

**PART 1**

# CROSSING THE USA

## *Nick Sanders style*

Riding America coast-to-coast is motorcycling's Everest.  
But is doing it with motorcycling's Chris Bonington a  
guarantee of a high time, or a scary one?



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By Gary Inman

**T**hat was a pretty section of ten-lane highway,' says Nick Sanders with a Stan Laurel smile as he determinedly itches his grey hair. And he's right. We've spent the morning on what could be the USA's most beautiful motorway. Climbing, climbing from the desert squelch of Reno, Nevada, the I-80 crosses the pine-covered Sierra Nevada mountains, skirts the ski resort of Lake

Tahoe, then arrows past the Sunday-driving hot rods and kustom cars near Sacramento, California and descends towards the upper class section of NorCal coast and the Golden Gate Bridge. And all on a tank of fuel. The legendary two-wheeled adventurer is leading a group of 12 riders, some with pillions, on an adventure touring industry first - a USA coast-to-coast-to-coast ride. New York to San Francisco and back to the Big Apple via Las Vegas, Texas and Memphis. And I'm along for the ride.

I say Nick is leading... 'I've become more of a facilitator than a tour leader on this one,' he points out, in his

## 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 one of the ultimate road trip...**

gentle, Northern tones. His tours are self-proclaimed ruffy-tuffy expeditions. They are high on miles, low on cost, comparatively speaking, and attract a certain kind of rider. Few of his tourists want, or need, to be led by the hand.

To be led by Sanders could be compared to climbing with Bonington or cycling with Armstrong. He's ridden around the world a fingers and toes amount of times. He's cycled round twice. He brainstorms a journey no one in their right mind would take on, then sets off, most often on a Yamaha R1, taking only a camera and the clothes on his back. He's an unflappable kook with

contacts in every port worth visiting.

Right now, spread over 50 or so miles of the West Coast's roads are a dozen riders, on British and Irish-registered motorcycles, all at slightly different stages of their road trip of a lifetime.

## 21-day biking odyssey

By now, just over a third of the way through the 21-day itinerary, riders have formed groups and set their own agendas. There are those who want to leave before sunrise, every day. Some prefer to stick with Nick. There are those who want to take a hundred photos at a dozen stops a day, and *Continued over*





those who take none, pausing only for petrol. If any of the group need Nick; the tour's doctor, Caroline, or back-up driver Jim Wolfe and his Ford F150 monster truck, they're there. If not, the group convenes at the hotel at the end of every day to compare notes and ignore the ad hoc briefing. There seems to be only one rule: stick to the route in the road book. And even that isn't being followed. Much to Sanders' exasperation.

Nine days before the descent into California the 'Incredible USA' adventure began in the downbeat and dusty port of Newark, New Jersey, a cab ride from Manhattan. Sanders' route promises to show more of America in three weeks than any motorcycle tour on the market. No one offers a coast-to-coast-to-coast trip, and if they did, it's highly unlikely they could do it for a sub-£4000 price.

In the blazing midday heat of an August Friday afternoon, the riders, from England, Ireland and Wales, stand in any available shade waiting for an anonymous shipping container to be, literally, dropped on the ground. Inside it are a variety of bikes ranging from a Yamaha single to a six-cylinder BMW,

but there's a heavy bias of box panniers and brush guard-equipped adventure bikes. Some look like they're ram-raided Touratech's window. They've all been shipped from, and will be returned to a, central Derbyshire base a fortnight after the trip ends. Whatever condition they're in by then.

The bike I was supposed to ride, a low-mileage 2012 Super Tenéré, is stuck in customs limbo. Because it is registered to a company, Yamaha UK, not an individual, it can't be imported with the others. Instead, it'll sit in a warehouse for us to return, and then be loaded back in another container and shipped back to the UK without its battery ever being reconnected. Instead, Nick lends me his own Super Ten, a 57,000-miler that he rode from Ushuaia, the tip of South America, to Prudhoe Bay, north Alaska, back to Ushuaia, then back to Prudhoe Bay. It has the patina of an adventure thoroughbred, dented Touratech panniers, a well-worn back tyre and a loose front brake banjo bolt that let the fluid leak out in the container. And now, Nick is going to ride it to the far side of New York, with me as pillion and no front brakes, in Friday rush-hour, to pick up



**Locals want to know who you are and where you have come from. Old folk clap their hands with glee at your accent**

Gary Inman

a rental FZ8 that he and his partner, the expedition doctor, Caroline Taylor, will ride two-up for the next 8000 miles. The adventure has started.

#### Free-form touring...

The kicks come thick and fast. By lunchtime on the first full day of riding, one of the group, let's call him 'Andy', has lost his phone and his wallet and crashed in a diner car park. He takes

it all in his stride. Before the end of the week, he'll have borrowed a credit card from Jim the back-up driver and lost it in the same day, and dropped his bike another half-dozen times, yet still seems to be having the time of his life.

Stop one is Niagara Falls. The schedule is fluid enough to let riders take a trip on the Maid of the Mist or do basically anything they want. If they want to arrive at hotels in the dark every night, they're free to, as long as they let Nick know. Some even make an impromptu visit to Canada for a stamp in their passport.

From Niagara, the route is through a closed-forever, former industrial heartland of upstate New York, that borders Erie, one of the great lakes. Ford's Buffalo Stamping Plant is one of the few huge factories still open. Surely the animal rights lefties will put a stop to even that soon.

One of the necessary evils of a three-week crossing is what Nick calls 'a Transit Day'. This is a charmless, brain-out Interstate (that is, motorway) slog across a dull state or three. They come early and late in the tour. The first is a 550-miler from Cleveland, Ohio, across Indiana, Illinois and into Iowa.

I leave the group for the night to visit friends, and the bars they own, in Des Moines, Iowa, and add an extra 100 miles to the day. My thinking is, 'When am I ever going to visit Iowa again?'

Pull up anywhere in the US on a dusty bike with a funny number plate and the locals what to know where you've come from and where you're going. They're fascinated and full of best wishes. Old ladies clap their hands with glee when they hear a British accent. Even one from Sunderland. The locals have tips too. Some more useful nuggets than others.

#### Two Bulls meets Battlax

'Do you like swimmin'?' I'm asked. 'There's this great place...' Turns out it's 250 miles away. It's like meeting someone in a petrol station in Carlisle and telling him there's a really clean public toilet in Telford. But, generally, their hearts are in the right place.

Near Wounded Knee, on the edge of the South Dakota Badlands, I meet a native American in a petrol station. He introduces himself as Errol, then adds, 'My real name is Two Bulls'. I tell him mine is Double Chin and my chief is Bridgestone Battlax.





Great advice comes from some the hundreds of Harley riders on the roads of the Mid-West. One name kept coming up, the Beartooth Pass.

The Beartooth Highway runs from Wyoming into Montana. While we're in South Dakota I make a plan to ride it with Stuart (on a 2012 Tiger Explorer) and Ian (on a 1998 Triumph Sprint he bought for this trip. He reminds people it cost less than Stuart's German pannier system).

These Mid-West states didn't mean much to me, before I arrived. I knew Sturgis, the Harley riders' Mecca, is in South Dakota. If pressed, I reckon I could've told you Mount Rushmore was there too, (but not that the architect of the four presidents' faces had the wonderful moniker, Gutzon Borglum). What I didn't know was that South Dakota and Wyoming have some of the most incredible roads on the planet. Before we've even reached the start of the Beartooth, in Red Lodge, Montana, Ian says he's had his best ever days' riding, in over 20 years. This was on the US 14 and 14a, through mountainous Bighorn National Forest. It's a mind-blower of sweepers, climbing up to more than 10,000ft (over 3000m),

which is, I think, higher than the loftiest paved pass in Europe.

I keep stabbing my Garmin Zumo as we climb. Just as I think we've topped out, we go higher. As the fields below become postage stamp-sized I pass a lay-by designated a 'scenic viewpoint'. It's crammed with cars and elderly gawpers. I pull in to see what the kerfuffle is, just as a handglider pilot girds his loins, says, to no one in particular, 'I'm out of here' and leaps off the ledge. He spirals on thermals. I know we'll beat him to the bottom. On the way down we pass a ghost mine, left empty and unopened since a mining disaster claimed 75 lives in 1943. It's an eerie site.

We fuel up before the Beartooth and talk to two Harley-mounted old boys who've just ridden it. They ensure us we'll enjoy it. Also known as US 212, the Beartooth criss-crosses in and out of Montana and Wyoming before heading to Yellowstone Park's north-east entrance. It has far more hairpins than the road through Bighorn, so I get in less of a flow. It doesn't help that the Yamaha's back tyre is as square as Mr Strong.

It's the kind of place I imagine one

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could feel quite insignificant. At the top are glaciers, even at the end of a hot summer.

#### Race to camp before dark

We're still two hours from the first night's camping of the trip. The three of us are desperate not to pitch our tents in the dark, so we're howling through

the countryside. We reach the entrance to Yellowstone to discover our campsite is still 86 miles into the huge National Park and the sun is going down like the Titanic. I'm not proud to say we treat the blanket 45mph speed limit disgustingly. We blur past the yellow stone of Yellowstone, the mud volcanoes and steaming pools. We filter, illegal; cross double yellow lines, stupid and illegal; and even give the hurry up to herds of buffalo crossing the road, stupid and potentially suicidal. But we do get to the site with just enough vestige of daylight to put our tents up, before it all goes inky black and the Milky Way comes out.

I found the idea of camping in Yellowstone impossibly romantic. The reality is grim. Partly my fault. All my previous camping had been done in lush Northern Europe, where the ground is green and soft. Up here, 2500m above sea level (the summit of Ben Nevis is 1344m), we're on hard, stony ground. Because of past experience I packed a cheap, foam rollmat, not an inflatable mattress. I get to sleep well despite the calls of the elk. If a strangulated hernia could sing, it would sound like an elk. Then my beer jacket wears off and the

temperature of  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$  chills my core. My foam roll mat is now as thick as a cream cracker. I feel so rough the next day I experience the need to get washed with my sunglasses on.

The plan was to spend two nights camping here. When I get the opportunity to split the price of a motel room with Ian, and also get a couple of hundred miles closer to the bike shop we're using for oil and tyre changing, in Salt Lake City, Utah, I make up my mind and leave. Forecasts of possible overnight snow (on September 6!) only confirm it's the correct decision. As one rider, also leaving for a motel, points out, they're not giving out any medals for staying in camp.

Instead, Ian and I pick a point on the map: Paris, Idaho, and decide to stay there the night. We ride 200 miles through rural USA; under the world's biggest elk horn arch; past the Teton Mountains; along the banks of the turquoise Bear Lake. We see real cowboys herding cows along a road. We get to Paris. It's closed. Well, it would be if there was anything there to be open. We carry on till the university town of Logan, Utah and finally call it a night. **Continued over**



It's been a great day, and it doesn't even feel weird to share a room with a relative stranger. We've bonded.

### Mormon pizza...

In Salt Lake City I take the opportunity to visit a young chopper builder whose bikes I'd admired, Andy Carter of Pangea Speed (see separate box). I sit on his hardtail Harleys while he's welding parts, then follow him to the surprisingly hip downtown area of the Mormon capital for a meal at his mate's cool pizza joint. This is what road tripping is about.

As is the experience of some of the group who veer off-piste when they ride past Bonneville Salt Flats and strike lucky to find a car with a potential top speed of 400mph. They don't see it run, but are treated to a tour and hospitality, before heading down 'America's Loneliest Road' - Highway 50. Since it was given that sub-title it's been crammed with motorcycles on tour.

'We ride to the surprisingly hip downtown area of the Mormon capital for a meal at his mate's pizza joint. This is road tripping'

Gary Inman

Back on America's most beautiful interstate, the Yamaha's tripmeter clocks 4000 miles before I see the Pacific. In a few more miles I'll have done what only a tiny percentage of American riders have - ridden across the continental USA. The trip is half-over.



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NEXT WEEK...

## The ultimate motorcycling road trip



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### INCREDIBLE USA: What's included?

This inaugural Nick Sanders 21-day Incredible USA tour cost riders £3800, pillions £1900. Included in the price was: accommodation for three weeks (motels most nights, camping for five nights); return flights from London; shipping of bikes to and from the UK; support truck and mechanic; expedition doctor; a meet and greet weekend at Nick's Welsh adventure centre. Riders had to cover their fuel (for 8000 miles); food and drinks; motorcycle insurance (from £250); personal travel insurance including repatriation (from £50). Next year's tour will start in August and run into September and will cost riders £3950, because some, if not all, the camping nights are being swapped for motels. ■ [www.nicksanders.com](http://www.nicksanders.com)



The price includes the cost of shipping your machine to the USA and back

### DEADWOOD

South Dakota doesn't just have great roads, it's crammed with history. Thought Deadwood was a fictitious set for the TV show starring him from Lovejoy? Me too. It's actually a real place at the heart of many a Wild West legend. In the Black Hills, just 15 miles from Sturgis, Deadwood, was a gold rush boomtown, a den of iniquity and a magnet for criminals.

Calamity Jane was a resident, virtually every stagecoach got robbed and Wild Bill Hickok broke the habit of a lifetime, sat with his back to the door of the a saloon and didn't see Broken Nose Jack McCall walk in and shoot him in the back of the head. Wild Bill didn't live long enough to make the same mistake twice. It's said the cards he held were black aces and eights, the Dead Man's Hand.



Forget the fella from Lovejoy, the reality is far more extraordinary

### PANGEA SPEED

Andy Carter is the 27-year-old behind the Utah custom bike firm, Pangea Speed. The name comes from the name of the land mass that covered earth before the continents split. He gave it this name because he makes parts for bikes, cars and aeroplanes, and hasn't split off into one niche.

Bikes are what he's best known for though. Pangea build unique customs, difficult in such a crowded arena. His Harley Shovelhead, Zion Express, was an art deco chopper, while his latest build is a turbocharged, big twin Evo in a hardtail frame with a Velocette Thruxton fairing mounted high, Bozosuko-style.

Pangea is one of dozens of small scale custom builders to visit on a US road trip.

■ [www.pangeaspeed.com](http://www.pangeaspeed.com)



Pangea Speed, named after the time before the continents split

### GROUP VINDIE TOURING

Organised 'adventure' tours like this always used to seem oxymoronic to me. I felt enough of a big boy to tour myself. Then I did one and realised it's the evening socialising that people enjoy. Riding in the rain for 300 miles then sitting in a lonely room takes the shine off a day. As does realising you one and only travelling partner is Getting. Right. On. Your. NERVES!

There's also the experience of the organisers. Nick Sanders has been there and done it, all in the same T-shirt, yet still has enthusiasm for riding and touring.

The final attraction is the group booking element of the tour. A few riders had priced up independent US trips, both shipping and renting bikes, and said they couldn't come close to the price Sanders offers.



400 miles a day is just ticking over for Sanders and partner Dr Caroline