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Motorcycling Guides

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PLANNING A US ROAD TRIP BY MOTORCYCLE

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Introduction

“ ... and you may ask yourself, where does that highway lead to?”

- Talking Heads, 'Once in a Lifetime'

I live, and do most of my riding in the UK and Europe.

Riding a Harley-Davidson across America had been a life-long dream. I did finally manage to make that road trip and covered 21,000 miles, over 27 states, in four-and-a-half months.

I wrote about that journey and was originally going to include this road trip planning guide as a chapter in my book 'France In America' but decided to make it more widely available, and free, to anyone who wanted to read it.

While most of the information included here relates specifically to the way I planned my trip across the United States, the same general principles would apply to planning road trips across any country.

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Having finally made my decision to ride across America, the big questions that first came to mind concerned the overall nature of the trip:

Where to go? How long to go for? What distance to travel? What type of tour to undertake?

The last question was the one I tackled first. There are probably three different types of approach to touring, and there are advantages and disadvantages to each of them.

The first approach is to do very little forward-planning or prior research, other than have a rough route in mind. I would call this the 'let's set out and see what happens' method, where it really doesn't matter if the route changes along the way. This is a very relaxed approach and allows for maximum spontaneity, providing the flexibility that many people crave. The danger is though, that you will almost certainly miss important points of interest, because you simply didn't know they were there.

The second method is to plan your journey along a specific route in advance, knowing ahead of time much of what you are going to see along the way. You don't have a planned timetable, though, and you don't book any accommodation ahead. You are not likely to miss out on important sights, as you have researched what you are likely to see along the way. Also, with no fixed timetable and no hotels reserved, you have the flexibility to stay in one place for as long as you wish. The drawback to this is that you don't really know how long the trip is going to take.

The third way is to have both your route and accommodation planned in advance. You know where you are going to go, what you are going to see and exactly where you will stay each night. This is good for shorter trips, where a fixed timetable is essential to ensuring that you can get back to work on a specific date. The main problem here is trying to gauge correctly ahead of time just how far you will be able to travel each day (in order to book your overnight stops ahead of time), knowing that there will be no real margin for error. The alternative is to join an organised tour, where all of that is taken care of by other people.

It is in my nature to plan ahead. On my long US trip, I would have bitterly regretted finding out in retrospect that I had ridden past something interesting, simply because I hadn't bothered to find out in advance it was there. I would probably never have the chance to go back to the majority of the places I was intending to visit on my trip, so making the most of my time there was crucial. This meant that planning ahead was a must.

I didn't have enough knowledge of America to judge how far I was likely to travel each day, nor did I want to tie myself down to using a pre-booked hotel every night. My approach, therefore, was to plan the route ahead in some detail but not, for the most part, to book any accommodation in advance.

The big picture

What I did next was very simple. I bought a large single-sheet map of the United States and, using a highlighter pen, I marked all the places I definitely wanted to see. These included Yellowstone, Niagara Falls, California, Milwaukee (home of Harley-Davidson), The Rockies, New York, Chicago, Monument Valley, The Grand Canyon and about ten other places that I definitely didn't

want to miss. I then stood back and contemplated the marked-up map and began to see a clear pattern emerging, in that many of the places I wanted to visit were concentrated in the northern and western states.

Over the next few weeks, I bought a couple of travel books that helped me to discover some more potentially interesting places to visit. I duly marked them onto my large map, which was now showing a considerable number of places on my 'Must-See' list.

I was lucky in that I had recently retired early, so I could make my trip at any time of year and, within reason, take as long as I liked to complete it. The places I wanted to see ran across the breadth and depth of America, in areas that could be very hot in summer and very cold in winter. It soon became evident that I would have to take the weather and time of year into account when planning the trip. I decided it would work best if I were to be in the northern states in the summer, thus missing the colder temperatures, before moving on to the southern states in the autumn to avoid the hottest times of year, particularly in the desert areas. This turned out to be a very wise decision, as I had great weather nearly all of the time.

The final factor for consideration was just as important as far as I was concerned. I don't like riding directly into the blinding morning sun, so, if at all possible, I wanted to avoid riding east.

I studied the map and mentally joined the chosen areas together, and it wasn't long before I could see an overall plan developing. The map overleaf shows the broad outline of my plan.



I would start in the north-east corner of America in the early summer and finish in the south-west corner in the autumn.

There was just one thing on my list that required me to be in a certain place at a specific time, and that was the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, the biggest in the world. Held in South Dakota in August, with an annual attendance of around 600,000 people, it was imperative that I booked accommodation well in advance. It fitted well into my plans and, if truth be told, I fit my plans around this event.

My overall strategy was decided.

God, or the devil, is in the detail

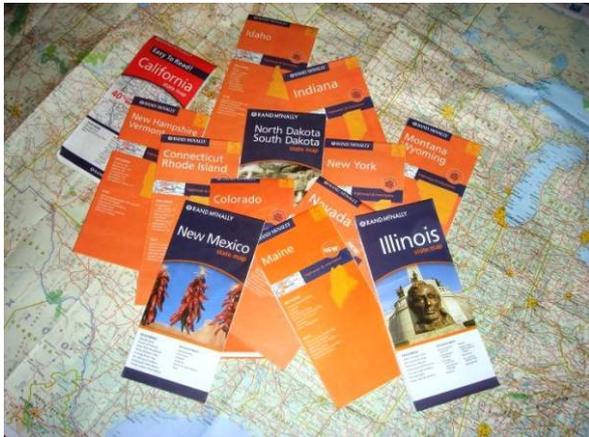
Having got an overall plan in mind, I then needed to plan the trip in detail. This took many more months of reading, research and looking at maps. I know that not everyone would have the patience or time to do this, but there is one simple and undeniable fact:

the more time you spend carrying out this research, the better the trip will be. It is easy to find a road that will carry you from A to B, but finding the best road is much more difficult – and this was key for me.

Above all, I wanted to avoid the fast, boring and characterless Interstates. As a biker, I was also hoping to avoid long, straight roads, because riding on roads containing lots of bends is much more fun on a motorcycle. I was in search of roads with great scenery, preferably with interesting places and things to see along the way. All of this was very important to me.

I knew of two ways to find out about such roads. The first was via a book called 'The Most Scenic Drives in America', by Reader's Digest. This sets out 120 of the best roads in the US, and I spent a few hours marking all of these up on my largescale map. I was then able to see at a glance the places I wanted to visit and the some of the good roads that might take me there.

I then purchased some Rand McNally folded state maps, one for each state that I was intending to ride in. These also highlight scenic roads with a line of small green dots alongside the best roads.



Over the next few weeks, with the help of these detailed maps and books, I was able to plan in detail the roads I would use throughout my trip. My route was now fixed. Well, almost.

For most normal people, it would have been enough to have this set of maps with the routes highlighted. I, however, took it one step further. There was so much to remember about my planned route, that I would need to either keep stopping to refer to my maps, or write down the road numbers, distances and junction references in advance, so I could consult them during my ride. Or, I could take time to enter the details of the entire route onto a sat nav / GPS system, along with waypoints where I wanted to stop. I realise this would not suit everyone, but this was my chosen solution.

For me, using a sat nav was a no-brainer, as it would surely mean the route would be easier to navigate. I bought a system by Garmin that meant I could enter the whole route on my computer, then transfer the planned routes into the unit on my motorcycle. It took a

considerable amount of time to enter every road into the software, but it was well worth the effort.

As I was entering the routes, I stumbled across a system that proved an enormous help in finding other great places to see, by using Google Earth. One of the Garmin features meant I could view my intended route in Google Earth. Many people upload their photographs onto Google Earth and these show up as small squares on the screen. It became clear to me that wherever there was a proliferation of these small squares near my intended route, there must be something interesting to see, as so many people had made the effort to upload photos of the place.

It took many weeks to find and enter all of this information but, again, it was worth it. During and after the trip, many people questioned me about how I had managed to find so many interesting places to see. The simple answer was through lots of prior research and planning.

During the planning stage, I kept wondering about how many miles I might reasonably ride each day, because that would determine how long my trip would take. Sure, anything up to about four or five hundred miles a day is possible, but that would mean just riding all day without stopping. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to experience only the tarmac and the roads; just blasting my way from point to point wouldn't do at all. I wanted to take in the best that America had to offer and, for me, that meant stopping a lot, talking to people, taking time to notice the countryside, the towns and cities and to learn about them as I went along.

My route would take full advantage of back-road America, so I reckoned on an average of no more than 200 miles / 320 kilometres a day. With this low-mileage rate, I could easily

afford to spend a few days in a particular place, if I wanted to. As it turned out, I did considerably less than that each day. I figured that the overall distance I had planned to travel would take me about three months. It turned out to be nearly five.

Accommodation

I used to enjoy camping when I was a lot younger, but those days have long since passed, so I quickly ruled out sleeping in a tent as an option on this trip. Choosing what type of accommodation I would use each night was a big concern to me; I was worried about the availability of hotels, motels and B&Bs, but I needn't have been concerned. One really good thing about doing a road trip in America is that there are usually plenty of choices, and, with the exception of very popular locations such as Yellowstone, Yosemite and Monument Valley, there is usually no need to book anywhere in advance. That suited me down to the ground, as I had deliberately chosen not to plan my accommodation in advance. Sometimes, you feel like carrying on riding into the evening; other days you want to stop your riding early. Not booking ahead gave me the flexibility I needed.

Generally, I stayed at low-cost motels, but occasionally splashed out on something more luxurious. The price generally ranged between \$50 and \$120 a night.

What I did learn throughout my trip was the need to find hotels or motels with guest laundry facilities. No doubt there are other chains with similar facilities, but I stayed at a Holiday Inn or Holiday Inn Express hotel once a week, specifically so I could do my laundry.

Rent or bring my own motorcycle?

My next big question during the planning stage was whether to do the trip on my own motorcycle, or rent one. This soon proved a very easy question to answer. The cost of shipping my motorcycle by air to the US, then back again by sea, was considerably less expensive than renting a bike for a few months. That, plus the fact that I really felt I wanted to do this ride on my own motorcycle, meant there was only one acceptable answer.

Shipping

Due to the lack of available information about temporarily importing a bike into America and the required US Customs processes, I opted to use a shipping agent, James Cargo Services (in the UK), to do all the work for me – and I am certainly glad I did. They not only crated the bike and arranged the air and sea freight, but also completed all the required paperwork. They provided an excellent service and I would definitely use them again.

Insurance

Insuring a rented motorcycle in America is really easy, but finding somewhere to insure your own bike as a temporary import is very difficult. Normal American insurance companies won't insure any foreigner without a US street address, so finding a specialist insurer is the only answer, and these are few and far between. I found only one, Motorcycle Express, which not only cover trips made on non-US motorcycles, but can also arrange roadside assistance and towing policies to cover them. It has to be said that the insurance for my few months in the US was quite expensive, and much more than what I pay for a whole year in the UK.

Most riders of Harley-Davidson motorcycles are members of HOG, the Harley-Davidson Owners Group. In addition, many Harley riders in the UK take out a bike recovery insurance policy called HOG Roadside Assistance. In the event of a breakdown, this covers transport of your bike to the nearest dealer plus overnight accommodation and other costs. I enquired whether the UK policy cover is applicable if you take your own Harley to America, and was delighted to discover that the answer was “Yes”. The UK and USA HOG organisations have complementary arrangements, whereby each offers cover in the other’s country, but you do have to notify HOG in your own country in advance to make sure you’re covered.

Health cover

Being a nation that works almost exclusively on private health insurance schemes, it is highly recommended that any visitors to the US also take out a health insurance policy. I did exactly that and, like all insurance in the US, it wasn’t cheap.

Immigration

The United Kingdom and United States have what is called a reciprocal visa waiver programme, which means that citizens of one do not require a visa to visit the other. This scheme is limited to 90 days, however; as my trip was going to take longer than that, I needed to obtain a US visitor’s visa.

Lone rider or wild bunch?

Another major question regarding the trip – should I do the trip alone, or with friends – kind of answered itself. Not many people can take such a long period off work, so it quickly became clear that I would have to undertake most of this long ride alone. I have previously toured as a solo rider and with other people, and enjoy both equally. Having company is great, but so is riding alone when you can do exactly what you want, when you want. It allows a huge amount of freedom.

The overall planning for my American road trip took a long time, but I was OK with that. I enjoyed the process and, for me, the research I undertook in advance only served to heighten the sense of anticipation for the new experiences that lay ahead. The time passed quickly between preparation and departure and, before I knew it, I was checking in for a flight at Heathrow Airport in London, about to embark on an adventure I had dreamed off since I was a small boy.