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IN 1

I'VE COME TO COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO TO RIDE MOUNTAIN PASSES. FIVE OF 'EM, IN ONE DAY. ALL WITH ELEVATIONS OF

10,000 FEET

OR

HIGHER

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY
GLEN ABBOTT

I T'S 326 MILES TO SALIDA, I'VE GOT A FULL TANK OF GAS, IT'S DARK, AND I'M WEARING SUNGLASSES. I'M ON A MISSION FROM H.O.G.®



Okay, so I'm not exactly "Joliet" Jake Blues. My Bluesmobile is actually an Ember Red Sunglo Ultra Classic® Electra Glide,® 2012 edition.

It's 4:45AM. I'm still bleary-eyed, despite the cool air washing over me like a mountain stream. The Glide's headlight and twin spotlights illuminate the empty Interstate, and the city's lights twinkle in the valley. The craggy outlines of Colorado's Front Range cut like a jigsaw puzzle through the night sky.

Sunrise is a little more than an hour away, but the parking lot of Pikes Peak Harley-Davidson is already bustling with activity.

Over a styrofoam cup filled with black coffee, I'm briefed by road captain Charlie Ford of the Pikes Peak H.O.G. Chapter.

"Object of a road captain is to lead groups safely from start to finish," he explains. "You have to think and see for the group that you're leading. Anticipate traffic. Anticipate weather. Anticipate people's attitudes sometimes," he laughs.

Charlie has been riding motorcycles for a total of 47 years, starting at age 7. Minibikes, dirt bikes, Sportys, Big Twins. Drag bikes, motocross, enduro, and hill climbers; you name it, he's raced it or ridden it. Charlie is the biker you've seen in every movie: H-D® tattoos, earrings, graying beard, face etched by years in the wind. He's the real deal, a serious rider, and he's taken most every riding safety and first aid course you can think of. He

knows whereof he speaks, and despite an appearance that might intimidate someone of the non-riding persuasion, he's a quiet, soft-spoken guy, and instantly likeable. I know I'm in good hands for this foray deep into the Colorado Rockies.

There are 190 of us registered for Pikes Peak H.O.G. Chapter's 13th Annual 5 in 1 High Altitude Poker Run – again, the goal of which is to ride five 10,000 foot mountain passes in one day. We've come from all over Colorado and the surrounding states, even a couple from Canada. The lure of the Rockies is irresistible; it's pure adrenaline for altitude junkies.

"Without getting ridiculous, I call Colorado 'God's country,'" says Paul Masek, safety officer for the chapter. "There's no better place to live and ride. You can ride on the plains, you can ride deep into the mountains, you can ride in the mountain valleys – the scenery and the roads are so diverse and beautiful, it's something different every time."

Indeed, the state offers more paved mountain passes more than 10,000 feet than anywhere else in the country. Pikes Peak H.O.G. even awards a "High Altitude Club" patch, with rockers for conquering 10, 15, 20, and 25 10,000 foot passes within a year's time.

INTO THIN AIR

It's sidestands up for our riding group at precisely 6AM. Besides Charlie and me, chapter members Ron Salvaggione and Delona Johnson ride along; Ron on his 2007 Road King® and Delona on her 2009 Sportster® 1200 Low. Delona, a fairly new

rider, is bursting with enthusiasm and anticipation.

"It's a personal challenge," she says. "I know I can do this. I want to prove to myself that I can do it. The 5 in 1 is the big ride of the year for the H.O.G. chapter. It's very technically challenging, with all of the switchbacks and the endurance and the elevation changes."

Challenging oneself seems to be a common theme. "I got my license in September," explains Candace Valentine. She's 61 years old and the proud owner of a blue and silver Heritage Softail® Classic. "I've probably got 1,000 miles under my belt. But I've been riding with one of the road captains, and I asked him, 'Do you think I can do this?'" After some reassurance, Candace has decided she's ready. "I have the skills, so I thought, okay, I'm going to trust my skills, and do it."

We pull out of the dealership's parking lot for a short blast up the Interstate. Other riding groups, each accompanied by a road captain, have left as early as 5:30; last group out will leave at 7AM. At 75 mph, the morning air packs a chilly, yet invigorating, punch. To our left, the Front Range glows golden in the rising sun. Our first destination is Juniper Pass – at 11,130 feet, more than two miles up in the sky.

At Monument, 15 miles north of the dealership, we exit the superslab for a more scenic route toward Denver, skirting Palmer National Forest with the mountains in the distance. Just past Castle Rock, four big-antlered bucks stand motionless in a field. "There's a lot of big animals in these mountains," Charlie advises. "You have to really keep your eyes open." In fact, riding the next day, we see a group of bighorn sheep grazing on a rocky slope next to the road.

We loop around Denver's southwestern outskirts and ride west. Turning onto Squaw Pass Road (State Road 103) at Evergreen, the real fun begins – a climbing, twisty, narrow ascent to Juniper Pass. The air becomes cooler; the scent of cedar perfumes the air. "It's gorgeous, just sensory overload," enthuses Ron.

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Continental Divide, the line from which rivers to the west drain into the Pacific and to the east into the Atlantic.

We arrive at 9:05AM, making a “quick” stop with more photos. Trees are sparse; the pass sits on the edge of the timberline, and ever-present patches of snow dot the mountaintops. In the valley to our north lies Winter Park, a popular ski resort. Winding back down through the mountains, I notice signs advising “Avalanche Area.” Not a reason for concern in July, but avalanches can be a deadly force of nature in winter.

At 9:05, we pull into Arapaho National Forest Picnic Ground – the parking area for Juniper Pass. Another group of riders is already here, and we line up to get our poker run cards stamped. Charlie is concerned that my frequent photo stops have put us a little behind schedule – we’re supposed to cover 326 miles, over twisty mountain roads, by 5PM. There’s a group photo scheduled at the end of the run in Salida. “We’ll need to make quicker stops,” he says, using a phrase that just may be an oxymoron. Nonetheless, I vow to try my best.

“One down, four to go!” someone in the group shouts, and we’re off with a roar. On the other side of Juniper Pass, we encounter thousands of bicyclists winding through the mountains; turns out that our ride coincides with the 47th Annual Mt. Evans Hill Climb bicycle race. Seems everyone on two wheels loves riding the twisties.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Berthoud Pass, our next stop, is about 40 miles from Juniper, with lots of curves in between, punctuated by a short stretch of Interstate. Its elevation tops out at over 11,300 feet. The pass runs along the

And Berthoud Pass averages almost 400 inches – over 33 feet – of snow per year.

We’re riding now toward Loveland Pass – at nearly 12,000 feet, a real Rocky Mountain high. Before the Eisenhower Tunnel opened in 1973, the treacherous pass was the only way to get up and over the mountains traveling west from Denver.

More twists and turns, with damn few guardrails. It’s 12 noon, straight up, when we arrive. Loveland Pass has that otherworldly, surreal appearance you find above the timberline, a barren place where climate and soil conditions conspire to inhibit tree growth. We’ve ridden 175 miles in six hours. Charlie had advised us that we would probably average 30 mph in the mountains, an estimate that turns out to be spot-on.

TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

Just two more to go. On the road to Hoosier Pass, we ride through Keystone, then Breckenridge. The latter is a historic 1859 mining town that has become an immensely popular resort in both winter and summer, something we realize crawling through downtown traffic.

Between Breckenridge and Fairplay, Hoosier Pass, at 11,500 feet, also sits above the tree line. We pull into the lot just after 2PM, and notice dark clouds approaching. “We need to be fairly quick here,” Charlie says. “It’s building right over us.”

Now we’re on the home stretch. It’s about 90 miles to Monarch Pass, then another 25 to Salida for the group photo. Along the way we stop to photograph the Collegiate Peaks along Colorado’s rugged Sawatch Range – so called because several of the mountains are named for prominent universities, among them Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. Near the town of Buena Vista, the rain briefly catches us. Big drops splash off our windshields, but just for a minute. It’s the only precipitation we encounter all day.

You could say we saved the best for last, but that would do a disservice to the other passes – they’re all pretty spectacular. We pull up to Monarch just before 4PM, and there are probably 50 bikes already gathered in the large parking lot. The sense of excitement is palpable – for some of the riders, myself included, it’s the first time we’ve ridden five 10,000-foot mountain passes in one day.

“This is freakin’ awesome,” says Delona, smiling ear to ear. “I would so do it again!”

Candace, the 61-year old beginning rider on a Heritage Softail, feels changed by the experience. “Now I know why people ride and are so passionate about it,” she says thoughtfully. “Every time I get on the bike I am not just going to a destination, I am taking a journey. Now I understand what the words ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ mean. I can really take MY journey anywhere I want to, and it will always be MY journey, alone or in a group.”

Afterwards, at Wallbanger’s Sports Bar and Grill in Salida, bikes tucked away safely for the evening, the jubilant riders pose for a group photo, and settle in for a refreshing beverage or two. After 11 hours on the bikes, and 326 miles, it’s time to relax, but even so, “We’re already planning next year’s 5 in 1,” Road Captain Mike “Toto” Macy says with a chuckle.

I guess there truly is no rest for the weary. **HOG**