

Press Junkets

SOME PEOPLE LIKE to travel. Some don't. And even among those who enjoy it, there are wildly varying definitions of what travel is, or should be.

Some prefer a kind of real-time travelogue, of watching through windows, or in a group being lead by a guide through foreign scenes. Call it leisure travel; stimulating but relaxing, served with full amenities.

Others prefer to immerse themselves in a kind of personal quest; some far flung route with little in the way of day-by-day necessities pre-planned. Unprotected contact and improvisation; rolling with the difficulties instead of resisting them. Call it adventure travel. And some would insist, the harder the route or more compressed the mission's timeline the better. Count me among them.

MCN readers tend to prefer adventure travel, if your mail is any clue. There are good reasons: Motorcyclists invariably experience travel as a continual "being there" rather than "going there." Exposed to the elements, we sense more deeply the texture, colors, sounds and smells as well as the sights. When we come to a stop, we are fully prepared to interact with others, as interacting is exactly what we've been doing all along. We were not, before opening a door, inside a lumbering temperature-controlled vehicle, distracted by daydreams or talking on the phone.

Riding is ultimately about relying on a sense of self-preservation to prevail. In a society that often seems bent on imagining that citizens can somehow be protected from any calamity if they'll only acquiesce to an all-knowing socialist nanny-state—entitled to sue if anything goes wrong—we choose to open our eyes to danger, call our own shots and take our own lumps. Living by our wits and sometimes dying with our boots on, we wouldn't have it any other way.

Press junkets are one of my favorite parts of this job; vivid punctuations to the hours hunched in front of a computer screen. They are job-related travel; part leisure, part adventure.

Manufacturers have very different styles when it comes to press events. Some arrange for you to ride their new machines relatively short distances, 150 miles or less, with maximum attention to stops, food and accommodations, and minimal detail in technical presentations: sort of a "feel good" approach.

My personal favorites include the most seriously technical presentations: hosted not only by the PR chief, but by the engineers who designed the machines as well, with engine cutaways, a wealth of charts and graphs and maybe even animated models.



In addition, the events' riding portion will try to duplicate a serious customer's anticipated real use of the machine, long-distances over demanding roads.

If the intro happens in a foreign country, that's even better, as far as I'm concerned. I've always loved to travel, and although I didn't get to do as much as I'd have liked when I was younger and raising children, I feel blessed to get the opportunity now.

Between MCN's May and June issues, a long drought of such travel has been filled to overflowing. At the beginning of the month, Yamaha flew a group of us to Santa Rosa in northern California to ride the new FZ1 over a variety of roads, highlighted by the stretch of PCH from San Rafael to Bodega Bay, a spectacularly scenic twisty road (not to mention a good test of suspension). That it was chilly and chose to rain most of that day didn't spoil the ride at all, even though I was fighting off a bad case of flu at the time (thus the bandanna over my face on the cover). Yamaha's technical presentations, under the leadership of Brad Bannister—an excellent rider and a real enthusiast first, and great PR guy besides—are now some of the very best we attend, which makes my job much easier.

And in the middle of the magazine's production cycle came BMW's trip to South Africa, 11 days altogether. The technical presentations were full-fledged, with all the chief engineers present and lots of engine cutaways. The riding was equally serious: on road and racetrack with the R1200S, a full day on the road with the F800S and ST, two aboard the K1200GT and two more on the new R1200GS Adventure, primarily in the dirt.

Besides providing summertime weather in April, South Africa has its own unique challenge, driving on the other side of the road, and you can't afford to get it wrong, regardless of jet lag. The Italians boycotted this event after one of their journalists got it tragically wrong earlier in the year in SA.

The need to have some control of the participants is done in a variety of way by different manufacturers. Liabilities are the obvious concern, although you always sign your life away before you throw a leg over every test bike. Some treat you as if you just graduated from a basic rider course and require you to ride behind a cautious leader, who points out every road hazard with an extended toe. Others expect you to be a good rider and know your own limits. BMW is one such, and tends to day-long banzai runs with stops every few hours for refreshment. The requisite photos en route, a very serious consideration especially for the full-color glossies, are best done by arranging for repeated passes in front of the photographer. These can take a lot of time.

Sometimes, we'd ride in a somewhat awkward large group, with hard acceleration to maintain distances ahead, and with a lot of accordion action, slowing too much on the corners—understandable but not ideal. My favorite day in South Africa was when I rode out of sync with the big group. Just out of Capetown in the morning, we'd come to Chapman's Peak Drive, a Big Sur-like winding road hugging a steep mountainside—my favorite stretch of the R1200GS into two years ago. When the group stopped for photos this time, the empty road ahead beckoned and I couldn't resist. And as our prescribed route followed the coastline and you couldn't get it wrong, the rest of the day I rode by myself, passing on the photo opportunities to ride alone, as an owner might actually do; keeping close to the speed limits and passing carefully.

Self-preservation remains my prime directive—especially on press events. The temptation to ride over your head is almost constant in a group composed of talented riders. The dirt section is where I had to draw the line. After the group had suffered dozens of minor mishaps and one totalled bike, but thankfully no injuries requiring the services of the helicopter medevac crew on standby, I said, "that's enough."

It's always your call to make.

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor