

TRAVEL

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New Mexico: New Santa Fe museum is a blast from the past. **L3**

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CALIFORNIA

CLUTCH TIME

There are thrills — and spills — at this macho motorcycle camp in the Mojave. The most important thing, Dan Neil finds, is to get back in the saddle again. **PAGE L4**



KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

AIR TIME: Times easy writer Dan Neil flies along a dirt trail during a rigorous five-day class in off-road riding. Usually gravity was his friend. Usually.

CALIFORNIA



Photographs by KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

PINNACLES OF POWER: RawHyde thrill seekers cruise around the cragged formations near Trona as they start on their 250-mile ride to Lake Isabella in the Kern River Valley.

School of hard knocks

If you go 'adventure riding' on a dual-sport motorcycle, there's one guarantee: You'll fall. But seeing the terrain may be worth the pain.

DAN NEIL

My ride to RawHyde Adventures' off-road motorcycle school in Castaic is typically heroic: daring and expert lane splitting, fistfuls of throttle and clutch, spectacular knee-dragging cornering. I even pop a wheelie or two. My riding skills astound me.

So imagine my surprise when, having left the asphalt to turn into the ranch's gravel driveway and going all of about 10 feet, I fall off my borrowed BMW F300GS in a spray of loose rock and liberated motorcycle parts ... Hey, whoa, what the ... ker-RASSHH! Pain and humiliation mingle inside my helmet. I have not dropped a bike ever, and yet here I am, resting gently on my face. The marquee lights around my motorcycle-riding ego suddenly go dim. The squirrels laugh. Gravel tastes funny.

So begins my five-day education in off-road riding. A half-mile up the hill, Jim Hyde, the founder and owner of RawHyde, is waiting for me under a canopy of camo netting, near a cluster of the school's BMW motorcycles. Hyde — a fit, barrel-chested 52-year-old with a red face and a white goatee — is sympathetic, sort of. At least he doesn't laugh.

"You know, we've had more people spill in the driveway than anywhere else," he says, smiling. Uh-huh. I suppose some sort of warning sign is out of the question?

RawHyde teaches something called "adventure riding," which involves piloting ridiculously large and powerful motorcycles — so-called dual-sport bikes such as the BMW R1200GS, KTM 990 Adventure, Ducati Multistrada and Moto Guzzi Stelvio — in the bush. Dirt roads, sandy desert whoops, rock-strewn switchbacks, water crossings, you name it. After a couple days' instruction, students can put their new skills to the test on an expedition to what Hyde calls Base Camp Alpha, a 400-plus-mile round-trip ride into the Mojave through some of the most dramatic and inaccessible terrain in California. That's why I'm here.

With their tall saddles and more limber suspension, dual-sport bikes are the SUVs of motorcycling; and as with SUVs, relatively few owners take advantage of the bikes' off-road abilities.

"People can be intimidated by these bikes," Hyde says. And not unreasonably. For one thing, they are expensive. A BMW R1200GS Adventure — the gold standard for this kind of riding — lists at \$16,750, and that's before all the panniers, fog lights, crash bars, navigation and communication systems that flush-with-cash owners typically bolt on. For another, the



TIME FOR A BREAK: Dan Neil, second from left, and other riders rest in "Burro" Schmidt's tunnel.



TAKE A LOAD OFF: Jerome Smith, 72, stretches out on a heavy-duty motorcycle.



MATT MOODY Los Angeles Times

If you go

OFF-ROAD RIDING SCHOOL

RawHyde Adventures, P.O. Box 244, Castaic, CA 91310; (213) 713-5652, www.rawhyde-offroad.com

Costs: Beginning, intermediate, advanced classes: \$1,295. Base Camp Alpha expedition: \$595. Motorcycle rental: \$145-\$595 per day

Requirements: Driver's license with motorcycle endorsement

bikes are heavy. The same BMW weighs 563 pounds, without gear. To drop one on the trail is to oblige yourself to pick it up again, which is, in Hyde's words, "tiresome."

And if you go off-road, eventually, you'll drop it. That's RawHyde Adventures' Lesson No. 1.

The desire to go big

With sales of high-performance sport bikes and Harley-Davidsons falling victim to the credit crunch, dual-sports are the hottest segment in motorcycling. Buyers are typically older and wealthier, which is to say, they don't need credit. Dual-sports are also the quintessential midlife crisis bikes, and male menopause is always a growth industry. For guys — and we are talking about guys here, almost exclusively — who want to take that epic three-month road trip of mandiscovery to find their inner Fonda, a big dual-sport bike is the only choice.

"It's cheaper than a divorce and a girlfriend," says riding instructor Mark Stickelmaier, 52, a theatrical equipment contractor by trade.

The patron saint of this crowd is Scottish film star Ewan McGregor, who with his friend Charley Boorman set off in 2004 to circle the globe on BMW R1150GS motorcycles, an arduous, frequently miserable marathon ride of some 20,000 miles chronicled in the bestselling book and documentary "Long Way Round."

"Every class has these amazing, unique individuals," says Bill Langford, 61, a riding instructor and former Ironman triathlete. "These are guys who are saying, 'I'm not done yet.'"

So it would seem as my fellow classmates gather for orientation at the ranch's dining hall on Friday night. There's Jerome Smith, 65, from Los

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[RawHyde, from Page L4]

Angeles, an actor, former Ford model and self-described "tree surgeon to the stars"; Joe Hagerty, from Northern California, an Iraq vet and Highway Patrol helicopter pilot. Here's a lawyer, there's an IT entrepreneur. Several have tens of thousands of miles of road riding experience; some are newbies. Every one of them is downright fascinating in one way or another.

Like many of his entrepreneur clients, Hyde is a refugee from the corporate world. He made a respectable fortune in medical equipment sales but in 1999 mortgaged everything to create an adventure tour business, which morphed ultimately into the riding school. The ranch — 120 acres adjacent to the Angeles National Forest in the Grapevine area, an inland Eden of rolling grassland, split-rail fences and canopies of oak — has been in Hyde's family for decades. Last year, RawHyde became a factory-authorized off-road training facility for BMW, which explains the couple of dozen Bavarian motorcycles for rent.

After dinner — caramelized onion quesadillas, salmon with green sauce, spinach, sheet cake and a lovely local Pinot Noir — the students wander off to their bunks. Some sleep in a large, dormitory-style tent. I get assigned a small sleeping compartment over an RV known as the "Hobbit Hotel." I take a shower outside as a stark white moon rises over nearby Whitaker Peak. A dozen men can be heard snoring softly around the camp. My leg hurts.

Rough and tumble

During the next two days — brilliantly hot, scented with meadow flowers — Stickelmaier and Langford patiently teach the finer points of braking, tight cornering and clutch slipping on these monster bikes. At first, the students are working in a corral-like field, attempting to master slow 180-degree turns. Later we move out to trails that thread through the hills and under the California live oaks. All but a few drop their bikes. I keep mine upright, and after a while I begin to think I've had my bad fall for the weekend. So wrong.

Riding these bikes — my F800GS weighs nearly 500 pounds — resembles nothing so much as judo because riders have to leverage their weight against the far greater weight of an opponent (the bike).

"These bikes are way too big to try to muscle them around," Stickelmaier says. The trick — far easier said than done — is to stand on the foot pegs and counterbalance your weight against the motorcycle, which wants to fall in whatever direction it's turning. The posture is strange, with the rider's one foot lifted off the bike entirely and a knee jammed into the fuel tank, almost as if he's trying to jump off sideways. But it works. Soon all of the students are able to turn figure-eights on the bikes at walking speed.

A couple of students struggle. Patrick Presley, a bridge inspector for the city of Phoenix, is riding his 2000-model-year F1150GS, a huge bike about 100 pounds heavier than a new F1200GS. Presley graduated out of Harleys — "I



PUT TO THE TEST: Richard Williams of Walnut Creek, Calif., rides through Jawbone Canyon, which demanded skills learned in class.

got sick of the pose," he says — so he knows a heavy bike when he lifts one. He drops the big yellow bike over and over until, on Sunday afternoon, his face is ashen from the effort. I ask him whether he's considering getting a newer, lighter bike. "That was the plan all along," he says, smiling wearily.

Some riders, meanwhile, are simply gifted. Hagerty, the helicopter pilot, is not a big guy, only 140 pounds. Watching him master his R1200GS is like watching a jockey control a thoroughbred. I ask him why he thinks he is so successful. He credits his study of yoga.

"It's all about balance and core strength," he says, "and being present in the moment."

For some reason this kind of riding — delicate, crafty, highly focused — seems to make people philosophical. For example: According to Hyde, men are less likely to get hurt adventure riding because — as in relationships — men have no problem jumping off a falling bike.

"Women tend to go down with the ship," he observes, only half-kidding.

Or consider deep sand. You would

think the best way to ride through it would be to watch it carefully, looking for ruts and shallows. Not so.

"The trick is to keep looking up, even into the sky, never looking down," says Lance Thomas, 47, a former rodeo bull rider and one of the expedition's support workers. "I think it's just a great metaphor for life."

It's good advice. I wish I'd taken it. During the last exercise on the second day, in the school's sand pit, I bury my front wheel and slam into the ground. Sitting up, slightly dazed, I feel as if I've been swiped by a dragon's tail but, slipping a hand under my riding gear, am pleased to discover I haven't broken my collarbone.

When I stand to get my diploma on Sunday night, I've got a bag of ice bandaged to my shoulder. Like I said: heroic.

The graduation trip

On Monday morning, the riders heading to Base Camp Alpha pack a duffel to throw in the chase truck. Langford, Stickelmaier, safety rider Jeff Irvin and Mike Myers, a Ventura



BASE CAMP ALPHA: The RawHyde adventurers chill out at the Mojave Desert post after a long, hard day of riding.

latimes.com

/ride

Need a longer ride?

Go online for more photos of RawHyde Adventure Motorcycle School.

County paramedic, lead a gaggle of 20 or so riders split into two groups. After a quick, roaring ride up Interstate 5, we turn off California 138 and head up Liebre Mountain/Pine Canyon Road, a snared 20-mile trail of rock, dirt and broken concrete following the contours of Portal Ridge like a high-water mark to Hughes Lake. This was the old route out of the Antelope Valley during the 1920s. In the switchbacks, deep sand — my nemesis — has collected in awful wallows. I topple off my bike again, falling on my bruised shoulder, which is by now turning wondrous colors of purple and yellow.

As we gain altitude, the air cools and the road ropes through a thick, lovely pine forest and mountain meadows golden with wildflowers.

It soon becomes clear that my group, led by Stickelmaier, is quicker than the second group. And we don't wait. Soon we're riding hellbent on the Aqueduct Road, a fun and fast desert dirt road running parallel to a concrete-capped aqueduct, William Mulholland's original water works. Before long we see the turbines of the Oak Creek Wind Farm in the distance.

From Mojave, we take the Randsburg Red Rock Road until we reach Last Chance Canyon Road, a silty uphill scabble that leads to William Henry "Burro" Schmidt's tunnel. A desert lunatic, Schmidt spent most of his life digging this quarter-mile tunnel into the granite of the El Paso Mountains, by himself, to no apparent purpose. With the temperature in the high 90s, my fellow riders welcome the chance to spell awhile in the coolness of the tunnel.

By the time we reach Randsburg, a barely there desert town at the crossing of U.S. Highway 395, Group B has been waiting an hour, carbo-loading with malts from the General Store.

At around 5 p.m. we arrive at RawHyde's Base Camp Alpha, just off the road in Homewood Canyon near

Trona. The camp consists primarily of a steel shipping container that Hyde has cleverly converted to a camp kitchen and hot-water shower. After a long day in the saddle, it looks like heaven. I pitch my tent among the cactus and sagebrush, take a shower, and proceed to tuck into a dinner of Italian sausage, salad, pasta, bruschetta, red velvet cupcakes. And lots of Advil.

Rugged, glorious terrain

The conversation around the fire reflects the eclectic group itself: energy policy, nuclear subs, law and, of course, motorcycles. Jerome Smith, the actor/arboretist, warbles a few verses of "Alfie." It's a grand night.

The next day's ride is far more challenging, a 250-mile enduro from the Pinnacles — extraordinary spires of calcium carbonate rising out of the badlands south of Trona — to Lake Isabella, a route that includes 10 miles of roller-coaster desert sand, which continues to terrify me. My group hammers over these whoops in the road at over 40 mph. I keep repeating Lance Thomas' advice, over and over, in my helmet. "Look UP! Look UP!" But I don't fall.

At one point, a fellow rider, Michael Reilly, from Southampton, N.Y., seeing my fatigue, leans over and gives me a draw off his Camelback hose. It's a touching, almost intimate gesture. We have bonded, these guys and I.

The last off-road section of the day is also the most spectacular: a 30-mile traverse of the Piute Mountains, which takes us from the sere scrub of Jawbone Canyon to the lush, cool meadows of Kelso Valley and then up 5,000 feet to the Sequoia-lined ridge road over the mountains. It's steep and difficult terrain, with dangerous cliffs and sections of technical riding that test all the lessons learned at RawHyde. I fall only once; unfortunately, I fall on top of my Good Samaritan, Reilly, who has gone down just ahead of me.

The crest line of the Piutes is fantastic, a postcard view of a California only a few ever see, and best seen from the saddle. If eating a little gravel is the price to get here, well, I'm buying.

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