



GREAT ADVENTURE ON A PLANETARY SCALE. BASI GREAT RIDE

Top right: The Warner Valley wetland
in stunning autumn hues.
Background: Wildhorse Lake, orphaned
by a glacier and lost in time, as viewed
from the summit of The Steens.

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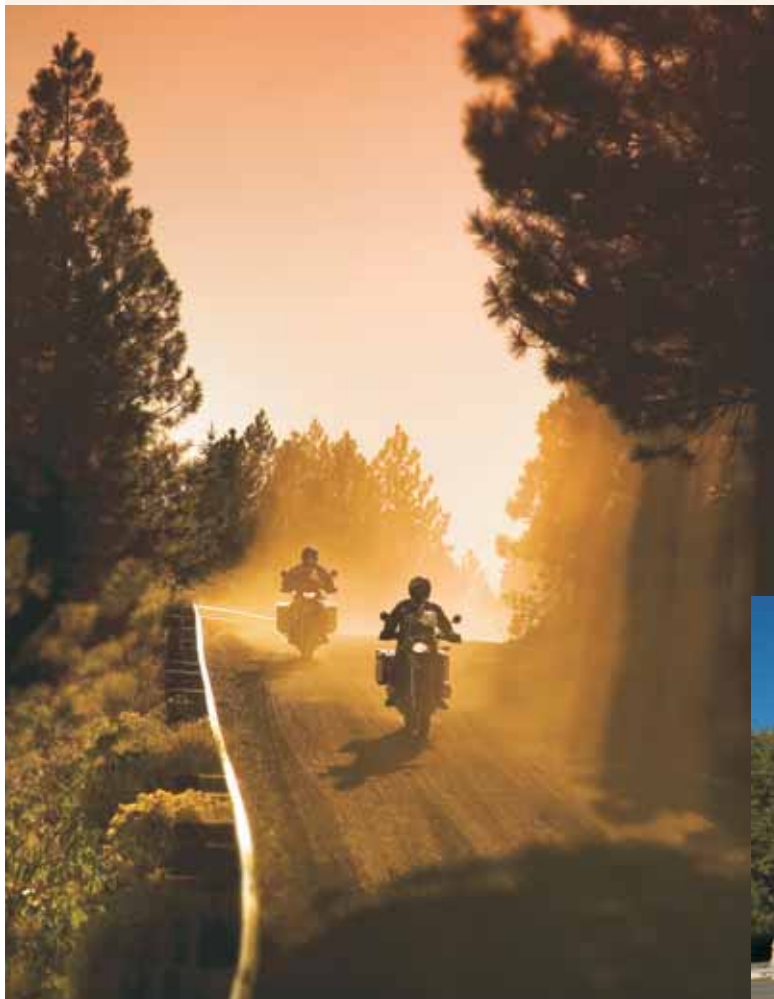


Quick, you old experienced touring rider out there, arise and identify the largest physical feature of the American West. The Rocky Mountains you say? Sorry, Larry. Take your seat. Think of the Great Basin and 210,000 square miles of six western states. Cogitate upon a vast region of the West where all the drainage runs down to the convoluted bed of an ancient inland sea the size of several European countries.

I've lived here in Big Valley in northeast California about 60 miles from the western edge of the Great Basin for 12 or 13 years now, I've lost count, a good thing I think. What you are about to read written just for you by your aging *Rider* founder was a ride I'd been anticipating for years. At last, finally, coming to my senses that life is indeed short, I called my master lensman friend Dominic Bonuccelli (see *You Can Ride Home Again, Rider*, November 2005) and said, "Yo Domino, how about following me and my GS on a 1,000-mile loop through the last lonely country in the west?" He agreed to a paltry fee. And he brought along his best friend Ryan Grey Smith, a successful architect from Seattle who rides an '03 BMW F650GS. Ah, Beemers in the Basin. It had a nice ring to it.

Cedarville, California—We ride over mile-high Cedar Pass in the Warner Mountains to Surprise Valley. Before we reach the valley floor there is a wooden sign posted along the road that reads “Entering the Great Basin.” Trust me, the sign is unnecessary. The brilliance of light and shadow, the clarity of the air, the scale of the whole world yawning away to a stark, arid, towering mountain range splayed against a huge pale sky to the east in Nevada—you don’t need a wooden sign to inform you that you have entered The Big Empty, and in this day and age, how joyful is that? The Sunrise Motel is our base here. It’s an old-fashioned kind of lodging where you park your motorcycle 3 feet from the door of your room. The manager reminds me of my favorite aunt. Cedarville was a trading post, a small log cabin in 1865. By 1867 it was a bigger business that supplied early ranchers with necessary goods. Today the two-story Cressler and Bonner brick building in downtown Cedarville stands mute to all the frontier history it has survived, but steel shutters (forged in 19th-century San Francisco) on all the doors and windows suggest it wasn’t always easy. You can still buy a saddle here, and thanks to the new world order, next door to the redolent-with-leather saddle shop you can get a passable turkey Panini at the

Below: Descending the summit of the Fandango Pass.



Surprise Café and Java Bar. Here also in a ground floor storefront of the C and B building is Floating Island Books, a treasure trove of Great Basin literature and maps run by my Bay Area ex-pat friend Mike Sykes. Mike’s is the ideal location from where to launch the tour. Much of the following was inspired by perusing resources here.

Summit of Fandango Pass, Warner Mountains, elevation 5,884-feet. This 12-mile side trip to check out the memorial to the thousands of emigrants who passed this way with their ox-drawn wagons on the Applegate Trail in the mid-19th century on their way to Oregon is our first taste of the more than 400 miles of gravel roads to come on this tour. Your machine is going to get dusty, and you’ll worry about losing parts on the washboards, but gravel roads take you to places like this where history just whups you upside the head, where precisely here at this spot on October 3, 1848, Captain J. Goldsborough Bruff entered in his journal the following: “One wagon with women and children in it...became uncoupled and downhill it ran stern first with great rapidity, the women and children screamed, men shouted...a dead ox a



Far right: The historic Cressler and Bonner building, downtown Cedarville. Right: Rock-hopping Pate Lake on our way to the summit of The Steens.



short distance in front of a heavy team brought up the backing (up) vehicle most luckily without damage to anyone.” A few miles north of here situated on a windswept grassy hill above the 1863-1893 military post of Fort Bidwell is a quarry stone school building with broken windows and boarded doors where the last classes were held about 60 years ago. If this evocative scene doesn’t stir some old longing in your

chest, you're losing touch with the kid you used to be. Don't let it happen.

Next day, what a day. The 40 miles of gravel byway that connects Fort Bidwell to Adel, Oregon, is so remote there's a sign at the California-Oregon border posted by a local ranch: The Rattlesnake Ranch Welcomes You To Oregon. Given the dreamy look of the spread from the main gate—horses graze in lush green meadows bordered by rugged rocky hills dotted with juniper and pine, and the only sound is wind rush—it appears to be a venue where you could be very happy with no newspaper, no cell phone,



no Internet, and maybe, if the gods aren't cruel, even no TV. You might miss all those commercials between downs when the Niners are losing, but I don't think so. From Adel, where you briefly pick up pavement again, you ride east into the Warner Valley where you will see a long string of pothole lakes that are remnants of a great Pleistocene sea. You will pause to gas up at the Hart Mountain General Store in Plush.

Left: A pause that refreshed us.
Below: Descending the summit of The Steens.

Yes, you're reading it right, Plush. Plush, Oregon. It's called Plush because of a local celebrity who was a member of the Paiute tribe. He got into a poker game with several palefaces sometime in 1888. The game was a set-up. The Indian was dealt a flush by another member of the party who held a better hand. He couldn't pronounce the word flush and called it plush and that's how history pivots.

Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. Here you ride on a rooftop of the Great Basin, an 8,000-foot fault block mountain that encompasses a 278,000-acre unfenced home to herds of the fastest land animals in North America, and you see plenty of them making like tan-white blurs across these seemingly endless high plains that have been their ancestral home for thousands of years, their great speed evolved from a time when two species of cheetahs hunted this region. Here upon this drift of wild, wide-open land you get the sense this isn't such a crowded country after all, but the Northern Paiutes would have argued that point. Their country was getting plenty crowded by 1866 when General George C. Crook, "The greatest Indian fighter in U.S. history" (according to General William T. Sherman) established Camp Warner up here to protect the growing influx of white settlers from people who preceded them by 11,000 years. The human cost of the mother of all blizzards that fatal winter, well described in the general's autobiography, forced closure of the post a year later. All that's left of this history are two lone white gravestones virtually hidden in a copse of trees 15 miles from the refuge headquarters in a setting I would describe as the middle of nowhere. We wouldn't have found the site without Ryan's persistence. Inscribed on the stones: Edward Cantrell, Sarg Co B, 23 US Inf 1846-1867, and Lewis Debold, Pvt Co D, 14 US Inf 1847-1866.

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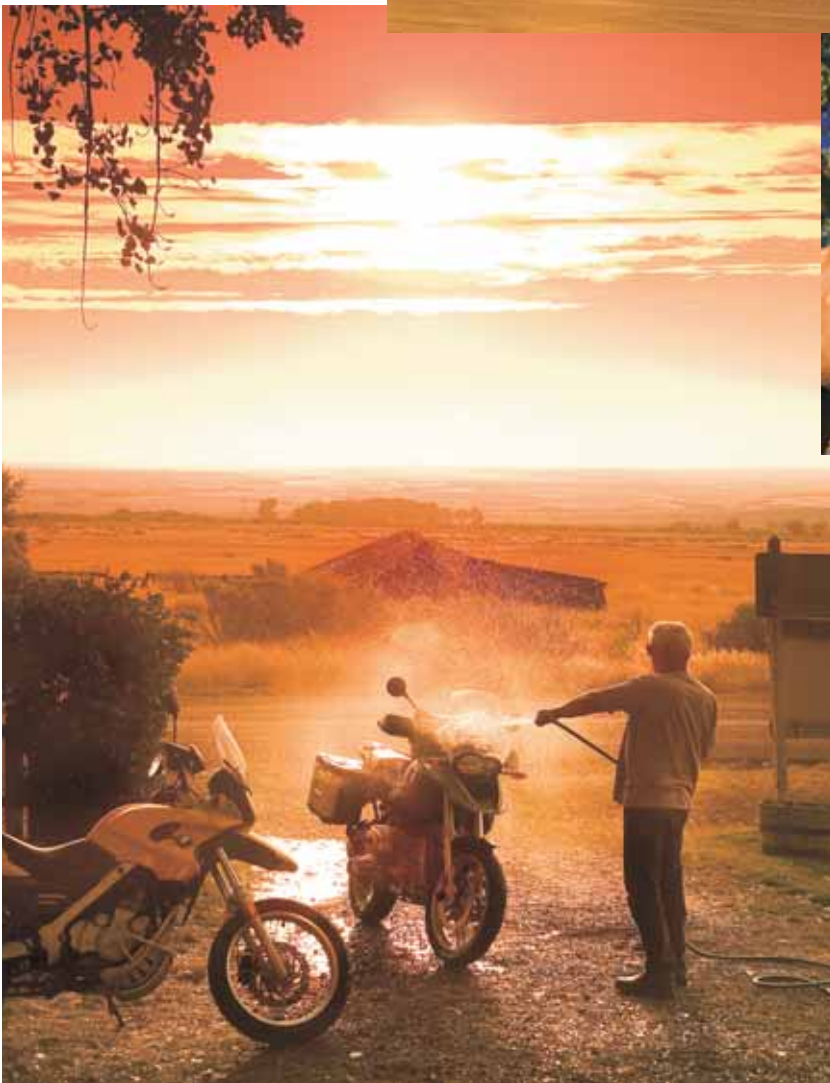
Frenchglen, Oregon. Pete French arrived here in 1873 with orders from his wealthy father-in-law, Dr. Hugh Glenn, to buy grazing land. French bought the P-Ranch and ended up with 200,000 acres. Unfortunately he was shot dead by a rival homesteader in 1897, so he didn't participate in the early 20th-century P-Ranch project to erect lodging for its guests that stands today as the Frenchglen Hotel, an Oregon State Heritage Site. The family style meals served here by manager John Ross and his staff are famous and reason enough to ride a long way to get here, the thick tender slices of roast pork with pineapple in the gravy would have had Salvadori in a rave dance were he with us that night. But even better than the fare in the hotel is the eye candy during your 75-mile ride that loops around the summit of the mountain here known as The Steens, a 9,700-foot fault-block mountain driven skyward

by awesome forces, and then a million years ago in a winter that lasted centuries, bulldozer glaciers 1,000-foot thick scoured huge rents in the earth like the Kiger Gorge. You park your machine at the top of the cirque here and your jaw drops and your knees weaken and you think, not in Glacier National Park, not in Yosemite Valley, nowhere else have you seen the complexion of the planet as dramatic as this. As if to put an exclamation point on things, as we park the bikes and walk a

Right: If old buildings could talk, what stories we'd hear, especially from this one in McDermitt, Nevada.

Below right: Welcome to the Rattlesnake Ranch.

Below: Clean-up in the front yard of the Frenchglen Hotel.



quarter-mile foot path to the summit of the mountain where the enormous view is of three states, a wild September thunderstorm careens in with howling winds and lightning flashes and grapeshot hail and plunging temperatures. Ah, memories are made of this.

Another day I'd term, what a day. Down to Fields, Oregon, population 14, early for breakfast, too early for one of their famous milkshakes but in plenty of time for one of their colossal breakfasts, like three eggs over easy on top of a load of hash browns covered with cheese sauce, and if you can't make up your mind about ham, bacon or sausage you get all three.

After breakfast, we head north on the East Steens 60-mile-long gravel "highway" to connect with pavement again at Highway 78, and then south on Highway 95 to Winnemucca, but not without first soaking in a hot spring along the way in the Alvord Desert, and while enjoying the soak staring upward at the vertical eastern walls of the Steens awash in golden morning light. We make it to Winnemucca in time to have a Basque din-din at The Martin Hotel (since

1885) astride the railroad tracks where we're not in Nevada anymore but rather in northern Spain, in family home-evening San Sebastian, where the lamb shanks fall off the bone and there are spices in the hominy and chorizo appetizer that smell exactly like the rain-dampened desert sagebrush we've been inhaling for 300 miles. There are meals you will always remember and this is one of them.

On tours like this I usually take a relevant book to read along the way. The one I pack this time is *Life Among The Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, written by Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins in 1883, granddaughter, daughter and sister of a succession of Northern Paiute chiefs. Her remarkable book is the first ever written by an American Indian in English, the eloquent personal record of a peoples' great struggle to cope with their fracturing world. She writes of her grandfather when he first encountered "his white brothers" and unsuccessfully tried to gain their trust: "I can imagine his feelings for I have drunk deeply from the same cup. When I think of my past life and the bitter trials I have endured I can scarcely believe I live and yet I do; and with the help of Him who notes the sparrow's



fall, I mean to fight for my downtrodden race while life lasts." Before leaving town, we ride to Winnemucca Grammar School (1890) to view Sarah's statue that honors her in the foyer of this stunning old brick school building emblazoned with symbols of Paiute theology (appropriate since among her many accomplishments she founded an Indian school in Lovelock). Her bronze likeness is also on permanent display in the Nevada State Capitol in Carson City and in The National Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., where on behalf of her people she once testified before Congress. She died October 16, 1891. A great, great lady. The manager of the Best Western motel on Winnemucca Boulevard where we stayed (I recommend it highly) told me that at sunset in just the right light and shadow the visages of the chief and his daughter occur naturally and are plainly visible on the reddening face of Winnemucca Mountain. I had no trouble believing it.



Gerlach, Nevada. Once again, what a day. A hundred miles of gravel road, some of the roughest we've encountered, between Winnemucca, where the Applegate Trail begins on the banks of the Humboldt River, and the old railroad town of Gerlach situated on the edge of The Black Rock Desert. Gerlach is essentially a one-man town. Bruno Selmi, he's 85 now, took a boat over from Lucca, Italy, after World War II and ended up here on the moon working his tail off at the U.S. Gypsum drywall plant a few miles down the highway in the company town of Empire. He figured if he was going to work that hard he might as well build something for himself, so it wasn't long afterward he established what is today known as Bruno's Country Club, the only casino, café, saloon, motel, gas station in town.

Above: Ryan atop the cirque of the Kiger Gorge.
Above left: Pausing on the highway to Winnemucca.
Left: Sarah Winnemucca and another great American in the foyer of Winnemucca Grammar School.



In 1950, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift, Arthur Miller (then still Marilyn's brilliant suffering husband), John Huston and the rest of the crew showed up to make *The Misfits* on the playa of the Black Rock Desert. Ask Bruno about this and he'll tell you about Lucille, a Reno woman who left her husband for a tough Gerlach cowboy, a rodeo guy and that Miller based Marilyn's character in the *Misfits* screenplay on guess who. Bruno's accent is still serious goomba and Dominic has family in Lucca, speaks the language passably and swears Bruno is a dead ringer for his grandfather, so you can imagine the repartee. It's just this wonderful evening and the specialty of the house that night is chicken parmesan, sauce by Bruno. In the morning I blurt, Hey Bruno, how about prosciutto and eggs for breakfast? He says, I got prosciutto. Let me just say this: Breakfast, heck, the whole Gerlach deal turns out to be one of the most truly memorable occasions I've ever experienced on the road.



Above: Somewhere on the lonely planet between Gerlach and Eagleville.
Right: Ride 'em along the East Steens "Highway."

Eagleville, California. Back in Surprise Valley in this idyllic quiet old ranch town where soaring heights of the South Warner Wilderness form a stunning mountainous backdrop, the loop is closing toward finale. Earlier a few miles north of Gerlach we postponed it for a while with a visit to John Bogard's Planet X compound,



Above: Ryan walks the line between Winnemucca and Gerlach.

where his mastery of ceramic art is displayed in dioramas of the ethereal beauty of this remote region of the Great Basin. At home we'll inscribe our journey on a map and realize there are 209,000 square miles out there we still need to ride. We'll be back. ³⁴

