

My First SS1000 Ride – MTF Ride-In to the IBA Party March, 2006

Damnit! I know that starting an article with a swear word is probably not good journalism, but it adequately conveys the frame of mind I was in when making my last minute preparations to do a saddle-sore ride out to Jacksonville, FL for the MTF ride-in and IBA party.

I had been watching the weather closely all week, mostly to anticipate what riding gear to wear on the I-10 haul over to the east coast. But the closer it got to my departure day for this trip, the more things were deteriorating. By Wednesday morning, there were little red boxes around the hourly forecast information at weather.com. That can't be good! By 3:00 PM on Wednesday, high wind and severe thunderstorm advisories (read tornado-spawning potential) were issued for the entire western half of the route I'd be taking.

This left me little choice but to push my departure time up from 4:00 AM Thursday to midnight Wednesday night. According to the hourly forecasts, I would be ahead of the rapidly moving storm front. So, leaving work a little early, I packed the bike, got my two witnesses, and unplugged the phones in hopes of grabbing at least a couple hours' sleep before starting this endurance ride at a little after midnight. I only got ten of those proverbial "40 winks," and hoped it would be enough to get me to the other end of this journey, hence the "damnit" at the beginning of this story.

In order to cover a full 1,000+ miles, I would need to go west to *Columbus*, get a gas receipt, and then turn around and head east. The good news was that the earlier start meant sailing east through downtown *Houston* at 3:00 in the morning. *Houston* is a different city in the middle of the night. No traffic! I was going at least the speed limit as I passed through an area that is normally jammed with cars.

As I got a little east of *Winnie*, what looked like a fire was lighting up the sky ahead of me. This spectacle eventually came into view and the few cars in front of me began to show brake lights as they slowed to get a better look at the mayhem on the other side of the interstate. The strobing lights of several fire trucks and emergency vehicles were adding to the gawk-factor. An 18-wheeler had run off the road and flipped over on its side, bursting into flames. Crews were still dousing the fire as I rode past. It was enough to give serious pause to the idea of riding this fast-moving interstate in the middle of the night. On my return ride into *Houston*, I could see the charred skeleton of that 18-wheeler up close and in the light of day.

My next stop was in *Orange* at a gas pump that refused to dispense a receipt. It was 4:30 AM and the station was not staffed. I moved over to the adjacent pump and managed to squeeze another few cents' worth of gas into the tank and get a dated, timed receipt. Only then did I notice a Pilot truck-stop a little ways down that would have been the safer bet. I took advantage of their brightly-lit hospitality, however, to use the bathroom and grab a quick cup of coffee, a banana, and a muffin. This was the first of many subsequent stops that resulted in pleasant encounters with interesting people, curious to know more about why a woman would be riding a motorcycle on I-10 by herself. Once back on the interstate, all I had to do was keep the throttle open and the wheel pointed straight ahead.

The most incredible sunrise greeted me as I crossed the *Atchafalaya Basin*, the reds and oranges of the sky turning the waters beautiful shades of soft pink and lavender. The swamps and river basins were teeming with heron and egrets in search of breakfast, and the scene lifted my spirits enormously after the long droning boredom of riding I-10 in the dark. The gas stop in *Grosse Tete* was my first opportunity to rid my helmet visor of the dead bugs transported from the crawfish farms and rice fields of western *Louisiana*.

Along some anonymous stretch of interstate in *Mississippi*, traffic came to a halt for no apparent reason and, as we crept along, I considered all of the various possibilities, none of which matched the reality. An 18-wheeler had crashed through the barrier on the opposite side, careened across the grassy median, and had come to rest within feet of oncoming traffic. Since emergency vehicles had not yet arrived, I could only assume that this had happened just minutes before. It was difficult to imagine how I might have reacted, seeing that enormous vehicle crashing toward me across the median. Once traffic began to move, a car-full of grinning, waving kids helped to brighten up the trip again, as did a thumbs-up from a female driver who obviously wished she were on a motorcycle and not in a car.

After leaning into some strong, gusty crosswinds while riding across *Mobile Bay*, I was in poor humor when faced with the next challenge: backed-up traffic trying to cross the *Escambia Bay bridge* in *Pensacola*. The sign that said “motorcycles can exit here” should have been the clue. But not knowing the problem, not wanting to move over into the right lane, and not knowing where the “here” exit would take me, I stayed where I was and crept along with the cars, trucks, and 18-wheelers as traffic merged down to one lane. The ugly truth was revealed soon enough. This bridge was damaged 18 months ago when Hurricane Ivan decided to rearrange some of the I-10 bridge spans. Flagmen were slowing speeds down to 10-15 mph and keeping the vehicles spaced well apart as we crossed two large sections of temporary metal grid plates. Normally these are no problem for me, but the grids weren’t perfectly aligned and the very slow speeds accentuated that fact, so it took supreme effort not to fight it or tense up. Now I understood the “motorcycles can exit here” sign.

That delay put a serious crimp in my bladder schedule so, rather than continuing to my planned lunch stop in *Crestview*, I got off in *Milton* and ate part of a Subway sandwich at the gas pump. This guaranteed that folks would come over and chat with me, including middle-aged women who have “always wanted to get a motorcycle and learn how to ride” but apparently have not yet summoned up the courage or the money. I hope that I’ve been an “enabler” for them.

I wish I could say that the remainder of the ride into *Jacksonville* went smoothly, but another serious wreck involving an 18-wheeler got my heart rate up one last time. Few things bring us face-to-face with our mortality more quickly than a serious accident. This one was on my side of the interstate somewhere near *Tallahassee*. A small car had rear-ended an 18-wheeler and it was nearly totally crushed beneath the back of the trailer. I have no doubt that at least one fatality was involved. Traffic once again was stop-and-go, as we crept along on the left shoulder to get clear of the wreckage and debris. Ambulances and EMT personnel were already at the scene, but I did not want to look as I rode by. I did not want to know.

Riding through *Tallahassee* was like reaching mile 21 in a marathon. At that point I knew I had it made, and was saying the equally appropriate things to myself as if I were running 26.1 miles. “Piece of cake; you cover this remaining little bit of ground all the time on a Saturday morning, no problem.” And as a matter of fact, just like seeing the Houston skyline from *Allen Parkway* in those last few miles of a marathon, seeing the signs for *Jacksonville* and for my exit to the “finish line” gave me renewed energy and alertness. Getting that last gas station receipt was like crossing the finish line. The short ride to the hotel was like a victory lap.

Out of the darkness of midnight on a desolate stretch of I-10 in and into the confetti-like brightness of a busy street in *Jacksonville* :

Miles: 1,063

Time: 17:13 hours