

Santa Cruz 2011

After the week just gone by, with the temps near 100, the day was expected to be super sweet. The morning started out in the mid 60s and stayed that way until we got home. Then it was at most in the mid 70s or low 80s. We had puffy clouds to start the morning. I was expecting a lot of riders to meet us in Hayward, so it wasn't a jolt to have just 3 bikes at the Roadhouse parking lot. A couple riders rolled in, just in time, to make it 5 leaving Fairfield. Had I been really, really on time, we would have missed them. Tch tch. I will skip over the long run of freeways except to say I tried to keep us near 65-72 and was forced to change lanes far more than I wanted to. Sorry folks. And there was that one ditzy lady as we were about to get onto Hwy 880. Everyone was thankful I did not have a RPG mounted on my bike. Once at the gas station in Hayward and everyone was there...

We had a total of 9 bikes. The regulars included Steve Wright, John Bourassa, Mathew & Brandy (a first timer) Barrett, Matthew Takeda, Ken & Paula (a first timer too) Pollett, and me. New to the group were Rich Elliott, Nathan Sanders, and Nicki Duesberg. As we, who rode the freeways, got gas and rested our freeway deadened brains, I checked who had FastTrack and who, like me, was going to go through the toll booth with cash. Everyone had FastTrack except me and Mathew B. I may bend to pressure and get one...soon. So the plan was for me and Mathew B to lead out first, then the group would follow with Steve leading a minute or two later. As we two rolled, I saw a lot of the group following. I guess I did not nail that plan down solidly. Fudge. All worked out well as we two having paid our toll found everyone waiting on solid ground in San Mateo.

Then we rode the last bit of freeway and finally started up the hill on Hwy 92. One day I hope to be able to hit those turns with spirit. Compared to previous runs up the hill, we were actually rolled faster. We made the turn onto Hwy 35 and we pulled over to the roughly paved wide spot. I talked with everyone to warn them about the visually deceiving turns, the changing radius turns, and more importantly to use their mirrors to spot speed racers from behind.

As it turns out I was the only one to encounter any speed racers and they were coming the other way...passing a car as they entered a blind right hand turn. Good thing I was practicing keeping myself off the center line on left hand turns. They passed harmlessly – only by my position being so far to the outside. The views of the ocean to our right were mostly obscured by the heavy fog pushing in. And the views of the bay were sullied by the thick fog/smog. They were much grander the previous week when I did my dry run. Here, everyone look in my brain and see...well that may be a bad idea...

I rolled at a mild speed, trying to keep myself not too much above the limits. OK, on some of the turns I scooted along nicely, but I pulled back down afterwards. I did a couple of stop and gathers to make sure we had everyone. Mathew B was very wisely taking it slow with his low sled. It is well designed for nice long freeway rides – not the twisties of Hwy 35. We had good fortune and had very little slow traffic. I did have to brake hard to avoid an idiot who pulled out of his driveway and then panicked and stopped in front of the SUV in front of me. But I saw his movement and was already prepping when he moved out. Safe.

We rolled into the parking lot of the deli across the street from Alice's Restaurant. The 'town' is called Sky Londa or Woodside – depends on the mapping tool you use. It was time for snacks, bathroom breaks, swapping stories, and a lot of eye candy viewing. This is one spot on summer weekends that a bike watcher will get their fill. Name your sweet bike and you will likely find examples. Rich had looked up the restaurant and found that they were closed for lunch on Sundays. I had planned on calling ahead, so I called with trepidation... They answered and yes they were open for lunch. Great.

We rolled out of there and onward south on Hwy 35. Again I mostly kept myself near the speed limits. I had got most of my speed-freak out last week in the heat. I saw a lot of the riders in my mirrors from time to time,

so I hoped I was doing better than normal. At Hwy 9, Rich waved and headed east (as planned) as we turned west. Oh this section is very nicely twistied and I did run at a higher spark. I used the 'straights' to slow down and let the pack catch up. Wheee.

When I did the dry run, I goofed at the stop sign at Hwy 9 and 236. I went straight for a short distance before going back and making the should have been left to stay on Hwy 9. This time I got it right and had no problems. When I got home from the dry run, I was tempted to add that into the route... But it would have made a long day even longer. But if anyone gets the shot, ride Hwy 236. It is a state park and the speed limit is 25, but it is oh so sweet scenery.

We again had mostly nice, courteous traffic until we got to Boulder Creek. Here the traffic stacks up with stop signs and signal lights. And the traffic continues until we made our turn onto Alba Rd in Ben Lomond. I had not ran this 4 mile stretch on the dry run and was expecting a rough goat trail. OK, it was rough in a few places, but this is a suu-wee-eet little road. Emphasis on little. There was a center line in many places, but enough places were too narrow for paint. As much as I was giggling with joy inside my helmet, I was sending sympathy thoughts to Mathew B and his low floorboards.

I stopped the group for a break at the top of the hill just at Empire Grade Rd. All agreed that was a fun road... well except for Mathew B. His wife, Brandy, was quite pleased with the road. It had beautiful views with lush forests, rustic and not so rustic houses, and hills receding in the distance. It was a very tight and technically challenging road. I loved it. I loved Mathew's description "It was a sidewalk"

Now we rolled down Empire Grade Rd. Wide and smooth with equally glorious views for 12 miles. This brought into north-west Santa Cruz. This is a newer, upscale section of town. At the bottom of Empire Grade Rd we made a right onto Storey Rd (spelled correct) and my instructions said right onto King. I just 'knew' that was wrong, so I made the left. Oops. I had designed a great way to cross Hwy 1 and that required the right turn. Fudge. I meandered, hoping to 'find' the planned roads, but failed. I found a nice parking lot and pulled the group in so I could recalculate (in GPS speak). I, being aware of my wrong-turn-ability, had a printed map of Santa Cruz, so I used it to find where we were and where we need to go. We were not that far off course. I aimed us and soon we found our planned road. And it was blocked off with some sort of farmers market/street party. So I was going to need to reroute anyways. It was a small vindication...naw...I screwed up.

I had that map and quickly figured an alternative and, ta-ta, with one more diversion we got to Hindquater Bar and Grille. They had the covered patio area all set for us. The staff was very nice and when the food came it looked and tasted great. There was one mistake, on Brandy's order, but what she got made her happier – serendipity works sometimes. Just as we were finishing a couple of expected friends of ... bad memory ... I wanna say Mathew T ... well they showed up and joined our well stuffed group.

We went outside and the new friends took group photos allowing me to get in the shot. Thank you very much. From the restaurant, we rolled to the gas station to refill our tanks. Leaving up Ocean St through the lights was not too bad. We made the left to stay on Ocean St (oh I thanked my dry run of last week which made finding that turn easier) and headed up to Graham Hill Rd. This is a nice alternative to a portion of cluttered Hwy 9. We did run into one of those CalTrans special one lane lights just out of Felton.

We did get rolling again and as far as I could tell we had everyone. Alas, Mathew B got a flat rear tire. Ken gave us the news. He and Mathew T rode back with a patch kit. The rest of us rolled across the street and waited in the shade in a church parking lot. I was busy figuring out alternatives for them to divert to more civilized roads with less twisties and more pull over safety spots. Unfortunately it was ugly and uglier choices, but I was ready.

Mathew T and Ken came back. Mathew B and Brandy decided to get a tow truck and stay the night if need be. Wisdom is often the wisest path (your moment of zen). So much for my great ideas.

Now, down to 7 bikes, we rolled back to Hwy 9...and the expected traffic. Up a lovely twisted road and not able to run at spark...painful.

Soon enough we turned onto Bear Creek Rd and I pulled the group over to make sure they had their heads on square. This is 14 miles of mostly smooth, tight, and technical road. I forewarned them that the road got real narrow and down to one lane. I had misplaced memories and this road, while tight and twisted was not the tightest. It had the center line the whole way - mostly. Black Rd was the road that often had no center line and was also rough in many places. I spotted a puma scampering over the side of the road on Black Rd. That and a few squirrels were the max wildlife we encountered. No deer. No wild turkeys.

Just before we got to Hwy 35 there is a real tight, right hand, uphill switchback. I made the turn nicely. Then while looking back at Nicki (who was my shadow through these run roads) to make sure she made it, I was going real slow, I caught my right heel on the ground and upset the balance. I almost went down. Safe! I figured that just a bit up the hill was a good spot to gather everyone. When we had everyone (and I saw oncoming cars on the road below) we rolled out and got onto Hwy 35.

Now it was back to mellow, mild, sweet rolling back to Sky Londa. To ride these roads with vigor requires too much speed. And there is almost always cops waiting to ticket the numerous speed racers. And if not cops, then the tow trucks get to pick up your damaged bike. Mellow was better. The parking lot at the deli was nearly deserted when we took our second rest stop there. I looked ahead on the route plans at just 20 miles of twisties left. Sigh. I have had plenty. I shouldn't be greedy. But I am. I wanted more! We rolled up the last of Hwy 35 into the setting sun and enjoyed the turns we had left.

John split from the group as he lived in Hayward, staying on Hwy 92. Steve sped ahead on Hwy 880 and was soon lost to sight. That left just 4 of us. Nicki pulled off of Hwy 238 the exit just before we took Crow Canyon. Ken and Paula kept straight on Hwy 238 for their home in Tracy.

In short order we were just three. We got to roll at a good clip on Crow Canyon. Twisties and foot dragging reminded us of all the great roads of the day. We stopped for gas and snacks just before Hwy 680. It had been a nice long day. I was pleasantly tired. Again as I was the only one now that did not have FastTrack, we said our goodbyes. The ride up Hwy 680, into the sun, was not too bad. Thick traffic made holding a steady speed difficult with too many lane changes. But with just three, I was a bit more ready to forge through.

We neared the Benicia-Martinez bridge and we waved goodbye. I got a last bit of fun on Lopes Rd before pulling into my garage. I was tired and mellow. Then the dogs started barking... Back to the real world.