



It's every hunter's lament: The things you see when you don't have a gun. In my case I was in San Francisco, about to ride down Lombard St (the world's twistiest), when I found the way blocked by a posse of Segway riders. This lot were exaggerating the moment far beyond its worth, as they trickled down the admittedly steep hill, but really they were playing 'look at me.'

My view is that if you're going to ride a two-wheeler, have the wheels in line, and rely on skill and co-ordination to stay upright. Yet at the bottom they were whooping and hollering, giving each other high fives as if they'd accomplished some wondrous feat.

Ha, for that you need to go back to the 70s, when Doug Domokos wheeled a Moto-X bike down that same street, a genuinely impressive accomplishment (check it out at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNa360R75aw>. Ed). All I have in common with Doug is that we were both

Kawasaki mounted (me, 650 Versys) and 40 years apart.

EIGHT-DAY RIDE

Just finishing a 4000km eight-day ride through California, the Versys was one of Dubbelju Motorcycle Rentals' fleet of 45 bikes covering all genres and brands from commuting 250s through mid-sized adventure bikes to touring Harley-Davidsons. The oddly spelt company name is pronounced like the letter W, the first of business owner Wolfgang Taft's name.

Wolfgang started the business (see www.dubbelju.com for more details) 20 years ago, and has a comprehensive riding knowledge of the best places to tour. I had asked him to suggest a route that would take in dramatic and varied scenery (mountains, forests, coastline, rivers, deserts) and great motorcycle roads, which are not always the same. His advice is priceless.

WEATHER WATCH

When I'd arrived, my naivety was exposed

– as the rain poured down I wondered aloud about the song's line, 'It Never Rains in California', but Wolfgang reminded me that the song refers to Southern California.

And while I only had to put up with rain in San Francisco, further south and inland, on my intended route over the 3048 metres (10,000 foot) high Tioga Pass through Yosemite National Park, the rain became snow, and all routes across the Sierra Nevada mountains were closed.

Change of plan, and after viewing the on-line weather radar, we decided I should follow the coastal road, past Monterey and Big Sur, with their forest and wave-pounded cliff views, south through the storm, and return to the Sierras in several days time, once the snow had melted or been cleared.

FABULOUS ROAD

And can I just at this point say what a fabulous road US1 is – smooth and winding as it follows the land's contours, but mostly with No Passing double lines along its length.

In which Racing Dave fulfills a long-held ambition of flying to the United States, hiring a bike and checking out some of northern California's best highways and byways.

HOTEL CALIFORNIA



Not a problem; in California drivers are aware of a motorcycle's advantages and readily pull over in the many 'turnouts' to allow safe (and legal!) overtaking.

The following day was a long one, as I headed east, over several moderately high ranges of hills, across wide and flat plains, and into much drier country. A navigation error in Bakersfield caused me to choose an unplanned route to rejoin my intended one, and what a joy it was – just the first three gears were used for an hour, crossing several saddles as I twisted my way north through cowboy movie terrain in the increasing heat.

Now entering serious desert country, I was surprised to discover that the road had gained some real altitude (and barely any traffic confirmed the remoteness of the area) as I crossed at 2400 metres (8000 feet) into Death Valley. My overnight stop was to be at sea level, in Stovepipe Wells on that arid region's boundary, and the temperature rose as quickly as I descended.

HOT AND DRY

Due to the lack of any humidity, the morning dawned cool, but by my departure at

8:00 it was clearly going to be a scorcher. After passing through the aptly named Furnace Creek, my first stop was at Badwater (also aptly named, being a near-dry salt lake), and at 24 metres (282 feet) below sea level it's the lowest point in America. And the hottest!

The heat accompanied me to my destination for that day, Las Vegas. For the experience, I stayed in one of the main resorts on The Strip, and indeed it was an experience. So is the traffic – even with six to eight lanes in both directions, it barely moves. Being in Nevada, lane splitting is illegal (yet there's no helmet law, go figure) but I found my digs, and soaked up the completely outrageous atmosphere. The only difference between La Vegas and Alice's Restaurant is that in Vegas you really can get anything that you want, including Alice.

DEATH VALLEY

The next day again dawned cool, but my ride through a different route north across Death Valley was again very hot. I reckon it would have been 30° C in the shade, but there was no shade, just sand, shingle, and

Racing Dave in the heart of Death Valley (main pic), providing us proof that he wasn't kidding about the Segway-mounted tourists on Lombard St (below) and on the coastal road south from San Francisco.





In the hills above Lake Isabella,

the fewest of scrubby plants.

However, several more 2400 metre (8000 foot) passes had the temperature back to quite pleasant, and with the snow-covered Sierra Nevadas now on my left, I paralleled that range to Big Pine for the night.

Wolfgang had advised me of a lookout in the nearby Bristlecone Forest and I wanted the sun behind me for a photo. Again, it was cool in the morning and about to get much cooler. Bristlecone is at 3352 metres (11,000 feet and for comparison's sake Mt Cook is only just over 12,000 feet), so is 14-degrees colder than the 1220 metre (4000-foot) altitude of Big Pine, and I rode through my first snow of the trip – if only I'd known what I'd see that afternoon...

PERFECT CONDITION

The 100km return for the photo was on a steeply winding road that was in perfect condition – good visibility, smooth surface, plenty of grip – and the sight of the snow-capped peaks was worth the two-hour ride.

Further north, it was obvious that the weather in the mountains was deteriorat-

ing, but I'd heard of an abandoned Wild West town that was worth a visit. Bodie (no sign of Doyle!) is at 2400 metres (8000 feet), and in the 1870s was a rich source of gold, with over \$US100,000,000 worth extracted from the harsh terrain.

As the gold ran out, however, so did the miners. A fire burnt down large parts of the town in the early 1930s, and by the '40s it was deserted. Now a nationally protected site, the corrugated, pot-holed, and rocky shingle road leading to Bodie is a reminder of how grim life was. Many of the remaining buildings are as they were left, still complete with furniture, and it's a sobering experience to explore the area.

SLEET, WIND & RAIN

Signs showed that Tioga Pass was open, but on the climb to that summit I braced myself for the obvious wintry conditions ahead. The ranger at the tollbooth wished me well but I could see he was anxious about the road ahead.

Compared to a New Zealand alpine pass, where because you climb to the top and immediately descend, inclement

weather has only a short effect, the Sierras are a contrast. For two hours I was riding above 2700 metres (9000 feet), with the sleet, wind, and rain battering me, and with a foot of snow on the roadsides, I was very careful and fairly slow.

Too slow, as it turned out, to keep my visor fog-free so visibility became of some concern, but eventually I made my way out, with the cheerful grin from the exit ranger adding to my feeling of accomplishment.

Now warm, and still dry, as I looked for that night's billet, I came by chance across the riding highlight of the whole trip. A 30 km newly sealed road was car-free, swooped across three sets of hills, had all the corners either constant radius or opening, and all the camber either flat or positive – a racetrack by any other name!

The Kawasaki 650 was given its head and although only of modest power and with comparatively ordinary brakes and suspension, I had a genuinely thrilling finish to the day.

GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME!

The disappointment with the weather vanished when the weather cleared overnight, and crisp sunshine greeted me the next morning. Although my intended route over the 2700 metre (9000+ ft) Sonoma Pass was blocked by fresh snow, signs to the more northerly (and merely 2500m/8500 ft) Ebbetts Pass indicated that it was open but icy. Good enough for me!

For scenery, this was the trip's highlight – massive tree-clad rocky bluffs, lakes, snow-topped mountains, and all bathed in bright sunlight – it was picture perfect. The hours of riding were superb, too, particularly on the descent.

Normal steep downhills had signs giving the grade at 6% to 9%. This was 24%, and with hairpin bends that if you misjudged the radius would have you in a three-point turn.

Come Ride California



We have bikes priced between US\$99 and US\$239/day depending on the model. Example: Kawasaki Versys (used by Dave in the above story) NZ\$172/day (3-9 days rate, based on today's exchange rate for US\$139)

All bikes come with panniers at no extra charge. The rental price also includes unlimited free miles, extra lock, 24 hour roadside assistance, and free trip planning.

See www.dubbelju.com for a list of bikes, more information and other magazine reviews. We are located a short shuttle ride from the airport.

DUBBELJU Motorcycle Rentals & Storage.
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BISCUITS 'N GRAVY!

The afternoon, further north again, saw me crossing the Sierras westward on Carson's Pass (a tiddler at just 2400 metres/8000 ft) with the longest, fastest, smoothest descent I encountered.

That night I stayed in a B&B in the tiny yet charming town of Camino, where breakfast included that gastronomic delight, biscuits and gravy. Now I know what a scone swimming in cat sick looks and tastes like!

This day was to be my final outing in the Nevada Range, eastward to Lake Tahoe, a summer boating and fishing paradise and a fabulous ski area in winter. Although sunny again, at 1828 metres (6000 feet), the air was cold until the afternoon and as I wound through the hills to the north I once again found a river-hugging, railway-overlooking, smoothly sweeping set of bends that lasted

another hour.

Sensory overload, later ameliorated by a wide flat plain where traffic built from the nearby Yerba City.

ALL GOOD THINGS...

My final night in the faded-from-glory town of Clear Lake (I thought it was seedy, Wolfgang called it characterful, but a walk along the lakeshore in the warm evening sunshine made all seem well with the world) had me eating in the best value restaurant I found, Howard's Grotto. Unprepossessing on the outside, delightful on the inside, and a four-course meal, including tax and tip, for just \$20.

I'd estimated two hours from here to San Francisco, and after crossing two more newly sealed fast roads over saddles and one first-and-second-gear-only narrow rough road over three saddles into the wine producing area of Napa Valley, I joined the

traffic madness of 101 south-bound to the Golden Gate bridge.

Between four and six lanes wide, and barely moving. Not sure of the etiquette on a freeway (can motorbikes use carpool lanes or lane split?), and riding (riding? crawling, more like) directly behind a CHP officer's patrol car, I was uncertain until another motorcyclist eased by, waved to the cop, and carried on unconcerned. Me too!

FINAL PHOTOS

I joined his wake and we soon cleared the gridlock before riding over the famous landmark into the city, with a view of Alcatraz Island to the east. I took my final photos at the centre of the 60s hippy culture, the Haight Ashbury district (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair), and the previously mentioned twistiest street, before returning the Versys to Dubbelju.



Rush hour on 'The Strip' in Las Vegas and where else but America.....

TOURING TIPS

I had decided to wear my Triumph adventure gear. This is excellent. With the jacket's seven, and the pant's two, vents open and just tee-shirt and shorts beneath, the desert heat caused me no discomfort, and with the waterproof linings fitted and wearing a jersey, in the freezing rain of Yosemite I was completely dry, including my feet.

WORDS OF WISDOM

Before I left, (from Dubbelju it's a five-block walk to the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit, San Francisco's underground) station at tourist central, Powell Street, from which a train travels to the airport) I had another chance to talk to Wolfgang, who, like all his staff, is a regular rider, and he has put almost 100,000kms (60,000 miles) on his personal BMW R 1200 GS.

He told me that most of his stock is

under two years old, and are sold from adverts on his website. He also stores customer's privately owned bikes and riding gear, and services their bikes to keep them ready for their owners to enjoy when in California.

RENTAL PACKAGES

Bikes may be rented for just the day and they have a selection of riding gear and helmets as well. Most bikes can have luggage added (my Kawasaki 650 Versys proved ideal for solo traveling, its torquey engine pulling sixth gear up most hills and averaging 22 km/litre, and had provision for panniers and a top box, but I travel lighter than that) where appropriate.

California has much to offer the motorcycle enthusiast, with cheap petrol (91, the highest grade, varied from US90 cents to US\$1.20 per litre), superbly maintained roads, excellent signage, and extremely varied scenery. The speed limit changes frequently and I saw every five

mph increment from 25 to 70 mph.

Without exception, everyone I met was polite, friendly, and helpful. Many enquired about Christchurch's recovery from the earthquakes (they are very aware of those risks) but when in return I asked what they thought of the USA's results in the Rugby World Cup, none had heard of it, nor cared. Me neither, it's not important!

On the open road, I noted that touring Harley-Davidsons just edged out Gold Wings for most popular bike, with various BMWs a distant third and everything else a very distant fourth.

MUCH TO OFFER

Dubbelju Motorcycle Rentals also has much to offer the motorcycle enthusiast, and my holiday was stress-free thanks principally to Wolfgang and Cherie, who handled my booking efficiently, and who were dedicated to ensuring that all went well. **KR**