



# Death Valley—an Adventurous Expedition

by Steven M Green



A day of challenges and marvelous two-track gravel roads brought us to one of Death Valley's hidden beauties: Striped Butte Valley. We set up camp and watched the rocks get painted glowing red by the setting sun at one of the most beautiful remote places on earth.

Let's face it: the recent plethora of action reality TV shows panders to the empty space in our DNA that grew out of having to hunt to eat and having to defend our families from predators while in our caves. You're likely reading this because you satisfy that innate need by riding a motorcycle. Adventure-type motorcycles scratch that itch with a blend of adrenaline and excitement that will leave you quivering. It's no surprise that this addictive relief from our day-to-day lives has grown in popularity faster than any other type of motorcycling.

If you're new to this adventure motorcycle phenomenon, you'll be looking for a place to start. One such place is through a new web portal, [TheWorldofAdventure.com](http://TheWorldofAdventure.com); a site developed by Jim Hyde and his *RawHyde Adventures* off-road riding school. *RawHyde* has been teaching folks how to ply the big adventure bikes over seemingly hostile terrain for the past 10 years. He has used this experience to build a multi-brand fleet of adventure motorcycles outfitted with the protective accessories that insulate the heavy bikes from serious damage when strewn about the landscape during the challenging learning process. The next logical

step was to make this information on his training, the bike prep, and the suppliers for this extreme sport available on this one site. But what about the whole experience?

The real test is to take a bunch of these farkled motos and ride 'em like we stole 'em. We were invited along on one of *RawHyde's* top tier events: *Expedition CV*—a six-day commitment to a challenging ride through the Mojave Desert and the unforgiving terrain of Death Valley with its surrounding mountains. Accompanying the group would be outfitted bikes from *BMW, KTM, Yamaha*

and *Triumph*. We would get to experience each bike on varied terrain ranging from tough off-road sections to ribbons of smooth highway.



At *RawHyde* headquarters, Jim Hyde (right) gave us all a pep talk, general ride procedures, and a bit of a warning about the excitement, difficulty and danger ahead of us. He wasn't kidding, but it was worth every second.



Arriving at the *RawHyde* ranch facility on a Sunday afternoon, our first glimpse of things to come was revealed by examining the bikes that were setup for the ride. The manufacturers from [World of Adventure](#) provided the parts and pieces needed to set the bikes up with full strength adventure capability, including lights, bags, wheels and protective pieces. The manufacturers included *Jesse Luggage Systems*, ***Black Dog Cycle Works***, *AltRider*, *Clearwater Lights*, *Sawa Tires*, *Best Rest Products*, *Woody's Wheel Works*, *Touratech*, *Giant Loop*, *Heideneau Tires*, *Baja Designs*, *Wolfman Motorcycle Luggage* and *Happy Trail* hard panniers. Additionally, some of us were outfitted with *KLIM* riding suits, which, like the rest of the added items, would soon get a full workout and show the stuff they are made of. As an added bonus, the top brass from *AltRider*, *KLIM*, ***Black Dog***, *Woody's Wheel Works* and *Wolfman* were



We stopped for a “group-up” at the edge of the beginning of the Mojave desert; a few hundred yards behind the camera, the cactus started sprouting from the desert floor defining desert. There were about 28 riders on this first leg of the trip.



Along the route were a number of especially challenging sections that required group efforts to get through. Our first encounter came in the form of a 100-yard sand trap. Very few riders made it through without a dump or two. Here, a rider is being pushed to get restarted by Shawn Thomas, one of the top instructors at *RawHyde* and star of *BMW's* U.S. leg of their ad campaign for the new water-boxer.

on hand to explain their products and design philosophy. These guys are all hard-core riders and torture their products before taking them to market; our group would later prove the durability and desirability of the packages—especially the protection parts!

After the introductions, we toured *RawHyde's* huge facility that includes a variety of training courses



Standing on the rocks at the entry to the Mengel Pass waiting for the carnage, were four *RawHyde* staffers. A sharp left turn led to a quarry of fist sized loose rocks going up a 45-degree climb. It proved nearly impossible for all but a few of the very top tier riders to master this challenge on a big adventure bike without some help.





The reward at the top of a hill climb was a panorama encompassing hundred of miles. We regularly reformed our group at rest stops to grab some water and share stories, while the *RawHyde* folks would give us pointers for the next section. "Keep the right around the shrub a quarter of a mile ahead because there is a big boulder hiding behind it and your pannier will hit it and send you flying." We all kept to the right.

*RawHyde's* staff preparing another gourmet dinner complete with cases of wine—another of Hyde's ventures in conjunction with award-winning Mantra Wines. Although the landscape and motorcycles evoked images of Ewan McGregor and his *Long Way Round* film, we were coddled into a luxury camping experience by the presence of great food and beverage along with an experienced and helpful

ranging from tight figure eights and sand washes to half buried logs teasing to be challenged by the students finishing up their weekend training. Following a hearty dinner, we joined the festivities watching students getting their diplomas and savoring the camaraderie that mushroomed from the teamwork of helping each other extract their bikes from some earthly trap or another. Part



We covered hundreds of miles of gravel two-track roads through the desert and into Death Valley. This easy section allowed us to view the magnificent solitude along our path.

of that group would join on the *Expedition CV*. After a briefing of the upcoming ride, we found our bunks and mentally prepared for the challenges facing us.

Our initial destination was *RawHyde's Base Camp Alpha*; an outpost in the Mojave Desert at the fringes of human habitation where a converted cargo container and a military surplus army tent defined the end of the first day's transverse

of highways and gravel roads, interrupted with Joshua trees and deep washes of sand. The sand pits provided an idea of the carnage ahead of us. *RawHyde* staff positioned themselves to help right the multi-cylindrical two-wheeled sirens after bottomless sand and gravity sucked imperfectly piloted bikes into a sleeping position. Upon arrival at *Base Camp Alpha*, we were greeted by

*RawHyde* staff. Wine tasting in the middle of the desert was an unexpected delight. The evening was topped off



Even a *BMW* rim will yield to the weight of a linebacker-sized rider when he lowers the pressure to 12 psi and runs full tilt through a rock garden. The rim was beaten into submission with the help of a camp ax until it once again held air for the tubeless tire; it lasted another couple of hundred miles until the ride was over. Although unplanned, the trip provided a couple of field fix lessons.





Another special section was a steep hillclimb over loose sand and gravel. As this rider crests the ascent, others wait at the bottom of the hill for their chance. Not seen in the photo were the *RawHyde* staffers on hand along the hill to help catch those that veered off the skinny path.

with a campfire songfest as stringed instruments magically appeared at the disappearance of daylight.

As the morning desert sun erased the nighttime chill, the *Expedition CV* riders bid adieu to about half of the recent course graduates, who only signed on for this first phase of the trip. The remainder of the group could choose to ride around the area testing various bikes or relax with some of the manufacturers' reps that attended the first part of the ride to

help launch The [World of Adventure](#) website. The day passed quickly, and after another couple of meals and a campfire, we prepared ourselves for what proved to be one of the most challenging motorcycle rides you can take on a big adventure bike.

After another hearty breakfast, (okay, full

*Rawhyde* staff photographer, Stephen Gregory, deftly massages his *F800GS* over another bowling ball size rock garden on our way to the evening's next camp site.



disclosure—*RawHyde* had a fully kitted chase *Jeep* and trailer complete with a cook) we set off on a day that would be 80 grueling miles of dirt, sand, gravel, rocks and boulders. It would take coordinated teamwork to get the bikes through the infamous Mengel Pass. If you think this is exaggeration, just *Google* images of "Mengel Pass." Although not on the agenda, the process of each of us exchanging help by pushing, pulling and pointing out paths between the boulders was the stuff of programs like Outward Bound and other similar events that create unity and teamwork. This trail was the catalyst for creating friendship bonds that form when adventure riders conquer a challenge.

Those of us in the U.S. are coddled into believing that roads are mostly all paved. The reality is that something in excess of 90 percent

of the roads in the world are not paved; the ad folks therefore challenge you to explore the unpaved majority of the world. As delivered, most adventure bikes—save the *BMW R1200GS Adventure* and the new *KTM 1190 Adventure R*—are mainly set up for street and gravel roads. The more adventurous stuff, like our boulder-strewn route, demands better protection. The outfitted bikes proved their mettle on the varied terrain. Bike armor





The ride can be perfect preparation for your around the world adventure; or to at least experience what it would be like. After an exciting hard day's ride, a tent and sleeping bag; campfire, food and company are all that you need.

from The [World of Adventure](#) partners, such as crash bars, skid plates and panniers were put to the challenge. A survey of the bikes after the day's hardest sections showed gouges and scrapes on the protective armor that insulated vulnerable cast aluminum engine cases. Adventure riders understand that the usual standard factory issue protection on these bikes is not sufficient for the kind of extreme duty we required. And like any other segment of the motorcycle universe, the diversity of accessories available allows each owner to farkle out their bike with their choice of bars, plates, armor, panniers and lights to suit both function and style.

Our route continued along a seemingly endless Goler Wash where the alluvial deposits of sand and rock snaked down from the heights of Death Valley to a remote area only reachable by unpaved roads—Striped Butte Valley. We arrived at dusk to watch in awe as the setting sun painted the ancient rock formations into shades of fiery red as we set up camp. Our *Jeep* chuck wagon arrived and quickly satiated our thirst for beverages and grub. The campfire did not last, as we were all delightfully exhausted.

Our fifth day of the ride was less intense; “only” 60 or so miles of rocky sand washes with the remainder of the days 130 miles being paved roads. Our route took us through the enormity of Death Valley and included a stop at Badwater, the lowest spot in the western hemisphere at 282 feet below sea level. From here, we rode on to a campground near Scotty's Castle.

Our sixth day was a return ride to the *RawHyde* ranch, mostly on secondary roads. This gave us an

additional chance to evaluate the assortment of adventure bikes in an environment where they are realistically used 90 percent of the time. The *Expedition CV* totaled about 750 miles.

The adventure bikes we were using included a *KTM 1190*, *BMW R1200GS* water boxer (2013), *BMW R1200GS* oil cooled (2012), *Triumph Tiger 800*, *Triumph Explorer*, and *Yamaha Super Ténéré*.

We switched off riding each of the bikes, which all had been kitted with proper protective accessories, panniers and lighting from The [World of Adventure](#) partners. A detailed comparison is the subject of another story, but all of the bikes proved capable traversing a route that would fully challenge any machine or rider. As expected, the larger, more powerful bikes had their



The lovely ladies of *RawHyde* accompanied us in the massive 4x4 sweep truck which also towed a trailer containing a built in “chuck wagon” grille. As we hovered around like locusts, our breakfast this day consisted of sausage and French Toast. Tasty food contributed to a spectacular experience.

advantages on the road, but no one ever waited for the others. *RawHyde* now offers a demo program where you can sign up to ride a couple of these bikes yourself, both on and off-road, if you want to do your own comparison before purchasing; some dealers will even credit you the test cost.

The trip was a very well organized adventure. We were immersed into an environment where, with a bit of training and a well-equipped bike, a rider can conquer seemingly impossible riding conditions and find a whole new world of places to ride and experience. Somehow, those narrow gravel roads in South America now seem a lot closer.