

Western States Ad

RAISING DUST IN THE

If there's one constant in adventure touring on a motorcycle, it would be to expect the unexpected. For this Southern California rider and his three East Coast friends, our week-long Western states adventure was, if anything, defined by the unexpected.



STORY AND

The crew (from left to right) Greg, Daniel, Bob and the author.

Top: Multitime AMA National Enduro Champion Mike Lafferty riding the trails near Mammoth Lakes, California.

Middle: Riding through Vasquez Rocks Natural Area Park. Bottom: Bodie, California.

Adventure

RUGGED SOUTHWEST.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN C. BECK



got the call that a small contingent of riders was planning to tow three KTM Adventures out West for some backcountry exploring. It was decided that Mammoth, California, would make a good meeting place. Routes were plotted, trailers rented, flights scheduled...and then all those plans were undone and reworked as each day materialized.

Mammoth is only about 400 miles from my home in Southern California, which afforded plenty of time for an unhurried ride on my KTM 950 Superenduro to the initial meeting place. With time on my side, I visited a few spots along the way such as Vasquez Rocks. A truly unusual park, these rock formations have appeared in many movies and television shows.

Leaving Vasquez Rocks, I followed the baked Highway 14, which passes directly through the Mojave Desert and the amazing landscapes of Red Rock Canyon State Park, and eventually empties onto Highway 395. I barreled down the parched highway with the radiator fan desperately trying to cool the engine, and saw signs reading "Death Valley" poking out of the waterless ground. Then, when approaching Lone Pine I felt a cool breeze, the valley turned green and Diaz Lake Recreation Area appeared on the horizon. Part of what makes rides like this so enjoyable is the sheer contrast you can experience in the space of just a few hours.

Along this same stretch of highway is the infamous Manzanar War Relocation Center. In 1942 thousands of Japanese-Americans were transferred to this facility. Many of the original foundations remain visible, and nearly all of the original building locations are marked. Origami remembrances, coin offerings and other recent mementos are placed throughout the Manzanar graveyard by visitors. It's a sobering experience to realize people were interred here as recently as 1945. Leaving Manzanar, I continue along Highway 395 past some very interesting abandoned architecture—still standing in the harsh desert landscape, a testament to unfulfilled ambition, perhaps.

A short distance up the road from Manzanar is the town of Bishop. While the largest city in the Owens River Valley, it still retains a small-town feel and is surrounded by both fantastic fishing and majestic vistas of the Eastern Sierras and Mount Whitney, the tallest mountain in the lower 48 states. Stopping for a quick lunch here, the heat apparently was too much for what I would later discover was a pinched fuel tank vent line. Sitting in a small café I looked out just in time to see fuel spraying from overflow tubes in a flammable fountain! Some minor parking lot moto-surgery followed and in short order, all was well.

Following the stop in Bishop, it was onward up the 395 to Mammoth where a KTM Rally was already in full swing. I joined in on a group ride that was being led by none other than National Enduro Champion Mike Lafferty! The planned ride

Right: The author's steed parked in Yosemite Valley.
Below: Greg riding immediately following the "Wild West" incident.
Bottom: Buildings in Bodie still stand today in a state of "arrested decay."



would take the group through a trail that had just been used for a time trial two days prior. It proved to be a tough ride—the group went from 19 riders at the beginning down to six before it was over!

Exploration in this area is all but limitless, perfectly suited to the on/off-road adventure bikes we were riding. There's nothing quite like



Left: A tunnel connecting trails under Highway 395.

Below: Bob and Greg on the trails just outside of Mammoth, California.

Bottom: The current state of decay echos Bodie's turbulent past.

barreling down the highway, seeing a two-track road beckoning you to head for the hills—and being able to take it! Some of the trails and roads in this area even have tunnels to allow riders to get under the highway. A loop was devised on the computer, based both on past trails I'd ridden and intriguing black lines we saw on the screen. The only "goal" we set for ourselves was to be in the general vicinity of Lee Vining around noon for lunch at the Whoa Nellie Deli—a quirky restaurant/gas station with fantastic food and generally a handful of other riders there to swap stories with (author's recommendation: Try the fish tacos).

Before leaving this area the plan was to make a quick loop through Yosemite National Park before heading farther north. The Tioga Pass is just up the road from Mammoth, and serves as an entrance to Yosemite—arguably some of the most scenic countryside in the United States. Given the amount of traffic in the valley during the peak season, it was one of the most dangerous portions of our ride as well.

Both myself and another rider in our group had very close calls riding through the valley floor, which left us longing for more remote country. While we did later find empty countryside, it was hardly less dangerous. Leaving Yosemite, our planned route would take us through Bodie, a preserved ghost town. Made a State Historic Park in 1962, it now stands in a fascinating state of "arrested decay."

Perched in the barren hills just north of Mono Lake, in its day this was a famously dangerous place to both live and work. It's said a person was killed every day in this town!

Beyond Bodie, the trail led us through mountains containing some of the last remaining herds of wild horses in the United States. Though far from civilization, this proved to be perhaps the most dangerous portion of the trip as we had apparently wandered onto private land. Moreover, two out of the three GPS units being used for navigation inexplicably stopped functioning as soon as we entered this area, and the remaining third unit didn't have the necessary routes loaded. Blindly making our way through this territory, we were reduced to navigating based on nothing more than reading the terrain. As our group spread out to avoid riding in each other's dust, two cowboys on horseback literally sprang out of the hills and boxed in the last rider of our group. Being about a mile up the road, we had no idea what was taking place behind



and were simply waiting for the rider at the next corner. Holding him at gunpoint, threats such as, "We could leave your body here and no one would ever find it" were being bandied about, and there was little reason to doubt them. Through sheer tact, our rider was let go with a warning to "Never come back." This is truly the Wild West!

Aside from being some of the most remote country we traversed, this area was most likely the roughest. Obviously shaken from the gunslinger experience, our rider took off to catch up with the group and the terrain finally took its toll. The trail was littered with bowling-ball size rocks, and one of them deflected the front wheel just enough to send the bike one direction, and the rider straight over the bars. Just prior to us deciding to ride back and make sure everything was all right, in rolls our tail gunner. It was immediately apparent something had happened, as evidenced by



the cracked fairing and crash bars, which had been repositioned about 3 inches back from their intended mounting spots. After a break to recount the story and make a quick inventory of bike and body, we were fighting daylight and needed to get moving. The pavement was a welcome sight in the waning daylight, offering a fast track for us up to North Lake Tahoe, where we would stay that night and further evaluate our route for the following day.

Modern adventure touring is a far cry from what the original explorers of this area had to overcome. Aside from paved roads and convenience stores, even in the most remote areas technologies such as GPS allow most anyone with a little knowledge and a good set of batteries to find their way back to civilization. However, this ride was proving to be an object lesson that advances in technology do not negate the potential for true adventure in the modern world. Following a quick re-evaluation of the intended route, we headed for a trailhead just beyond Truckee. It was there we would again leave the pavement and follow portions of the Donner Party trail westward until reaching Gold Rush country.

Heading through Nevada City, California, our route eventually brought us to Auburn, where we would explore many of the dirt roads in the surrounding hills. Much of the landscape in this area has literally been reshaped by the quest for gold. Areas such as the Malakoff Diggings have been carved out by huge water cannons, leaving behind small canyons. Trees are left clinging to vertical cliff faces by a few roots where the ground beneath them has simply fallen away. Aside from the evidence in the geography itself, much of the equipment used in these massive operations still stands today. Some of the original water cannons are still in operation for educational and demonstration purposes, and gold mining operations continue in many spots to the present day. We had learned our lesson this week regarding wandering into private land, and were being extremely diligent about avoiding any staked gold claims!

After a half-day of exploring the backcountry, it was time for our group to finally split up. There were flights to be caught from San Francisco, and I had a long ride ahead of me back to Southern California. We said our good-byes, vowed to schedule other adventures soon, and then I headed over to Highway 101 for the scenic ride back home. Nine days and 2,111 miles later, I was back at my doorstep with a thick layer of dust, a few new scratches and stories to last a lifetime. 34

Top: Memorial in the graveyard at Manzanar, California.

Far right: Taking in the view of Yosemite Valley. Right: While long-since closed for business, you can still get a glimpse of the general store's contents in Bodie.

Bottom: Entering the back roads of California's Gold Country, you're treated to many vistas like this.

