

# RIDING THE EASTERN SIERRAS

**GEOFF TOMPKINSON** and his wife Liz explore the USA's mesmerising Sierra Nevada mountains on two wheels



“F

\*\*K Geoff, this is not good, I can't see anything,” my wife Liz sounded concerned.

“Can you see the yellow line down the middle of the road?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” she said.

“That's all you need to see,” I replied.

This was a short snippet of our bike-to-bike communication whilst riding in freezing fog over Carson Pass in California. We found ourselves battling the weather on day two of a week-long tour of the Golden State, but I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's go back to the beginning.

Liz and I had planned a trip to California and Hawaii using a wedding anniversary and birthday as an excuse for what was going to be an expensive holiday. Part of this trip was a seven-day tour on two motorbikes from San Francisco to Los Angeles via the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, known as the Eastern Sierras. Our route started in San Francisco on the USA's Pacific coast. We then planned to travel eastwards inland, taking the Tioga Pass through Yosemite National Park, before travelling south along the Eastern Sierras. We would then cut back to the west coast and finishing in Los Angeles.

However, by the time we boarded our flight to San Francisco from our home in Austria, we already knew the Tioga Pass was closed due to exceptional snow falls. We were forced to take the one route still open to us. We would go further north to Lake Tahoe, via the Carson and Luther passes. This would add around 250 miles to the journey and use up the free day we had planned to spend in Yosemite, but we had little choice.

We pitched up at the motorcycle rental company MotoQuest, located on Treasure Island, halfway along San Francisco's Oakland Bay Bridge. We arrived in a taxi wearing all our biking gear and carrying four pannier inner bags, a Kriega wet bag and an array of cameras, batteries, mounting options and tools. In typical laid-back California style, the guys at MotoQuest were completely relaxed with us adding whatever we wanted to our two-brand new Suzuki V-Strom 1000s, and they left us to our own devices to rig up things as we wanted.

We soon got the bikes packed and found ourselves under leaden skies, making our way with aching clutch hands across the seemingly endless chessboard of strip malls and traffic lights that is the low-rent, once high-crime capital of the bay area known as Oakland. Our adventure had begun. After a few long hours, we finally ▶

## WHO'S WRITING?



Geoff Tompkinson also goes by the name *The Honorary Austrian* under which he pursues his passion for photography and videography. Having retired from a 40-year career in photojournalism and videography several years ago, he and his wife took up motorcycling with a passion. They live in the Austrian Alps, the perfect place for touring some of Europe's best biking roads. You can enjoy more of

Geoff's travels at [www.facebook.com/honoraryaustrian](https://www.facebook.com/honoraryaustrian), and at [www.youtube.com/thehonoraryaustrian](https://www.youtube.com/thehonoraryaustrian).



#### ON THE ROAD TO BODIE

## THE BIKES

We rented the bikes from MotoQuest in San Francisco and returned them to their premises in Los Angeles at the end of the trip. MotoQuest were great to work with and very amenable to us rigging up the bikes for cameras etc.

We both had Suzuki V-Strom 650s which were almost brand new. This was the first time we had ridden the newer model of this bike and we were both extremely happy with them. They performed faultlessly and had ample power even with panniers, top box and waterproof Kriega bags. The bikes were extremely comfortable for cruising and fine on road or for light off-road excursions. Excellent all-round bikes for the money.

escaped the built-up areas of the city and passed through rolling golden hills of sunburnt grass, dotted with emerald trees, under what was now a cloud-scudded beautiful big sky. It wasn't to last.

As the day progressed, the horizon was getting progressively blacker and blacker and we were heading straight for it. We pulled over onto the red earth alongside a fruit tree plantation and donned wet weather gear just in time.

California is a land of extremes and we were about to experience one of the less enjoyable ones. Barely five minutes later we were battling through tracer bullet rain and gusting wind against a Mordor-like backdrop illuminated only by periodic tree-like flashes of lightning lacing the black velvet sky. We got very wet, very quickly.

Day two saw us under blue skies once again, heading towards Jamestown, located on the edge of the Sierra Nevada region of California. We rode along undulating roads lined on both sides with endless fruit tree plantations and Tuscan-style ranches. After Jamestown, the scenery changed as we rode gently winding lanes through overhanging trees and past occasional shiplap wooden homesteads, complete with white picket fences and swinging veranda chairs. At the small town of Jackson, a right turn saw us on Highway 88 and the start of the Carson Pass.

Due to excessive snowfalls, this was the only route open to us in order to get to the other side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Well before we reached the summit of the pass at 8,500 ft, we had entered the clouds and visibility dropped to almost zero. Only the

prominent yellow line down the middle of the road, and the fact that there were no hairpin turns, made it possible to ride at all. As we got higher and higher, the temperature dropped to just above freezing. There were no other motorbikes on the road, nobody would be so stupid. There was only the occasional car looming out of the mist with yellow flashers blinking. It was monotonous, cold and mesmerising. We were praying that we were sufficiently visible from behind, whilst reminiscing about that scene in the Jim Carey movie *Dumb and Dumber* where the pillion passenger froze to the rider. Not even heated vests, winter gloves and thermal underwear could stop the penetrating damp and cold. We rewarded our hardship and efforts in South Lake Tahoe that evening with a wonderful meal and a bottle of wine in a superb little boutique restaurant called Cafe Fiori. They even had Earl Grey tea to finish.

The next morning the sky gradually cleared to a cloud-scudded blue as we made our way south along the Nevada section of highway 395, an unremarkable straight line through scrub flatland towards the distant hills. At Bridgeport, a small town that sits 1,970m above sea level. I got chatting to a gravel-voiced biking enthusiast in the car park out front of a diner. He told me about the nearby gold rush ghost town of Bodie. We decided to visit it after a hearty lunch consisting of a triple-decker club sandwich with fries and cokes.

Bodie is a ghost town located in the Bodie Hills, east of the Sierra Nevada. It became a boom town in 1876 when gold was dis- ➔



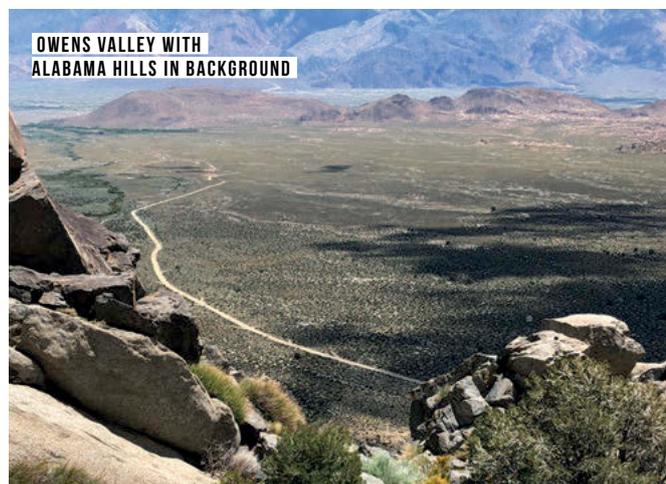
CARSON PASS FOG



MONO LAKE



BODIE GHOST TOWN



OWENS VALLEY WITH ALABAMA HILLS IN BACKGROUND

covered and, by 1879, it had a population of around 6,000 people with around 2,000 buildings. It's even said that in 1880 it was California's second or third largest city. Bodie had banks, a fire brigade, a brass band, railroad, workers unions, newspapers and a jail. It also had a red-light district and a small Chinatown.

Murders, shootouts, bar-room brawls and stagecoach holdups were regular occurrences. Gold bullion from the town's nine stamp mills was shipped to Carson City, Nevada, with armed escorts. Over the years, Bodie's mines produced gold valued at £26 million. After the boom times of the 1880s, the town went into steady decline as prospectors moved to new and richer finds elsewhere. By 1910, the population was down to 698 and today it is a National Historic Landmark. A total of 170 buildings remain. After several fascinating hours amongst the remnants of this once booming town, we headed back up the unmade road that led out of the ghost town and down to our overnight stop at the quaint Gateway Motel in the town of Lee Vining on Mono Lake.

The next morning, we awoke to our first sunny day. White, fluffy, cottonwood seeds were blowing all around us as we crossed the street for breakfast. Soon enough we were back on the bikes, standing up on the pegs as we gingerly rolled down a loose gravel path to the shore of Mono Lake. We paid our \$3 (£2.30) visitor fee and left our tank bags with the warden who'd agreed to keep a watchful eye on them for us. This place is an unmissable surreal land and waterscape of towering alien formations reflected in the shimmering surface of the saline lake. You can easily

lose yourself and many hours exploring and photographing this unique location. We certainly did.

Formed at least 750,000 years ago, it is possibly a remnant of a larger, older lake which once covered large parts of Utah and Nevada. In recent history, the city of Los Angeles diverted water from the freshwater streams flowing into the lake for their own use. This caused the water level to drop in the lake revealing the majestic limestone tufa towers seen today.

Tufa towers like these are formed underwater as subsurface water enters the bottom of the lake through small springs. High concentrations of calcium in these waters cause calcite to precipitate around the spring openings. It is the build-up of this calcite over centuries that causes the formation of towers like those seen at Mono Lake. After a legal battle with Los Angeles city authorities, it has been agreed that the water level in Mono Lake will be partially replenished but not so much as to completely submerge the towers once more. That would ruin the tourist attraction.

We were well behind schedule when we finally left this magical place and headed off on our route to the town of Lone Pine after another little side excursion onto the Tioga Pass. This was the pass we had wanted to take when we first planned the trip and we were determined to try to get a feel for the Yosemite we had missed due to bad weather closing the roads. We just got far enough to shoot a video of us riding through the Redwoods before we were once again stymied by a road barrier.

Back on Highway 395, and we came to the Mammoth Lakes



TIOGA PASS IS CLOSED



BODIE OLD CAR



MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

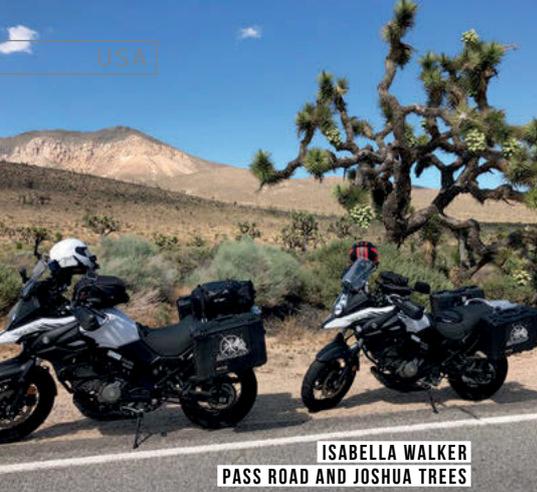
scenic loop which wound its way through sweet-smelling pine forest with footings covered in snow. There were no wide-open views here, but we enjoyed riding this loop even more than the last one. A brief stop for lunch at the imaginatively named Burgers Restaurant in Mammoth Lakes set us up for the remainder of the ride which proved to be a hot and sticky 100 miles south through a huge flat basin with the distant Sierra mountains to the right and Death Valley to the left. This is cruise control and squared-off tyre territory. The scenery changes so imperceptibly slowly you would need a fast time-lapse to notice any change at all. We over-nighted at the Comfort Inn in Lone Pine (the town's lone pine tree blew down in the great storm of 1876). We enjoyed elk steaks to celebrate the end of another great day.

The next day's route took us to the city of Bakersfield, but not before visiting the excellent Museum of Western Film History just along the road from our hotel. This museum is dedicated to the 800 or so cowboy films and countless television shows made in the Alabama Hills, located behind the museum. The most recent of note being Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. After an hour or so visiting this nostalgia trip of a museum, we headed off into the hills to absorb some authentic cowboy atmosphere. Having been brought up watching *The Lone Ranger*, *Hopalong Cassidy* and *Bonanza*, as well as countless John Wayne and Randolph Scott westerns, it was impossible to not imagine shootouts, stagecoach hijacks and Apache Indian encampments behind the rounded rocks and in the sandy depressions. The contrast

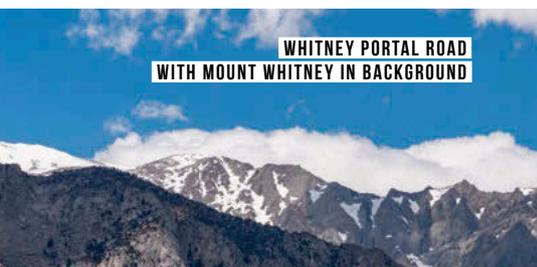
between this smoothly eroded maze of reddish sandy rocks and arches, seen against the snow-capped jagged peak of Mount Whitney in the distance is starkly beautiful and was used to great effect in all those historic movies.

We'd had so much fun in the museum and the Alabama hills, that the morning had already flown away. It was lunchtime before we even got back to Lone Pine. We grabbed a surprisingly good toasted ham and cheese sandwich at the Chevron petrol station and wolfed it down sitting on the curb in the parking lot. Sometimes these are the best meals of all. There followed another mesmerisingly straight, hot (35C) and seemingly never-ending ride down Highway 395. The Sierra Nevada mountains on our right became gradually smaller and smaller the further south we went with the nothingness of Death Valley to our left.

We eventually sweated our way to Isabella Walker Pass road and, after a much-needed ice cream at Brady's Mini Mart, we headed west towards the hilly remnants of the Sierra Nevada mountains and Lake Isabella. This part of the ride would soon make the monotony of the previous hours well worth it. The scenery rapidly changed character from the flat desert scrub we were now so used to. At first, it melded into gently rising slopes on either side of the road with more dense bushy scrub and stunted fir trees. Then, as we progressed ever westward, we went through more forest sections followed by huge areas dominated by Joshua trees and scattered cacti. The right-hand side of the road would often change abruptly to a lush dense green vegetation whenever ▶



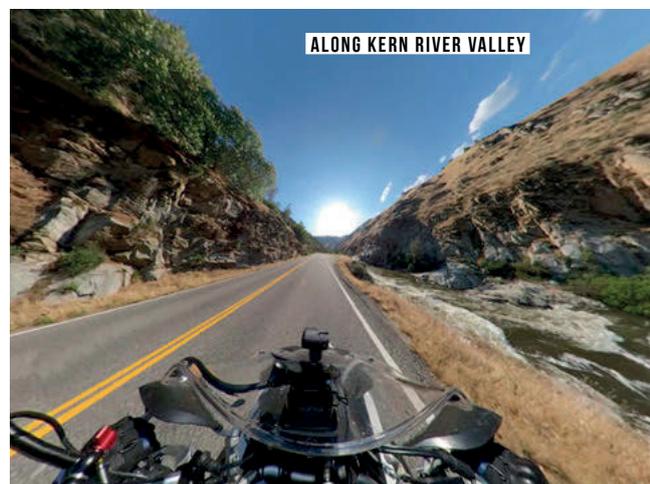
ISABELLA WALKER  
PASS ROAD AND JOSHUA TREES



WHITNEY PORTAL ROAD  
WITH MOUNT WHITNEY IN BACKGROUND



MARICOPA HIGHWAY



ALONG KERN RIVER VALLEY

it got close to Canebrake Creek which followed the road.

As we approached Lake Isabella and passed through the town of Weldon, the scenery changed to cultivated farmland with crop fields and herds of cattle on either side of the tree-shaded road. A stark irrigated contrast to the barren backdrop of the sandy Sierra Nevada foothills all around. Some way past Lake Isabella, we entered the final, and easily the best from a riding point of view, stage of that day's route. The ride along the Kern River valley down to Bakersfield is spectacular. Winding and twisting our way along the valley floor with the raging rapids in full boiling flood to our right, it was a blast of a ride and a fitting end to another fantastic day of Californian experiences.

The next morning was unremarkable as we left Bakersfield on straight highways and headed South West towards Maricopa before picking up the California State Route 33 towards Ventura on the coast. This would be our last day before heading into LA to return the bikes. On a hot, straight, featureless dusty section of the 33, between intermittent stops caused by numerous road resurfacing gangs, we pulled into a dusty parking space next to a lone Harley-Davidson motorcycle parked outside a small shack. It had a single-storey drystone wall frontage and a shiny new green pitched roof and was grandly called The Place.

There we ordered another American staple, a burger and fries, and got chatting to Wolfgang, the Harley rider. Wolfgang turned out to be a very experienced world tourer and motorcycling journalist from Germany. We swapped stories and route suggestions

and he told us we were about to enter a really great section of the 33. He had just ridden it in the opposite direction.

Boy was he right. Barely a few miles further down the road the flat featureless scenery rapidly changed. There were sandy hills and rocks, topped with green shrubs receding to trees, on either side of a twisting, rising and falling tarmac ribbon winding its way between the rolling hills of this section of the Los Padres National Forest. It probably wasn't the most remarkable scenery of the trip but undoubtedly one of the best rides. Good tarmac and little to no traffic encouraged spirited riding and big grins all round. It was a great way to end this trip of a lifetime. All that remained was for us to fight our way through the sprawl of LA and return the bikes. **ABR**

## WANT TO RIDE THE EASTERN SIERRAS?

The rental for the two bikes for seven days was roughly £2,100. We planned all the stops in advance and the average price per night for a double was £100. All accommodation was through Booking.com which often gives the advantage of late cancellation should you need to modify your plans. This was something we had to do once due to the excessive snow falls closing the passes we had originally planned to use. We flew to San Francisco from Vienna (we are based in Austria) on Austrian Airlines. It cost £2,500 for two in premium economy, which added comfort on the trip as well as increasing the baggage allowance which we needed as we took all our own gear.