

Text & Photos: Phil Kerr

Road trip USA

MSL-reader Phil Kerr, won a bike trip through the USA, courtesy of the Road Trip/MSL competition. Four thousand, two hundred miles, 23 days and nights and seven states later, he tells his story...



Scott spread a dozen maps across a table in the Phoenix Inn, Bend, Oregon. "Any ideas where you want to go?" asked the founder of Road Trip USA.

We did have ideas, but without Scott's knowledge we couldn't have planned a route across the States. However, after our suggestions of places we wanted to visit, a route was slowly formulated. Looking at the distances, I began to realise the size of the challenge we had set ourselves.

My travelling companions for the next four weeks were my brother Gareth and our pal Ben, both far more experienced riders than me, who had opted for Kawasaki GTR1000s. I wanted something lighter and easier to handle but still practical for a long journey. So, on Scott's recommendation I had



chosen the Suzuki Bergman 650cc Super-Scooter. I had endured endless jibes from Gareth and Ben about being landed with a Vespa-esque hairdryer on wheels. But, seeing it for the first time I was amazed. With a long wheel base, front and rear disk brakes, digital dash, massive screen and rear box, it didn't look like any other scooter I had seen.

The Suzuki might not have panniers, but I was going to be able to carry more than the other two. It was unbelievable how much stuff you could get into the space beneath the seat. I shoved in a rucksack, cooking stove and gas canisters, sleeping bag, inflatable roll mat, spare shoes and vacuum-packed meals. That left space in the top-box for the remainder of my clothes, and I had the added bonus of a large glove box below plus two side glove compartments below the handlebars,



which were really handy for storing water bottles. The only thing I had to bungee strap on to the passenger seat was my tent.

Fortunately we had planned to cover just 150 miles on the first day, heading north to a small town called Condon. We had planned to avoid the main interstates and keep to the country lanes, so to enjoy the riding and be able to appreciate the views.

I was enjoying riding the Suzuki. It was the first time I had ridden a scooter and it was invigorating.

We arrived in Condon late and looked for somewhere to stay, which didn't take long as the town was not much more than a main street with a general store, bank, funeral directors, café and a single hotel, where we were swiftly booked into a luxurious corner-suite.

The next morning, after enjoying an American breakfast of pancakes and syrup, we set off on our first full day's riding, 260 miles due east to our next destination, Joseph.

Immediately the landscape changed to rolling, golden-coloured prairie. It was a glorious ride, as we ate up the miles under a brilliant sky. There was very little traffic. Occasionally we'd pass a couple of bikers and would exchange the customary wave - dropping your left hand and letting it drag in the breeze. I thought it was a much cooler way of acknowledging camaraderie than the nod used by us Brits.

It was a hot day, but we didn't really notice the heat until we stopped at La Grande. Heading into one of the ubiquitous Mexican restaurants, we got chatting to some people who were setting up stalls for a street festival. It was amazing how interested people were in us. Often, we had hardly got off our bikes before someone would ask us where we were heading. Once they heard our accent, that was it, we were embroiled in a full conversation about what we thought of their country - I couldn't

get over how friendly the Americans were.

Joseph was straight out of a Wild-West movie. When we first got there I thought it had been mocked up, just for tourists. Beautiful low-rise wooden buildings and signage lined a wide, main street decorated with bronze statues of horses and cowboys. There was a saloon with hanging swing doors, and a bank on the corner that looked like Billy the Kid might charge out of it at any minute.

We found a campsite at the other end of Wallowa Lake, bordering Joseph. It was a superb feeling to be camping out under the stars, with a fire lit and our bikes parked up next to us.

However, even with my thermals and a woolly hat on, I'd been extremely cold during the night and didn't get much sleep. I realised that the sleeping bag I'd bought wasn't going to be up to the job of camping at the heights we were headed to. Joseph wasn't even in the Rockies proper and we were already at over 3000ft. All our planned destinations for the next few nights were winter-season ski resorts and we were only a couple of months away from the start of the season. Our plans might have to be reviewed.

It wasn't warm the next day, but that didn't stop us from enjoying the road through Hells Canyon, possibly the best road I have ever been on in my life. I don't think there was a single straight section.

By now I was really getting into the feel of the Suzuki and I loved leaning it into hairpin bends and feeling it carve into turns. It was so effortless, and I was able to soak up the views as I took corners and peered into the gorge below, separating Oregon from Idaho and marking the time-zone boundary between Pacific and Mountain Time.

Next day, we crossed two 8000ft summits, and at Galena Summit it snowed. It got so cold that we were forced to stop to warm our gloves on the exhausts.