The BMW Club
United Kingdom & Ireland

The BMW Club Southern Section

Wild West Tour 2026 Part 2

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After the first six days of heavy riding, we were delighted to have a day off the motorcycle for a well earned rest in a different part of Las Vegas before commencing the second half of our Wild West Tour.

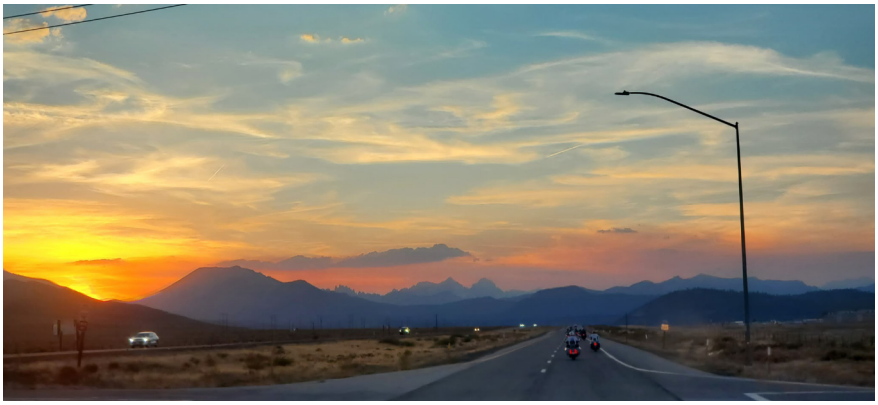
There was huge contrast between the two hotels and two different parts of Vegas where we stayed. Whereas the Treasure Island we stayed in at the start of the holiday offered the typical mega-resort experience of the modern Strip – with a range of high class hotels and designer shopping experiences nearby, including the Palazzo, Caesar's Palace and the Bellagio - the older established Golden Nugget Hotel & Casino is located in Downtown Las Vegas: a vibrant, chaotic area centred around Fremont Street and its historic anchor, the Golden Nugget. Historically known as "Glitter Gulch" for its dense concentration of neon signs, the modern pedestrian mall offers a highly sensory experience defined by stark contrasts.



The highlights include the Viva Vision screen - the world's largest LED canopy at 1,372 feet long - which delivers massive light shows. Amongst drawbacks in our view, however, the environment is incredibly noisy, brash, and crowded. Visitors encounter highly sexualized, aggressively street-vended entertainment that feels more vulgar than the modern Strip, alongside a highly visible population of vagrants and panhandlers (beggars, often in wheelchairs with ex-military signs).

An exciting experience of the stopover, however, was that three of our Originals earned an adrenalin fix on the SlotZilla zipline. They chose between the shorter ride in a seated position, or a longer ride in a horizontal super-hero position which took them up to 40mph for the entire length of the Fremont Street Experience, or about five city blocks 11 storeys high. The entire length of Zip-Zilla and the Super-Hero Zoom ran underneath the brilliant canopy screen, adding another exciting visual dynamic both for them and for those of us watching from below.





On day 7 of riding, having acquainted ourselves with our expanded group and picked up the additional Harley bikes at Easyrider, we continued on the Wild West Tour, this time heading West into California. There were now 10 motorcycles and a van in our troop and our final destination for the day was Mammoth Lakes - a year-round mountain resort town and alpine ski centre

set in the Eastern Sierra Nevada mountains. With elevations up to 7000 feet, Mammoth Lakes is famous for its dramatic landscape and massive volcanic history.



The 290-mile journey west began with a monotonous, straight-line drive along US-95 to CA-266 but the ride grew thrilling at the CA-168 Westgard Pass, a California motorcycle jewel. This road is widely considered by riders to be one of the most thrilling, challenging, and hidden motorcycle gems of eastern California. The descent from the 7,313-foot summit includes exceptionally narrow roads such as a canyon section that chokes down to a blind, single-lane rock gorge. Although the roads are well-paved, there are also 'sidewinder' twisties, featuring a rapid-fire succession of hairpins, blind curves, steep drop-offs, and decreasing-radius turns. Then, as you exit the tight rock canyons, the landscape abruptly opens up to a viewpoint ahead of a massive, sweeping desert floor, with towering, jagged, snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada range. The roads were fantastic – really high-quality asphalt, a rider's delight – despite the terrain. One of the mountain ranges we passed through is appropriately called Chocolate Mountain – the ride was a tasty treat indeed for all of us after the earlier fast but admittedly tedious straights.



From this riding reward, we then joined a major road at Big Pine (US-395), which led us all the way to Mammoth Lakes and our overnight stop at the Outbound Mammoth Hotel. We arrived just as the sun was setting which was another beautiful bonus, although it also meant the temperature had dropped, as you would expect in this alpine area.





Amongst stops in the day, we visited the Area 51 Alien Centre which was a diner, gift shop, convenience store and gas station. Not a single extraterrestrial to be seen, disappointingly, other than those emblazoned on T-Shirts and posters, but it was good to stretch our legs and use the conveniences. We also passed (but did not stop by) the Nevada Test Range - infamous as the majority of tests were done here in the development of nuclear weaponry.

We retired to bed early again, knowing that after cracking so many miles into California, our wake-up call would now take us on to even more fantastic scenery.



<u>On day 8 of riding</u> (150 miles from Mammoth Lakes to Sonora), we left at a somewhat chilly 15 degrees (highest temperature later in the day would be 31) and immediately travelled on stunning sweeping roads into mountains covered in trees and ferns on the Inyo National Forest, passing through beautiful lake lands such as the June Lake Loop, Silver Lake and Grant Lake.



At a fuel station on Lee Vining, near Olmstead Point (a scenic overlook along the Tioga Road, State Route 120), the bikes were lined up for fuel, just before the entrance to Yosemite. Four miles further, at the alpine high elevation Tenaya Lake, we stopped again and walked through to the most gorgeous sandy cove, which was a total surprise to us. We also stopped at the Olmsted Point itself, whose granite slopes are dotted with large glacial boulders (dropped by ancient melting ice) and grooved, polished rock surfaces. When it was opened in 1961, the road was named in honour of the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted who has been considered the father of American landscape architecture. He is best known for his design of New York's Central Park.









We were lucky to visit - the Tioga road is only typically accessible by car (and motorcycle) from late May or early June through November, as it closes for the winter due to heavy snowfall. At a stop on the Stanislaus National Forest, a little further along, we came up close to giant sequoias and some of our party stood on a fallen tree trunk to really show the magnitude of their size (one person needing a hand down because he was a little short and the descent is less easy than the climb on board!) A pine cone in the hand further exemplified the scale of these gargantuan trees.



Unfortunately, we were also exposed at times over the days of riding to dead or dying trees, something explained by beetles, climate change and also forest fires. The 2013 Rim Fire in Stanislaus started from an illegal campfire and it took only 36 hours to turn into a 10,000 acre wildfire. Over nine weeks more than 5000 firefighters battled the fire but it grew to more than 257,000 acres (8 times the size of San Francisco) before being contained. This was California's third largest wildfire at the time and cost $127 million to control.



From this stop, we rode past Saddleback Lake and into hills which took us to heights of over 9000 feet, temporarily dropping temperatures further to 9 degrees and with the wind whipping us from different angles as we turned our motorcycles into the left and right hander sweeps! For perspective, the UK's highest mountain, Ben Nevis, is only 4400 feet high, whilst the highest paved road in the Alps (at Come de la Bonette in France) is 9,193 feet. Basically equivalent to where we were riding - very fun but quite challenging, especially because wind cannot be seen.

To preserve Yosemite for posterity, Abraham Lincoln set aside the Mariposa grove of giant sequoias in Yosemite as the USA's first state park in 1864; 26 years later it became a National Park. We stopped at one of the parking areas here and were astounded by how beautiful it is amongst giant redwood trees including the Grizzly Giant (which we did not see, as it was further away unfortunately) but which has an estimated age of 2,700 years. After lunch, we moved on through Moccasin Creek, then Jacksonville Road on to Sonora and our overnighter at the Hotel Lumberjack.

Jeff made the decision, for the 170-mile stretch of Day 9, Sonora to San Francisco, to deviate from the usual route, as traffic was destined to be heavier on the original path. We duly set off on CA-108 to Yosemite Junction, slipping on to the smaller O'Byrnes Ferry Road within Black Creek Park, and then spending pretty much the rest of the day on freeways and straight roads (principally the CA-12). Whilst the drive was therefore much less scenic and interesting than on previous days, there were a number of stops to keep us engaged.

The first of these was not exactly planned, however.



On one stretch of the Sierra conservation area we had to pull over suddenly because Steve's Harley started handling weirdly, and he thought he had a flat. Steve, Jeff and Shay checked it over, and Jeff even took it for a quick spin and felt the same thing—but they couldn't find a nail or any obvious damage to the tyre. The rest of us, meantime, stayed out of trouble and sought shade across the road - it was super hot again. From, this position, we were able to have a very good view of precisely where we had stopped. The towers were a bit of a giveaway, to be honest. Our temporary neighbour, less than 400 yards from where the motorbike and our entourage was temporarily parked, was a Correction Facility at Jamestown Tuolumne County! All of our attention duly arrested, we were relieved to get going again – Steve driving even more carefully, as we headed for a fuel stop at Copper Valley where the bike could be looked at again. (By this juncture, however, the problem disappeared. He heard a crack and it seemed the problem was simply a rock lodged in the wheel rim which had then released itself).



We crossed almost immediately after into Calaveras County line, coasting past the beautiful Lake Tulloch. This is a very smooth, scenic ranch area, with a road that twists and dips gently through golden, oak-dotted country. Classic Californian golden hills and grazing cattle. We saw some fruit orchards and planting en route (strawberries and other berries; nut and olives groves; nectarines, plums, apricots and other stone fruits; apples and pears; corn, vineyards etc), especially in Sierra and Northern California (Calaveras, Stanislas, and Tuolomne) We didn't know

that Del Monte had gone bust, so the government is having to help fund farmers in these areas to plant different produce, as their market for peaches etc has now radically changed. I wonder what Jeremy Clarkson would say about the British government's responses to our own home-grown dilemmas?



At Sausalito, near the northern end of the Golden Gate Bridge, we made a lunch stop. Often called "California's Italian Riviera", Sausalito is a lively town with yacht and marine culture, waterfront promenades, boutiques, restaurants and a Mediterranean vibe. We had been advised by Jeff to order fish only when in a proper seaside town and as the six 'originals' eyed the menu in the restaurant (Napa Valley Burger Co), unsurprisingly it was a unanimous vote for fish-and-chips! Beautifully presented and very tasty indeed – if a little surprising that we had somehow found an eating establishment in California that did not serve coffee! Suitably sated, however, we explored the thoroughfare a little more, before heading back to the bikes and the journey on to San Francisco.







As we approached 'the golden city' we enjoyed a high viewpoint stop for photos, taking in the panorama of the city below and the way the Golden Gate bridge – and other neighbouring bridges – sit in the valley below. We then loved the experience of driving over the iconic Golden Gate suspension bridge, a 1-mile wide strait connecting San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. From there, a short drive on to the 2-night accommodation at the Hotel del Sol. A comfortable location in the city with secure parking, if a little tight (Meccano comes to mind), and within easy walking distance of restaurants, the Bay and many other sights and attractions.



A welcome day off the bike next day brought another highlight of the tour, in our prebooked 15-minute cruise and visit to Alcatraz Island, 1.25 to 1.5 miles from the northern shore of San Francisco. Once a fort, a military prison and a maximum-security federal penitentiary, Alcatraz is perhaps most famous for its incarceration of inmates such as Al Capone ('Scarface'), Robert Stroud ("Birdman of Alcatraz"), Alvin Karpis ("Creepy": The first official "Public Enemy #1") and James ["Whitey"] Bulger (The infamous Boston mob boss and later FBI informant).





What many of us outside the USA may be less familiar with, however, is the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz from 1969 by the Indians of All Tribes, who did so as part of a civil rights campaign (with the title We Hold The Rock). They achieved not only wide-spread profile and support (including from actors such as Marlon Brando, Jane Fonda and Anthony Quinn) but also contributed to overturning the government's intentions to sell the island for commercial development, paving the way for it to become a permanent museum as it is today.



A historical exhibition details both this and the centuries-long systemic oppression of Native Americans, focusing on the forced assimilation of indigenous children and religious justifications for land theft. For generations, the U.S. government forcibly removed Native children from their families into more than 400 boarding schools to systematically destroy their culture by banning native languages and changing their names. Over 3,100 children died in these schools and survivors faced lifelong trauma. The exhibition claims the Roman Catholic Church operated 84 of these schools. Through the centuries, they also historically justified indigenous land grabs using a 1493 papal decree (the Doctrine of Discovery) by Pope Alexander VI, which stated that Europeans had a "God-given" right to the land. This was only revoked by the church in 2023, while a year later (2024) President Biden issued the first formal U.S. presidential apology to Native Americans for the boarding school system.



The prison cells and all the buildings of Alcatraz were also fascinating to visit and there were tales of some of the 14 attempted prison breaks as well as an outline of the day-to-day life of those contained. The most famous escape, in June 1962, enabled Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin to actually slip into the water – never to be seen again. It was assumed they drowned in the freezing water, but who knows?

Because they were physically confined, most prisoners at Alcatraz sought refuge through books. Literate convicts read 75-100 books a year; the 15,000 volumes in the library included philosophy, fiction and educational material. An extract from the1960 Federal Bureau of Prisons Booklet said, "…these men read more serious literature than does the ordinary person in the community. Philosophers such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel etc are especially popular…."



This was a fascinating visit although the return to the mainland was slower than our journey there. The queue for the ferry snaked to a very long line – we saw two very full ferries depart before we reached our own crossing!

Day 10 of riding, 220 miles from San Francisco to San Simeon, took us all the way down on Pacific Coast Highway 1 to our final stop of the Cavalier Oceanfront Resort. The beautiful coastal views were wonderful and the sweeping roads captivated us for a time – but the pillion was nearly dropping off after a while. A lunch stop in the town of Monterey was greatly appreciated and we would have loved to have been able to stop there longer. It is a really lovely town, with a wonderful atmosphere and inspired many of John Steinbeck's most famous writings, notably the novel Cannery Row. He is lauded here with a statue and other tributes, and indeed one road we passed - Soledad - was just like a town mentioned in Of Mice and Men, studied for many years by GCSE students in England.









The ride from Monterey down to San Simeon is a world-class, technical coastal roller coaster featuring tight, endless sweeping curves, dramatic 5,000-foot drops from the Santa Lucia Range straight into the Pacific, and narrow lanes that demand constant focus. The road hugs the edge where the steep Santa Lucia Mountains plunge straight down to the ocean, while on the Big Sur stretch it is defined by continuous, tight, technical twisties and sweeping turns built right into the cliffs. Big Sur is a collection of national forests and California state parks; the section we rode is carved into hills where 3500 foot high redwood covered mountains plunge down







into the sea. We stopped at Willow Creek for a photo opportunity of this glorious area.

It was early evening when we arrived at our overnight hotel (Cavalier Oceanfront Resort), nestled on a scenic seaside bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was cold by now and we were both tired and hungry, so we headed briskly after check-in to eat in the adjoining restaurant, only really appreciating the splendour of our location in the morning, before heading out again for our next day's riding.

Day 11 of riding, the 305 miles from San Simeon to Lone Pine, was our penultimate day together as we continued making our way back to Las Vegas. It started smartly again, our bikes immediately heading into hills but, despite the wind and elevation (around 1800 feet), it was now already warmer – a foretaste of the heat we would find the rest of the trip.

On our way, we stopped at a viewpoint towards Morrow Rock (9 volcanic outcroppings with the 580 ft high rock at the entrance of Morto Bay being the most famous) and at Lake Isabella, in the heart of the Kern River Valley

(on the southern end of the Sierra Nevada range). The route also took us across California via Central Coast and Central Valley highways up into Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.



Our first significant stop of the day was at Blackwell's Corner, located in a remote, arid stretch of California's Central Valley at the intersection of Route -46 and Route -33. The fuel point and store is positioned in northwestern Kern County near the small town of Lost Hills and the surrounding landscape is flat, heavily agricultural, and dominated by wide-open desert topography and distant oil fields. It was at this place, in 1955, where James Dean stopped for an apple and a pack of cigarettes on his 'last drag' before the infamous crash just 30 minutes later that resulted in his early demise. Large representations of Dean by the fuel pumps made for an obvious photo opportunity for our group and, within the store itself, there is appropriate memorabilia and even a 'dust bowl' display for those familiar with this tragic 1930s period in American history.







The James Dean mementoes include the legendary orange-tinted racing goggles that he had worn and which are displayed in a lighted, bullet-proof case. It seems that, in the aftermath of the wreckage at the crash scene, a married couple had stopped at the site and the wife discreetly picked up the goggles, slipping them into her purse. Their family kept the goggles hidden as a private memento for over 62 years before, in 2017, a family member inherited the goggles, authenticated them against period photographs, and donated them back to Blackwell's Corner - recognised as Dean's final known stop while alive.



The crown jewel of the riding today came on the CA-178 after Bakersfield. Once you leave the Bakersfield outskirts, the highway immediately shrinks into a 28-mile stretch of narrow, winding two-lane road that closely hugs the rushing Kern River. We experienced tight, blind S-curves, short straights, and steep drop-offs (elevations up to 5,200 feet) with no guardrails; the ride is relentless, highly technical and visually spectacular. Partway on this road we had lunch at Nelda's Diner, a simple local establishment, before then resuming the rest of this awesome road, with views now of Lake Isabella, a large man-made reservoir of exceptional beauty. Framed by mountain towns, the lake is popular for a wide variety of water sports and fishing, as well as hiking and other nature exploits.



From US-14 we then turned north towards Indian Wells and straight on the US-395 to Lone Pine. Researching this route further, we found that we had also been running close to the National Air Warfare Centre at China Lake; a museum on site showcases the historical weapons, aircraft, and technology developed at the installation but, sadly, no time to visit on the day. An opportunity for the future maybe.

Our final stop for the night was at the Dow Villa AAA Motel & Historic Hotel, on the edge of Death Valley. Next day we knew it would be an early start to enable us to travel through parts of the 120-mile long Death Valley in all its glory - but also with sufficient time to exit it before the sun was at its height! Dreaming of flat deserts and hot sun – our assumptions of the terrain – we were in for a very pleasant surprise with the actual landscape to come.



At 7am, as we left our hotel in Lone Pine for day 12, our last day of riding (235 miles), we headed southeast past the southern tip of dry Owens Lake on Highway 136, watching the towering Sierra Nevada range shrink behind us as we transitioned into high-desert terrain. Highway 136 then took us deeper into remote and rugged country towards Death Valley National Park and, within just a few miles of that turn, the road transitioned into a narrow, twisting, rugged canyon climb. The road began to roll and dip with the natural topography, making for an incredibly engaging ride right from the start.
We were constantly climbing towards Father Crowley Overlook (nearly 5,000 feet up) and the bike was continually leaning into the crosswinds and ascending. This culminated in a sudden, jaw-dropping drop into the Panamint Valley—a dream section of asphalt for riders, full of fast sweepers and technical elevation drops.

At Panamint Springs we stopped to remove layers as the temperature was already climbing quickly. A keen photographer soon spotted the bikes and not only took a few pics of us at this stop, but also waited kerbside further up the road, knelt down in the dirt, so that he could capture live footage of the 'rumble and hum' as we soon pounded past him.







We stopped again at the general store on Stovepipe Wells to purchase souvenirs and snacks. Turned out, through signage at the venue, that this quirky retailer, with a wagon outside, was actually on the gateway to Bungalette City, the first attempt to provide full scale tourist services in Death Valley. Opened in 1926, the complex consisted of 20 small tent cabins supplemented by several larger buildings and army tents. Other attractions included electric lights and running water, while a revolving beacon light on the roof of the main building guided wanderers to the desert oasis. Death Valley itself, meantime, consistently has the highest temperatures on earth, apparently, with 49 degrees being a common air temperature in July and August.







Ironic, therefore, as we continued on our way into the Valley, that we could still see on the distant skyline a very tall snowcapped mountain. On researching this once home, it was most likely Telescope Peak – standing tall at more than 11,000 feet. It is the highest point in Death Valley National Park and, because of its immense elevation, its summit accumulates heavy snow during the late autumn, winter and spring months, providing a sharp, beautiful contrast to the arid desert valley floor below.





We rode on from Stovepipe Wells to the appropriately named Furnace Creek, a smooth, scenic cruise across the open desert floor. Unlike the severe grades, twists, and dangerous dips we met over Towne, this 25-mile stretch was relatively flat, straightforward and allowed us to settle into a relaxed rhythm while taking in the massive scale of the valley. Furnace Creek sits at an elevation of roughly 190 feet (58 meters) below sea level in a great rift valley.

At Zabriskie Point, just a short 15-minute drive east from here, the landscape shifted into a chaotic, intensely eroded labyrinth of golden-brown mud hills and badlands (a type of dry, heavily eroded terrain made up of soft sedimentary rocks and clay-rich soils). Motorcycles parked up, many of the riders found shade and took Gatorade, while we joined three chaps on a short, paved, uphill walk of about a quarter-mile from the parking lot up to the main observation platform. According to Tripadviser, this iconic vista is a classic Death Valley stop, famous for its lunar appearance and used in film and album art (such as U2's The Joshua Tree). Certainly, it captured the immensity and splendour of Death Valley for us. We saw a rippled landscape of gold, rust, and brown hills (carved over millions of years by water and wind) and in the distance, we could even see the distant salt flats and the Panamint Mountains that we left earlier.



Back on the highway, we rode to our lunch stop at Pahrump, a biker hangout called The Hubb Bar & Grill. Jeff had already called ahead and we were immediately met with a bucket of ice-cold beers (non-alcoholic!). Coming from the bright sunlit desert into the dark saloon took a bit of adjustment, but it was really distinctive in its décor, with strings of fairy lights, motorcycle posters and colourful artwork, and a pool table which the three Martins enjoyed whilst we waited for our food. Unfortunately, the wait was the only downside – and a temporary one we hope. The cooking facilities had broken a little while ago and there was a really, patient older lady trying on her own to cook individual meals on a single small airfryer. Suffice to say that the simple hot dogs, burgers and chips we generally ordered took quite a while to arrive – and that's without taking account of locals who had also arrived after us and were waiting uncomplainingly.



When done we joined the chef in a seated area by her outside cooking area and she must have taken pity on us, as she had very kindly switched on overhead sprinklers – lovely and cooling before we were to head out for the last 60 miles or so to Las Vegas, dropping the bikes off first at Easyrider and then pulling in for the night at Treasure Island again. Another evening and full day to explore more of the city before our 10pm flight home next day.

So, that was the bitter-sweet end of an amazing 17 days in the US – 12 days of riding – 2900 miles of unadulterated adventure – on the Wild West tour. We had booked the trip nearly two years earlier, a bucket list prize for Paul's retirement, and can honestly say that, however excited we had been for the holiday, it far exceeded our expectations. We wanted a bike trip that would provide thrills and spills, iconic scenery and good company, and this tour gave it to us in spades. Sadly, Orange & Black are now amending the trip to offer it solely in two halves (not as the complete tour we enjoyed) and they are reviewing further the destinations and routes. We are sure that they will come up with excellent trips once this is thrashed through, and we know that Jeff and Shay will be amongst those to contribute ideas based on their journeys with biking groups such as our own.

We just feel so fortunate that in the 250th anniversary year of the USA as an independent country, and in the 100th year of Route 66, we got to enjoy the adventures and places we did. And the WhatsApp group is still active! Riders are still sharing stories, photos and video – the Originals hope to meet up again next year if we can (even if our homes are spread from the south of England up to Arbroath, Scotland!). Who knows? We may even meet up on another wonderful biking quest again.

It was a helluva place to meet in the first place!

