

Novice Harley rider overcomes jitters in the mountains



Riding through the Eastern Sierra.

Photo/Barbara Knox

By Brenda Knox

EASTERN SIERRA NEVADA – As we came to the sign that said five miles to go, I just kept thinking “keep it steady, we’re almost there.”

I never felt so much relief as when we exited. The rain had let up a bit as we got off the highway.

I took the lead since I knew where the Westin was. My dad and Roni later told me they thought we were never going to actually get to the hotel, since it’s about another three miles before you are actually in the town of Mammoth.

We had made it and now we had one of those stories. You know the kind that every time you’re with the people who went through it with you, you say “remember the time?”

Getting started

Lake Tahoe has been my recreational base for many years. It’s where I like to spend my time biking, hiking, skiing and kayaking. Early this summer it became our jumping off

point for our new hobby – riding our Harleys.

Weâ€™d planned the trip with my parents in the beginning of the summer. We were excited to hit the road for our first motorcycle road trip. My parents are in their late 60s and just started riding again in 2008 after a long hiatus.

My dad is an expert at handling his 2008 Screaming Eagle Anniversary Edition Ultra Glide. Heâ€™s been riding motorcycles since he was a teenager and introduced me to dirt bike riding when I was a teenager. He also was a motorcycle cop for several years.

My dad had coached Roni and me all summer. We put in some miles on our Harleys to get comfortable on the road. Our bikes are 2008 and 2009 Harley Sportsters 1200Cs. Roniâ€™s has the upgraded Screaming Eagle package, which means her pipes are louder than mine. Both are black with upgraded pegs, handgrips, windshields and engine guards.

I never took to the street as a teenager, so riding this cruiser is a new and challenging experience. Roni was also exposed to motorcycles and dirt bike riding as a teenager, and she spent a few years on a street bike in her 20s.

When we completed the motorcycle class in March to get our licenses, it was the first time either one of us had been on a motorcycle in 30 years. Needless to say, weâ€™re hooked and weâ€™re looking forward to this adventure.

Ready to ride

We packed up our bikes and headed out on an August Saturday about 9am under fairly cloudy skies from the usually sunny Lake Tahoe. Mistakenly we decided not to take our leather jackets, figuring we could layer appropriately with our mesh. How cold could it possibly get? Well, it was cold.

We stopped for breakfast in Markleeville. I love that ride

with its beautiful, sweeping curves, though Iâ€™m always keeping an eye out for wild turkeys along Highway 89 into Markleeville.

The Wolf Creek caf  served up excellent ham and eggs for breakfast. After eating and warming up we headed over Monitor Pass to Highway 395. Monitor has many curves, making you feel like you are riding to the top of the world.

The clouds continued to gather as we weaved down 395. Itâ€™s a beautiful ride through a canyon with the Walker River on the left.

A few drops of rain fell on us, but nothing serious. We stopped in Bridgeport to gas up, stretch our legs and take a restroom break. We also spent a significant amount of time wondering about the ominous clouds gathering over the Sierra.

The plan was to take the June Lake scenic route if the weather held.

The ride from Bridgeport to the June Lakes Loop includes a sweeping downhill that feels like you will end up in Mono Lake. Itâ€™s beautiful beyond words and pictures.

The wind picked up. My dad left us in the dust. His bike weighs about 1,000-plus pounds fully loaded and the wind does not affect him as much.

We decided to take the June Lake Loop. The sun was shining and it took us out of the more forceful wind of Highway 395. The loop is a gorgeous 14-mile stretch of two-lane road that takes you around Grant, Silver and June lakes.

Imagine steep granite walls to your right and the lakes on the left, mixed with beautiful pine trees and aspens. This was a great little side trip. Did I mention a bright sunny spot?

Mother Nature rules

We got back to Highway 395 heading south to Mammoth Lakes, with only 15 miles left. As we pull onto 395, three large bolts of lightning strike out to the southwest, the direction we are heading.

I remain optimistic for a couple of miles as I can see bright sunny holes in the clouds; it's the dark, rainy ones that I'm in denial about. Unfortunately, we were traveling faster than the storm and with 10 miles until the Mammoth turnoff, the skies opened up and we were in a driving rainstorm.

Being new riders, this was a nightmare for Roni and me. It was so bad, we could not see through our windshields. My face shield was completely covered with raindrops. I had on my fingerless gloves and the rain was pelting my exposed fingers felt like a really bad acupuncture session.

I know the best thing to do is to keep it steady, no sudden movements, no heavy shifting or breaking, and stay away from the painted lines on the highway. Knowing all this actually caused me to feel like I was cemented to the motorcycle, paralyzed in the exact position I was when it started pouring. This would not have been bad, except I could not see and needed to do something.

I slowly pried my left hand from around my grip and opened my face shield. Ah, yes, I can see (sort of) now.

Out of the rain

We rode up, looking like a bunch of drowned rats. Thankfully, they let us temporarily park the motorcycles under the entrance to get out of the rain. I could only laugh hysterically in relief.

Hot showers and baths all around and we felt like new people. We walked to dinner, and ate at the Base Camp Café. As usual for the Sierra, the weather improved tremendously, skies cleared. It felt good to stretch our legs.

At the Base Camp Café we sat outside and enjoyed a really good dinner. My parents had the French onion soup, touted as "made from scratch" on the menu and it was indeed yummy; a good portion with lots of cheese. My mom supplemented her soup with half a Mammoth veggie sandwich. It was at least 4-inches tall, full of fresh tasty peppers, cucumbers, sprouts, onion, tomatoes and lettuce. My dad ordered the special, the Rueben sandwich. It looked fantastic although I did not get a chance to taste it, but dad enjoyed it. Roni had the kosher chili dog and I had a bowl of the three bean and turkey chili; both tasty and hot after that cold rainy ride.

Oh, and I can't forget the local micro brew served at the Base Camp Café. I had the Amber Ale and Roni had the Hefeweizen; both excellent. After dinner, my dad and I walked the mile back to the Westin, and Roni and my mom took the free Mammoth shuttle.

After dinner, we were obsessed about the weather for Sunday. All Saturday eve, we watched the news, the Weather Channel, and I repeatedly checked my iPhone for the latest weather. Our plan was to go to Yosemite Village on Sunday, about 100 miles from Mammoth Lake.

Back in the saddle

None of us was up for a repeat rainstorm. We finally decided to go to bed and we'd see how things looked in the morning. Morning dawned with clear blue skies, and we headed off to Yosemite. Temperature was about 50 degrees and was not expected to be much above 60 for the day, so we bundled up under our light mesh jackets.

After a delicious breakfast of bagels, oatmeal and fresh fruit in the hotel at the Whitebark, we rode off about 9am, back north along 395 to the Highway 120 (Tioga Pass) turnoff. Before heading up the pass we stopped at the Mobile Gas Station where the famous Whoa Nellie Deli is located at the

bottom of Tioga Pass. We did not eat here as we had just had breakfast, but Iâ€™ve been here a couple of times in the summer and highly recommend the fish tacos.

After getting fuel, taking a restroom break, and adding another layer of clothing, we fired up the bikes and headed out.

Tioga Pass is the most beautiful and dramatic entrance into Yosemite. Itâ€™s also an incredible climb – climbing up what feels like the side of a cliff. At least going up we are riding on the inside, not on the non-guard rail outside (that would be at the end of the day); 12 miles up and weâ€™re at the entrance to Yosemite.

My parents buy a lifetime pass for \$10, which also gets in four motorcycles.

I think one of the best ways to see Yosemite is by motorcycle. You become a part of the vastness, the beauty, you feel small in a way that is only accomplished when you are exposed to the elements.

Earlier in the summer I enjoyed the drive through Yosemite a couple of times in my SUV, but it is so much better on the motorcycle. We cruised through Tuolumne Meadows and then stopped at Tenaya Lake to stretch our legs and take pictures.

We watched the climbers go up the rock faces; all exclaiming thatâ€™s something we never want to do.

As we headed out along 120 toward Yosemite Village, Half Dome came into view. We decided not to stop at Olmstead Point as we still had a ways to go to the village.

It was imperative to keep my eyes on the road during this section, but I could not get enough of Half Dome and the surrounding peaks of Yosemite. Thank goodness the terrain becomes a little more mundane along Highway 120 after that and

I was able to just ride and concentrate on all the curves.

At this point I need to mention that I was the slow poke. My dad being a very experienced rider just sailed around all the curves. I was more tentative and just could not seem to find my groove, especially around the right-handed corners. But I persevered and rode on, probably driving Roni crazy, as she was riding behind me. Although Roni seems to abhor our recreational activities that require us to perform under our own power, she rides her iron horse with a confidence and agility that I envy.

The final 15 miles into Yosemite are steep, full of curves and spectacular views. At the top before the big descent is also where the recent fire burned up to the road. The smell of smoke is prevalent and invasive. It felt like a punch in the gut and brought back memories of South Lake Tahoe's Angora Fire of 2007.

We waved to a crew of firefighters still tending to some of the hotspots.

Down we went in to the valley. I took the 25mph speed signs at face value; although my dad insists you can go at least 40-45 around those curves. I obviously saw more of the gorgeous scenery than he did.

There is a tunnel that is quite long on this stretch of road. It was a little scary. The motorcycle headlight does not throw off a huge amount of light. With my full helmet and sunglasses on, I could barely see as I went through the middle of the tunnel. I just kept looking toward that small bit of light at the end hoping the tunnel did not have any of those 25mph curves.

Out on the other side we continued to descend into Yosemite Valley.

After finding parking, we ordered lunch at the outside grill,

the food was fresh, pretty good and quite fast. I enjoyed the sweet potato fries served with my veggie burger. We had wanted to go to the Ahwahnee, but it was crowded and we could not find parking. The temperature was warm and mild on the valley floor, we were able to shed our multiple layers, and jackets during lunch. Shirtsleeves would have been my preferred outfit all weekend, but it was not to be.

After lunch, we decided we better head back to Mammoth, we had a 100-mile return trip and it was getting late. You don't necessarily get to places fast on the motorcycle, but it sure is scenic and fun. We geared up – multiple layers, multiple gloves for me, and off we rode, up out of the valley into the cool temperatures of Tuolumne Meadows. We took our last break of the day here.

We boosted our energy level by sharing a couple of bags of peanut M&M's between the four of us. I was glad for the restroom break before the ride down Tioga Pass. I had been a little apprehensive about that all day. My riding had improved on the way out of Yosemite Valley and across 120 I was getting more comfortable in the curves and increasing my speed, and actually enjoying it, which is the reason you ride in the first place.

Headed home

As Tioga Pass loomed ahead, we saddled up and drove out of Yosemite. If you have never driven in and out of Yosemite via Tioga Pass, you are truly missing some of the most spectacular scenery Yosemite has to offer. It is my preferred way to access the park. I anticipate its opening each year. That having been said, I was also terrified of riding my motorcycle down the pass; I had driven down it in my SUV three times earlier this year, but still my blood ran colder than the outside temps at the thought of descending the pass on my Harley.

But what goes up must come down and so it was to be.

Roni usually rides behind me and she will attest that I did well coming down until I got to the spot where it looks like the road just runs off the cliff. You look out and it looks like a serpent and I thought I might just slither off its back. I slowed way down. Roni put on her flashers so the cars behind her would slow down.

But I made it through, took a deep breath, up shifted two gears and rode the rest of the way down at the speed limit. Now I want to do it again.

The ride into Mammoth was thankfully dry and uneventful. We rolled into the Westin about 5:30pm, satisfied with a great day of superb riding and stunning vistas.

Monday we left Mammoth about 9am and had an uneventful, lovely ride back up Highway 395 into Tahoe. After four days and 660 miles on the motorcycle odometers I was still ready to ride the next day.

We had an enjoyable trip and being able to share the experience with my parents made it even more special. It is nice to see them living life to the fullest. We have another two or three trips planned before it's time to hang up the motorcycle helmet for the season, and pull out the ski helmet.

Brenda Knox is a biker chick who lives in South Lake Tahoe.



Riding through
the Eastern
Sierra.

Photo/Barbara
Knox