

Exploring Western Canada with Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays

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The engine's gravelly purr stirs my soul as I untwist ribbons of asphalt with a Speed Triple's telepathic handling. A sense of discovery guides me through glacial valleys, into river canyons and over mountain passes. Encountering a car or other multi-wheeled nuisance is a blissfully rare occurrence as I hug the coast of impossibly turquoise-coloured lakes and race along rivers churning violently with spring run off. Luggage is being beamed into first-rate hotel rooms before my arrival and my machine is somehow free from yesterday's remains of suicidal insects. Oh, and there's food too. A dream? Of course, but it's a dream I lived one week in June

Whistler, British Columbia, is a place known much more for its skiing than motorcycle touring. If you listen to the locals, several years of being voted a top ski destination has taken a small share of its charm away, but I found it a beautiful location to start a motorcycle adventure. Guides from Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays met our international group for the first evening for a briefing and introduction to the motorcycles. Our assembly had members representing Germany, France, Great Britain and the USA. The varied backgrounds and senses of humour would lead to many entertaining evenings around the dinner tables and dartboards.

Triumph's wide range of motorcycles fills most of motorcycling's niches commendably, and Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays has nearly all of them. I didn't have much experience on the newest generation of British bikes; my last substantial experience was a temperamental 1995 Speed Triple, which I sold a few years ago. If you have ever watched the Speed Triple Challenge back in the mid-nineties and saw the frequent pile-ups on turn one you know what I am talking about. I loved that bike, but it was planning my eventual and gruesome end from day one. Anyway, today's Triumphs are a different story, and I was in for a revelation.

My first two days were aboard the Tiger, as the new Speed Triple was to be delivered mid-way through the trip. Triumph's answer to adventure touring was a surprise. I didn't think much of the new styling over the old version, but as soon as I hopped on and felt its handling and power I was a believer. A chase truck with a trailer and spare bikes left little use for saddlebags, though each of the bikes were fitted with an excellent Givi top case for essential items between stops.

During spring through early fall, British Columbia is a stunning destination for motorcyclists. The basic ingredients – good roads, low population, magnificent scenery and friendly locals at every stop – make British Columbia a

destination just this side of heaven. A tour can only be as good as the guides and Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays has some of the best imaginable. Robert Smith, a soft-spoken Englishman and self-proclaimed motorcycle nut, gave even the rustiest motorcyclist the confidence to get through the toughest conditions. World traveler and epicurean extraordinaire Brandon Douglas's knowledge of every decreasing radius turn and gourmet menu limited the risk of nasty spills at the apex and the dinner table. Mike Dyndul, a new comer to the crew, was on his maiden tour and, of course, endured a gentle hazing, but never let it affect his service. Luggage magically appeared in hotel rooms, helmets were cleaned at every stop, bikes were washed every morning, luggage was packed almost without notice and Brandon provided passionately intimate knowledge of every menu on the tour. In fact, almost everything that makes the Holiday run smoothly went unnoticed, but not unappreciated by the guests.

If you have only toured with a spare pair of jeans and a toothbrush, having the chase truck and attentive guides is a spoiling experience. Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays has a reputation for providing luxury tours at reasonable prices and they more than lived up to expectations. I felt stupid letting them handle so many of the mundane details like helmet cleaning and luggage handling, though, after a few days it became quite addictive. I felt like Thurston Howell before the three-hour tour.

Our journey began at a reasonable hour and with a bit of rain, which did little to dampen our spirits. Our guides encouraged us to stay in a relatively tight group at the early stage of the day to ensure everyone's safety as we grew accustomed to new machines and roads. After a couple of hours of light rain the sky cleared and precipitation of any type was banished for the rest of the week. In fact, I began removing layer after layer of motorcycle garb until I was down to my Arizona summer riding gear by the third day. Hey, isn't Canada near the Artic Circle? Regardless, a B.C. summer is a pleasant way to live through the heat.

Pulling in to our first stop near Seton Lake we received the first of the many service touches that would make the trip so enjoyable. As we ogled the emerald waters, drinks were brought out and our helmets cleaned. They seem like small things, but how many times on a long trip have you forgotten to wash your visor at a gas stop, and being too stubborn to pause until the tank is dry again, studying entomology for three more hours?

Easier roads at the beginning of the trip allowed us all to get acquainted with new machines and road rules. A good thing too, as the last few kilometres into Sun Peaks for our first overnight introduced us to vast quantities of "brown ice"; however we all got through our first day without mishap.

You have to get up early to witness the crew prepping for the next day's ride. The only evidence I found most days was rapidly evaporating puddles a

water under each spotless bike. After a hearty breakfast we were off to Salmon Arm and then Revelstoke for the night. Our first stop was Westwold, home to a zany Christmas store of epic proportions. Year round you can buy every conceivable year-end holiday item you can imagine and hundreds more you can't. At the persistent urging of Brandon to try the ice cream at the store nearby, most of us caved and had our second breakfast. Warning- if Brandon is your guide he will talk you into eating more than you know is right – and why not? It's a vacation, not a fasting retreat. Oh well, turn the preload up a click or two. If my bike didn't have luggage at the start it surely did by the end.

This was one of the shorter days on the trip, which allowed us to sample other motorcycles that afternoon on an optional ride along Lake Revelstoke. I tried out the Sprint RS and later a Sprint ST for an afternoon of high- speed scenery surveillance.

The road along Lake Revelstoke was built for the workers at Mica Dam and subsequently very few cars are encountered. A blessing, as wildlife is something you have to constantly watch for. A high-speed encounter with an elk would be unpleasant at best. The Sprint RS surprised me with its performance and handling. Occasionally pausing to photograph a particularly beautiful scene, I often felt like the only person on the planet, a nice feeling in moderation.

Later that day I traded the RS for the ST and was struck by the vastly different characters of the two bikes. The specs on the machines are very similar, but the feel couldn't be more different. The ST handles in a much statelier manner than the RS and doesn't feel quite as willing to accelerate. To be fair, it is much more relaxed ergonomically and a bit heavier, so that is expected. All in all, I preferred the RS, especially when a chase truck is carrying everything you need.

After a night in Revelstoke we were off to Fairmont Hot Springs via the stunning Glacier National Park and picturesque Lake Louise. Being on a high performance motorcycle with a low car/bike ratio encourages high speed and I find myself conflicted when trying to weigh up riding at an entertaining pace or sightseeing in a more dignified manner.

After a night in Fairmont Hot Springs we make our way towards the US border and a two night stop in Nelson. Pulling into Nelson I see my object of desire, a brand new silver Speed Triple in the Prestige Inn parking lot. But there is a problem...Mike Ciebien, the owner of Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays is having an animated conversation with the local authorities. Oh great, I think, they are going to impound the bike and I'll never get to ride it!! Fortunately everything is worked out and my fears are put to rest. The next day the Triple is mine.

Nelson is known for the free-thinking attitude that surrounds it. Usually free thinking is accompanied by the presence of wacky tobacco and indeed as I walked to my room, only two doors down from the front desk, the smell was in the air!! I had to laugh as I walked by, they weren't kidding about the liberal attitude.

The next day Brandon talked me into a helicopter ride into the surrounding mountains. Being more of a ground-based adventurer this was quite a feat. I had never flown in one before and was somewhat reluctant to give it a whirl. But his infectious enthusiasm won me over and I knew I would not regret trying it. If you've never flown in a helicopter, it is a much different sensation than that experienced in an airplane. One second you are on the ground and the next you are three hundred feet in the air! No sonic clues tell you when it's going to happen, the rotor changed pitch and you go. Soon we were cruising along the lake and up into the mountains. Seeing inaccessible places from our hovering mount was incredible. Even more incredible is rushing up a ridge and the sudden drop off on the other side. It feels like the bottom of your world just dropped away, but I was enjoying it regardless. A recommended experience, but I wouldn't want to do it in bad weather.

On the road to Kelowna I had plenty of time to think about the experiences thus far and enjoy the purity of riding a naked bike. With no fairing, riding is stripped down to the basics. Dormant senses awaken. Using every limb to operate a powerful machine keeps the mind alert. New scenic wonders provide visual stimulation. Spring smells and temperature variations keep more passive senses alive. The constant threat of the unexpected keeps reflexes on alert. Soon the mind is operating at a much higher capacity than needed by such lesser activities like staring at a computer or driving a car through mind-numbing traffic. Troubles or concerns bogging the mind down only hours before dissolve into a quickly dissipating vapour. Those who do not ride can never understand this and my sincere hope is that they have some endeavour that provides a similar benefit.

Kelowna was the most cosmopolitan night of the trip and Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays wanted to end our last night with luxury. The Grand Okanagan Hotel fit the bill nicely. After many road trips in the States ending at a Motel 6 or similar, it felt nice to stroll with my insect-encrusted gear through such opulent furnishings. A night on the town and dinner at Earl's was a great way to wrap up our last overnight on the road.

The last day consisted of more beautiful scenery and roads that led us to Skihist Provincial Park and an excellent picnic, prepared by the Rocky Mountain Motorcycle Holidays staff. The park overlooks a canyon that contains the mighty Fraser River. Our peaceful setting was almost ruined by rowdy cruiser types that decided to ride the trails leading to the park grounds. Fortunately, a Ranger

appeared out of nowhere to send them packing and peace was restored. Then he returned to the private parallel universe from which he appeared.

After a leisurely meal we reluctantly got back on our bikes and headed back into Whistler. We all enjoyed the wonders of British Columbia and realized that it offered so much more than expected. The imagery in my mind will reflect the many discoveries and experiences I had during this weeklong dream. Another enchanting corner of the world explored on two wheels. I can't imagine a better way.