

Six go to Sturgis

29th July - 12th August 2008

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FACTS: A YEARS PLANNING, 5,000 MILES, 15 DAYS, 8 STATES, 6 CHELSEA & FULHAM H.O.G. MEMBERS AND \$2 TO THE £.

It all started with Beaky. A colleague offered him - ergo his mates - the use of a ranch in Nemo, South Dakota USA, a town 20 miles south of Sturgis. The plan quickly developed. I would fly to Los Angeles and hook up with Conor McAnally, ride from LA to Denver to meet Richard Beake, David O'Flaherty, Andrew Papas and Paul Wiggins before journeying to the 68th annual Sturgis motorcycle rally then riding back to LA. Simplicity itself.

Los Angeles to Denver

Exiting LAX arrivals I find Conor talking as ever to complete strangers he's a people magnet; mostly nutters, but always makes time to chat and in this the antithesis of me. Extracting him from his new best friends it's straight off to Bartells' H-D to collect my rental. A stock black Street Glide which I ride to Conor's house and fit a water bottle holder to the bars - visual disaster but essential to have accessible water in the desert. After a late lunch in 'The Grove' and some power shopping (\$2 to £1) it's back to Mac's for beer and a mapfest.

I never sleep well before a trip, it's pre-ride excitement - no known cure, so I'm up and ready early. After some last minute packing decisions, which involve Mac rushing about getting increasingly hot and sweaty finding stuff, I wait by the bikes trying not to look impatient - not easy. We set off 7.30ish, Conor on his beloved 80,000 mile Road King, me on the rental, through the burbs of LA on Interstate 10, stopping for breakfast - pancakes and maple syrup - yum, at Penny's, West Covina. (West Covina, CA is the epicentre of a 5.4 earthquake 2 hours after we left - loud pipes on that Road King). Turning left and joining 62 at Desert Hot Springs and after 27 miles right onto Park Blvd we enter the Joshua Tree National Park. This lovely desert park is filled with a distinctive species of Yucca plant, some 15m tall and their form is supposed to represent the hand of Joshua pointing to heaven, and the most extraordinarily rock formations which remind us both of the Boulder Man in the underrated movie Galaxy Quest.

In Twentynine Palms we rejoin 62 and ride deeper into the Mojave Desert. You know the one - flat road in either direction disappearing to an unseen vanishing point and temperatures hitting 120°F - oh blessed water holder and H-D hydration vest! Meeting 95 we head north to Laughlin, Nevada, passing the occasional 4x4 trailing a boat, which seems weird in the desert until we cross the 'other' Colorado River, an oasis awash with boats and jet-skies. Our first overnight stop is Harrah's Laughlin, a faceless 24hr gambling hotel where, settled in my room, I discover all the liquids in my wash bag have exploded - superheated from the desert. We blag our way into a supposedly full restaurant with views over the Colorado, my fillet is the size of a £2 coin and Conor's crab legs extend beyond the tables edge - no pain there then.

A Casino at 7am is surely, culturally, one the most depressing places on this planet. Fluorescent faced punters pouring coins and credit cards into noisy lifeless machines. At breakfast I people watch - mostly old, sun dried people whose morning kick is to gamble whilst gorging, one waitress to take your order, another to take your bet. Desperate.

We hit the road northward for 85 miles to visit the Hoover Dam. It's big, I mean properly big with lovely Art Deco detailing and possible the most horrid visitors centre a mediocre architect could conceive. After marvelling at the many engineering achievements to construct the dam, it's south on 93 to Kingman Arizona for lunch and to 'do' Route 66. Following 66 and the fading, fantastically kitch motel signs to Williams the landscape slowly changes from desert to gently rolling green hills and trees we turn north on 64/180 to Grand Canyon for our overnight.

I know it's a big hole in the ground, I'm just surprised that it suddenly appears; unremarkable landscape and uninteresting trees, then - big hole. We arrive at dusk, pulling up outside Bright Angel Lodge & Cabins to check in. Whilst sorting the cabin and parting with the wonga an officious and plainly stupid Bell Boy decides he'll report our bikes to the police. Some words of encouragement regarding his future employment are shared before we ride the short distance to our cabin for the night. Buckey O'Neill's cabin is the oldest building on the South Canyon, 6 yards from the rim and we're staying in it, Conor (6'2") on the sofa and me (5' 11") in the enormous bed - nobody said life was fair (remember the crabs legs). Whilst pottering about on the Canyons rim before supper a Park Ranger let us observe, through his monocular, a juvenile California Condor sitting in a slightly scruffy teenage way on a branch down one of the canyons. We watch the sun go down whilst calling those we cherish to rub their noses in the vista they're not enjoying.

Woken at 5 by a coach load to orthodox Jewish kids chanting and chatting outside the cabin, we get up and witness the sun rise over the Canyon rim, the light and colours continually changing as the fauna, including my first Chipmunk, starts to come to life with the increase in temperature. Packed, we ride to Papillon Helicopters, book a flight and go for breakfast. Here's the thing... no amount of photographs and certainly no words I command can explain the experience of seeing the Grand Canyon as a Condor sees it - DIY. Usefully, I can tell you the Colorado's a river and it's red.

Back on the bikes we ride around the southern rim to Desert View, which gives us a real perspective of the Canyons breadth as California Condors circle, then south-east on 64 to Cameron and north on 89 through a parched desolate lunar landscape of large pink, cream and red mounds. East on 160 to Tuba City and Kayenta for lunch. Whilst parking up, a speed bump is so steep it takes Conor's bike stand clean off! Laying the Road King down, out with the Leatherman and after some suitable vocab, spring and stand restored. So just the ride to Colorado via Monument Valley and Mexican Hat this afternoon.

The 183 takes you through the red buttes of Monument Valley, feature of numerous Westerns by director John Ford and home to the Navajo Nation, some of whom have parked their trailers around the stacks. Very attractive. Just because you can doesn't mean you should. Past these extraordinary monoliths and onto Mexican Hat, Utah, where it's hotter than hell and the same colour. Into Colorado on 262, the landscape slowly changes

and the colours from the rust red and pinks, that have been the overwhelming tone of our trip so far, turn to yellows, beige's and, as we head north on 666 to Cortez, green.

Stopping in the Main Street Brewery - Cortez, evening starts to draw in as we sip some local brew and coffee - shall we find a place to stay in Cortez or continue and get few more miles under our belt and reduce the ride to Denver tomorrow? Back on the iron we crack on. The 145 becoming increasingly European in feel with tight bends and Riders Edge lines to follow, we sweep through Dolores into the forests of the San Juan Mountains and beside the Dolores River. After 45 miles into the mountains it's getting dark, cold and the critters are starting to appear, some of whom are on the large side. Pulling into a closed gas station on the edge of Rico and donning all our warm gear we agree the next hotel/motel is our destination. Passing the Rico Hotel Mountain Lodge, we carry on to the end of this small town to scope out any other establishments, none, u-turn and pull into the Rico Hotel carpark. The lobby is deserted but up some stairs we find a couple of girls chatting by a computer "where's reception", one replies, she "...hasn't had reception for 30 miles". "No, hotel reception". "Oh, see my Dad, he's in the kitchen". We trudge downstairs past the unoccupied leather sofas towards the restaurant where, behind a serving hatch a guy is lovingly manoeuvring with asbestos hands, food on a hot plate. They have rooms - great rooms at \$79 - tiny, with quilted beds that fit into all four corners and bathrooms that feature turn of the century porcelain and tin shower cubicles, wonderful. After the '30' rule (30 mins to unpack, wash and appear in the bar/restaurant) we sit down in the Argentine Grille. What a meal. Turns out 'Dad' owner/chef is Irishman Eamonn O'Hara, former executive sous chef at the famous Hotel Bel Air in Los Angeles. How lucky are we? The other customers are chatty and welcoming - mostly apologising for 'W'.

5am. Knock, knock on my door - "are you awake?" Well I am now! So into the Rockies and the Sawatch Range as the sun rises. Great roads and superb mountain scenery we blatt on, join 62 then 550 to Montrose and east on 50, what a blast. Stopping at Monarch Crest on the Great Divide, elevation 11,312ft, this point separates the two watersheds of America. Now, as we head east all the rivers flow towards the Atlantic Ocean, previously they drained to the Pacific. Dropping down to Poncha Springs the 24 takes us north, eventually we stop in Leadville for lunch. After a burger in Doc Holliday's where, on the 14th August 1884 Holliday shot Billy Allen over \$5, it's briefly on 91, then the remaining 90 miles on I70 to Mile-High City.

Our meeting point with the guys flying in to Denver is The Crystal Inn, Aurora, minutes from the airport and next door to Mile High Harley-Davidson. We arrive at the 'Inn' at five, dump the luggage and head back down the Interstate to a huge - huntin', fishin' n' shootin' - supermarket. Bass Pro-Shop is entirely devoted to killing stuff, or enabling you to get somewhere to kill stuff - all we want is a couple of roll-up beds. The 'ranch' in Nemo it transpired during the planning process was not as we imagined, a vast building with prairie disappearing into the distance, but a one storey house and garage in the woods - so we needed to buy bedding, camping - my favourite! Back at the hotel Richard 'Beaky', David 'DOF', Andrew 'Ewok' and Paul 'Wiggs' have arrived and are waiting in reception. After much manly (no longer than 3 seconds) hugging, a young lady loads us into a van and drops us off at Outback for steak, beer and cud chewing.

Denver to Nemo

Next morning, as soon as the doors open the guys are in the dealership organising their rides. While the endless paperwork is being sorted the opportunity for H-D shopping is not to be missed. Gloves, jackets, sunglasses and someone bought a pair of chaps (Wiggs eventually returned them as they were too large - he may have been distracted by the assistants magnificent personalities). Beaky's bikes, an olive Road King; DOF, a baby blue Road King; Ewok, a black Street Glide and Wiggs, a dark blue Ultra. Before being allowed to ride their rentals each had to prove their competence, once around the block. Conor and I have parked up out front and, as each in turn completes this gruelling test of skill, applaud loudly and award points, ala 'Strictly...', much to the bemusement of the other customers.

Bikes packed, we're off. Conor SatNavs us out of Denver on I25 towards Cheyenne, Wyoming. The I25 is arrow straight and the 100 miles to Cheyenne are hot, flat, brown, dull and dusty. I'm leading as we pass Cheyenne and turn off to join 85. Pulling up for water, a stretch and to discuss the route, we agree that it would probably be marginally more interesting to stay on the side roads rather than the Interstate. Travelling from LA our experience is you can maintain, with due caution, Interstate speeds on the roads less well travelled. We plough on through the grasslands - yawn - stopping in Torrington for lunch. Fill the iron and continuing north on 85, we overtake a pick-up accompanying a cluster of 10 bikes, I'm leading and pay no attention to the patches they wear, later the guys tell me they're Outlaws. Who knew? After 20 minutes the same 10 bikes hurtle past us, obviously miffed, across two solid middle lines, circa 100 mph, on the brow of a hill with their support vehicle. Neat. 20 minutes later we pass the stationary support vehicle and female driver deep in conversation with a Highway Police Officer regarding the ticket he's issuing. Nice.

Refilling in Newcastle the road and the scenery becomes more interesting and we're in our element. We've arrived in the Black Hills. Passing dozens of bikes, the black top increasingly twisty. I'm leading, with perhaps a touch too much exuberance, and completely miss our turn and in error arrive in Lead, South Dakota. Pulling over we sort out our route to Nemo and discuss what we perceive as a lack of motorcycle comradeship from the bikes we've been passing. We six waving like loons, you know the score, left hand down in the V-sign or a right boot out to signal empathy. Not a glimmer of mutual response - strange? Conor agrees to lead us to base camp with his SatNav. After 5 miles we pass the Nemo Road turning. Feeling a little sheepish as I'd missed our turning earlier, I pull alongside and suggest we should have turned off. SatNav say 'no'. We carry on, however it becomes clear we're not getting closer to our destination. Consult the map again and after a series of alternative directions Conor disappears down a dirt track into what looks like bear country convinced the SatNav has got it right. I'm not and, as his Road King is enveloped in a cloud of dust, ride off in the opposite direction finding the Nemo Road at the next junction and after a bit of tooting and froing the ranch - well Beaky, DOF, Ewok and I do. Thinking perhaps I'd been a little harsh abandoning Conor to the bears suggest we should go back a find him. Strangely this isn't met with a lot of enthusiasm (jet lag one presumes). So alone, back down the Nemo Road and after a couple of miles find Wiggs (who in true C&F form has stayed to mark the junction - for an hour) and Conor waiting for rescue. I sense a certain tension in the air and decide to stay on the bike, circling until they're ready to leave.

Arriving at the ranch again the owner, the lovely Christine, who has waited since 4pm for our arrival, it's now 7pm, has set up beds, supplied provisions and Budweisers - wonderful. Chris makes her excuses and leaves us to it. Having consumed a few Bud's we get to the tricky subject of the sleeping arrangements. The bedroom has an enormous bed, a single bed, a put-u-up and a piano squeezed into it. The sitting room & kitchen has floor space and a sofa. The Dining area has a single bed tucked into the corner. There is a vast garage which contains a Camaro and a cold concrete floor. Solution - draw straws. Outcome - Beaky the sofa, DOF dining room single bed, Ewok the kitchen floor - poor chap, Conor the other single bed, me the put-u-up and Wiggs the vast double bed!

Sturgis and Black Hills

I'm awoken by the sound of not so muffled chatter and emerge in time to see (Ewok had tuned the TV into the Hungarian GP) Massa's engine blow on the final lap - Huzzah! We breakfast at the Nemo Fire Station, a charitable event in support of the local fire department, then ride to Spearfish Canyon. Beautiful, but awash with frustratingly slow motorcyclists. In the land of the free, apparently all you need to ride a motorcycle is a car license and in some States pass the briefest of tests and away you go on 1550cc. Terrifying, but explains a great deal and they DON'T like being overtaken. Shame. Leaving Spearfish we drop down to the "Faces" - Mt. Rushmore, causing a bit of a stir with the other visitors, it's our accents and the 'Chelsea & Fulham, London England' vests we wear. After many posses for the tourists us, not the national monument we head for Crazy Horse.

The Crazy Horse Memorial, started in 1948 by sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski and Lakota Chief Henry Standing Bear, is a mountain that's slowly being dynamited to honour the culture, tradition and living heritage of North American Indians and like a lot of things in American staggering in scale. In a video presentation we learn all the "Faces" would easily fit in Crazy Horses head alone! Back on the road to Hill City one of my shift levers falls off. Trudging back to pick it off the road, dozens upon dozens of bikes roar past while Wiggs and Conor, who were behind me waiting. Conor, seeing all's well pulls out into the flow of bikes to go tell the others, unfortunately it happens to be in front of a 3 patch motorcyclist who regards Macs manoeuvre as a personal slight and decides to explain his perceived grievance at the next junction. Not nice. Hill City is a one horse town occupied by hundreds of Harley's. We stop to take pics and buy t-shirts, then back to base for barbecued steaks and iced beers on the deck with deer and wild turkeys for company.

Breakfast on the deck, the plan today - Badlands, Wall and Sturgis. As we head east on I50 then 44 after Rapid City it starts to drizzle, first bit of precipitation we've seen all tour, gas up and on with the wets. Needless to say within 20 miles the sun appears and it's getting hot as we stop for coffee at a bar in Scenic, who said the Americans don't have a sense of irony, DOF's as happy as a pig in the brown stuff. He's come to the States with 3 goals, one of which is to go into a seedy bar with a flickering neon sign. Tick. After sticking a signed C&F dollar over the bar it's back on the tarmac.

Over the years we've ridden thousands of miles together and take pleasure from riding in tight staggered formation, our pride was about to take a bit of a reality check. On the 31 miles to Interior we see coming towards us, at speed, a snake of Ultra's, two matching reds in the lead followed by 20 identical blacks - all no further than a bikes length behind the other - wonderful sight. We supposed later they were probably military for whom Harley-Davidson produce Patriot Special Editions.

To quote Frank Lloyd Wright "I was totally unprepared for that revelation called the Dakota Bad Lands". Badlands National Park is made up of flat grasslands, populated with Prairie Dogs sitting atop their colonies, mixed with the most extraordinary rock formations and canyons of varying colours, hues and textures. I hope the photographs give an impression of its supernatural quality and beauty. After a visit to a fossilised dinosaur site, we head west to Wall, home to the fascinating shopping emporium that is - Wall Drug. Thence to our raison d'être, Sturgis.

Sturgis is a small town, population 6,400ish, in South Dakota where for the past 68 years motorcyclist, predominately Harley-Davidsons, gather for the first full week in August, usually 500,000 of them! This year was no exception. We knew the score and had swatted up on the back roads into town avoiding the worst of the traffic and parking parallel to Main Street, in Sherman, we enter the crush. Now, I don't like rallies, just not my thing. Too many tattoos and too much testosterone and that's just the girls, most of whom seemed to have forgotten their clothes, but I knew Sturgis had to be experienced once.

Down the southern side of Main St. we stroll, trying to look as cool as 6 middle aged English/Irish guys can - that'll be not very then! Bikes are rammed in both sides of Main and chevron parked in the middle with beer halls and tattoo parlours now occupying the usual shops of Sturgis. Finishing our southern promenade we return up the northern side where t-shirt and pin stands bring our wallets out. In Beaky's case this means attaching a few of his dollars to a young ladies chest. We've always thought Beaky's a potential train wreck, that hasn't quite left the rails yet - surprising for a Nuclear Engineer. Would Sturgis provide the uncoupling mechanism? Onwards and DOF's back in the brown stuff. Tick. Road Kill Cafe. Yum! At each end of Main St. there's a metal staircase and for \$5 each you can ascend to view the throng. Because we're "so cute" according to the young (as in to be my daughter) girl in the booth, we all climb to the top for 5 bucks. What a view, thousand upon thousands of iron and chrome beasts. Sturgis, despite my misgivings is quite a sight. After a refreshing libation in one of the many beer halls we leave for a bar in Tombstone and people watch from the balcony as the sun sets. Back to base for more beer and a barbecue. What a great day.

Black Hills to Los Angeles

Today is going to be our last as a group. Conor and I are to start our journey back to LA but there's one 'must do' before we leave - Devils Tower. On 24 we pass the town of Aladdin, Wyoming, (pop 15, elevation 3,740ft) with a beer tent outside the General Store the population has increased by 1000% plus motorcycles. Devils Tower National Monument you see from a long way out, featured in the 1977 Spielberg film Close Encounters of the Third Kind, as it rises sharply out of gently rolling wooded hills and green prairie. The approach road takes you around 270° of this 1,267ft monolithic igneous intrusion and it's very impressive. In the car park we take lots of pics, say our farewells and after some more manly (remember - no longer than 3 seconds) hugs, Conor and I set off.

Heading south on 14 for 61 miles and lunch in Moorcroft before heading west on I90, passing Gillette on the edges of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands. Near Buffalo WY we join 16 into the beautiful mountains of Bighorn National Forest and enjoy 60 miles of great riding. This changes shortly after leaving the park as the landscape becomes featureless and only changes when we approach a river where the land is cultivated and green. At Worland we head north for 38 miles to Greybull then west again, our destination the historic town of Cody. Cody, as in William Frederick Cody "Buffalo Bill", is a traditional 'Western' town on the edge of the Absaroka Range. We've booked to stay in the Chamberlin Inn a charming family run hotel just off Sheridan Avenue the main street and after an excellent dinner at Wyoming's Rib & Chop House it's to bed. Big day tomorrow - Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.

Whilst breakfasting we book our hotel in Jackson before visiting the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. I don't get it, a celebration of killing and don't stay long, the road beckons. Passing Cody Old Trail Town on the right we ascend into the mountains to Buffalo Bill Reservoir and the Shoshone River. Stunning scenery and superb riding, what lucky people live in the hills above the reservoir? Rich ones, judging by house size and quantity of plate glass. Their view today however is not unspoilt, there's smoke on the water and as we ride alongside the river through the Shoshone National Forest the smoke becomes thicker - forest fires. Near Wapiti, the sound of firefighting Skycrane helicopters drown out the Harleys potato-potato. We watch in wonder as one descends amongst the trees, hovers just above the river, drops a snorkel into the fast flowing water and sucks up 2,500 gallons of water before ascending to help control the fires in the mountains. We ride on as another Skycrane hovers, awaiting its turn at the watering hole. It's hard to comprehend the skill and nerve of the pilots.

The smoke slowly clears as we reach the east entrance of Yellowstone National Park revealing this extraordinary place of natural beauty. Over the Sylvan Pass and past Eleanor Lake, I see my first live American Buffalo (Bison, for the pedant) in fact I see lots of them by Sylvan Lake. Wallowing, fighting, posing, getting it on, but mostly eating. They make a wonderful earthy sound as they move and have a lovely attitude when standing in the middle of the road at 6'6" tall and weighing 2,200 pounds. We walk over to a hot spring where they've been wallowing to get closer to these truly magnificent animals. Yup they're big and I love 'em. Naughty Americans for killing so many...

Back on our iron beasts we skirt Yellowstone Lake to Fishing Bridge where, after a coffee, we decide to follow the Yellowstone River north to Canyon Village and join the Grand

Loop Road around to Old Faithful. With the scenery becoming more extraordinary we stop at Mud Volcano (It's weird but I like the smell of sulphur and there's plenty to enjoy here) bubbling pools of mud and water are all around us, the rocks coloured with bright reds, oranges, yellows and greens. Having had our fill of rotten eggs we continue through the beautiful Hayden Valley to a lookout with views of the Lower Falls and at this point I think any traveller to Yellowstone starts to run out of superlatives and I'm no exception.

Lunch in Canyon Village and westward to the towns of Norris, passing Gibbon Falls on the Gibbon River to Madison before heading south along Firehole River to Old Faithful. Brilliant turquoise pools and increasing numbers of geysers, most of which are showing some form of activity ranging from small splutters to torrents of steam exploding to the surface, surround the Loop. Parking up we've just missed a 'show' so wait for the next performance on the empty seating that surrounds this most famous of geysers and after 50 minutes of being entertained by a Chipmunk, Old Faithful does its party piece. My expectation (friends will tell you I become a little testy if they are not met) is - a ground trembling roar, brimstone, a tower of water to the stratosphere, lightning obviously and perhaps a roll of thunder. What I get is a gentle display of bubbling water and steam, followed by a plume of water that slowly rises into the sky, sounding like a spring shower with the light breeze creating an earth bound cloud. Not what I expected, but lovely and calming. Sometimes you don't have to shout to be heard. Over Craig Pass, we turn south past West Thumb, then Lewis Lake and along the Lewis River, Yellowstone has one last memory for us. On the bridge across Crawfish Creek, poetically by Moose Falls, a small crowd has gathered. We stop and walk back and there by the creeks edge is a male Moose, a real live Moose with Moose antlers and everything. He promptly sits down, disappearing into the high foliage and starts to graze.

Through the south entrance down 89 and almost immediately into the Grand Teton National Park. An Osprey flies over our heads as we close in on the Teton Range, which are unlike any mountain range I've visited before. There are no foothill, just blocks of rock rising sharply 7,000 feet, seemingly straight out Jackson Lake, to nearly 14,000 feet above sea level and they're the most dramatic and beautiful mountains I've seen. Riding parallel to the range the sky darkens and briefly experience our first real rain all trip. We pass a small group of riders on the side of the road with a bike the wrong way up, phew - paramedic in attendance. Passing the National Elk Refuge we enter the film set that is Jackson. Our hotel is a large, slightly tired ski lodge, but the rooms are vast and after '30' we head helmet-less into town, legal but very weird. Beers in the Silver Dollar Bar, followed by a delicious supper in the grill. What a day. Visual overload.

Jedediah's on East Broadway for an excellent breakfast. I seriously over-order. South on 89 out of Jackson and over the rafter filled Snake River for the journey through the Rockies. Great ride, great scenery and lots of those classic red roofed barns you see on television. Briefly entering a corner of Idaho via Montpelier and passing the cobalt Bear Lake we take a right to Logan. I'd noticed at our last gas stop my rear tyre is as bald as a bald thing. With the SatNav we quickly find Saddleback Harley-Davidson and once we'd contacted Glen at Bartels' the tyre is replaced whilst we lunch across the road. Properly shod we join the I15, 34 miles south of Logan and crack on to Salt Lake City with the Great Salt Lake shimmering on our right. The traffic becomes increasingly heavy and we pull off at Provo, 45 miles south

of SLC, for fuel and ice. Conor nips out of sight behind an RV to enter a Conoco and I hear a high pitched squeal like a loose fan belt. The RV moves on and Mac's gassing up. Paid and we're ready for the next leg - Highway 50 "The loneliest road in America".

Conor engages gear, nothing. I look down and his drive belt is on the floor. After pushing the Road King off the pumps Conor calls H.O.G. Assistance. Meanwhile, a guy who's just filled up his car comes over to see if he can help, a Harley rider, he knows a H-D dealership just up the road in Lindon. He gives them a call and they're on their way. 30 minutes later a trailer arrives and the Road Kings loaded. H.O.G. Assist hasn't even answered the phone! Timpanogos Harley-Davidson is constructed out of material recycled from Geneva Steel, a closed plant from across the tracks, and it's 60,000 square feet of industrial chic. The guys in service are stars and straight on the case - diagnosis, other than a busted belt, a new front pulley is needed. Some anxious moments follow but parts have the part and, with some Irish blarney, Chad and Nick agree to stay after hours and fit the bits - excellent. In a yellow cab, driven by the most dangerous looking Hispanic you can imagine, with bad 'home made' tattoos, called Angel we search for accommodation. Hampton Inn - no rooms. Angel suggests LaQuinta, they're booked solid, but luckily for us have just had a cancellation. As we're getting ready for supper Chad calls - bad news the Road Kings off-side swing arm has broken clean through. This has suddenly moved from inconvenient to trip threatening. We walk to McGrath's Fish House and discuss what to do next. I offer my usual pragmatic advice. Dump the Road King for scrap, get the tins sent to LA and hire a bike for the rest of the trip. Harsh, but he takes it pretty well considering I'm suggesting killing his pride and joy.

PS: Never go to a McGrath's Fish House, they wouldn't know what to do with a fish if it came with a recipe under its gill.

Angel collects us the next morning and gives us a brief biography - lived in LA, did 10 year in 'pen' (must have been bad and explains the bad tattoos!), brothers dead from drugs, moved to Utah and now runs a cab business and mentors young offenders. At 9am we're in the basement of Timpanogos to inspect the damage, I think the pictures tell the story. Looks like Conor had been riding his Road King for about 4 years (another story) with only quarter of an inch of swing arm actually attached! Okay, into action. Mac starts the process of renting a bike, he'll resolve the Road King later.

While we await all the license and insurance stuff to go through a Orem Motorcycle Policeman arrives on his Road King. Once the sunglasses come off, Officer Dan Holdaway becomes human, he's a young man with braces on his teeth and we start chatting, get a demonstration of his speed gun and inspect his ride noticing the boards are wafer thin and the back of the frame is wearing away - discuss. Turns out he's the Utah demonstration team tutor and reveals he can 360° the Glide in 15 feet! We accept this, but I suspect a little doubt flickers across our faces. Dan disappears into the dealership to reappear 15 minutes later with one of those dainty little H-D bags, puts on his glasses and he's the law again, mounts up and starts to leave the car park. As we watch, he performs a perfect 360° as advertised, his boards showering sparks, gives us the briefest of smiles and disappears. Wow.

11.30am Conor has a black Street Glide and we're off. Back onto I15, off at junction 244 we head west on 6. Through the gold and silver mining town of Eureka, not quite a ghost town but click for a look. We stop in Delta for gas. Conor's fallen in love with the Street

Glide, talk about out of sight out of mind. Now we're on 6/50, mountains on the left, sand dunes on the right, then mountains & desert, dry lakes, dust swirls and the smell of desert sage. A pattern of riding develops, miles of straight road through flat desert, followed by gradient, gentle curves and switch-backs in the mountains to traverse a range. After passing a few signs "Do not pick up hitchhikers" we arrive in Ely, Nevada. There are only three roads into Ely, the 6, 50 and 93, it's home to Nevada's death row State Prison and Robert, not a young man and cashier of the Shell garage. "Hi, can you tell me if there's a gas station in Austin" (the next significant town, 147 miles west). "Don't know, never been there". With banjos ringing in my ears we set off on Highway 50 proper.

You really don't want to run out of fuel or water out here, the roads moniker is not a misnomer there is nothing but desert, dust and dried lakes. Apparently the American Automobile Association "...warn all motorists not to drive there unless they're confident of their survival skills". After 77 miles we ride through another Eureka which appears significantly more prosperous than the one we'd past 280 miles earlier. Over the Toiyabe Range into Austin for gas and the attendant gives me a sticker, "I survived HWY 50". Back on the iron we head for Fallon stopping in Cold Springs for a coffee passing soon after Sand Mountain, a designated site for off-roading, the road takes us across huge mud-flats where for 10 miles by the edge of the road names and slogans have been written with pebbles. Through Fallon, bizarrely a Naval Air Base in the desert, and 30 miles later as the sun starts to set we join I80 heading for Reno.

It's dark by the time we reach Reno and the main strip is closed, our arrival coincides with the 22nd Annual Hot Rod celebration. Consequently the congestion is awful but eventually we reach the valet section of a neon encased hotel - no room. One of the valets gives us a list of other hotels, we phone them all. No joy. We leave Reno, other than a missed opportunity to join in the oohing & aahing at the spectacular vehicles we're not sorry to be on our way - dump. At junction 201, before Floriston, we pull off I80 having seen no likely stop overs. It's getting cold and as we put on more layers "How you feeling?" "Good. You?". "Good. Let's crack on". I've got a hotel in Sacramento, California marked on my list of possible hotels on our route. Call, book, go. The 130 mile journey across the Sierra Nevada is unpleasant - dark, cold, busy with bad drivers and a bad surface, road works everywhere.

Le Rivage Hotel is a smart hotel on the banks of the Sacramento River. We rode 725 miles yesterday so it's a late start and we're going to take it easy today. After a delicious breakfast and massage Lauren, the concierge, not without difficulty finds us somewhere to stay in San Francisco. 45 miles on I80 and off at Cordelia Junction into slow moving traffic heading up the Napa Valley. North on 29 passing the town of Napa we enter the valley which, unsurprisingly is full of vineyards and heavily advertised wineries, into which the coaches and day trippers disappear. Through the exceedingly twee town of St Helena we stop in the nearly as twee Calistoga for a long lunch in Calistoga Inn & Brewery, tasting all the house brews, some delicious, most not. Further north on 128 and the road is a more interesting ride with much less tourist traffic, lots of vines but no wineries up here where the rolling hills are brown and bare and the valley floor carpeted in regiments of dark green and you can smell the hot earth. Trees line the road with the occasional faux Chateau glimpsed as the curves get more challenging, too soon we hit I101. South to Santa Rosa,

west on 12 to Sebastopol then north on the Pocket Canyon Road, a twisty amongst the Sequoias where we chase down a sports bike. Riding parallel to Russian River the sports bike turns right and we turn left onto Highway 1 over the river and out from behind Peaked Hill there it is. The Pacific Ocean. AWESOME.

The road is narrow and surprisingly challenging with sharp curves and dips descending to the waters edge but we're loving it, flowing down this beautiful coast road with shoals of rocks sticking out of the waters surface, bordered with cliffs, wind twisted trees and wooden houses. The evening is drawing in and the temperature has dropped so we stop to put on some warmer kit and take a photo of Muir Beach with the sun setting over the bay. Back on the bike my riding has completely changed and I'm riding like a prat, having a moment with a Merc on a corner. I calm down, sorry Conor, odd how a break can mess with your concentration. Joining 101 we cross Golden Gate Bridge at dusk and Mac leads us to The Stanford Court on Nob Hill, a smart hotel that's being refurbished so the room rate is good and the rooms state of the art. We take the concierges advice and, with an excellent view over the bay, enjoy oysters and scallops at McCormick & Kuleto's on Fisherman's Wharf.

From the moment I arrive in San Francisco I know it's my kind of town. What a great vibe. The famous trams take us up and down the Bullitt hills and I do some more power shopping whilst Mac lies in the sunshine calling his family. Late morning it's back over the bridge to the trendy town of Belvedere to enjoy excellent views of northern San Francisco. Before we leave Belvedere we stop at a Shell station, whilst I pay in the small wooden hut Conor moves my bike to allow a motorist to use the pump, before heading down the famous Pacific Coast Highway (PCH). There's a sea fog hanging over the ocean which occasionally creeps on land causing the temperature to vary considerably as we go, for the third time over the bridge and through the busy suburbs of San Francisco. The PCH stays just above sea level, the fog gets thicker and we don't get any views of the ocean making the journey rather dull, apart from the odd phalanx of brown pelicans disappearing into the gloom.

Turning off at Santa Cruz for a late lunch we park up outside a likely looking spot. I go to lock my bike. No keys. I quickly turn the ignition back on. The usual questions - where did I see them last? where have we stopped? checked all your pockets? What about at the Shell Garage, 90 miles back in Belvedere? As usual I'd left them on the seat but Mac had moved the bike. Stay Calm. Conor gets hold of the garage and speaks to the cashier "have any H-D keys been handed in". "No". "Please could you check the forecourt". While the cashier, we presume, wanders about the gas station I start to question Mr. McAnally about the whole moving the bike thing. He talks it through and suddenly a light bulb comes on. "Ahh... I didn't want to sit on the keys so I put them in my pocket". Keys appear. Arse! Lunch is now a much more pleasant prospect.

It's been warm and sunny while we've eaten but it is now cold and foggy back on the PCH and don't see anything of Monterey Bay. Never mind, we've got the fabled '17 mile drive' around Pebble Beach and Golf Course to look forward to. No we haven't. At the gated entrance we're told you are not allowed to ride around this famous peninsular on a motorbike! Hence no link, if you pardon the golfing pun, for them. Conor's incandescent and disappointed, being a keen golfer. Off to Carmel then. Carmel-By-the-Sea is just the

other side of pretentious and we hang out in the Carmel Valley Roasting Company aka Starbucks and, as it's late afternoon, we book a hotel on my list. It means going back up the coast but at least I've researched it and it's a lot cheaper than the hotels in Carmel. The air dank and heavy with mist we find The Sanctuary - Marina Dunes across the road from an RV park. Slightly concerned I've found a wrongun' a feeling not lessened when we go into reception, Mark who had taken our booking, is a young man who's plainly unfamiliar with deodorant and is as slippery as lounge lizard. Checked in we are taken by golf buggy to our rooms. They're, despite my misgivings, very comfortable with warm gas/log fires, right on the beach and we presume with wonderful views of the ocean. After dinner we retire to the warmth of the fires and the sounds of the ocean.

The fog is still coast bound and the ocean subdued as we saddle up cold and damp and what should be one of the most spectacular parts of our journey, including Big Sur, is disappointing. The fog only clears when we're up high and the sun warming so we stop for lunch in a restaurant that's at altitude and clinging to the cliff side - I also see my first wild hummingbird feeding. The fog starts to clear as we ride further south and we try to get into the architectural fantasy that is the Hearst Castle but all the tours are booked solid until late. Today is becoming slightly frustrating. It starts to get hot and we stop for a beer in a little seaside town and after warming ourselves on the boardwalk like cats we decide to ride onto Santa Barbara for the last night of our trip. After cruising up and down Santa Barbara's lush East Cabrillo Boulevard we find Fees Parker's DoubleTree Resort, it's just gone 6 as we enter reception and the charming receptionist offers us fabulous rooms at \$250 (rack rate \$750!) he also recommends the Brophy Bros Restaurant on the harbour for dinner. Great call, excellent supper and local beer sitting on the upper balcony watching the sun set.

The ride to LA is surprisingly dull considering the reputation of the PCH. Unfortunately, every square inch of this beautiful coastline has been developed obscuring any views of the ocean and in the short distances between towns the view is blocked by RV's parked nose to tail. Lovely. We get back to Conor's house in good time to take the holder off the bars, fill up and return the bike to Bartells' H-D. The staff are very friendly and don't cause a fuss over the mileage and happily refund the cost of the tyre. We go for a long lunch in Magnolia on Sunset & Vine and with a few beers reflect on the journey... the sights and experiences - architectural achievement, natural wonders and unreserved friendliness from the people we've met - but for me, as it always is, it's been about riding a Harley-Davidson Motorcycle with my mates. Sometimes riding for the sake of riding. Sometimes to get somewhere with purpose. But always to experience the solitude that the wind and just your hand on the throttle brings you, followed by the comradeship of those that have travelled the same road and to chat about the ride over coffee.

It's back to Macs to pack and he drops me, after some more manly hugs, at the airport. As I walk towards the plane, a side door opens and Paul McCartney & entourage follow me onto the aircraft. We go our separate ways as we're welcomed by the flight attendants. Sir Paul, sans Heather, to count what's left of his money in first class and me somewhat further back to count my memories.

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