

## Peak Experiences

**M**AYBE I'm a control freak and I didn't know it. I just got back from South Africa, where a group of American journalists were invited to try BMW's new R1200GS. You can read the technical details in this issue, and I'm pretty confident you won't find more information out anywhere else. I spent a lot of time talking to the engineers to gather information that wasn't included in the big press kit.

I never imagined that I'd get a chance to see Africa. But it had never been one of my must-see-it-before-I-die destinations, either. Images of powerful animals, gorgeous wild country and tales of adventure were pretty well balanced by a barrage of negative stories about poverty, disease and racial discrimination, so that my usual reaction to Africa was more curiosity than a compulsion to visit. Like many of you, I suspect, I will also continue to being more than a little ignorant of the continent's history.

But, it's a good idea not to harbor a lot of preconceptions when you go somewhere, and it wasn't that hard to get aside my worries, knowing that BMW would do their best to be sure we'd have a positive experience. Kildare was hired to handle the details of a four-day tour around '03 BMW models after the new GS introduction, and I already knew Kildare's name as a top-notch job. However, I couldn't help but notice that his pre-tour information mentioned that a Hepatitis-A shot was advised.

So, I called my wife's HMO doctor, who specializes in travel inoculations, figuring this was probably alarmist. But she suggested half a dozen more inoculations. Kildare, I figured. So, I called my own doctor, and he looked it up for me, finally suggesting five inoculations and a precautionary prescription for Malaria pills and Cipro, just in case. A day later, starting from both ends and both butt cheeks and carrying enough pills to register as a certified hypochondriac, I was pronounced fit to travel. It was a good thing I didn't wait until the last minute. Just the idea of not being saved from all these potential illnesses wanted me for a while worked.

Traveling half-way around the world takes some time, too, even at nearly the speed of sound. A flight to Atlanta would gather the group for an overnight stay, and then, in the morning, we'd all make a 15-hour jump to Johannesburg together. I've only flown business class a couple of times in my life, and it's always been on BMW's credit card—sweet. By comparison, trans-Atlantic flights in coach could even give someone claustrophobia. Note: The seats to screen should not be entertained for more



than a few seconds when you're five miles up and a thousand miles from anywhere.

South Africa, if you didn't guess, is the southernmost country on the African continent. Settled around the same time the Dutch were trying to find some alternative to being flooded out of Holland and landed in New York, it still reveals lots of Dutch influence. Afrikaans is a Dutch dialect, and all the towns around the west coast, where we rode, had Dutch names, although the Dutch were eventually defeated by the British Empire, as its gold, diamonds and strategic location were too hard to resist—also making English the official language.

Although the country's indigenous people outnumber the combined colonizers by about four-to-one, the minority had significant economic clout, and tried to take unfair advantage for a long time. Apartheid, the official policy of segregation that earned South Africa a boycott by the rest of the civilized world, ended exactly two years ago. The result, as far as we could see, has been very positive; genuinely happy people and the most successful economy on the continent. There is still significant poverty in places, but you can't help but think that the future promises to be better for everyone.

The countryside around Capetown looks a lot like the southwestern US, semi-arid with similar vegetation, cactuses and oak trees, etc. but the earth is often red, like the rocks around Sedona, Arizona. The mountains are high, but not so high as the Rockies, and because their ridge tops are broken, a pass through the mountains is not so high or long and twisty as it would be in Colorado or the Alps, for instance.

We covered about 1,000 miles in total,

much of it running straight to the bottom, with the throttle nearly pinned. Because the country is so empty by US standards, there is little traffic, and the car drivers are amazingly courteous, always pulling to the shoulder as you approach, so that you won't need to use the passing willows. Hoping to preserve their good will, we immediately responded with waves or flashed lights.

We drove on the wrong side of the road, a big concern for me at first, but since you'd warned yourself enough times about the consequences of getting it wrong, it wasn't hard to do. Only when you were pulling onto an empty road were you likely to get it wrong. I only did that once.

South Africa turned out to be a wonderful place, very clean and well-kept, full of extraordinarily warm, friendly people and beautiful landscapes, with giant, deep blue skies overhead. It was even reasonably inexpensive, too, at least compared to Europe. (Gas was about \$2.25 a gallon, for instance.) Except for the wild ostriches and occasional baboons swarming at rest stops, it looked a lot like home.

I bought four African music CDs before I left, sort of "greatest hits" collections, and listening to them, you'll immediately recognize the roots of reggae and gospel. The music keeps the experience fresh for me.

But strangely, in spite of the wonderful company of my fellow riders, and we really had a great time together, the good food and great hotels, the experience I think back on most often was riding alone up a mountain pass one beautiful afternoon. The road was perfect, and my rhythm on the bike gave me a delicious feeling of control. Tearing the big R1200GS from one turn to the next was such a satisfying experience—a bike-control experience. I sometimes wonder why that should be my favorite memory, because there was lots of really great memories, but I suppose it figures after all. The real reason I was there in the first place, and that's somebody uses of every person that came along, is that we all got such a kick out of motorcycles that we'd dedicated our lives to it. There are certainly more lucrative ways to make a living, and maybe somebody somewhere has more fun than I do making a living, but I haven't met them.

This month marks my fourth year of being in charge of MCN, and I thank you for making it possible. I'm truly blessed!

*Dave Sealey*

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Editor-in-Chief