

## Dust For Brains

“Let’s ride to Mexico.” It seemed an exotic and highly adventurous proposition for a young couple in their early 20s, and the romance of the words captured our spirits. This was in 1972, and I had recently purchased a gleamy red 175cc twin cylinder motorcycle that looked like a Triumph Bonney in three-quarter scale. A modest little bike for zipping around town, surely it would be perfect for a camping trip to another country.

I laid out a map of Texas and drew a line straight west from where we lived in Houston: San Antonio, keep going, Del Rio... Del Rio! The name sounded like music. Right on the Rio Grande, across the border from Ciudad Acuna. There was a big lake there, Lake Amistad, and the map showed a state park with campgrounds. Cool. I looked it up in our 3-letter tourist guide and they said the campgrounds had showers and overlooked the water. Excellent! How many more ingredients did you need for a perfect vacation?

Looking at the map, figuring our speed... it was almost two hundred miles from Houston to San Antonio and another hundred and fifty miles past that to Del Rio. At an average speed of fifty miles an hour, we should be able to make Del Rio in a day. So that would be the first leg.

From Del Rio we could ride southeast, paralleling the Rio Grande to someplace like Laredo. Laredo sounded good. Hadn’t we all grown up with that sad young cowboy all wrapped in white linen? Maybe something of the old west still lingered. The guide said Laredo had campgrounds too. Perfect. Then from Laredo, we could take US 59 north to Houston and complete the loop.

We were all jazzed about the description of the campgrounds overlooking Lake Amistad, and we thought we might spend two nights there, communing with nature, a Walden Pond out west. On the day after Christmas, we packed the bike with a one-person sleeping bag, a two-person tent, a duffle bag of clothes, a bag of camping stuff, a hatchet and a canteen. I remember being impressed at the size of the pile of strapped on top of that little luggage rack. The bike wheelied on the center stand, the back wheel on the ground, the front wheel seeming to paw the air like it was ready for launch. I cranked the pre-load on the rear shocks to “heavy,” yanked the bike down from the stand and off we went out I-10 West.

Back then Katy was not a seamless extension of west Houston, and passing it was the first milestone confirming we had left the city. I was glad to be out of the city traffic. The bike handled heavily, and it didn’t make as much speed as I expected – 45 to 50 for the most part, maybe wind it up close to 55 if the road was flat and there wasn’t any headwind. Since the speed limit back then was 55, I hoped we wouldn’t be a hazard as long as we stayed in the slow lane.

We passed rice fields full of wintering geese, and I thought it remarkable how flocks of geese sound just like a hundred people at a cocktail party. Uncanny really. Even though we were going slow, hearing that field of geese on a crisp cool morning was a nice note for the beginning of our first cross-country adventure.

We droned along and presently crossed the Brazos River, very near the town of San Felipe where Stephen F. Austin founded his first colony. The land rises up west of the Brazos valley and the highway climbs a bit of a grade. I had to keep it wide open to get it over 45. I was still in the early stages of discovering what the bike could and couldn't do and still thinking I should be able to will it faster somehow. I leaned forward, my eyes checking the speedo for any glimmer of an increase. Nothing. Cars sped past but gave us a wide berth and thankfully no one honked. I was glad when we topped out on the other side. I could come off wide open and get almost to 50.

I tried to imagine what we looked like to the hawks wheeling overhead – these two shiny-hatted creatures with this comic-book pile of stuff on the back of this buzzy little red contraption. I was very happy to be out there with those hawks, though, on two wheels in the middle of the world.

We stopped for gas and then lunch and then gas again, and pulled into San Antonio around 3:30. We hadn't made nearly the time I had expected. We talked about riding another three or four hours to get to Del Rio and decided against it. We'd already ridden longer than we'd ever ridden before and that was plenty. Besides, San Antonio counts for a good place to stay on holiday.

We rode around the central area of town down by the river and found a “reasonably-priced” hotel behind the Alamo. We parked right in front and walked up the stairs into the lobby, the hotel folks looking at us like we'd just stepped off a tramp steamer and we might be carrying weapons. Since we had cash they let us have a room, but I guess even low-rent hotels have customers that raise eyebrows. We unpacked the stack on the back of the bike and hauled it all upstairs to our room – the tent, the sleeping bag, the camping stuff, the clothes, the hatchet *and* the canteen.

Next morning I packed it all back up again, thinking ahead to the shores of Lake Amistad, thinking to myself, it's gonna be great.

San Antonio sits at the base of the Balcones Escarpment and beyond is the uplifted Edwards Plateau. The many springs and rivers cutting through the uplift have created the Texas Hill Country, a lovely place to ride a motorcycle. US 90 skirts the plateau to the south, and aside from a long haul up the escarpment into Castroville, 20 miles west of San Antonio, the road was flat and we could keep up a pretty good pace. That haul up to Castroville, though, was accomplished at the peppery rate of maybe 35 miles per hour, me leaning forward and concentrating the whole way up. Everything on the highway whizzed past us. I was waiting for a guy with a two-donkey wagon to pass us.

We rode through little towns with great names like Hondo, Sabinal and Uvalde, and I was grateful to be less of a traffic obstruction at town speeds. In between were miles and miles of farm and ranch land, watered by the Medina, the Frio and the Nueces rivers. The Medina was once the boundary between Coahuila and Texas, and Santa Anna camped by it on his way to the Alamo. Texas was a lot smaller back then.

The Nueces River marks the western edge of the Edwards Plateau, and the farmland thins out as the land grows dryer and dryer. Groves of Spanish oaks become clumps of scrappy looking mesquite trees and parched creosote bushes, and cactus grows everywhere. I had never seen land this dry – the soil looked like it had been left out in the sun too long. For someone who grew up around swamps and loved the lush intertangling of everything in them, this land was very foreign. You clearly could die out here if you ran out of water. I was glad to be on a highway going somewhere, glad those little twin cylinders were beating their heart out and hauling us onward.

Somewhere west of Brackettville, whizzing along through that over baked spaghetti-western countryside, the joy and satisfaction of cross-country riding settled in. I was on a road I had never been on, in a landscape I had never seen, and I felt like we could ride forever. Nothing of concern lay between the pavement and the sky, just the freedom to move and the pleasure of doing it. So what if we weren't going very fast... it didn't matter. We had plenty of time and it was fun just to be out there on the bike.

The landscape became dryer and dryer and I felt like we were in full desert by the time we got to Del Rio, though of course I've found out since that there are far dryer places. To my eye the land was bleak and Del Rio was a small, cheap-o little town. The main road brought us right up to the bridge into Mexico, but we decided against going through the checkpoints just then and continued on out to Lake Amistad.

We easily found the campground. The official state signs led us right to it, and then let us know when we crossed its boundary. Without the signage, though, I would not have believed anyone would camp here – a surreal moonscape of blasted white rock and oddly blue water that blazed so bright in the sunlight it hurt your eyes. It really was a view from another planet. I had not imagined a campground without grass or bushes or trees, being from an eastern and wet part of the country. Instead, bleached and jagged rocks extended as far as we could see, rocks on top of rocks with little rectangular camping areas defined by smaller rocks. Extremely sparse patches of stony soil sustained an occasional scrubby brush, weedy tuft or far-flung thorny stalk. I wondered how many hundred miles it was to the nearest tree. I thought the state had a lot of nerve calling this place a park, much less a campground, and was annoyed at the conspiracy of all my sources in deluding me.

We rode through the campground and stopped at the dam to walk around. Yes, the campsites overlooked the water from gently rolling hills, just as the camping guide had said they would. But the near-absence of any life forms was discouraging. There were some cool lizards running around, admittedly, but that wasn't enough to convince us to

sleep out in the middle of a rock field without so much as a bush nearby for shelter or companionship. The water didn't look inviting either. That strange blue color made me wonder if chemicals had been added.

Once again we hauled our camping gear into a motel room. Even at low-end rates we knew we wouldn't be able to afford a motel tomorrow, and we hoped the campsite in Laredo would at least be in the ballpark of what they said in the write-up – which actually was very little. The camping guide left almost everything up to the imagination except the address.

After checking in we rode back down to the international bridge. There was a long line in both directions waiting to cross so we ate on the US side and headed back to the motel and the rock-free bed.

The next day we rode southeast along the river, the rocky land becoming more sandy. The little bike that could just kept chugging along. I had it twisted up to its design limits for sustained periods, and it banged away like a trooper. It never once hesitated or faltered or made me worry that it wasn't going to get us home. But by now I knew that this was the wrong bike for this kind of riding. The threshold between basic transportation and having a real motorcycle had been mentally crossed, and we were going to have to stop riding cross-country or get a bigger bike.

After an hour and a half or so we made the sixty miles to Eagle Pass and another hour brought us to Carrizo Springs. This was the South Texas brush country, famous for bob-white quail and whitewing dove, wild javalinas and giant rattlesnakes. Six to eight foot rattlesnakes are common, laying across the road and soaking up the heat.

We rolled into Laredo mid afternoon. As in Del Rio, the highway into town goes right to the international bridge, but we continued on to the campground passing industrial complexes, warehouses, distribution companies and truck lots. A little white picket fence separated the campground from the highway so from the outside it looked almost promising. But once inside it was clear we were in a wholly urban space – an asphalt parking lot filled in with oyster shell-filled campsite areas. It was worse than Lake Amistad. A vacant lot in an industrial part of town. With oyster shell campsites. Who came up with that idea? Oyster shells to sleep on.

There were quite a few pickup truck campers and RVs, some looking like they were there permanently, but no other tent campers. We didn't want to spend the money to rent a motel, as we still hadn't been into Mexico, so we pitched the tent, rolled out the sleeping bag, and put all our gear inside. We had used none of the camping items like the little cook stove or the nested pots or the folding cooking utensils. We sure hadn't used the hatchet.

We rode back down to the bridge, parked and went across into Nuevo Laredo. The sense of being in another country was instant. The cobblestone streets, the buildings, the

vehicles, the light, even the smells changed. We had never been to Mexico and didn't have anything specific in mind as we looked around, we just knew we needed to bring something back. We followed our feet as they wandered down the streets and around a town square. Little kids selling chiclets were running everywhere, and virtually every space at street level was selling something – leather goods, pottery, furniture, stuffed frogs playing pool, cabrito on a stick. This is what we had come for – the total immersion experience.

We came upon a store with blankets hanging outside. We went in and found a gray blanket we liked with rainbow stripes. Buying it felt like accomplishing a mission. On the last day of the trip, we had finally done one of the things we had set out to do. The nice shop lady rolled it up and stuck it in a paper bag and off we went to explore some more.

This time we ate in Mexico and it was dark when we got back to the campground. After a fitful night on the oyster shells, we were up before dawn to pack the bike and head back to Houston. I put the blanket on top of the pile. It looked like something from the Keystone Kops as we headed out shortly after daybreak.

We watched the countryside slowly change as we made our way up the coast, and again I felt the joy of being on two wheels out there in the middle of things. I liked doing this and I was going to want to do more of it. We got in to Houston near dark, tired but feeling seasoned. The little red bike had plugged away for all it was worth, dutifully carrying us home, and we had learned a lot about traveling on a motorcycle.

I realized what “they” meant when they said motorcycling is about the ride, not the destination. Except for Mexico, the destinations had sucked, more so because of our anticipation. But all the time on the ride, the passing views of the towns and countryside, the glimpses of other lives in the moments of the journey, the wonderful feeling that the bike gave you of being connected to the surrounding world – that had somehow become the payoff for leaving home. Even on something as unsuited to the task as that little red bike, riding across the country was its own reward. At the end of the day, the ride was the point of the trip.

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