust his masterful sense of adventure, I'd had doubts about his plan. How were we going to squeeze a day trip on the San Juan River between Monument Valley and Moab? I was ok heading out in the frigid pre-dawn, but when we crossed the San Juan at Mexican

Hat forty minutes later, a new wave of worry flooded my mind. I'd never seen the San Juan look so nasty. We found out later from Jay of Wild River Expeditions in Bluff that the river was pumping 10,000 cubic feet per second. The last time I ran this stretch it barely put out 400 cfs.

Nonetheless, our battered crew dutifully dropped their leathers, donned rain gear and life jackets and hopped onto rafts at Sand Island. Marcus, our Wild River Expeditions guide, immediately launched into his interp. I thought, "that's nice, he's trying to distract us from the cold." Then, if on cue, he motored straight for the only wave on the whole blown out river.

Two memories stand out from our river day: my apology to Rojo for ever doubting his genius, delivered as I stood soaked and shivering and grinning like a fool on the river bank, and the staggering number of sport balls floating down the river. We saw footballs, soccer balls, a volleyball, and a bunch of basketballs, including one of those old red, white and blue ABA balls. Not to take anything away from the guides or the San Juan scenery--both were exceptional. Sometimes it's just the quirky funny things that stick.

A Southern Utah shopping mall Feeling Kinda Flushed

The San Juan rocked, but day four took the cake. After our river trip we rode to Moab as new storms darkened the skies. Bonnie had arranged a collection of comfortable houses for our layover day. We settled in, washed our river-muddied clothes, our Harleys and ourselves, gathered and cooked a civilized dinner. We partied, and then pooped out early. It rained through the night. The next morning, anticipating clearing skies, Rojo, Christa, Gary, and myself decided to pursue our plan to canyoneer with Matt Moore of Desert Highlights. Matt impressed me. He carried himself with the relaxed, confident air of someone who actually pays attention to the quiet places he visits. I just wish he hadn't called my combination of nylon shorts and polypro long underwear the "Spring-break in Escalante" look. After gearing up at the Desert Highlights downtown shop, our guide, Zach, drove us past the Slickrock Trail to our non-descript trailhead. The recent rains brought a flush of color to the rolling desert hill country, the cold a blush to our cheeks. The saturated sand felt firm underfoot. A small stream began to flow in the drainage. Our pleasant walk led to steeper terrain, and finally a sandstone pouroff. Our first rappel. As I stood at the lip of the void I thought, "Why am I dropping into a slot called 'The Medieval Chamber' when it looks like rain?" Zach assured us that the rap would be straightforward and the slot short and easy. We shouldn't have any concerns for a flash problem even with the overcast sky and the dark, threatening clouds hovering above. The first rap went off without a hitch. We ate lunch a stone's throw from the top of 100-foot tall Morning Glory Arch, which we planned to simul-rappel to reach the canyon floor. (When "simul-rappelling" two canyoneers join themselves to a single length of rope, face each other and then, using their body weight as the anchor, lower off opposite sides of an arch or a spire.) I can't say that I'd ever wanted to rappel this way, but I can say that I've been waiting most of my life to see what happened next.

Gary, anchored to a separate line, rapped first, then Christa and I rapped off the arch as a team, followed by Señor Rojo and Zach. The weather started to turn. Rain fell, our tempo quickened, my heart beat faster, my focus narrowed. We all got down fine, but before we could pull the ropes and finish our hike the drainage flashed. Two waterfalls roared to life, one on either side of the arch. Mists from the heavy pounding falls whipped the glistening leaves of the cottonwood trees below the arch. The chamber reverberated. We had to yell to communicate. Down canyon, domes of slickrock high above us rushed with hundreds of cascading waterfalls as the rain fell in sheets. The scene, although frightening, was ethereal.

We pulled our ropes as soon as possible. All Zach said was, "We need to run!" He looked nervous and initially I thought he was putting on a face for effect, but our first chest-high stream crossing convinced me that he wasn't joking. We ran the rest of the way, crossing the flood-swollen creek over and over, drenched, until we finally reached a path that took us high above the drainage. I smiled. It was good not to be the guide.

On the Road One with the Road

Moab represented the halfway point on our ride, but the last two days flew by with unexpected speed. I found my groove with the bike. I kicked my feet up on the highway pegs and relaxed through the miles. I was living the Harley-Davidson dream. The days were still eventful, the weather still hurtful at times, but the road slipped by easy.

We finished our fifth night with yet another fabulous lodging accommodation (although the houses Bonnie had set up in Moab would be hard to beat). Boulder Mountain Lodge, in my opinion, ranks as one of Utah's ultimate eco-lodges. Nestled just below Boulder Mountain and just above the wildlands of the Escalante basin, I can think of no place more serene. Jen and Blake of Hell's Backbone Grill also do an incredible job lifting the spirits of weary travelers. Their meals include organically grown produce from an on-site garden and locally raised natural meats, served by an

energetic crew. We had found biker Nirvana. Back on the road early, with skies finally clearing and the designated All-American Highway 12 winding out into slickrock heaven, I couldn't help but feel the sense of gratitude and reluctance that comes near the end of a successful adventure. Despite initial misgivings, everything about this trip had worked out perfectly. In retrospect, even the tough times seemed essential, and our blissful last day seemed like a reward. I let the Hog run free through the stretches of open road and the tight, twisting corners leading to Escalante and then on to Bryce Canyon National Park. As we hit the incredible scenery of Highway 89 and Zion National Park I felt overwhelmed. The day's mileage seemed sensible, but the sheer beauty of the ride was just too much. Only one thing could overwhelm my senses more—saying goodbye, at the end of the day, to my scooter and getting into my car.

The group stayed that night in Springdale, at Zion Park Inn, and ate one last wonderful meal together at Flanigan's Spotted Dog Café surrounded by the splendor that is Zion. It was hard to think of the gang disbanding. Everyone was ready to get home, of course, but you could also see that this incredible land, with vistas stretching beyond the comprehensible, and these incredible motorcycles, and beautiful highways, had left an impression. We had completed the circle, and no one would leave unchanged.