

ALASKAN ADVENTURE RIDE

It was somewhere between the towns of Chitina and McCarthy when it finally started to sink in, that feeling of not knowing what time it is, not knowing what day it is and most importantly, not caring. That is when you know you are having a good ride. Mike and I were trying to catch the old man, he was getting nervous about the thunderheads in the mirror. Rounding every turn, we saw his fresh tracks cutting through the Alaskan wilderness, looks like the old man was gettin busy on that KLR, he really doesn't like the rain. Speeding along, we came up on fresh tracks of another kind, yep, there she was, a mother black bear with baby in tow and she was not happy to see us.....

As I look back on the planning of this Alaskan trip, seeing bears or going fishing was not my primary focus. It was going to be all about riding Alaska, it had been on my "to do before you die" list for quite some time. I realized a while back that I love travel and I love riding motorcycles, it didn't take a genius to figure out how to combine them. There are a few simple steps, #1 pick your next destination, #2 jump on the internet and do a search for (fill in the blank) motorcycle tours #3 remind yourself that life is way too short, grab your credit card and go! That was the easy part, trying to get your buddies to join you, that can be challenging. Everyone has an excuse, "I don't have the money", "I don't have the time", my answer to that is: Get even, die in debt. As for the time, what are going to do? Go to work? Mow the lawn? I say find the time, tomorrow is no guarantee.

This time it actually worked, it didn't take much to convince the old man, he has been telling me about Alaska for years. The conversation went something like "Hey Pops, you wanna go to Alaska and rent a couple of dual sports?" "sure". My brother on the other hand, took some work. He comes from a motocross background so if the bike isn't scary fast and constantly trying to throw you off, he isn't interested. I pulled out the "the old man isn't going be around forever you know" speech and that did the trick on him, he signed on and left the wife and kid to fend for themselves for a week (don't kid yourself Mike, they loved every minute!).

When we arrived at the Anchorage airport the rain was coming down in buckets, no exaggeration, it didn't look good. The old man started to mumble something about a car rental when Mike and I chopped that right off, although, I am sure Mike and I were thinking the same thing, "this might suck". This tour was going to be a little different, it was a "self guided" tour, in other words "Good luck boys, try to keep the rubber side down, see ya next week!" There is a certain freedom in that approach, I couldn't see this trio of characters doing it any

other way, besides, the old man would have tested any tour guides patience with his constant home made pie stops. If there was pie, we stopped. Actually, in retrospect, that wasn't a bad plan at all.

We showed up at Alaska Rider Tours after a heaping breakfast across the street (don't remember the name but wicked good crab omelets). Phil was there to meet us, he is the head cheese at AK Rider, his crew was busy outfitting our bikes, two Kawasaki KLR 650's for pops and I and a Suzuki DR650 for Mikey (he had to have the sporty one of course).

After what seemed like just a few minutes, we had packed our gear into the saddlebags while receiving general instructions like, " You guys are gonna have a blast" and "Don't forget to do the bonus rides". Phil had given us each a personalized tour book, with maps and suggested side rides.

As we pulled out of the parking lot the perma-grin started in, I had finally made this happen, riding a motorcycle in Alaska with my Dad and brother and to top it all off, the sun had decided to escort us out of town (after mikes stop to buy some bear spray).

I must admit, getting out of town wasn't the highlight, I don't care much for freeway but we must pay our dues. It wasn't long before we got off though, maybe 20 miles to the Old Glenn highway. Some rain had come through a few hours before and it left behind that wonderful smell, fresh, clean, it reminded me of the north coast but somehow different, this was Alaska.

After some really nice twisties, we took a break at Independence Mine then up to Summit Lake. Having a dual-sport is the only way to go in Alaska, some of the best scenery is found off road and you can make good time while having a blast. Mikey and I took a detour to go and walk out onto a glacier, that is a very cool thing to do. Our first night was at a mountain lodge with incredible 360 degree views and much appreciated, locally brewed coldies. One of the preconceptions that I had about Alaska was that the food is generally not so good, this place straightened us all out right quick. Another preconception that went out the window was about Alaskan women, again, this place straightened us right out (or was that one too many coldies?).

The following morning we woke up to some menacing looking clouds headed our way and by the time we had the bikes packed and warmed up I felt just a few drops, time to put your head down and grab a handful. We got away from it for the most part. Had to stop for pie in Chitina. After you cross the Copper River it is 60 miles of dirt road to McCarthy and some of the most incredible scenery, and of course, angry mamma black bears.

So there she was bigger than....well bigger than your average rottwieler anyways. My first reaction seemed to make sense to me, stop now. Mikey, however, had a different idea, his was more like "OOOOOH LOOOOOOK a bear! And a cute little cub too! Hey Kev! Look.....kev? I was a good 100ft behind him, bike in gear and half turned around waiting for him to realize that he had gotten way too close to mamma, about 20ft. I think she was in what experts like to refer to as "Fight or flight" mode and she wasn't running away. There was a tense few moments of silence and stillness, mamma was sizing up the situation. I heard the "grrrchunk" of a DR650 getting into gear (or was that Mikeys brain finally getting into gear? I think both) at that moment, after baby was accounted for, she slowly walked into the woods, giving us a "next time buddy" look. Mikey looked back at me with with bugged out eyes, they said enough. I gave him the "I had your back the whole time dude" look and we were off again.

The town of McCarthy is a must do on the Alaska list. There is a foot/motorcycle bridge that does not allow cars to get into town. It is a tiny town with a huge party spirit. I think most Alaskans spend a lot of time locked down due to bad weather, so watch out when the sun shines, its party time. There was a fun bar there but there is no way I'm gonna remember the name of that one. I woke up the next morning with a headache and all my money was gone, I must have had a great time.

Next day was Thompson pass, stunning, truly majestic, those are the best words I can come up with and they don't cut it. The following day was the Legendary Denali Highway (after stopping for pie). We finally caught a little rain but there was no dampening our spirits. I decided to break away and get out front for a little "one with nature" time, as I rode through this amazing country I was thinking that the scenery just doesn't seem to stop, just then I noticed a bald eagle off to my left, he was effortlessly pacing me, pretty cool. The halfway stop on the Denali highway is Gracious house, another cool mountain lodge type place with a fun bar called the Sluice Box. Dad was elected to take over as temporary bartender because the man behind the bar wore several hats, one of which was tow truck driver and an RV full of Germans had just gone kaput.

Randy came in out of the rain, he had rented a V-strom from the same place we did, he was going it alone and having the trip of a lifetime. He taught us the adventure rider salute "FYFF" chatted for a bit and he was on his way.

Another must do is Petersville, bring your bear spray, I didn't see

them but you get far enough out on an Alaskan dirt road and you can kinda feel 'em. On a clear day Mt.McKinley is right in front of you, impossible to miss. This area was the most remote and reassured me that true wilderness can still be found and appreciated without paying an entrance fee.

All in all this was an amazing ride, I give a lot of credit to AK Rider Tours (akrider.com) for picking some great places to stay and ride, we all agreed on that. The bikes held up fine and we laid down 1326 miles in six days. The crew was friendly and helpful even if we didn't need it. They say that they have a whole herd of beemers for next year and a few new tours. This a great way to test ride a bike you are thinking of buying, on that subject, I heard a rumor of a Buell Ulysses and I have my fingers crossed for a KTM adventure.

I have many more memories that I could share, but I say go out and make some of your own. The best time seems to be July and August. I have spent some time adding up the numbers, flying up and renting a bike made way more sense to me, time wise and money wise, besides, I figured I'd be pretty beat by the time I got there had I ridden the Alcan. I strongly suggest that you put this one on your "to do before I die" list. Alaska has some wonderful surprises and the home made pies are great.

Keep the rubber side down.

-Kevin O' Shaughnessy.