

Honeymoon From Vegas

TWO's Mark and Tracie Shippey opted for a Honeymoon with a difference – riding 2000 miles across the West Coast of America on Victory Kingpin's.

Sleepy and jet-lagged the heat hit like a brick wall as we stepped from the air conditioned Arrivals Lounge into the blazing dry desert heat of mid-afternoon Vegas. Sitting on the runway waiting to dock had been an experience. As we descended into Vegas we were greeted with an unusual sight; a great Pyramid and the Sphinx were silhouetted against a New York backdrop, the Eiffel Tower to the side. The Strip runs alongside the airport and the major hotels such as the giant pyramid of the Luxor were there to see.

We made our way by luxury coach, riding kit in tow, to the famous Flamingo, one of Las Vegas' most prestigious and original hotels that has seen the likes of Greta Garbo and Elizabeth Taylor on the guest list since it first opened in this desert Oasis in the 1950's.

Fighting sleep, we all got acquainted in the pool bar over a couple of giant cans of Fosters, before heading off for a group dinner at the Harley-Davidson café. The food leads you to believe that it could be part of a chain – incorporating Planet Hollywood and Hard Rock – as the food is so similar. However, the memorabilia adorning the walls is superb. Tanks from various musicians and rock stars including Lenny Kravitz hanged regimented from the walls, interspersed by pictures, mostly black & white of the famous on their steeds.

Succumbing to the inevitable, the next day was purely for acclimatisation to the intense heat and adjusting our body clock's to the 8-hour time differential from the UK. Tracie and I decided to pay the Apple Store and GAP a quick visit as is our want anytime we venture across the Atlantic. \$300 lighter with a new silver iPod mini and GAP jeans in tow we headed off to Pat Clarke Motosports – the local Vegas Victory and Big Dog Motorcycle dealer to collect the pair of Kingpins.

The newscasters hadn't been kidding when they said that temperatures would soar up to 109°. Apparently this was the hottest day of the year so far. With temperatures already in the 90s by 8am the best place to be would be in the airconditioned malls and casinos, of which there are plenty. Stupidly I made the (un)clever decision to walk to Pat Clarke's. As we turned right at the Stratosphere Tracie looked as if she would faint from the excruciating heat.

A short bus-ride later and we were gunning the throttle on a pair of new Victory Kingpin's. Spotting Las Vegas Harley-Davidson, the largest Harley dealership in the world on the way back, we popped in to drop off another \$170! I have never seen a dealer with such an incredible amount of floor space. Eventually back in the safety of the Flamingo's air-conditioning, we decided to wait until night-fall to venture out of the hotel again. The Stratosphere was a must on our 'To-do list'. Four fair ground rides sit atop a 109-storey building that rockets out of the Nevada desert providing the most spectacular 360° views of the area. At ground-level I'm not too bad on big rides, but suffice to say I

needed clean boxers after these rides. It wasn't the actual ride that gave me the proverbial willies, more the fact that we so bloody high up! If you get to Vegas ever, pay it a visit.

A day spent wandering the hotels and casinos along the strip. Las Vegas is a surreal world. One that I am glad to have witnessed but not one that I would ever feel the need to revisit. Caesars is a must. One of the most famous hotels in the world and home to some of the most prestigious sporting and musical events from World Championship Boxing to headline acts such as Celine Dion and Elton John (who has just signed a 75-gig three year deal to start february 2006). Each hotel has the obligatory casino level where blearey-eyed gamblers can be seen loosing the family fortunes at Black Jack, Craps, Poker, and the endless rows of gleaming multi-coloured Slot machines. If you can find your way past this vast money-losing enterprise a whole host of multicultural culinary delights await for you to take a much needed rest and refuel before heading off to the emclosed hotel shopping mall. Many of these are on a par with even the largest of the UK's shopping complexes and contain all the high living names you come to expect.

The Venetian was incredibly surreal. St Mark's sqaure is a centre-piece and a canal flows through the shops and restaurants complete with Gondola's and opera-singing Ventian oarsmen. The ceiling is a fake sky with moving clouds forever set in an early evening mode. This must be incredibly bizarre to work in as it gives you a false sense of existence compared with the startling glare of the real world outside. Each hotel appears to have its own side show, each one trying to better the last. Treasure Island has a male v female pirate ship encounter resplendant with pyrotecnic effects and sinking ships. The Mirage has an erupting volcano, while Caesars replays a sscene from Atlantis.

After a power nap, the Shippey World Championship Cribb competition recommenced. Started on the flight over we decided it would run for the next 18 days finishing on the flight home. Finally this trip felt like the honeymoon we had hoped for. Relaxing in the lazy afternoon sun, the mist-spray keeping us cool as we laughed and chatted the afternoon away taking the occasional dip in the crystal-clear pool to cool off.

By Sunday morning we had all had enough of this most surreal of cities. It had been like a living nightmare. I had almost received my first panic attack as I stood in the middle of the casino in the Venetian. All I wanted was a way out to the Strip to buy cigarettes and to see daylight. But as I stood like a lost child, all forlorn as if waiting for my mummy to sweep me up and away from this horrible dream, people around were laughing and ghambling oblivious to my plight. The hotels are very cleverly constructed so that every road leads you to the Casino and a route to financial ruin.

An early start beckoned as the previous day the rest of the group had picked up their rented Harleys and undertaken a 100mile ride in the baking sun. By 5am we were ready to rumble. Bleary-eyed and a few nursing sore heads, but ready for the adventure that lay ahead. The first day would be acclimatising to the iron horses as we made our way 300 miles from Vegas, a quick stop at the Hoover Dam – a magnificent feat of engineering that has to be seen to be believed, then after a breakfast stop at D'Zs Diner we headed off along part of the historic Route 66 from through the cowboy town of Oatman and onto Twenty Nine Palms, buried deep in the desert.

I remember people taking the piss in the past that all America is good for is straight roads. They weren't far wrong. This country is huge and a trip like this puts it more into perspective. One road we travelled was almost 100 miles long, and dead straight until the ever-so-slight 4° bend near the end, almost put there to wake you up! The heat was relentless, but one plus point was that it was dry heat, not that moist humid nonsense you get so often in Europe. Fortunately every time you got a sweat on your clothing instantly dried.

Mid-afternoon and we reached our destination. 29 Palms, just along the road from the infamous Fort Bragg military training camp. The shops were evident of the mid-west. Marine Barber's, and Chapels of Christian Worship. Again I needed cigarettes. I recalled a liquor store on the way in to the hotel. Blow me down! I walked in and it was an Asian corner shop! I could have been back home down the local shops, not 5000 miles away in the US desert.

The most welcome sight of the day greeted us at 29 Palms – a swimming pool and cold beer on tap!

The following morning we finally made our way out of the desert and up into the mountains. With a much needed cool breeze across our seared faces we entered the picturesque town of Big Bear. A favourite of LA residents for weekend snowboard and skiing trips, it provided a scenic base for the impending Fourth of July celebrations that night. The fireworks rocketed into the black night sky from a flotilla moored in the middle of the immense lake. The night sky was filled with a beautiful technicolour display, accompanied by the odd bottle of beer!

One thing you cannot fault Tim and Su at Big Rock for is the superlative choice of hotels. They range from the Corporate (Hilton, San Francisco) to the surreal (Madonna Inn, PCH1). The Mandarin in LA is home to the 'beautiful people', celebrities and rock stars lounging on soft cushions on the decking, before retiring to pristine white hotel rooms straight out of the Heals Directory. I think they all had a shock as 19 leather-clad riders thundered into the underground car park before traipsing into the clinical clean sterile environment of the lobby.

It's a hard life but someone has to do it. We spent the next day lounging by the Sky Bar pool on the terrace of the Mandarin overlooking LA up on Sunset just below Beverley Hills. The bronzed Californian waitress pandered to our every whim and even delicately declined Tim Bycroft's advances with a gentle 'you're so sweet' put down. The heat was now bearable, a couple of degrees lower than the never-ending sauna of the desert. LA 'Home of the Body-bag' as Ice-T put it, may not be to everyone's taste. A vast sprawling urban explosion squashed into the Californian plate by the claustrophobic smog that hangs over the city like a road sign. Indeed the view from the mountains yesterday was breathtaking with the extremes. Standing on the Rim of the World, the smell of pine fills your nostrils as you gaze over the spectacular mountain vista. In the distance, I'm sure, lies the Pacific Ocean. But LA lies between you and the largest expanse of water on earth. Mountain ranges dot the horizon dancing out of the smog in random uniformity as if floating in a 'Lord of the Rings' style fantasy world.

We had all arranged to visit Six Flags' Magic Mountain theme park. However, things changed as we munched on fresh Grenola and Denver Omlettes over breakfast. A cruise along Mulholland Drive then down to Venice beach to gawk at the muscle-men and bikini-clad roller bladers seemed more palatable. Four hours later and we were still lounging by the pool (the temperature of the water nestling upon that of a warm bath), rubbing in factor 30 while Miss Nubile 2005 brought us more iced water.

Taking a ride up into the Hills round Mulholland we were rewarded with a fantastic nighttime vista over the whole of LA. Millions of lights twinkled in the dark night, and all I could think of was how lucky the rich and famous were that lived in the palace-sized houses behind us.

Heading out of LA in military formation we rounded the coast, leaving Sunset Boulevard behind us, and ventured out onto one of the best roads America has to offer, Pacific Coast Highway 1. I had ridden the northern section the previous year on the Triumph Rocket III launch, but had eagerly awaited this ride as we made our way up the coast towards Monterey for the MotoGP. Here we split into a number of groups to get the best out of the roads as we possibly could. The rugged coastline is totally addictive. Jagged rock faces and rolling countryside disappear inland, while sweeping roads carve across the top of sheer drops to the ocean hundreds of feet below.

Taking the lead I beckoned Tracie and a few others to follow, stick the bikes in third and don't brake unless I did. A big cruiser is an excellent training tool to improve your riding. Once you get over the physical size and weight you realise how well balanced they are with a very low centre of gravity that actually helps and not hinders rapid progress through these roads. True, you can't ride them as quick or hard as a sportsbike, but they would have been wasted on these glorious roads as we would never have looked either side of our clocks.

On the way into Monterey we startled a number of US riders. Bedecked in the latest trick kit and riding Mille's, Blade's and GSX-R's, we pulled into the kerb to let them blat past along the straights. However, I was determined not to be outdone. Chasing them down we caught up and passed most of them into the twistier sections of PCH1. We must have been a sight; big grins under open-faced lids as sparking footboards scraped through every bend closing the gap until finally it was the sportsbikes who conceded and with a mark of respect waved us through.

Once again, Tim and Su had organised the Big Rock trip to coincide with a MotoGP round. We were privileged to be part of the first round on US soil in nearly 18 years. Arriving early at the circuit on Saturday the place was heaving with over 80,000 screaming fans by 9am! True it was a double weekend's racing as the AMA was in town to run support with the MotoGP, but even so, I don't think I have ever seen so many people at a track before. Fittingly, Nicky Hayden on the Repsol Honda was the man of the moment, proving the adage that home soil does have its advantages as he powered away to lead the race from start to finish. Very apt and very emotional.

Breaking camp on the Monday morning our final stage of the trip began with the 120 miles to San Francisco. The perfect city to end any trip in. The city is so cosmopolitan and relaxed that you cannot help to feel at home the minute you enter the city limits.

Shopping, bars, shows, more shopping, fine food; whatever and whenever you want it, it is here. Although most of the group were self-confessed sportsbike fanatics, they had finally, after 12 days on the road, realised that a cruiser was the perfect tool for this trip. However, among the 16 bikes, 14 were Harley's with only Tracie and I on Victory's. I had swapped with a few of them over the trip and not one of them wanted to give the Victory back. Engine power, handling, and even kudos with other riders was so much better with the Victory. However, Tracie and I rode the final leg on our own to much dismay! Four hours later after a leisurely ride (and nearly killing my new bride), we met the rest for drinks in the restaurant at the top of the Hilton.

A final dinner was mixed with fond memories, tales of derring-do and the sworn promise by everyone there to repeat the trip next year. It was conclusive; excellent roads, brilliant organisation, and first class accommodation all the way. The only problem now is how to save for 2006...