

RIDING THE DIVIDE

Canada to Mexico the back way.

by Clement Salvadori

photography by Mark Waters and the author



Let me preface this little story with a simple statement: This was the best ride I have ever taken on the North American continent. I've motorcycled from Alaska to Panama, from Nova Scotia to Baja California, and this trip topped them all.

Out of the blue

I get a phone call. "Hi. You don't know me but my name is Mark Waters and I want to ride from the Canadian border to Mexico along the Continental Divide on dirt roads. And I think you would be a good person to do the ride with." Or words to that effect.

Turns out that Mark makes his living videotaping corporate get-togethers (boring) and new-age seminars (interesting). Having ridden motorcycles for some 30 years, he got the brilliant notion of doing this Divide ride and working it into a video on "adventure motorcycle touring." So I'm going to travel with a total stranger for the better part of two weeks, covering a minimum of 2,500 miles.

Why not? The worst that could happen is that we won't get along and will go our separate ways, right? OK, I say, when and where do we meet? Nine a.m. on July 2nd at the Port of Roosevelt border crossing, in Montana.

About eight o'clock on the evening of July 1st I ride a BMW R1150GS into Eureka, Montana, closest town to Roosevelt, with two motels to choose from. One has a BMW F650GS Dakar in front of a room. That's him. We split a bottle of claret at the picnic table on the grass, open up a tin of Spam and slice a loaf of pumpernickel bread, while discreetly taking each other's measure. Waters doesn't seem like an obvious wacko, his bike is properly packed, and he has a really nifty video camera with a handlebar mount.

The 2,500-mile route we will be more or less following had been mapped out by a bicycling club, and is about 80 percent dirt and gravel roads, 10 percent pavement and 10 percent "single-track" trails, which we will detour around. I've got Michael McCoy's \$15 book, *Cycling the Great Divide*, which breaks the trip down into 62 30- to 60-mile days; Mark has the complete \$60 set of maps.

Next morning we are off. We take a quick run up to the border to establish the three-flags aspect of our trip, then head southeast to Grave Creek Road. That is a thin, single-lane strip of asphalt running under a canopy of trees for miles. No traffic, just us. Soon we are in the Flathead National Forest on old logging roads, just what these GS models are intended for. The views are stupendous.

Eventually we enter the Greater Whitefish/Kalispell miniopolis, and make a quick dash down to Seelye Lake on the pavement, as the bicycle book says that the dirty route may have locked



Occasionally we found a bit of a water crossing, this one on Park Country Road 53 in Colorado.



Taking a break in the Pioneer Mountains of Montana.

gates—easy to foil with a bi-cycle, a little tougher with 600 pounds of motorcycle. Then it is back to the dirt, past the Cottonwood Lakes and over Huckleberry Pass and down to Lincoln, going by the haunts of my old college classmate, Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber. No point to seeing if he is home or not, as the feds took his entire house as evidence.

By now we've been on the road for 10 hours. We stop at a Lincoln gas station, and Mark cheerfully gets off his F650 before putting the sidestand down. That is proof we are tired, and that it's best to do the pavement to Helena, rather than going up Lost Horse Road, past Dago Gulch and over Priest Pass. Adventure Touring Rule number 26: Gotta know when to hang it up for the day.

Morning, refreshed, ready for new adventures. We slab it down to Butte, during which ride the map, the only accurate map, of our route slips out of Mark's pocket, flares open, and gets nailed by a truck. We U-turn and find the map still pretty much intact, nothing that a couple of yards of Scotch tape won't fix up. ATR number 72: Make sure all the pockets on your jacket are zipped up.

Myself, I'm happily tearing up my book, sticking the appropriate page in the map window of my tankbag: "16.1 Turn right onto gravel road; 24.7 Continue straight; 36.7 Use caution on the next 20 miles of unsurfaced road;" etc.

Out of Butte we trickle up a forest road and find ourselves on a lovely ridge, the Continental Divide, where a gaggle of mountain bikers are resting in the shade of some trees. Later that day we ride several splendid sections of remote road, like the Old Bannock Road, first used in 1862, and then the 57 miles of Big Sheep Creek Back Country Byway, and the 80 miles east from Lima, Montana, over Red Rock Pass at 7,120 feet, and on to U.S. 20 at Henrys Lake, in Idaho. That is about 150 miles, and the number of vehicles on these roads could be counted on my fingers. There is a whole lot of room out there in the middle of this lovely country, and few people seem to be taking advantage of it.

I love dirt roads. I don't mind pushing aside a bit of freshly spread gravel, a springtime tradition intended to keep a dirt road from becoming a mudhole. Centerlining a rutted section is fun. If you are not comfortable off the pavement, then you have a choice. Either don't travel on these remote roads, or learn how to ride them. It is not difficult, it just takes some practice. These are the kinds of roads for which "adventure touring" machines are designed.

We camp at Island Park, and then head for the Wyoming border, skirting the south side of Yellowstone Park on a forest road—where Mark's Beemer's rear tire picks up a 10-penny nail that tears up his innertube good and proper. ATR number 87: Always carry a spare rear tube for your bike. He took the wheel off, strapped it to my bike, and went off on July 4th to find a new tube. He came back six hours later. All part of the adventure.

After the harrowing day we spend the night in

Dubois, Wyoming, and I do recommend the Twin Pines Lodge with the \$40 cabins, and the Cowboy Café for chicken-fried steak. Next morning it is over Union Pass (9,210 feet), then down along the west side of the Wind River Range, across the Big and Little Sandy Rivers, and right along the Continental Divide, crossing it three times in 20 miles. Then into Atlantic City, and then 90 miles of glorious desolation to cross the Great Divide Basin. Apart from an encampment of wannabe Pony Express riders near Atlantic City, we met just one pickup truck on that stretch. I loved it—big land, big beauty, big sky.

After Rawlins we head south over the Divide at Middlewood Hill (7,965 feet) and drop into Colorado. At Steamboat Springs we have agreed to split for two nights, Mark going east to his home in Longmont, me heading west to see a cousin in Carbondale—and do some laundry.

Two days later we meet in Breckenridge and head up Boreas Pass (11,482 feet) along with a friend of Mark's on a Honda GL1800. Boreas gets a lot of tourists and is a pretty civilized gravel road, though in truth most of the roads we were on were in rather good shape. The Winger just did that one stretch with us, which was a good thing, because about 100 miles farther on we had a muddy creek crossing to do, and wrestling the GL through would have been no fun. Over Marshall Pass (10,842 feet) in the drizzle; rain is the biggest worry on this trip. Many of these unsurfaced roads are clay, which is fine when dry, completely unnegotiable when wet. We're eating pie in the Pie-O-Neer Café in Pietown, Arizona, when a large local, who had obviously eaten way too much of the strawberry rhubarb delicacy over the years, asks us where we're headed. We point south to the Mangas Mountains, where big, black clouds are gathering.

"Humpfh," he says, "that's 40 miles to the next pavement, and if it rains on you out there, you boys better be prepared to spend the night." For the first 30 miles the road seems to be dodging the thunderstorm, and we get up to the Continental Divide at Valle Vences. "Looks like we made it," says Mark. ATR number 132: Never count your chickens before they are hatched, nor your roads before they are completed. The east slope has been drenched, and it takes us the better part of an hour to do the last 10 miles, on wet gravel over slick earth.

The last night on the road is in Silver City, where everything closes up very early and the only food we can find is at the drive-up window of a Taco Bell. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a Silver Citian hard

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Above left: The last fill-up, at Hachita, Arizona; the border with Mexico is a mere 65 paved miles away. Above right: A good cup of espresso starts my day very well indeed.

A flat tire in Wyoming's Targhee National Forest; Mark is strapping the wheel to my bike to go off and seek a new inner tube.

Along Red Meadow Lake in Montana's Flathead National Forest.





MAP BY BILL TIPTON

The F650GS Dakar returns for 2003 with ABS for \$9,190 and without ABS for \$8,690.



Left: Big adventure, big adventure bike:
The 2003 R1150GS comes in three standard color combinations for \$14,500 with ABS.

to surmise. We have one last short 30-mile section of dirt, the Separ Road, and it is a beaut. By this time the Rocky Mountains have long vanished, and the Divide is merely a slight rise in the desert scrubland, the sandy road running almost along the ridge. The world is all ours! The morning temperature is pleasantly cool, the light is soft, enticing, enhancing the flowers, the old corals, the occasional windmill, the remote Thorn Ranch. And nobody but us.

Then we see semis moving in the far dis-

Port of Antelope Wells, New Mexico, 2,915 miles after leaving the Port of Roosevelt, Montana.



Unlikely Siblings

The BMW R1150GS and F650GS Dakar.

This trip was ideal for BMW's *Gelände/Strasse* (Land/Road) motorcycles, the F650GS Dakar and the R1150GS. However, one would be hard put to find two more dissimilar machines. The 1150 I rode has an air/oil-cooled opposed-twin engine, six-speed tranny and shaft final drive; the 650 has a liquid-cooled single, five speeds and belt drive. The 1150 has a wheelbase of 59.4 inches, and a Telelever front end and Paralever single-sided rear swingarm, both with over 7 inches of travel. The 650 sports a conventional telescopic front fork, a conventional two-sided swingarm at the back, both with 8.3 inches of travel, and has a 58.6-inch wheelbase. The R1150GS also has ABS on the triple-disc brakes, which is not available on the two-disc 650 Mark owns.

For tires, I mounted the more rounded Metzeler Tourance variety, and Mark had the knobbier Metzeler Sahara Enduros. The biggest difference is in the bikes' weights, with the 1150 weighing a good 150 pounds more than the 430-pound 650.

The 1150 came with stock saddlebags and BMW tankbag. I strapped a duffel to the back seat to hold my camping gear. Mark had taken the aftermarket approach to equipping his 650 (except for the BMW engine-guard option). A pair of Jesse panniers carried much of his gear, along with a Wolfman seatbag, a pair of Aerostich tank panniers and an Ortlieb Dry Bag from the Aerostich RiderWearHouse catalog. A Touratech mounting system held his Garmin GPS.

It was good that both Mark and I are long-legged, as the 650 has a seat height of over 34 inches, and the 1150's is 33.8 inches. Ground clearance is good, and both bikes have skid plates. On the gravel roads both bikes were fine, but on the gnarlier, steeper, loose-rock roads, the lighter weight and more aggressive tires of the 650 had an advantage.

On the pavement I preferred the 1150.

Two sizes, one purpose, take your choice. CS



In the Deerlodge National Forest, at about 6,800 feet.

tance, and the Separ Road connects with Interstate 10. The good ride is over, but just for the record we will take the asphalt the last 70 miles south to the Antelope Wells border crossing—no town, just two little customs and immigration stations that exist out in the middle of the Sonoran Desert. I had actually logged 2,915 miles on my GS' odometer for the trip, what with my dashing around a bit.

We go back to Hachita, a village 45 miles back up the road with a café and a single low-octane gas pump. Mark is going one way, I'm going another. It was a good ride, a great ride, and I am really glad he asked me to come along.

In fact, I'm seriously thinking of going back and doing it south to north. **28**

*SOURCE: Anybody who wants to make such a ride should get a copy of Michael McCoy's *Cycling the Great Divide*, which is carried by Whitehorse Press (800-531-1133). That book, at \$14.95, is all you really need.*