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Riding the Golden Gate Bridge on a Harley has to be the perfect end to a perfect trip.

HAPPY HARLEY DAYS

To be honest, the idea of riding on a strange bike, across a foreign land, with a group of strangers had never held great appeal for me. After all, a good blast across Europe on my own bike, with a group of mates, has always satisfied my two-wheel wanderlust. But things change. For me it was actually two things, in the last couple of years, that convinced me to give a group Harley riding holiday in California a try.

The first prompt was extremely pleasant. I was lucky enough to be invited on a Triumph launch in Santa Barbara, and those few short days convinced me I wanted to see more of California, but next time with my pillion of almost 40 years, Julie, aboard. And the second, much less pleasant, was a health thing that made me realise I may not be immortal so, if we were going to do all these things we had talked about, we best get our finger out.

It was while flicking through back issues of this very magazine that I spotted an old advert for Californian Motorcycle Tours. Research on the internet, followed by a few emails either way to

the friendly proprietor, Fred Brunn, and almost before I knew what had happened we had booked.

It's safe to say that Mrs Wheeler isn't a great flier and I suspect the prospect of Manchester to Atlanta, followed by the cross-country flight to San Diego – a total of 12 hours in the air – didn't excite her. But the time passed quickly and the supposedly bankrupt American company Delta Airlines provided great service.

After a good night's sleep in the very comfortable Humphrey's Half Moon Inn and a lazy day seeing the sights of San Diego, the time arrived to collect the Harley. I have to admit that leaving the Harley shop and weaving out into what was the San Diego rush hour tested even my experienced nerve a little. It had been some time since I had ridden a Milwaukee big twin, never mind 800lb of full dress Electra Glide. But, with all the bikes safely back at the hotel, we had the 'get to know you' dinner to look forward to.

Everyone seemed to loosen up quickly and, by the end of the evening and after a few glasses of wine, no one was short of conversation. I suspect I

wasn't the only one to be a little apprehensive about this aspect of the holiday. And to describe our bunch as diverse would definitely be an understatement. Fred leads as many of the tours as he can himself and always has a 'rear gunner' to make sure no one goes astray. Our backstop proved to be one of the highlights of the trip. Florida resident and retired dentist Tony Tesone had originally met Fred when riding on one of his tours as a paying customer. He enjoyed it so much and came back so many times he was now part of the team. Others from our side of the pond were computer whizz kid Jonathon Burg and, from Dublin, medical man Barry Teeling and his wife, Maeve. From the east coast of the US came Cary Lipman, who runs a chain of laundromats, travel agent Fernando Carbone and relative youngsters, both of them still in their twenties, computer programmer Erik and insurance fraud investigator Tracy Schneider, from New Jersey.

If our real life backgrounds made us a diverse lot then our riding only served to make us more so. We ranged in experience from Cary who, although



With everyone safely up the top of Fred's favourite 'shitty little road' the views made the effort well worthwhile for, left to right, Malc, Julie, Tracy, Erik, and our tour leader Fred.



The first photo stop of the morning and the mist is still burning off Big Bear Mountain in the distance.



The last of the storm clouds drift away over the aptly named Paradise Beach.

Sounds expensive?

Well, no, not really, not when you consider the whole package. We chose the seven-day Best of California tour, just one of several different tours, which starts from San Diego and ends in San Francisco. This cost \$3475 and \$1650 for the passenger plus the flights, which ran out at around £1000 for the both of us. It is possible to continue the loop and ride a total of 13 days ending back in San Diego – at additional cost, of course.

Insurance for the bike costs \$20-a-day with \$1000 excess, should the worst happen.

Apart from the flights and insurance, the headline price is totally inclusive. Californian Motorcycle Tours deliver what they promise, and you need not spend another buck. Hotels and motels are booked and paid for along the way, as are restaurants for evening dinner and lunch stops. Fred plans all the fuel stops and, believe me, it feels great rolling up to the pump and not having to get your wallet out. In fact the only things not covered are alcohol and souvenirs and, at the time of our trip, we had the advantage of a very favourable exchange rate.



It never rains in California, or so the song said. Julie, Barry and Maeve head for a late breakfast in the rain.

he had ridden quite a lot in the past, now rode only Main Street on a sunny day while he admired his chopped Harley in shop windows, through to Jonathon, who had lots of miles on various bikes under his belt. But the slightly worrying star turn had to be Barry. He confessed that, prior to landing in San Diego, he last rode on two wheels 30 years earlier, and that was a Honda 50! We needn't have worried; the bloke was obviously a natural. He launched his Electra Glide in blue each morning, a relaxed Maeve smiling on the pillion, with great style, and rode like a pro.

Our first day's riding set the scene for the whole week. Within minutes we were out of a relatively quiet Sunday morning San Diego and on sweeping back roads. Our end-of-day target was the ski resort of Lake Arrowhead, 8000ft up in the San Bernadino Mountains. Fred's wife, Corinne, on her Ducati Monster, joined us for the first morning before turning back after lunch to prepare for her day job the next morning.

Any concerns I might have had about riding in a group of strangers were quickly dispelled as we settled into almost perfect formation. And, when we reached the first 'twisties', as Fred calls them, those of us who wanted to go a little quicker dropped in behind Fred and dragged the footboards, with shotgun Tony rounding up everyone else like a faithful sheepdog.

That first day felt much longer, but for all the right reasons. By the time we reached our log cabin motel at Sleepy Hollow, with just 150 miles under our belts, it's safe to say we all had a warm glow, and it wasn't just from the heat. Conversation at dinner was easy, something you'll understand if you've shared a great ride with friends, and amazingly, within just 24 hours we had all become friends. The scenery had been stunning and it just went on and on. Looking back, I guess this was one of the lasting memories: the rugged beauty was

endless, and around every corner was a new vista even more stunning than the last.

After a hearty breakfast – and, boy, do they know how to do breakfast that side of the pond – we set off towards the second night's destination – the legendary Venice Beach. Food and comfort stops play a large part in this holiday but, contrary to most people's preconceptions about American food, it isn't all junk, or massive in size for that matter. Of course, Fred's local knowledge plays a big part here. Every restaurant, either at the lunch stop or evening meal, was different; all had character; and all the food was great.

Riding back down past Lake Gregory and Silverwood Lake, we crossed the Cajon Junction and threaded our way into the San Gabriel Mountains. If day one had been spectacular, the ride along the Angeles Highway, which took us to Tujunga Canyon, was breathtaking. From the San Fernando Valley we headed to the Pacific Ocean, Santa Monica and then Venice Beach. And what an experience Venice Beach proved to be! It's a mad place, stuck largely in the hippy years, and many of the regular population are clearly equally mad. But what an experience and, even knowing that some of the smiles might have been chemically enhanced, you would have to go a long way to find a happier population.

Our smiles faded a little too early the next morning. Struggling to find the loo, I twigged something was wrong. A quick check in the corridor confirmed it wasn't just us without lights. We had apparently caught the edge of a tropical storm during the night and it had put the electricity out across a few blocks. And it was still raining. Safe to say we didn't go to California for rain, but to be fair it was the first they had seen in that neck of the woods for five months. A delayed start allowed the brave – Erik, Tracy, Julie and me – to visit the local Harley shop and stock up on T-shirts.



This Venice Beach snake charmer is a good example of the colourful scene that makes the area a must for any tourist to visit.



The stunning scenery just goes on and on.

Needless to say, ours were the only bikes parked on the shop's forecourt, and the guys at Bartel's Harley-Davidson thought we were really strange coming out in the rain – until they spotted my English accent, that is.

The delayed start wasn't really a problem: we had only a gentle, 111-mile cruise up the Pacific Coast to Santa Barbara. The contrast in scenery, from two days largely at some altitude, was amazing, yet equally spectacular. At times it was a challenge to keep at least one eye on the snaking road, such as the pull of the ocean to our left. A late lunch at the aptly named Paradise Beach Cafe, while the waves gently lapped just feet away, proved to be heaven for the seafood lovers in the party.

Arriving in Santa Barbara, it was good to find the memories of my previous visit weren't rose-tinted. Santa Barbara is a great town, very clean, with very friendly locals, and just enough 'characters' to make it interesting. And Fred's choice of motel and restaurant was the best of the tour. For a man who previously wouldn't have picked such a noisy restaurant as first choice, it was one meal I wouldn't have wanted to miss. In fact, we decided we could easily have spent a week there.

Next morning we cut inland through the Los Padres National Forest. A coffee stop in the Danish town of Solvang, with its quaint buildings, inviting patisseries and souvenir shops, was compulsory. From that morning on I was the brunt of Tony's cowboy jokes, thanks to being unable to resist a decorative cowboy belt.

After some more of Fred's great twisties back in the mountains, we headed back towards the coast and Highway One at Pismo Beach and on through a foggy Morro Bay to Cambria. Tourist attraction and nature reserve Morro Rock, a volcanic outcrop that juts 576ft from the sea, was almost hidden from view by the fog. Amazingly, rock to



Highway 1 snakes its way around Big Sur.

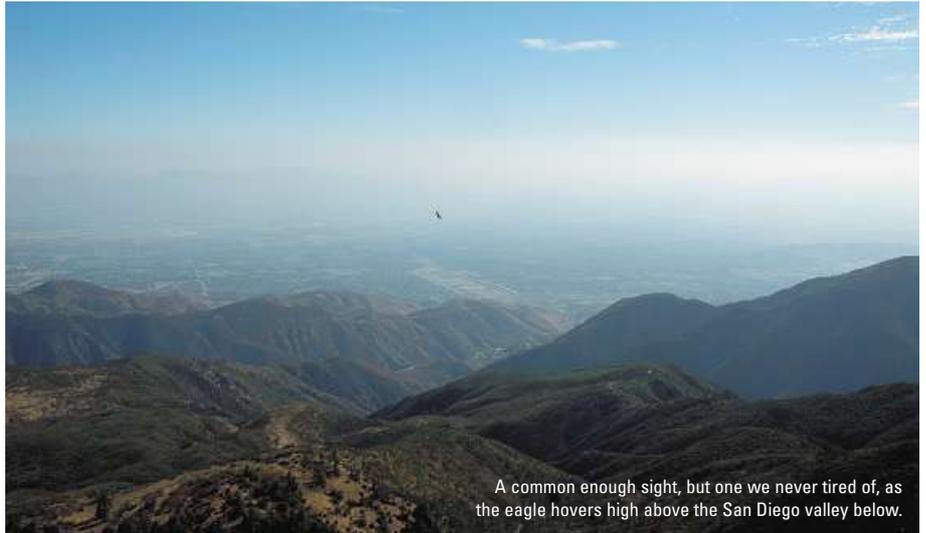
What do I need?

Apart from the obvious, as little as possible is the short answer. We chose Davida open face helmets – and perfect for the conditions they were, too. But, if you are used to the enclosed, full face feel, a lift-front job could do the trick. We rode in jeans, T-shirts and leather jackets, very lightweight gloves, and walking-style boots. On one early-morning start, with my cockpit temperature gauge reading 45 degrees, I could have done with more layers on but, by the same token, with the dial over 100 degrees, probably a true 90, the day earlier I rode without my jacket, something I had never done before in 41 years' motorcycling.

Tour organiser Fred helpfully provides a travel light packing list, but still we took too much. Bear in mind you have to carry on the bike all your own kit. Even with the giant 'Glide top box and two panniers, things got tight as the week progressed, but we were buying new souvenir T-shirts every time the Harley wheels stopped turning. Oh, and don't forget your driver's licence and your camera.

What can I ride?

The whole Harley-Davidson range is available, and Buell as well. They all come with soft luggage, except the Electra Glide, which is what Californian Motorcycle Tours recommend for all two-up riding. It has a topbox you could live in and good hard panniers. Sportsters are slightly cheaper to rent than the big twins but a lot less comfortable. For the type of riding you will be doing the Harleys are perfect. And no, not all American roads are straight; in fact, when you ride with Fred, very few are. Californian Motorcycle Tours can be found at www.californiamotorcycletours.com



A common enough sight, but one we never tired of, as the eagle hovers high above the San Diego valley below.



There aren't many straight roads in the magnificent San Gabriel Mountains.

make breakwaters all along the coast had been blasted from this great piece of history for almost 100 years, with the process stopping only in 1969.

The coffee stop in Morro caused quite a stir with the locals. Within a few minutes of our stopping, the gleaming Harleys had drawn a small crowd, much as they did at every stop, and breaking off an interesting conversation to hit the road always proved difficult.

We had a layover day in the former mercury-mining town of Cambria and, once again, what a great call this proved to be. Each time we rolled into our overnight stay, Barry's first quest was to find the best bar in town. He is an Irish rugby player, after all, and, eh, riding a big heavy Harley in 80 degrees is thirsty work. Well, in Cambria he found us a gem. It was like something time forgot – not built for tourists but, I suspect, pretty much as the miners left it. I ordered a whisky and it came skimming down the bar just like on the cowboy movies. If the local gunfighter had swaggered in with a pair of pearl-handled six-guns on his hips I wouldn't have been surprised.

But we didn't just waste our layover day in a bar, however good it might have been. In the morning

Fred took those of us who wanted more riding up what he described as 'a shitty little road with great views'. He wasn't wrong on either count. Even the very experienced riders among us had a moment or two on loose-gravelled hairpin bends aboard Electra Glides. But it was well worth it for the unbelievable views. At one time a giant eagle flew alongside us for several minutes while hovering over the valley floor hundreds of feet below.

We had planned to visit the local, world famous, vineyards in the afternoon, but not quite in the style Barry clearly had in mind. You can probably imagine how the rest of the day panned out, as eight of us climbed into the pearl white stretch limo, with its built-in cocktail bar, to visit three Paso Robles wineries. No one was early for breakfast next day.

The temperature the next morning was a shock. Just the day before my Harley 'outside' temperature gauge had climbed past 100; now it struggled to get past 40 degrees. Within an hour things had warmed up, thankfully. Our ultimate destination was Monterey, but this day's ride was one of those you never want to end.

If you only ever ride one piece of road in the US

then make it Highway One from Cambria to Monterey. The views are breathtaking, as are the curves that cling to the cliff face. A coffee stop at Big Sur to watch the whales was made all the more memorable by the religious nut who sang hymns and constantly asked Satan to get behind him, all while painstakingly producing what turned out to be a great mug of hot chocolate.

High above the ocean, with just the ever-so-slightly unstable cliff face on our right, and a brisk wind, it's safe to say more than a couple of the party had a nervous moment or two. We arrived early enough at our motel in Monterey to allow Fred to guide Erik, Tracy, Julie and me on the short ride to Laguna Seca Raceway. With a classic car event taking place the next day, the gates were open and we got to see the infamous Cork Screw first-hand. Back in town it was down to the Fisherman's Wharf, once the home of a large whaling fleet but now paradise for our seafood fans.

The majority of us now had only 125 miles to go to our journey's end, with only Jonathon, Tony and Fred doing the return leg, and our mood was a little subdued. But the scenic, if a little blustery ride along Highway One around Monterey Bay and through Santa Cruz soon lifted our spirits.

And no one can ever forget that first sight of the legendary Golden Gate Bridge. Riding over on a Harley has to be the ultimate way to see it. San Francisco is an incredible city and, after threading through the busy streets, none of which are on the level, we arrived at our final motel, which was right on Fisherman's Wharf. The week, and 1000 miles, had slipped by all too quickly.

After one last day of sightseeing, more great food and a final frenzy of T-shirt buying, it was time to say sad goodbyes and head for our various flights home. It's safe to say that long-time friendships were forged in those few short days of Harley-riding pleasure, and it's also a good bet some of us will meet up on a reunion tour at some time in the not-too-distant future. I, for one, can't wait to get back. **MSL**