

the great escape

ride of 2006

By Kirk Johnson

May is here and Jerry, a friend of mine, and I wanted to escape the Valley and get in some quality riding time. Jerry is a CPA and around the first of May finally brings him some freedom. After massaging income tax numbers for four months straight and not seeing sunlight, he said, "Let's put Phoenix in the mirror and make it disappear." My job was to come up with an acceptable route for the great escape.

While mapping a general route, I picked three geographical locations, making sure they were in cooler areas. Not knowing all of the touristy attractions along the way, I just drew out a route and estimated a timeline. This was about riding – not a destination – so I didn't circle any attractions or make any hotel reservations. I calculated that the ride would be about five days, four nights and roughly 2,000 miles. Plan B was just to add a day if

necessary. Very simple since I like easy and this was truly about enjoying the open road.

The three geographical locations selected were places that I have wanted to ride; the Coronado trail, the mountains in Southwest Colorado and a stretch of road in Southern Utah. Route mapped; now it is time to execute. A side note to those that want to take a ride like this: The perfect time of year for doing this is middle May. It is that time of year when the seasonal lodges are opening for the summer tourist season and the weather is great. We did not have a problem getting a room and were told that after Memorial Day there are problems getting a room, even during the middle of the week.

the southwest ride

Monday; One of the Best Driving Roads in the Nation

Monday, May 15, around 7:00 am, we headed east towards Safford, Ariz. and then to the south entrance of the Coronado Trail Scenic Byway. The route lies between Clifton and Alpine, Ariz., on US-191. This is a favorite of motorcyclists and driving enthusiasts, with many switchbacks, steep grades, and hairpin turns and is known as one of the best driving roads in the nation. This road trip goes past mining towns, the Blue River primitive area and the White Mountains. The "twisties" begin north of Clifton and mostly end at Hannagan Meadow. Beyond Hannagan, the curves are lazier and the road meanders through the forest the last few miles into Alpine, Ariz.

The town of Alpine is at an elevation of 8,050 feet, sits along a mountain meadow at the base of rocky peaks and was named by immigrant pioneer settlers after their beloved Alps. This was a great ride. One of the most mind blowing scenes along the way was not



of nature itself, but the great hole in the earth from Phelps Dodge. This mine was so deep and big I could not believe it. I wish I could share a picture with you but there was no place along the way to take any photos. From there we headed north through 10 mph corners and twisties as we climbed to over 9,000 feet and to cooler weather. Just before we got to Alpine, we had about 10 miles of cool rain. Finally about 3:00 we decided that we should make a decision on where to spend the night. At 6:00 we ended up in a little burg on I-40 called Chambers.

Tuesday; Canyon De Chelly, Echo Basin Ranch, Silverton and Ouray

Tuesday morning we headed east on I-40 to Exit 357 or Highway 12 and headed north again. This road was lined with rolling hills and small communities. I was told by Dan Bradshaw with Rally in the Rockies that this was a much better route than the shorter and busier Highway 191. He was right; this was a very nice relaxing route north to the Durango area. We headed north for about 20 – 30 miles then headed west to Highway 191, then north to the Canyon De Chelly National Monument.

We took the Canyon De Chelly National Monument route and we were very disappointed. The North Rim road was not paved and there was a construction stop along the way. While sitting for the construction delay, I was thinking how lucky we were it wasn't raining. This would be a nightmare to ride in if the dirt road was wet. Well, just as we were starting to move through the one-way section, we found ourselves behind a water truck soaking the road to minimize the dust. Bummer! Not only was it slippery and a pain to ride on but the bikes got really dirty.

Finally we got through that mess and head north to Mexican Water, then east to Durango. Just before Durango we stopped at Echo Basin Ranch to see the new site of Rally in the Rockies. This place looks great. It is about 7,800 feet in elevation. Great views of the Rockies that tower to over 11,000 feet. Can't wait for the rally during Labor Day, Aug. 30 – Sept. 4, 2006.

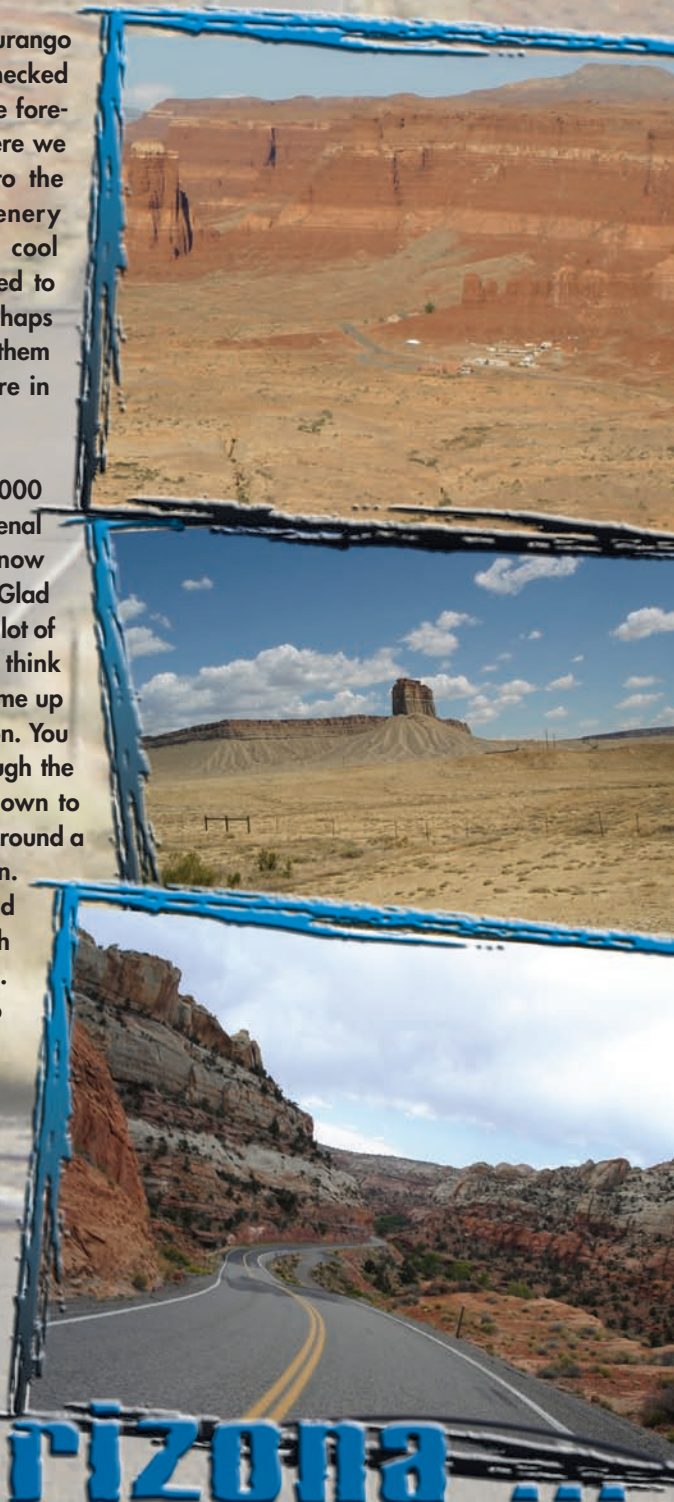
From there we headed to Durango and grabbed lunch and checked the weather. No rain in the forecast. Great news! From there we headed north on 550 into the Rockies. More great scenery and twisties. Climbing to cool weather, we were prepared to don the electric vests and chaps but ended up not needing them since the temperatures were in the 60s.

We climbed to above 11,000 feet and had some phenomenal views. We saw a lot of snow with some along the road. Glad it was late afternoon with a lot of sunshine. Then, when you think you have seen it all you come up on the little town of Silverton. You wind your way down through the valleys in the mountains down to about 9,300 feet. Then you round a corner and come to this town. What a stunning view and great ride. We rode though Silverton, but did not stop. We wanted to make it to Ouray to spend the night.

We wound around more mountains and passes to find our way to the great little village of Ouray. Along the way we had to stop many times to take pictures and take in the scenery. This is some of

the best riding I have done in a long time. From the majestic mountains to unbelievable waterfalls and streams we were treated to some of the best views the USA has to offer.

Finally, we found ourselves looking at one awe inspiring view of the city of Ouray. This little village is truly a gem in the Rockies nestled in the little



from arizona ...

...to utah and colorado...

valley around towering mountains. Unlike other mining towns, Ouray never experienced a large fire that consumed a large portion of the town. As a result, a significant number of 19th century commercial buildings remain in town adding to the looks of this quaint community. I remember back around 1990, I passed through this town heading south with the kids on vacation. I still remember the views of the city from over 15 years ago and at that time said that this is one town I wanted to visit. Here we are.

I do not know much about the history of Ouray but it is one kickass neat little town. We walked around the town then decided that we needed to take the bikes and ride around the town. As you can see by the pictures, it didn't take long but what a treat. We had a great meal and a couple of beers before heading to the motel for the night. You will definitely need a reservation during the tourist season.

Wednesday; Rugged Country Wonderland and Mind-Blowing Views

Wednesday we took off for more mountain riding. It was a relaxing ride down

the western slopes through Telluride and then down to Dolores. From there we headed west to Monticello on 491 then south on 191. We are now at Blanding, Utah. This is the section that I was not too sure of as I have never heard anything about this part of the country. From Blanding to Hanksville it is about 126 miles without any services. Jerry only has a 3.7-gallon fuel tank and he has been getting 30 - 35 mpg with a new 80 inch (freshly punched out and still breaking in) Porsche engine on the V-Rod. That equates to not quite enough gas, bummer. To get around this concern, he carried a 1-gallon plastic spare gas can on his luggage rack.

This was a 126-mile ride across some of the state's most rugged canyon country. We were totally awed mile after mile. It took us hours to cross this wonderland because of all the stopping and picture taking. This section of the road has not been around for long. It was completed in 1976 and offers great views of the Henry Mountains to the west, then winds through rugged canyon country before crossing Lake Powell at Hite Crossing. The road surface was excellent the entire route and the traffic very light. This has to be one of the most isolated and beautiful areas in the USA. I just thought the mountains were great, this was again mile after mile of mind-blowing views for the rider.

We spent the night at Hanksville. This is a small agricultural and mining community with just a few hundred people. All that night the only thing that we

could talk about was the great ride that we had that day. Totally unexpected. That is what made it really great.

Thursday; Spectacular Desert and Mountain Wilderness through Utah

The next day we were in for one more day of spectacular riding. For the next 140 miles we would pass through more of the truly spectacular desert and mountain wilderness areas in southern Utah as we headed to Bryce Canyon. All the time we were at an altitude of around 5,000 to 6,000 feet,





Flagstaff where we got in real late and spent the night.

summary

Rides like this is what living is all about! The Coronado Trail provided some of the greatest road in the nation. The mountains are fantastic, but the route 95, 24 and 12 through southern Utah was the best. It's as though this is a best kept secret. I have not talked to anyone that has gone through there before and I do not see a lot about this area in travel books. The only clue to this being an area that I wanted to visit is that it is marked as a scenic byway on the map. Make it a point to ride this area!

When Jerry and I leave for the Rally in the Rockies this fall, we are going back though southern Utah just to ride this area again. If you are going, let me know at kirk@phoenixbikers.com. We should make a run that way. For more pictures of this great escape ride, go to www.phoenixbikers.com, click on pictures and find "2,000-mile Trip May 2006." Coronado Trail, Colorado Rockies, Southern Utah. RUMBLE

Ride safe

Kirk

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making the riding temps in the 70s. How perfect is that? We did climb to around 9,000 feet several times going over several passes with many great views.

We got to Bryce Canyon National Park in the middle of the afternoon. We spent several hours in the park before heading south. This is my third visit to the park, so we did not spend a lot of time there. Just the same, it is also a great place to ride. From there we headed down through Fredonia, Ariz. then to Jacob Lake on the way to Marble Canyon, then south to

...and back again.