

BigCountry

WORDS: MALC WHEELER PICS: JULIE WHEELER

Regular Transatlantic traveller Malc Wheeler thought he had ridden all the good roads there were to ride in California. That was until he tried the Sierra Nevada Mountains for size.

It had been a long, but spectacular, day. If you've ridden anywhere in the USA, especially in the west, you'll know the spectacular bigness of the place. The ride, all 230-plus miles of it, in temperatures topping 90 degrees, that got us into, and through Kings Canyon had been mind blowing.

Having ridden some great roads in two previous west coast tours with the same tour company, California Motorcycle Tours, Julie and I had an idea what to expect from this 10-day jaunt. What we didn't anticipate was just how incredible each vista, around each bend, would be. Nor did we anticipate our lodgings for that night.

Our tour leader, Fred Brunn, who just happens to own the company but rides up front on almost all his tours, described Kings Canyon Lodge as rustic. Our 'cabin' made my potting shed back home seem an inviting place to spend the night. The rest of our party, Brian and Traci Salisbury from England, Tomoyuki Yoshihara, who quickly became Tommy, from Japan, and our sweeper Larry Adair, in real life a San Diego canine cop shared a floor above the main building.

Dinner was equally interesting, 'must be ordered before six, no drinking on the porch, and the bar closes at seven', set the scene for an evening just as strange. I for one was pleased Larry never travelled without his gun on his hip, once I had met our host for the night.

But this was an adventure holiday after all, we kept reminding ourselves, and by the time we had ridden farther down the valley; strangely no one minded an early start the next morning, for breakfast, the discomfort of the night before was turning into one of those in jokes. And thankfully this tour only had one Kings Canyon Lodge on the itinerary.

Our tour started, as most of CMT's tours do, in San Diego, one of the world's finest cities. The hotel of choice is Humphrey's Inn and Suites, which is situated on Shelter Island and has spectacular views of the bay and the lights of the city across it at night.

After two days of relaxing besides Humphrey's pool we are always ready to ride and on a typical San Diegan Sunday morning, with the temperature already reading 70 degrees by our 9am start we were all keen to get rolling.

Riding in a group of strangers can be an interesting experience; you are never really sure just how much riding your companions have done, but it was soon evident that this was a seasoned group.

The tour we chose this time looked the most challenging offered on the CMT website and was billed as only being suitable for experienced riders. A couple of days into the ride it was clear to see why. This tour company avoid freeways at all costs and really know the best back roads. And take it from me some of those back roads are pretty basic.





> Enjoying the ride, while taking in the views, called for maximum concentration with no barriers and a 2000ft drop.

Mountain man

Our ultimate destination was the Sierra Nevada Mountains, but just as Fred's roads aren't straight, neither are his routes. After a short run up the freeway we headed towards San Bernadino and once free of the Sunday morning traffic the roads just got better and better. To give you some idea of the scale of California and therefore a glimpse of the scope of what there is to see; San Bernadino County alone covers 20,155 square miles. That's larger than Vermont and New Hampshire combined.

The lunch stop came at Escondido. While CMT's itineraries promise a decent amount of miles, we topped 2100 on this 10-day tour, comfort stops also figure large. Escondido is clearly the place to be seen on a hot, sunny, Sunday, and let's face it most Sundays fit that description in California. While we sat in the shade of the veranda, enjoying lunch, we watched a steady stream of Harleys rumble by, along with a smattering of sports bikes.

Refreshed we headed for that night's stopover just above Lake Gregory. The ride around the Rim of the World Highway, which takes you to 4000ft above sea level, is worth the flight across the Atlantic on its own.

Smooth Tarmac makes for mile after mile of footboard scraping pleasure, while the stunning views back down the valley make you slow down enough to enjoy them.

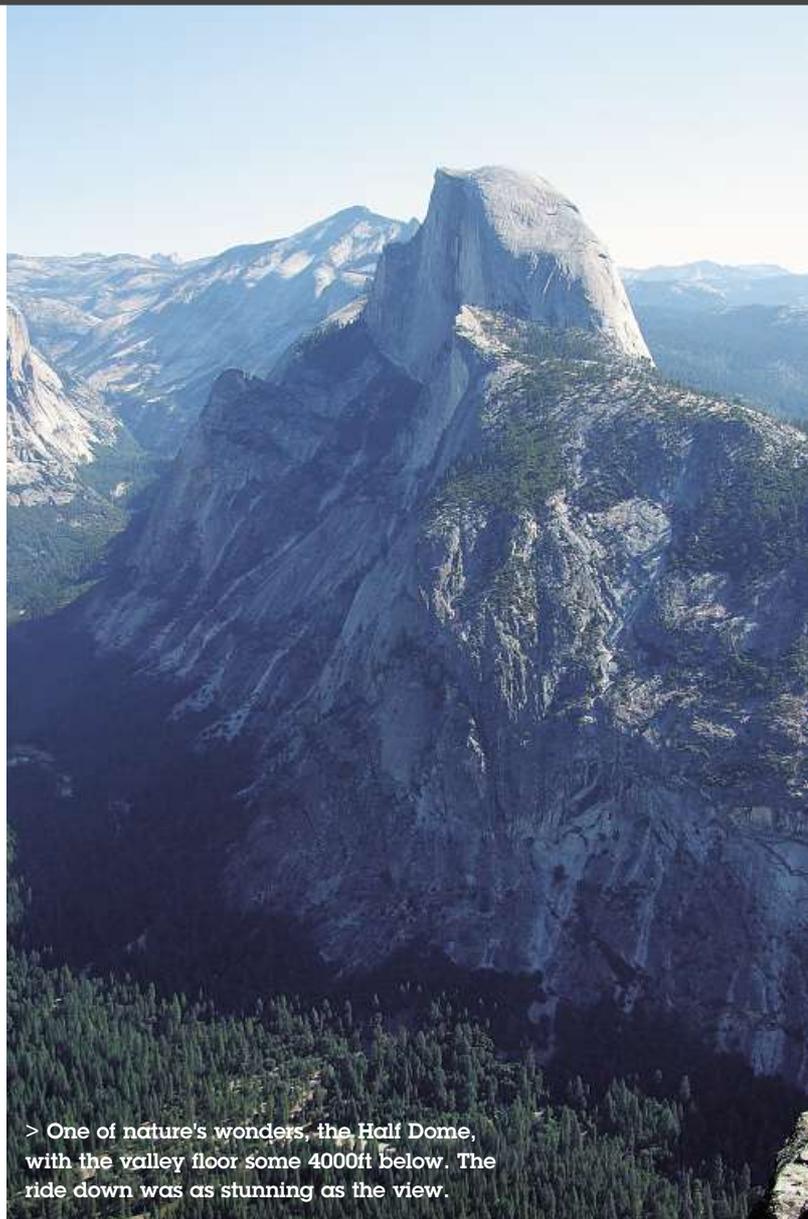
The log cabins at the quaintly named Sleepy Hollow provided a comfortable first night on the road and after a great meal and a glass or two of Californian red, what else, we all enjoyed an early night.

Desert and forest

After one of the worst summers back home anyone could remember it was surprising how quickly the Brits in the party started to complain about the heat. But even by local standards the early September weather we encountered was extreme.

The cockpit temperature gauge on my Electra Glide reading the top side of 100 degrees by the time we reached the valley floor and passed the Edwards Airforce base. We headed back down the mountain via what is known locally as the Spiral Staircase, what seemed like an endless series of downhill hairpins. By now it was easy to see why this tour is aimed at experienced riders only.

Skirting the Mojave Desert we made our way towards Kernville. One of Kern County's biggest claims to fame is the earthquake that struck in 1952. The other has to be the incredible roads. From Tehachapi, where we enjoyed lunch while trying to find some shade, right through to Kernville, the road bent and wiggled around the edge of the Sequoia National Forest, giving us a small



> One of nature's wonders, the Half Dome, with the valley floor some 4000ft below. The ride down was as stunning as the view.



> Above: Eight in the morning at Bridgeport Inn and the bikes all had ice on the seat, but by 10am it was up to 90 degrees!
 > Below: Great roads ensured that we weren't the only riders getting an early breakfast. Tommy, right, is helmeted up and raring to go, while Larry, centre, and Maic, left, take a more relaxed approach to starting the day.
 > Below right: The interesting road surface was just waiting to catch out the unwary.

Going it alone?

Why bother with organised tours? A question I've been asked on more than one occasion by motorcycling friends. Well, having tried both, for me the answer is simple, it makes life so much easier and you most definitely get to see parts of the USA that you would struggle to find alone.

We have ridden three of California Motorcycle Tours' routes now and, before you ask, paid for everyone with my own hard earned brass, and each has been very different in so many ways. From the Best of California, taking in famous Highway 1, which is a cruise by anyone's standards, through to our latest visit for the Peaks and Passes tour, which most definitely isn't for the less experienced or faint hearted, they all have one thing in common, unbelievably spectacular scenery and some of the twistiest roads on the planet.

CMT's package is all inclusive, with the exception of flights, and includes motorcycle hire, fuel, accommodation and food and drink. Only alcohol and souvenirs are extra. But the great appeal for me is not having to route plan; you are given a map each morning but I have yet to need to use it during the day, and being able to follow an experienced local who knows all the best roads and places to stay, Kings Canyon Lodge being an interesting exception, means you can enjoy the scenery along the way.



taste of what was in store the following day. What was the best, and hardest, day's riding so far lost none of its shine by our overnight at Kings Canyon Lodge. I guess it's the little quirks that make adventure holidays different.

With a liberal covering of sand on the inside of many of the tight second-gear corners some off road riding experience proved useful, with one long front wheel slide, caused when I clipped too tight into the apex, only saved by a hefty boot. No mean feat on 800lb of full-dress Harley!

From Kings Canyon we headed towards Oakhurst, again winding and twisting our way out of the National Park. A faint smell of burning wood and a haze of smoke in the distance was a grim reminder of just how fragile the environment in the area is. We climbed through mile after mile of charred trees, looking like something from a horror movie, which were the stark remains of a fire five years earlier – yet beneath the stumps new greenery flourished as the forest regenerated itself.

After a comfortable night at Oakhurst, with a great evening meal, especially for the seafood lovers in the group, followed by a few drinks on the porch sharing tales of the day's ride, we headed off towards Bridgeport and the best day's riding of the tour. In fact one of the best day's riding I've had in 44-years of motorcycling.

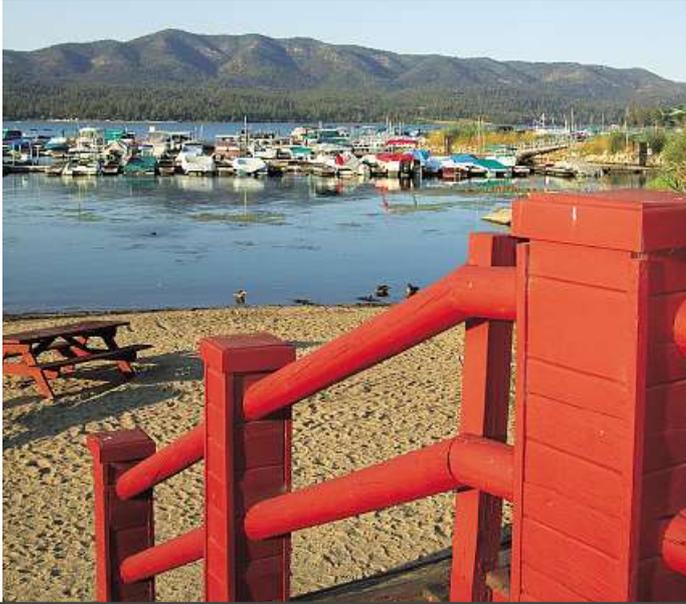
What do I need to know?

Even if you've never ridden stateside before it shouldn't be a problem, another advantage of following a local is that you soon get the hang of the different ways of doing things.

To me it has never seemed strange riding or driving on the right and within a couple of miles I drop straight back into it. If it's your first foray to the US it's worth brushing up on the road signs, which make perfect sense when you get the hang of them and with local guidance from tour leader Fred and his sweeper at the rear, you'd be very unlucky to get into any trouble.

Being able to travel light is essential. There is no support vehicle on CMT's tours, although other operators do have a van and trailer bringing up the rear. If you are riding two-up you should have all the space you need with the Electra Glide luggage.

Being on the west coast of the US means that the weather is almost guaranteed, we only carry the most basic of wet weather gear; the sort that rolls up to make its own bum bag, and have only used it for one day in the last three, 10-day tours, although it can be chilly first thing in the morning and at altitude, so dress in layers and remove them as the day warms up.



- > Above: The sun slips behind the mountains as we enjoy the scenery at Big Bear Lake.
- > Right: The ravages of the last major forest fire are a stark reminder of the fragile environment, but already Mother Nature was throwing out new growth.
- > Below: Yes that is a road winding its way up the mountain, and yes, we have just ridden up it. The grin lasted all day.
- > Bottom: With the San Diego night skyline in the background new found friends head for a final dinner before the long journey home. Left to right, Malc, Julie, Brian, Fred, Tommy and Traci.



We enjoyed our overnight stop in Bridgeport, a real redneck town where you can buy your automatic pistol at the checkout alongside the chewing gum. Brian celebrated his 50th birthday the day we left Bridgeport and started the celebration with the best breakfast of the week, and ended it with a great dinner in the charming town of Mariposa after 250 very hot, but equally enjoyable miles.

As we headed, all too quickly, towards the end of our ride the most comfortable evening on the road was our last before checking our bikes back in at San Diego Harley-Davidson the following day.

The town of Big Bear is a ski resort in the winter, in fact almost unbelievably the ski enthusiasts would be arriving less than two months after we left. And we left with the temperature at 80 degrees. With log cabins nestling up to the shore of the lake we enjoyed another great evening reliving the day's ride.

With only a farewell dinner to enjoy in San Diego and the long flights home to contemplate, the last few miles into the city passed quickly. But, if previous experience is anything to go by, the memories will last a long, long time and new friendships, built on a common bond of a great motorcycle ride enjoyed together will last longer.

What can I ride?

California Motorcycle Tours use the local Harley-Davidson dealer's fleet, so you are sure of a late model, low mileage bike that has been well maintained. Other tour companies offer BMW tourers and the like.

The whole Harley range is available, but you have to keep in mind that you have to carry all your own gear for the 10-day ride. If you are travelling two-up then it has to be an Electra Glide. Solo riders have more choice, with most of the tourer range coming with ample panniers and space to tie in a tote bag.

If you've not ridden a Harley Tourer before don't be put off by the size and weight. They are well balanced and carry their weight low down. However, it may be a good idea to rent the same model; most UK based Harley-Davidson dealers offer rentals, and spend a day or two on familiar roads before crossing the Atlantic.

