

# DESTINATIONS UNKNOWN

Searching for twisting California roads for a motorcycle tour book sounds like the ideal gig. But even maps and GPS can't help Steve Thornton find his way.



Curves, scenery, and a VFR800: what's not to like in Southern California? The answer to that should have been simple.

Michael Sanders was leading me through Kings Canyon, his red Honda VFR800 just ahead on Highway 180, when we turned a corner and struck a scene as clear and brilliant as a punch in the face. The rock towers that filled the sky before us could make you believe in your enemy's gods. Half an hour back, we rode through stands of giant Sequoia, and then the road twisted and fell into this canyon of grey palisades and you almost expected thunder and revelations. In five days on the highways of Southern California, I had become weary of twisted roads, insensitive to gorgeous scenery, but this woke me up.

A week earlier, Brian Bosworth and I had flown down, leaving behind a wet late September Vancouver and Michael Sanders, who would join us later. We spent that night in an extravagant house in a Los Angeles suburb, eating and drinking from supplies of food and wine and scotch that filled a 12-foot-long marble island in the kitchen. Our hosts – Mike's former wife Iris and her boyfriend, John – seemed pleased to have us there. A bedroom and a private bathroom awaited each of us, and downstairs was a pool, where you could sit and look out at palm-fringed hills in the blue distance.

In the garage were three Honda VFRs plugged into battery chargers, wearing hard bags and Destination Highways paint. Come morning, Bosworth and I would straighten out our gear and pack up, and by mid-afternoon we'd be ready to hit the road.

By mid-afternoon the next day we were nowhere near ready to hit the road. Bosworth had spent hours looking for stuff that had somehow become lost since we were last there. After lunch, we took two of the Hondas down to a shop for new tires, and then we went back and looked for more things. By 6 p.m. we were ready to eat meat and drink beer, but we still didn't have a running VFR, so we took John's Kawasaki Vulcan from the garage and headed out to Marina Del Rey, where John and Iris were on a boat, preparing steaks for the grill.

But Bosworth didn't know exactly where Marina Del Rey was. We got close, and then we got lost, so he yanked the Vulcan onto the sidewalk at a busy intersection and dug out his cellphone. He was talking to John when I heard an electrically amplified voice: "YOU CAN'T PARK A BIKE ON THE SIDEWALK." Half a block away was a police car, and it was heading toward us. Bosworth was oblivious to the approaching cop; he was explaining to John why we took his Kawasaki and trying to get directions, but John couldn't

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seem to figure out where we were. I yelled at Brian. He looked up. "The cops are coming," he said into the phone. "Ask them for directions," John suggested. Bosworth hung up on him. Now the cop was getting out of his car. "We're from Canada!" Bosworth yelled. Five minutes later, we were on our way.

Later that night we were in Topanga Canyon, on a road with no straight parts. I was on the back seat, and Bosworth was pushing the Vulcan in a way that frightened me. He seemed to think the Kawasaki would become a sportbike if he just went a little faster into the next corner. I had no sense of the motorcycle's connection with the road, no feel for the grip between tire and asphalt. But Bosworth got us back, and the next day was Saturday, and on Saturday we started riding. It was about time.

Eight months earlier, at the Vancouver Motorcycle Show, I had run into Bosworth at the Destination Highways booth. I had known him and his riding and publishing partner Michael Sanders since 1999, when they had produced their first book. Bosworth asked if I would like to help them with the Southern California book. They would fly me to Los Angeles, put me up in motels, feed me, give me a 2002 VFR800 and send me out to play on the sweetest roads in Southern California.

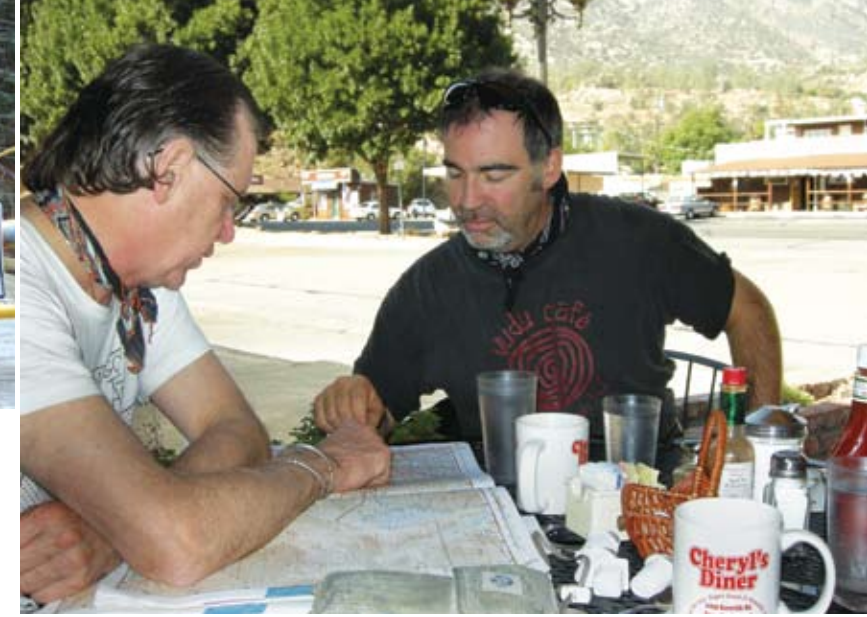
My first trip down, in March, was a sort of Destination Highways boot camp. I learned how to set up the recording gear, make sure the microphones were working, keep the power cord off the pavement and make useful mileage notes. I wasn't very good at it. I broke power cords and forgot to turn the recorder on and got lost so many times that Bosworth and Sanders were generally surprised to find me where I was supposed to be.

But there were moments of joy: an evening in the hot tub of a Temecula motel under a full moon, drinking Bosworth's barrel-proof single malt; cruising through the seared sand-washed landscape of Joshua Tree

**Sanders steams through a series of bends at Kings Canyon (upper left), and prepares to attack a foggy road in the high forest (below). At Brown's Cycles (below right), a backyard tour entertains while a tire is changed.**



**Angeles Crest Highway is spectacular, but short. Damaged by storms, the mountain road has been severed since 2005. Breakfast meeting: Bosworth (left) and Sanders confer over a map book. Below right, a slice of the Carrisa Highway.**



National Park; riding late one afternoon into a scatter of low hills smeared with purple flowers as far as I could see, like snow on a wind-drift prairie.

Before that trip, I had poured over maps of Southern California. I had learned that Los Angeles is not just a state of mind but an actual place; that it is bound by an ocean on one side, by mountains and deserts on the other. I had daydreamed about riding across the state all the way to Nevada; the longitudinal adventure of it thrilled me. Then I arrived, and I discovered that so much of what a motorcyclist desires is within an hour or two of the city. The region is rife with canyons, peppered with mountain ranges. Fabulous roads are everywhere. Soon I was complaining that there were too many curves, there was too much scenery.

Bosworth explained some things to me. They had been there before. They had scouted the region by air and had already ridden many of those roads. This adventure had seemed so lop-sided and hit-or-miss that I had not noticed how organized it really was. Bosworth and Sanders had been doing this for years, and they had evolved a method of working that baffled a newcomer. They communicated in a language that seemed almost mystical, generally by cellphone, but sometimes in huddled rushes of conversation over a map book spread out on the trunk of a motorcycle.

To miss a good road would be a serious error, so every road that might be anything had to be ridden. And if it *was* anything, it would be analyzed, given a rating and several paragraphs of description. But there were so many roads that to go at it helter-skelter would require vast amounts of time.

So they had scouted, and Bosworth would ride in one direction, and Sanders would go somewhere else. If a road seemed worthwhile, the other would ride it, too. Then they would compare notes, make decisions. Is this one a contender? Should we send Steve out to do it? Bosworth and Sanders would do the analysis, but if I rode it, with my helmet-cam running and the microphone inside my chin-bar receiving all the experiential things I said to it, I could write about the road later. In my living room, with the VCR running and my self-conscious, generally observant but occasionally stupid remarks issuing from the speakers, I could write paragraphs of description that might

become useful, later, to some rider in a new place.

But now, I was that rider in a new place, and I was screwing up. I had gotten comfortable with the recording gear and the requirement to observe and note things in March, but it had taken a while. Now Bosworth had just thrown something new at me, and besides, I was in a state.

My father had been having trouble breathing for some time. I had planned to fly to Ontario at Thanksgiving to hang out with him, but a week before Bosworth and I left for Los Angeles, my mother phoned. That night, I went out and bought wine and cigarettes, though I had been a nonsmoker for some time.

When Bosworth and I got to Los Angeles a week later, I was sober, but smoking two packs a day. That Saturday morning, sitting by the pool in Los Angeles and having my first cigarette of the day, I thought about my dad gasping for breath, and I went into the house, held the pack of cigarettes under a running tap for 30 seconds, and threw the soggy mess into the garbage. I didn't smoke again, but for a while, in grief and nicotine withdrawal, I was less than myself.

"Steve," Bosworth said on that Saturday morning in September, "come here. I want to show you how to use this thing." *This thing* was a GPS unit. We stood in the driveway, under palms and searing blue sky, while he

PHOTOS: STEVE THORNTON

demonstrated how if you pushed this button, that would happen, and if you did something else, another thing would happen. At least, that's how I remembered it, later.

In the kitchen, he sipped a beer and we went over maps laid out on the marble island. I would ride west to Ojai, where I'd fire up the recording gear and head north on Highway 33. A right turn on Lockwood Valley Road and a 20-mile ride east and north would get me to a flyspeck on the map called Lake of the Woods. Then a turn onto Cuddy Valley Road heading up to Mil Potrero Highway and, following that, to a kinky little thing that climbed up to Cerro Noroeste, at 8,286 feet of elevation. Good plans, but by the time I got onto Cuddy Valley I was so thirsty I could have drunk peanut butter and I had long since stopped paying attention. When the highway kinked to the right I went straight; I didn't even see the big sign, I just carried on up the mountain on the wrong road as it narrowed and crumbled. "This highway is crap," I said to myself. Suddenly the road spilled into a parking lot, landing me in the middle of a typically surreal Southern California scene—surrounded by people with giant telescopes aimed at the darkening sky. I pulled out my map book and asked a guy where I was. He started laughing. "You've got a map and a GPS unit and you're asking *me* where you are?" Later, Bosworth shook his head in frustration. "Steve. I showed you how to use the GPS. I thought you understood."

The next day, he sent me down Fort Tejon Road. I got the start wrong by a quarter mile. I didn't even think about using the GPS. The day after that, looking for Lake Hughes Road, I rode past a big sign without seeing it. It did not occur to me to use the GPS. I didn't know what was wrong with me. "Steve," said Bosworth. "I don't know what's wrong with you."

A few days later I was on the Carrisa Highway, running east at 100 miles per hour. Bosworth had just complained by cellphone message that I was running late, and it had been a long day. It was a long hot plunge through the desert, with few curves but with big humps that lifted my ass out of the seat. My video camera was running and the sun was going down. I flew.

Into the hills and the curves piled up, one after another and many of them tight enough to knock my boot off the footpeg. It was dusk, and the camera was still running. But was it seeing anything? I didn't have time to stop and check the tape. The road slid through the mountains and came out on the other side, 70 miles from Santa Margarita. The sun was down. I was almost out of gas. I filled up, got a coffee, checked my phone. Bosworth had left another message: meet me in Kernville for dinner. But I was already late for that.

Through the dark I rode north, and instead of taking



Highway 178 up to Lake Isabella, I skated right past, up to Highway 155. It was on this road that I found myself in hills of purple flowers back in March; it was here that Michael Sanders lost the rear end for a moment in a sandy curve, and here that I went off the road at 90 miles per hour in a distracted moment. Sanders and I recovered from our little frights, but this road was really something, and now I was heading east, after a three hundred mile day, and the sun had gone down.

An hour later, I reached Glennville. There was a sign: Motel. I should have carried on and met Brian for a late dinner; it was only another 20 miles, but I couldn't do it. My ass was killing me, and I'd had it with Bosworth and his bullshit. I got myself a room. The restaurant and the store were closed, but the manager gave me fruit and a cheese Danish. Four hours after I was to have met him, I called Bosworth. "I was just about to phone the Highway Patrol," he said, so obviously and completely relieved that I was still alive that I forgave him for everything. It had been a tough five days, but something unwound in that moment and fell off me.

The next day, Michael Sanders arrived. I found Bosworth at Kernville, and we were sitting at an outdoor table, eating breakfast, when a red Destination Highways bike rolled past. A few minutes later, Sanders walked up to our table. "I'm sorry about your father," he said.

We took our time over pancakes and coffee, and Bosworth filled in Sanders on where we'd been. Then Sanders left and I tagged along. Bosworth headed to some other place, some other road.

Our road took Sanders and me through a forest of Sequoias, and then into a canyon with walls that scratched the sky, and for a while, nothing else mattered. ◀◀

AD