

## Rating The Riding

CONSIDERING THE DIFFERENT jobs I've held over the past 40 years, I have had the unique good fortune to tour on a variety of motorcycles through more different venues than probably 95% of the touring riders in the world. And, that being the case, I am often asked the question, "where's the best place to ride?"

Obviously, this is a much more difficult question to answer than it would seem on the surface. For starters, how any individual rider would rate any particular ride is going to be determined by a large part on that rider's own particular preferences in terms of riding style. Do you prefer really tight, technically-challenging roads, or are wide, high-speed sweepers more your style? Is beautiful scenery important to you? Density of traffic? Neat things to see and do along the way? Are high speed limits, or even the lack of speed limits altogether a high priority? Do you ride a full-dress touring bike, a sport-tourer, a cruiser, a dual-sport or a sport bike? The best rides for one may very well be a pain in the ass for one of the others.

So, when I started thinking about coming up with some kind of rating system for different touring venues, about all I could do was to base my criteria on my own personal preferences. With that in mind, I eventually came up with a sort of quasi-subjective point system, based on a simple 10-point score for each category, with 10 being a virtually-unattainable "perfect score."

These are the categories I decided on:

**Ride Quality** – Number and length of sections within the tour that are at least moderately challenging to my riding skills. Points deducted for long, straight and boring sections, or time spent passing through densely-populated areas.

**Road Quality** – Smooth, well-maintained and even surfaces with a good traction rate highest. Points deducted for frequency of potholes, sand or gravel.

**Traffic** – Based not just on the frequency of other vehicles encountered, but the type, and the courtesy of local drivers.

**Expense** – The less a tour costs me, the longer I can ride. From country to country, or even different areas within a country, there can be huge discrepancies in the costs of fuel, food and lodging.

**Variety** – A couple of days of the same kind of riding is fine, but I don't want to do the same thing over and over for six or seven days straight. A mix of different roads and terrain is more appealing to me.

**Weather Conditions** – Certainly I have no control over the weather, but by the



same token I wouldn't choose to ride in Canada in December any more than to ride in the Mojave Desert in August. So, I want to ride where there is a fairly temperate climate at the time I will be there.

**Exotic Appeal** – This can be anything from riding where they speak a different language than I, to riding on the "other" side of the road. I enjoy mingling with other cultures, trying strange foods, or even being challenged by something as simple as finding different electrical outlets in the wall sockets or trying to figure out how that toilet flushes.

**Scenery** – I think most touring riders are like me, in that we really enjoy expansive scenery. Percentage-wise, you see a lot more bikes pulled off at scenic look-outs than you do cars.

**Off-Bike Attractions** – When the riding day is done, the touring isn't over. It's great to end the day's riding at a location where there is something interesting to see or do.

**Bragging Rights** – This is the toughest one to own up to, but if we are honest with ourselves, I think we all know that our decision to ride many places is at least partly based on our need to be able to say, "been there – done that!"

Okay, so those are my 10 personal criteria for rating a touring ride. With each category at least technically capable of earning 10 points, the total for any ride could conceivably total 100 points – though in reality, we all know that a "perfect" ride doesn't exist... at least not in this world. And I have to admit that my wife helped with deciding on the criteria, and is allowed input in deciding the ratings afterward, since she tours with me most of the time, and her satisfaction with the ride definitely influences my own.

So, to answer the often-asked question of "where's the best place to ride?" – here are my top five ratings, with a tie for fifth:

- 89 points – South Island, New Zealand
- 87 points – Swiss/Austrian Alps
- 85 points – Dolomites of NE Italy
- 81 points – Adirondacks of NE NY
- 79 points – Blue Ridge Parkway of North Carolina
- 79 points – Utah Canyonlands

Now, keep in mind, these ratings are purely subjective (ie, "They are unique to the person experiencing them, relating to qualifications that are only available to that person's consciousness." - Wikipedia). Any one of you could probably use the same set of criteria, and come up with an entirely different list. And it is also worth noting that I can only rate those places I have personally experienced, and for the short time that I experienced them. One example of how fickle and totally unscientific this system can be, is that I have ridden through the Utah Canyonlands area at least six times, and if I based my rating on only the first trip, the area would probably have rated much lower, because I encountered particularly bad weather, bad traffic and road construction during that ride. But subsequent journeys were much, much more pleasant, bringing the total rating experience to a much higher level.

It is also true that up until just a couple of months ago, New Zealand was not on this list, and only enjoys the number-one position because I spent 18 days riding there this past November. Up until then, I would have been willing to bet that nothing could ever knock the Austrian and Swiss Alps off the top of my list. I can't tell you how pleased I am to have been wrong. In fact, I have already made plans to return there in January 2010.

I know that some people will feel that I am being much too anal in trying to quantify and rate specific touring venues since, as I noted, it is a purely personal and subjective decision-making process. But try to remember that because of who I am, and what I do for a living, the question comes up all too often, and I not only need some kind of answer, but often a means of justifying that answer.

There are certainly worse ways to make a living...

  
—Fred Rau