

story and photos by RICHARD SZPIN

# TAKEN FOR A RIDE

## *...in the Rockies!*



Last summer, I rode Western Canada for two months, and in that time I was taken for a ride, a guided tour with a group of riders through the Canadian Rockies.

What led me to consider a guided group motorcycle tour? Like going on

an all-inclusive holiday, on a cruise, or to a resort, you can expect service and pampering, and I got it: daily bike washing, excellent hotels, great dining, very knowledgeable riding guides that were both personable and affable, challenging rides, outstanding scenery, curious encounters with wildlife, and “hand-holding” such as fuel stops

when they were the last thing in the world I would have been thinking about. I got all that, including advice that improved my riding skills.

Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays Limited ([www.rockymtnmoto.com](http://www.rockymtnmoto.com)) specializes in guided group tours in the Canadian West. Last July, I joined their tour that left Calgary, Alberta, destined for Whistler, British Columbia. The great number of forest fires raging throughout central B.C. would force a number of changes to the tour, but it was still a tremendous experience.



Prior to the excellent dinner at the first orientation meeting, the company's message to the group was clear. "Let us take care of the rest of your holiday!" After signing all the required liability, rental and waiver documents, we had the opportunity to meet our fellow riders. While a rider could use his or her own motorcycle for the tour, the organization offered a rental option as well, with a great selection of bikes from which to choose. The choices included in the English metal mounts are the Triumph Tiger 955i, Tiger 1050 and the Sprint ST1050, while the German stable of steel contain the BMW R1200RT, R1200GS, K1200S (a sports beauty with incredible stability) or the F650GS... a super collection of bikes. Also available are Harley-Davidson touring bikes and a Suzuki GSX650F. Each participant also received an information manual that provided the day's final destination and a descriptive itinerary. With this, your family at home could follow you every day from a map.

Each day, we started with a safety talk highlighting the roads we were about to ride, what to expect, potential hazards and the riding protocol. The last item meant that one

of the crew would lead the group, riding near the speed limit with rock steadiness in the left-hand tire track of the lane. The rest of us were to follow in staggered group riding formation.

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If someone wanted to separate from the pack, they were free to do so, as we were always informed of our hotel destination for that day. A 'tail gunner' who rode last in the group would accompany the solo adventurer, a security precaution that was particularly beneficial

for any riders unfamiliar with the Canadian terrain.

The tour headed south and west from Calgary, riding through Black Diamond and Turner Valley, Alberta's famous oil country, and then into arguably the most scenic riding area in all of Alberta, the Kananaskis Valley, via the village of Longview. The main highway through the valley, Hwy 40, has it all for a motorcycle enthusiast: Rocky Mountain foothills, tree-lined glass-smooth roads, wildlife encounters with mountain goats, elk and even bear, and a great hotel complex in the Kananaskis Village where one can have an authentic western lunch at Woody's Bar with some unique ethnic fare, pierogi (the Ukrainian version of ravioli). The ride through the Kananaskis Valley is stupendous, peaking at the Highwood Pass, the highest drivable pass in Canada at over 2200 metres above sea level.

I really enjoyed guided motorcycle touring because its many benefits made me, a first-time participant, feel secure and reassured all the time. This reassurance wasn't tested until a few days later as we began our Rocky Mountain crossing. We would experience hairpin turns and



switchbacks, ess-bends and sudden changes in road elevation. The unexpectedness of these many road dynamics made all of us sharpen our riding concentration. Also, knowing that each of the guides are trained in first aid and that the support van was equipped with a basic medical kit put everyone at ease.

Usually our daily riding began after breakfast, commencing about 8:30 a.m. and ending about 4 p.m. The company tries to screen the riders for experience, and each rider in my tour group demonstrated great competence. No matter how challenging the routes, each one met the test with great success. Still, one must be fit with good stamina and capable of riding for long days. We stopped regularly for a rest or for refueling, and always, one of the ride guides would wash every rider's face shield, a perk that spoiled me for life. Now, when I stop after riding for a while, I almost take off my helmet ready to hand it to someone for washing.

Driving further west, our riding capabilities were tested more and more, particularly in the region of New Denver, just west of Lake Kootenay and north of Nelson, B.C. In this area, Hwy 31A has roads with hard corners and sharp switchbacks with surprising

drops and rises; all told, it made for amazing riding. We had to ride cautiously, not just because of the demands of the road layout but also because of the animals. In this instance, it was cattle grazing right along the roadside, sometimes even wandering onto the highway itself.

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As we entered ranching country, the scenery really changed. Sunburnt brown grass and grey log-post fences surrounded old barnboarded homesteads. Majestic in their stance,

small groups of horses were corralled behind the log fences as they grazed freely in the sun-baked grassy fields. I recognized that I was really riding through Western Canada, the real west.

Next we rode the Okanagan Valley, southward from Kelowna. This part of British Columbia is the hottest region of Canada with unexpected sweltering heat and temperatures reaching 40. This is the most northerly desert area of North America, the Great Basin Desert, and it is hot. Leather is a reasonable protective barrier against the heat while riding, but at any stop lasting longer than a couple of minutes in this part of Canada in July, gear becomes unbearable very quickly. The riding was great, as roads were flat but still curvy. We rode south from Penticton using Hwy 97, through Oliver, to the town of Osoyoos, where we stayed at a superb resort.

Our planned route to Whistler had to be altered because of the catastrophic number of fires in the British Columbia interior, particularly in the area of Lillooet, our intended direction. We could see the grayish-black plumes of smoke rising from the distant mountains, and occasionally the wind would carry the acrid smell of smoke down to where we were, telling us that



the fire situation was indeed dangerous. This smoke signal, along with the RCMP's travel warnings, convinced our guides to abandon our original riding plans and detour south to Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver. Disappointed, the group still found enjoyment in riding through the agricultural centre of southern B.C., where we now entered more cosmopolitan and commercial areas that contrasted with the natural, pastoral settings of the earlier days.

Doing a guided group motorcycle tour was a novel but very rewarding experience. Our riding routes were chosen with care based on extensive knowledge. The roads of the tour offered a variety of riding scenarios from numerous tight curves, at times blind, and sometimes with sudden elevation changes, to gentle and



sweeping corners with spectacular scenery.

In my view, Western Canada is a rider's paradise, with Alberta and British Columbia offering some of the

very best riding in all of Canada. For the solo traveller, and for your first tour of Western Canada, doing it as part of a guided group tour can be an outstanding experience. **MMM**