

Big Bend Trip April, 2004

The alarm went off at 4:30 on that Wednesday morning in April, much too early for me, especially considering that I'd finished packing the bike late the night before. The newspaper delivery was already on hold, so there were no distractions as I readied the houseplants and the cat to be left behind as I took this five-day trip to Big Bend National Park in southwest Texas. It was still dark when I fired up Candy and backed her out of the garage at 5:30 AM for my ride to the rendezvous spot: Denny's on Fry Road in Katy, TX. The construction on I-10 in that area had the exit ramps to Fry Road nearly unrecognizable and I was not the only one to miss the turn. Fortunately I managed to "snag" a side street just past Fry Road that ducked behind a Home Depot and miraculously got me behind Denny's and next to the Shell gas station, which is exactly where I needed to be.

After filling up, I met up with part of our group already seated inside Denny's and I ordered coffee and toast. We were beginning to wonder where our fearless ride leader was, as he's usually one of the first to arrive for any of our club's rides. But he eventually showed up with the same missed exit story that I had. The previous week, another female rider in the group had posted positive vibes on the forum about this trip, which of course others immediately took as a jinx. She was admonished and warned that in order to ward off the evil spirits of the ride she had to wear a purple boa and an amulet containing yak teeth and other exotic items, including a head bolt from a Shovelhead. Not to let us down, she showed up draped in a purple feather boa, and had prepared amulets for all of us to wear.

As the 7:00 AM departure time rolled around, we were still missing a small group who were coming from Crosby. We waited a few more minutes, but eventually had to hit the road without them. As we headed down Fry Road...sure enough...the three of them on bikes, followed by their wives in a Ford SUV, appeared and a U-turn got them into our group as we continued south toward Alt 90. Knowing they'd probably need gas, we turned into a gas station for a quick fill-up, which gave us women in the group a second chance at the bathrooms before our long ride.

Our first stop for gas was in Eagle Lake, which gave us short break to load up on snack food and water and to use the bathrooms. The ride on Alt 90 was smooth and nearly traffic-free and we made pretty good time to Seguin, where we stopped for gas again before hopping onto I-10. This stretch through San Antonio got us into some traffic but before long we were back on 90, just west of the city. Lunch that first day was at a fast food restaurant in Uvalde. Some among us were quite happy with that choice as we knew it would get us in and out and back on the road in a hurry!

We gassed up again and continued west on 90 toward Marathon, our first night's destination. The terrain began its noticeable change west of Del Rio, where things started looking a lot less agricultural and a lot more like desert. Ralph put his turn signal on just west of Seminole State Park, where we turned into an overlook park with a fantastic view of the Pecos River. The deep gorge cut into the land by this river is surprising, and its depth fools the eye until a view to the north to take in the bridge spanning the gorge puts it into perspective.

Leaving this gorgeous "photo op," we crossed the Pecos River and continued west to the next stop at the Judge Roy Bean museum. This scenic and pleasant little museum and landscaped grounds gave us another chance to stretch our legs and have our photo taken, standing on the porch of that rustic little building, and to learn a little more about the "law west of the Pecos."

We got down to the business of getting to Marathon, riding on a stretch of road that reminded me how glad I was to have gotten my bike serviced before the trip. Our next stop for gas was in Sanderson and none too soon for me, as I had switched my tank to reserve about 5 miles before getting there. Running 75 mph on a continuous up-hill grade, into a headwind, had seriously cut

into my gas mileage. This was our last chance to stretch our legs and take a potty break before the last segment of roadway. And what a roadway that turned out to be!

Just a few miles west of Sanderson we came to a flagman who had traffic stopped in a construction area. Vehicles were being escorted through a one-lane segment of torn-up roadway and soon enough it was our turn to be escorted west. The road was little more than dirt, sand, and gravel and we bumped and jostled our way along behind the escort truck. Not far into the stretch a large truck passed us going the other way, watering down the roadway, which had turned the dirt into slimy mud. So now we were slipping and sliding our way along behind the escort. Those of us unfortunate enough to find ourselves in the left track had to also contend with a deep groove barely one tire wide. Fortunately the end was finally in sight and we could pick up the pace considerably as we headed toward Marathon.

Our first night's stay was at the historic Gage Hotel in Marathon where we quickly got checked in and made arrangements for a group dinner at the hotel. It was a pleasant end to a very long day, as we ate together at one long table and discussed all sorts of topics until we all began to drift off to our antique-filled rooms and plush down comforters. It was to be an early departure the next morning after a very long day in the saddle. But we didn't let that stop us from briefly stepping outside to enjoy the nighttime sky. Those of us in the group who are middle-aged city dwellers have rare opportunity to see the sky as it appeared in our childhood, before halogen lights on streets and mega-shopping mall parking lots began robbing us of starlight. Jupiter was amazingly large and bright, appearing next to the quarter-moon, and the Big Dipper was easily visible overhead.

We awoke to a "crisp" clear morning, still dark, as we loaded our bikes and found the nearby gas station to fill up our tanks. Very soon we were on our way south toward Big Bend National Park. A detour along the route took us to Stillwell to visit the Hallie Stillwell Hall of Fame, a tribute to a woman who lived well into her 90's, an amazing pioneer woman, living in that harsh land. As a rancher, she was also looked to as an authoritative historian of the Big Bend region and earned the respect of other ranchers and cowboys as a capable and determined land owner, rancher, even a Justice of the Peace.

From there it was on to the park with a stop at the Panther Junction Visitors Center to pay our entrance fees, view the panorama of the park, and take a short break before the technical and scenic ride up through the Chisos Mountains to Chisos Basin. We were not disappointed! The road was excellent, with hairpin turns and swooping S-curves. The mountain views as we wound our way up and over the roadway and into the basin were breathtaking. For those of us who've never been to Big Bend before, it's hard to believe that such grand-scale ruggedness exists in the state of Texas. A short hike along the Chisos trail took us to an overlook point where "The Window View" gave us exactly that: a view through a break in the mountains out over a panorama of the Rio Grande and the Mexican Chihuahua desert beyond.

Lunch was at the lodge in Chisos Basin where most of us took advantage of the excellent soup and salad combination and, after a brief break on the shaded and pleasant outdoor patio, we loaded up and continued our ride through the park, working our way back over the Chisos mountain range to the park road that would take us southeast toward Boquillas Canyon on the Rio Grande in the extreme southeast corner of the park. The ride toward Boquillas was on gently rolling hills across a relatively flat plain covered in blooming prickly pear cactus and forested with blooming ocotillo 6 feet tall or taller, creating a bizarre landscape of red-tipped fingers waving at the sky. As we neared the Boquillas overlook, we could see the Canyon wall ahead, seemingly dwarfed by the open vastness of the river valley before us. The bikes lined up along the driveway in front of the canyon were like toys in comparison. Here it was very hot, and the dryness burned at my nostrils as we kicked at the hard dry ground and gazed across the shimmering heat at the canyon wall.

From here we rode on to Rio Grande Village for an ice cream break, spending some quality time sitting on the benches under the cool shade of a covered patio. Refreshed, we headed back west past Panther Junction and exited the park on the west side, to spend the night in Study Butte. Here the desolation is nearly complete. The town itself seems perpetually under a dusty haze, as precious few if any parking lots are paved. Most business establishments including the Big Bend Lodge where we spent the night are built on dry gravel and dirt. Only the small concrete pad at the gas station pumps provided any solid footing.

Dinner that night was in neighboring Terlingua, a town now making money on its past as a "ghost town" left over after the cinnabar (mercury ore) mines were closed down. Live entertainment and a surprisingly upscale menu made dining at the Starlight Theater a unique experience out in the middle of desert scrub. But after our second long day of riding, the group was quick to head back to the motel for the night. Even the adjacent gift shop full of unique and unusual gifts and items wasn't enough to tempt the group for very long.

Another 7:00 AM departure time saw everyone congregated in front of the Big Bend Motor Lodge in Study Butte, saying goodbye to one member of our group who would be short-circuiting the trip to head straight for Alpine TX to deal with an ignition problem on his bike. The group then headed back to Terlingua for a terrific breakfast eaten on the covered outdoor deck at Ms. Tracey's Cafe, with a fantastic view of the sunrise up over the mountain ridge to our east.

After chowing down on eggs benedict, pancakes, breakfast burritos and a mess of good home-cookin', we mounted up and headed east, back into Big Bend National Park, pausing long enough to take a group photograph in front of the entrance sign. We took the Santa Elena Canyon road south, by far the prettiest road in the park. The Sotol Vista lookout point gave us views of the craggy mountaintops silhouetted against the rising sun to the east. Down toward Santa Elena Canyon lookout, we began to see the enormous looming wall of the canyon straight ahead, its many shades of gold and red made even more brilliant by the early morning sun at our backs. At the lookout point, the black willow trees in the river valley far below us looked like small shrubs against the canyon wall. Once down at the riverbed we could truly appreciate the massive size of this canyon, made more evident when some among us walked out into the nearly dry riverbed.

From here we retraced our ride back out of the park, stopping briefly at the historic Castolon settlement, and then continuing west to Study Butte and then out Route 170 to ride one of the top-rated motorcycle roads in the state of Texas. This road dips and weaves its way along the Rio Grande River for the roughly 60 miles between Terlingua and Presidio and the bike procession in my rearview mirror looked like an E-ride at an amusement park. A very fun E-ride at that! The lunch stop that day was in Lajita, a once-sleepy little town with ambitions of becoming the Palm Springs of Texas. An 18-hole golf course and growing complex of restaurants, gift shops, and hotel are turning the desert landscape into a lush green oasis along the river. The restaurant has a pleasant covered veranda, a good place to get out of the hot sun and enjoy a leisurely lunch. Afterward we made the required ride over to visit the Mayor of Lajita and pay our respects to this horned and furry "first citizen," a goat known for his taste for beer. But either the town or its owner has put the goat "on the wagon." No more beer for him, so a scratch on his chin, a pat on his head, and we departed for Presidio.

Presidio was a quick gas stop (and for some of us, an ice cream, candy, chips, and assorted other junk food stop) before we turned north on Highway 67 toward Marfa. This is a pleasant road across rolling hills with giant sweepers that can be taken at some speed. The landscape passed by swiftly and suddenly we were in Marfa, turning east onto Highway 90 toward Alpine where we'd be spending the night and hopefully catching up with our friend who'd headed there that morning to seek repairs for his bike. We stayed at a nearly new Ramada Inn and once checked in and cleaned up we met back up to ride as a group to a steakhouse in town called the Reata. We enjoyed a pleasant outdoor dinner under a canopy of Wisteria vines as the temperatures cooled to a pleasant breeze. A couple of us left ahead of the others to get gas and to head toward the

motel, but the rest of the group weren't far behind. I tucked Candy into the parking lot and gratefully crawled into bed.

The cool pleasant breeze became 40-degree winds by the next morning, the leading edge of a rapidly moving cold front that was pushing into the region. Our plan for this day was an early morning ride to Ft. Davis State Park and breakfast at the park-owned-and-run restaurant and then on the McDonald Observatory. Last minute wardrobe changes were in order for the group, as everyone sought to add more layers before we headed out at near-dawn. The ride to the state park took us on another of Texas's top-rated motorcycle roads, Highway 118. We encountered a herd of deer along the side of the road a few miles north of Alpine, as two darted across in front of our ride leader. From three bikes back, I witnessed their road crossing and could see their powerful leaps across a livestock fence, and was thankful that riders and deer were unhurt in this near encounter. Past experience with this road taught our ride leader to take an easy pace until well after sun-up.

Our breakfast break gave the sun a head-start, and temperatures were noticeably better when we left the restaurant and headed for our destination, the McDonald Observatory, owned and staffed by the University of Texas and home to the second-largest telescope in the world. A tour through the visitors' center and gift shop was followed by a 13-minute introductory film about the history of the observatory and its first telescopes and advances in technology since that time. We departed the visitor center and rode up the steep winding road to the observatories at the top of one of the highest points in the area. It was tempting to admire the views, but the demands of the driveway up the mountain took precedence. Once at the top, however, we had near-360 degree views for miles on an absolutely clear and crisp morning.

Sufficiently awed by the vistas, we headed back down the mountain and onto a loop ride that took us back to quaint and historic Ft. Davis and a gas stop. No one was ready for lunch, so the group decided to continue back to Alpine before stopping to eat once we got just east of town. Besides, no road trip on motorcycles would be complete without a stop at Dairy Queen! Full and ready to start heading east toward home, the group saddled up for our long journey to Del Rio, where we would be spending our last night on the road. We had a small scare when one of the bikes had a problem with the shift lever, but this was easily repaired, and we were underway again.

West of Sanderson, we picked our way through that same construction area that had us slipping and sliding a few days earlier. This time, the road was dry and full of ruts, but far preferable to mud. We stopped in Sanderson for a fast gas break and continued east on 90. As we neared the bridge across the Pecos River, what can only be described as small black missiles started to fly in my face, hitting my hands, my legs, my helmet, my windscreen. They were everywhere! I presumed they were some kind of beetle, but couldn't imagine there being so many. Others in the group experienced the same thing. Once we arrived in Del Rio, we could see the bug carcasses hanging off our bikes and clothing and immediately realized we'd run into a giant swarm of bees!

Our last night on the road was spent at the Days Inn in Del Rio. Initial ideas of taking a taxi across the border for dinner were met with less than unanimous enthusiasm. One look at the pleasant pool and covered patio made our decision for us: beer and pizza delivered poolside for a relaxing last night to our trip. Stories were swapped and kudos were given where earned for a great trip and great company. Before retiring for the night, all agreed to a later than usual start for Sunday: 8:00 AM.

We awoke to a light misty rain and immediately started to suit up in our rain gear. Of course, we like to think of it as our rain-prevention gear. As we lined up to pull out of the parking lot, one of the bikes would not start. It was quickly determined, after a push-start didn't work, that it was only a bad ground, and it was easily fixed. The ride east to Hondo was fast and without any further rain. But in Hondo, we lost one bike to a broken belt and it had to be left behind in a nursing

home parking lot, after obtaining permission from the residence manager, to be retrieved the next day by trailer. Another rider, whose wife was following our group in their Ford SUV, volunteered to ride in the vehicle and turn his bike over to the now-rideless member of our group. The stretch between Hondo and San Antonio becomes flat and unremarkable save for the ribbons of bright yellow coreopsis that line the shoulders of the highway as far as the eye can see.

We took a gas and lunch stop in Seguin after riding through some brief showers on I-10 as we passed through San Antonio. Then it was back onto I-10 for the last 200 miles to Houston. The group began to break up as some riders chose to set a faster pace than others, eager to get home. One last gas stop in Sealy, and we all said our goodbyes before getting back onto the Interstate and riding the last 50 miles home. As I parked my faithful, trusty bike in the garage, I apologized to her for putting her up so dirty and wet, but promised her I'd give her a good wash and detailing the next day.

All of us put over 1700 miles on our tires and our backsides on this trip, every mile of it pleasant and enjoyable, not just for the scenery, but for the companionship of the group, the camaraderie, and for the well-planned and well-organized itinerary, thanks to our ride-leader. The stops were perfectly timed, and the selections for lodging and meals were excellent. Coming from the flatlands of Texas, the rugged peaks and mountains of Big Bend and the lushness of the Davis Mountains are spectacular. The cacti cooperated by being in magnificent bloom, as did the miles and miles of those famous Texas wild flowers: bluebonnets, coreopsis, primrose, Indian paintbrush, Indian blankets, and lavender phlox. The large open spaces of Texas were capped off with topaz-blue skies during the day and black, starlit skies at night. It doesn't get much better than this!