

CROSSING THE USA/NICK SANDERS STYLE: PART 2

'IT'S LIKE THE F***** DAKAR RALLY'

So said one participant on this double coast-to-coast holiday of a lifetime. 'What Nick has given us, money can't buy' said another. So which is it?



Evilskunk

The road kill on this trip is startling. Armadillo, possum, racoon, prairie dog, a horse! But the worst are the skunks. I stopped to take a photo and was gagging from ten metres. The odour is unholy. Like a Batman criminal's chemical spill. After registering the stench of the first one I keep smelling them across the US. I'd get a whiff then, half-a-mile later, spot the monochrome corpse. If you ever see a live one, run and hide.



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By Gary Inman

The road is so straight, so empty, the scenery so devoid of stimulus, I chew my glove off, fish the phone out of my coat pocket, slide the screen active, choose the calculator and start doing sums at 80mph. I work out I've averaged 403 miles per day for 16 straight days of riding. That's the equivalent of York to Land's End every single day. "It's like the f***ing Dakar rally," reckons Stuart from Bristol.

Over 6000 miles down with 2000 still to go on this, the first of Nick Sanders' Incredible USA tours. 14 bikes - including one ridden by the world's pre-eminent, two-wheeled ultra-marathon rider - pressing-on from New York to San Francisco and back to New York. An uber-schlep across America stopping at a do-before-you-die list-filling array of manmade and natural wonders. Our tyres touch the roads of 24 states of the Union. More depending on detours, planned or otherwise. It's just this bit is a bit, well, boring. Still, my eyes could do with the break. They were suffering from beauty overload.

The first, westward, half of the three-week schedule (in last week's MCN) served up the surprise delights of South Dakota and Wyoming's mountain passes, plus Niagara Falls, Yellowstone, Bonneville Salts Flats, the Badlands and San Francisco. The return run began with a 340-mile run down US 1, the Pacific Coast Highway.

Pacific Coast adventures

This is what riding dreams are made of. Round virtually every other corner is another postcard-worthy scene. At one beach the sea is dotted with dozens of kitesurfers, the air full of a flock of their parenthesis-shaped wings. Multi-million dollar Thunderbirds HQs dot the cliffs. But the PCH is so beautiful and so world famous it is choked with other sightseers and bucket list-tickers.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

■ **Touring on two wheels is the pinnacle of adventure, but where to go? And who to go with? Few riders know more about long-distance travel than multiple world record holder Nick Sanders... MCN joined him on his latest venture, an organised yet not regimented ride across the States. A truly incredible journey. Here's part two of the ultimate road trip...**

Herds of rented Winnebagos ruminate along the route and packs of identically dressed, lithe, European cyclists struggle up the inclines. But it's not a road you'd want to attack head-down, that would be defeating the object.

Another beach is peppered with elephant seals. As some of the group snap the stinking sea mammals, not everyone is impressed. "I can see them at Whipsnade," sneers Ian, failing to get into the groove.

That's the thing with a long tour like this, people naturally have up days and down days and they don't coincide. Late nights and early mornings conspire with long days in the saddle and common clashes of personality. But it's not like going on holiday with your family. If one of your family is grumpy, that's it, you're stuck, no one's having a very good day. In a group this size, you just ditch the miserable mook and ride with someone else. No feelings hurt, no problem. They'll be better tomorrow.

Organised 'adventure' tours like this always used to seem oxymoronic to me. I felt enough of a big boy to tour myself. I didn't understand the attraction and wondered how it could be an adventure if you knew which hotel you were booked into at the end of every day. Then I did one, up through South Africa, Namibia and into Zambia, with Charley Boorman, and nearly killed

myself. That added a dash of adventure to proceedings. And I realised it's the evening socialising that people enjoy. Few bikers have a group of mates with the time or money, or money at the right time, to go on a three-week tour. Of course, there's also the safety net an organised tour such as this offers. I also used to sneer at this aspect. Then I lightened up, realised this is supposed to be fun, not a Herculean task, and let myself go with the flow.

Pick 'n' mix companions

Some days are like today. I leave with one group, split off when they, or I, stop for photos, and end up riding with someone else. I leave Ian, the Stuarts, and the KTM-mounted newlyweds, Jenny and Alex, in the middle of the PCH, and bump into Keith the copper at Morro Bay. It's the junction where today's route leaves the ocean and heads inland. We're not going to see the sea again until New York, so I planned to stare at the ocean with a cup of coffee for a few minutes. Instead, Keith and have fish and chips from a thatched tiki hut while pelicans wheel overhead. It's memorable.

The rest of the day's ride is a hectic blast over a baked, dusty, orange mountain. Keith is hustling his behemoth of a BMW R1200GS Adventure. It's Tourateched to the eyeballs. We're hauling. I'm going as fast I feel comfortable, on the 1200 Super Tenéré. It was transformed by new Continental Road Attacks at the service stop in Salt Lake City. The Yam's air temperature gauge reads in the high-30s and the bellyful of fried food is making me feel less than sharp.

There are 50 miles of deserted desert twisties. This is Highway 41 in central California. It's just a locals only route, but if it was in the UK it would be famous and festooned with speed cameras. There's barely a dozen other vehicles on the whole stretch.

We wouldn't be on this road either if the tour was going entirely according to plan, but Sanders has had to change

tack on the hop. Tour doctor, and Nick's pillion, Caroline Taylor, has been keeping abreast of news regarding a killer virus affecting people who've stayed in camps in California's Yosemite National Park. The disease is spread by rodent droppings. Campers keep dying. I've cut right back on my intake of mouse poo, but I still agree with the decision to sidestep the area. So we stop in a Super 8, Sanders' budget motel of choice, in the middle of nowhere town, Ridgecrest, on the way to Las Vegas.

Sanders and Sin City

The Nick Sanders element of the tour is an attraction to all on the tour. He's hands-on, heart-in, but not suffocating. He's there if you need him and not if you don't. He, with his small team, arrange everything. There isn't anyone back at home to sort things, he's regularly on the phone chasing, harrying, smoothing.

Though I've visited before, once to get married, Sin City is a shock on many levels. Firstly, it comes after the sub-sea level, boil-in-the-bag, 40° experience of Death Valley, Badwater and Furnace Creek. Secondly, we're stuck in the first traffic jam for two weeks and filtering is illegal in all states, except California. Split lanes and the locals turn vigilante. Finally, we're in the middle of a biblical thunderstorm. The Almighty has tired of the way depravity has pervaded the mainstream and send a tempest to dampen the sinners' fire. Maybe.

What isn't in doubt is the fact the desert city can't take it. Vegas's broad streets are wheel spindle-deep in places. The flooding will make the national news. It's at times like this the Garmin proves its worth. It leads us straight to the off-strip hotel.

Vegas is turning to mush. The escalators, that send a tidal flow of flesh and money from one casino resort to another, are all on the fritz. I leave the hotel with three new, but good, mates from the tour and play beer pong, drink the cheapest and most expensive
Continued over

drinks of the trip, lose at blackjack, then split as some Vegas virgins want to sample more of what the place has to offer, and those who've been there and done it turn in.

The next two days could fill a holiday themselves. Leaving from Vegas, still-wet socks bungeed to the back of the bike, we hit Hoover Dam, then a section of Route 66, and camp in Grand Canyon National Park; beer round the campfire before rising to watch the sunrise fill the canyon with colour. Then pack the tents and ride along the south rim to Monument Valley. Road trip nirvana.

I find the husks of dead businesses that dot Route 66 more interesting than the surviving tourist traps. Hackberry General Store is like a giant fridge magnet. Drawn to it are dozens of French Harley fans on rented Hogs. We, in Gore-Tex, riding adventure bikes, are invisible to them. They, with all their luggage being carried in a people carrier, and wearing stupid beanie helmets, get an Anglo lip curl.

Darkness and deer fear

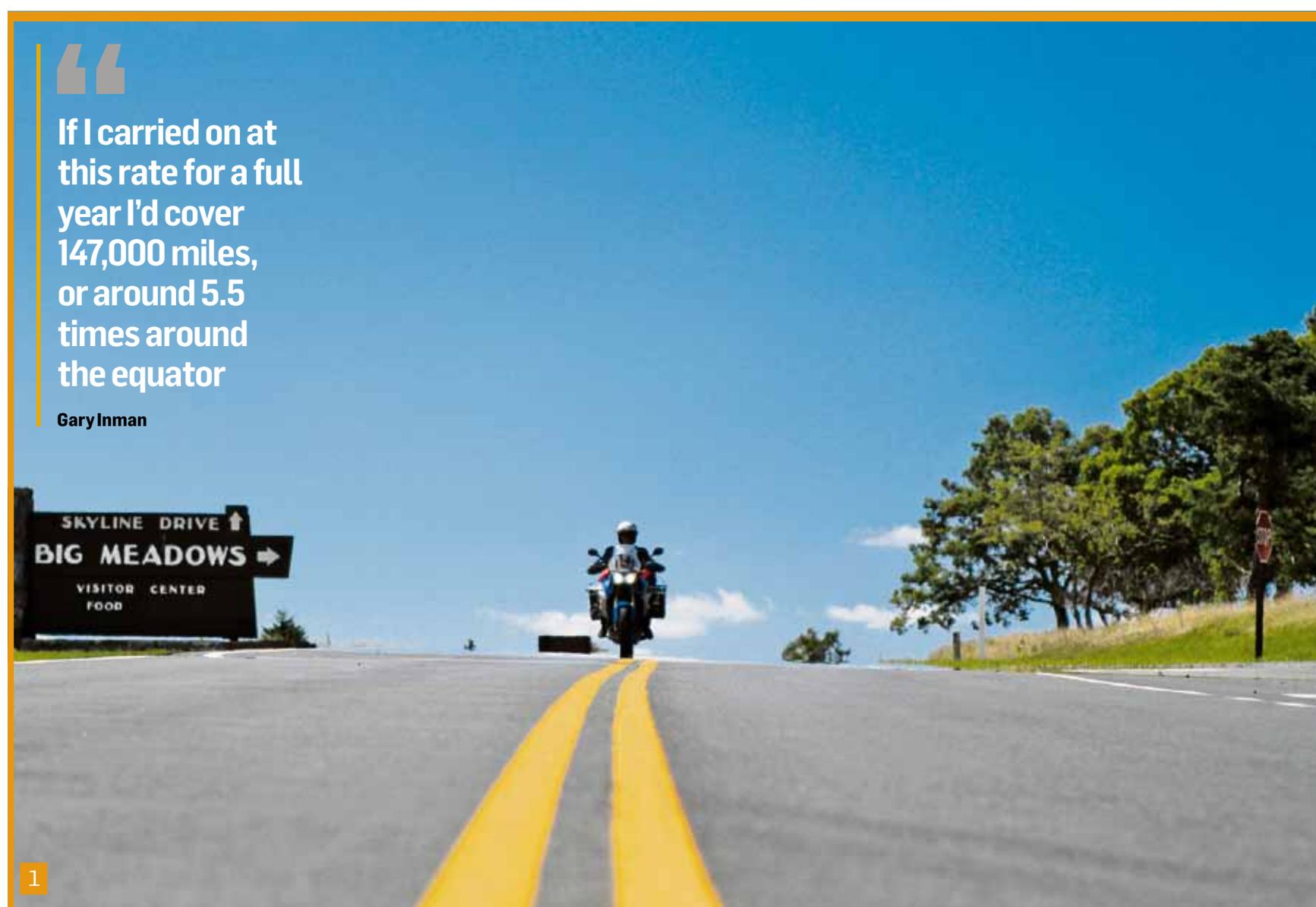
After a stop at the Roadkill Café (that doesn't sell roadkill), the small group I'm tagging along with ride the final 60 miles of the day, to the Grand Canyon, in fading light. None of us are happy about that. Putting up a tent in the dark sucks, but the real problem is virtually everyone on this trip has become apprehensive about riding in the dark. It's deer fear.

First were the stories. Up in the mid-west every biker had a tale about a friend colliding with a deer. No one wins in those stories. Then some of the group had sphincter-clenching near misses after a visit to Alcatraz meant they rode PCH in the dark. This evening it's my and Bristol Stu's turn. We are, to use police parlance, 'making progress' up a two-lane road through thick forest when the van we're about to overtake startles an elk. The huge creature, metre-tall antlers towering above its walnut of a brain, thinks about bolting across the road. We make eye contact. It rears up and heads back into the forest. My heart rears up and heads back into my ribcage. Stu and I slow down. Putting up tents in the dark isn't so bad.

First impressions are crucial and New Mexico doesn't make a good one. It calls itself the Land of Enchantment. Shiprock, just over the border from Utah, is as enchanted as a blocked toilet. It makes me think if you've only got one go at life, then don't spend it in a place like this. It also reminds me that while the USA is a country, it's also pretty much a continent too. I knew there would be variety, but it's astonishing. We've all seen the bright and shiny a thousand times, but this tour also rides through parts that look third world. Other areas appear post-apocalyptic.

New Mexico improves though. Another day, another deserted road. Something crosses in front of me. It takes me a second or two to compute. I see another. When the third one comes into view I brake and jump off the bike. You know a spider is big when you can see it crossing a road from the seat of a Yamaha travelling at over 80.

Two transit days let me play with the Garmin and confirm my slight



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If I carried on at this rate for a full year I'd cover 147,000 miles, or around 5.5 times around the equator

Gary Inman

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autism/OCD tendencies. The inbuilt compass shows the route's angle. I'm most happy when it exactly 0, 90, 180 or 270 degrees. Much of Texas and Oklahoma sees me happy. There are more bends in a snooker cue.

Two years riding...

And I'm back on the calculator. If I carried on at this rate for a full year I'd cover 147,000 miles, or 5.5 times around the equator. I'd probably be a bit less keen on riding motorcycles than I am now, too.

With nearly three weeks down I'm in a riding groove, though. Pack the bikes at 6.30 most mornings, then ride. Perceived wisdom says the average British biker covers about 3500 miles per year. We more than double it in three weeks. After 16 days that delivered one or two hours of rain, including the Vegas deluge, we're dealt two of the

INCREDIBLE USA: The Facts

Bookings are being taken for 2013's Incredible USA tour. It will run from August into September and cost riders £3950, pillion price is half that. Included in the price is: accommodation for three weeks (motels most nights, sharing a room); return flights from London; shipping of bikes to and from the UK; support truck; expedition doctor; a meet and greet weekend at Nick's Welsh adventure centre.

Riders must cover their fuel; food and drinks; US motorcycle insurance (from £250); personal travel insurance including repatriation (from £50).

■ For more info or to book, go to www.nicksanders.com

worst in any of our memories. Again, Sanders changes things on the hoof. He cancels two nights' camping, organises lodges for one night and a motel for the next, asking just \$20 extra to cover it.

The wooden huts at the Blue Ridge Motorcycle Campground are the accommodation highlight of the trip. The owner cooks up fresh caught trout and homemade apple pie. The group, that varies from the newly retired, to the just married and include a 42-year-old and his 64-year-old dad, chow down in an open-sided canteen. It's just the boost the end of the trip needed.

The last two days are blessed with sunshine. I stick with Nick and Caroline for the ride along Virginia's incredible Skyline Drive. It's cursed with a blanket 35mph. We're doing 67 when a ranger stops us. He threatens us with jail, but UK licences and contrition see us let off

with a stern talking to. 14 bikes, 8000 miles each and only two tickets were handed out in the entire trip.

On a sunny Thursday morning, 21 days after collecting the bikes they're loaded back in a container for the voyage back the England. Other than walking pace tip-offs, due to top heavy, loaded up bikes, there were no scrapes. The riders all think it's been value for money. A couple of the hotels were niggled about, but that was it. Many have been on trips with Sanders previously and many more say they will join him for others in the future. It is really a trip of a lifetime and to do it on your own bike makes it something even more special.

"Without Nick I couldn't have done this," says 59-year-old Owen from Ireland. "I'd heard about riding the open road, but this has redefined it. What Nick has given us, money can't buy."



The 65,000-mile Super Tenéré

Because it wasn't registered to an individual, the machine I was supposed to ride, Yamaha's XT1200 Super Tenéré press bike, wasn't released by US customs, so Nick Sanders loaned me his own personal Yamaha. He and partner, Caroline Taylor, rode the whole 8000 miles, two-up on a rented Yamaha FZ8. They're hardcore.

Nick's first edition model had already covered 57,000 miles, ricocheting from Argentina to Alaska, back to Patagonia and back, once more to Alaska. Other than scuffs and bruises, and a worn back tyre, it didn't feel like it had ridden the equivalent of twice around the equator. It was tight and eager with no noticeable sag in the suspension. And it was comfortable. The heaviest days saw me doing 650 miles. The only discomfort was caused by my choice of underwear, not the bike.

Tanga briefs next time [too much detail – Ed].

Nick's Super Ten came with the official Akrapovic end can, with a pleasant, not offensive note. It also had a smart Touratech lockable Garmin perch and Touratech aluminium panniers. The luggage is so rugged it acts as crash protection. One side was already dented from an off in the snow of Tierra Del Fuego. Unfortunately the panniers leaked (the official Yamaha ones used on the tour didn't). Some Touratechs fitted to a Tiger Explorer leaked too.

Also, I don't know if it was down to the heavy, non-official luggage, but the bike reacted adversely to worn tyres. The front would weave at 30mph. There were two other Super Tens on the tour, both on OE tyres and neither complained of wobbles. Nick said he'd never had an issue before.

