



The BMW Club
United Kingdom & Ireland



The BMW Club Southern Section

Wild West Tour 2026 Part 1

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Nothing quite prepared us for the sheer beauty and grandeur of the Wild West Tour we recently took through Orange and Black (O&B).

The tour was split in two – east from Las Vegas into Utah and Arizona; return to the different, earliest and historic

part of Vegas - and then west into California. O&B enabled people to book either or both parts which is why our first half involved just 6 guests (4 riders, 2 pillion), as well as Jeff as our tour guide and Shay at the back in the van which carried our suitcases (full size – a revelation in bike riding) and lots of other gear; Gatorade being one of the most useful, as hot desert riding inevitably takes its toll on the energy levels! Quick top up of this hydration booster (and on a couple of occasions a shot of a 5-hour energy booster) and we were off in the saddle again!

We coined our 8-person group 'The Originals', a really fun unit and, in our view, enjoying the best scenery and adventures of the whole tour. Though all of it, absolutely, was incredible!

The 'originals' set the tone for the holiday – we were the butt of many a joke at the start as the only ones who bucked the Harley trend and chose a BMW R1250 GS instead. This was first rebutted when the administrator at Eagle Rider, in completing our paperwork, said the BMW was actually the best bike because it's a 'real' adventure bike and can spin/manoeuvre more easily. There was a \$750 deposit compared with \$100 for the Harleys and she joked that she would keep a close eye when Paul drove it to the lot! Secondly, from the butt of the joke, we became the butt of dreams – all the other riders found their bikes quite uncomfortable after lots of riding (about 200 miles daily average on the 12 days of riding). Just saying....



On our first day, we set off a little late after a couple of administrative and servicing hiccups, but were grateful to have a ride, since three potential drop-in hirers were turned away in the hour we were there, being told there was no stock available (apart from a smaller BMW and a Triumph). This story persisted throughout the State and with all dealers, apparently. The reason? Perhaps the 100th anniversary of Route 66, which since its celebrations commenced in April, had brought a lot more hiring traffic!

Setting off in 35 degrees, our first day's riding was from Las Vegas, through the Nevada desert to Springdale, Utah. We didn't see too many other bikes on the road in this part of the journey with largely desert and tumble weed, but there were some interesting roads alongside the freeway. The scenery changed to blue/grey tinted mountain tops and gravelly red soils (from the crystalline and metamorphic rocks); vast blue skies were interrupted with dense white clouds, like inverted oceans at times, drifting as if massive, slow moving icebergs and casting vast shadows over the terrain below. Roads were all in excellent condition. The priority was to knock off the 210 miles it took us to get to the more exciting parts of the trip, stopping overnight at the Hampton Inn & Suites, one of Paul's personal favourites. Situated in Zion Canyon against a backdrop of towering red, white, and pink sandstone cliffs, the setting took your breath away and the accommodation was very comfortable. Like many of those we stayed in, we had a room with two double beds and a bath with shower over. A super start – but there was much more awe-inspiring scenery to come.



Day two, 185 miles from Springdale to Bryce Canyon, took us through Zion National Park and a canyon-rich landscape 170 million years old, with brown to orange-red sandstone from the Navajo Formation. Red Canyon, on the Dixie National Forest has unique vermillion-coloured rock formations with Ponderosa pines and two hand-carved road tunnels.



Bryce National Park is just off Highway 12 and had spectacular red sandstone spires and formations. It is known as the 'most photographed place in Utah' and easy to see why. There are many coloured rock pyramids (so-called hoodoos) at the rim of Bryce's Paunsagunt Plateau and semi-circular rock basins, the largest of these being the amphitheatre called Bryce Canyon. Pillars, towers and bridges made of limestone and sandstone shine through the exposure of light and dark in colours of red, yellow, brown and purple.

Unlike the rockfaces in Nevada which were once underwater, the astonishing, spectacular canyons of Utah were carved by the ice many thousands of years ago. It is remarkable to think that these hot desert areas, where even the insects seem sparse – our visors were crispy clean of bugs over the first days of riding - were once so lush. Even now, at our lunch stop, Aunt Sue's Chalet, we were told the snow can be 30 feet deep in the winter and the roads will flood and be impassable.

Our evening in Bryce comprised Country & Western dinner entertainment which was great fun and really cemented our group, especially through the fun 'A song like me' which reprises the chorus 'Helluva place to lose a cow'. This is based on the real history of the naming of Bryce Canyon - Ebenezer Bryce rode into the canyon in 1874 by complete accident as he was trying to locate a runaway cow; the canyon was named after him and, when asked how he found the place, he simply said:



"Well, it was simply a helluva place to lose a cow". More of this later, but suffice to say that we did buy Jeff a rather natty beanie hat at a gas station next day – he really rocked the cow look!

Saturday, day 3 of riding, started rather chilly and we had to delay the set-off to allow for residual overnight frost to go, eventually leaving our overnight hotel at 8 degrees. This temperature soon rose to 15, however, and pretty much settled at 25 for the rest of the day (although we did see a high of 33). As usual, we took our cues from Jeff, layering up or down as he did (though we did not brave it in non-protective clothing – long-sleeved white Easy Rider sweatshirts as some of the others did). Our mesh jackets, single layer jeans and vented shoes were perfect for the changing weather conditions. Perhaps we were lucky though: we were constantly informed that on the last Wild West tour in June it had been so hot that they even had to literally hose down the riders from the van on occasions.



Today's 325-mile ride from Bryce to Bluff, Utah was our favourite day of riding in the whole tour. It delivered an incredible mix of technically challenging twisties and a breathtaking, fast-shifting palette of natural landscapes that felt like jumping from Earth to the Moon and Mars. Forget boring, long straights—the roads we navigated were a rider's dream, packed with challenging, fun, and fast-paced twists. The journey offered beautiful contrasts, plunging from high mountain elevations down to desert floors just 35 feet above sea level.

Bryce Canyon's landscape is defined by its iconic pink cliffs, hoodoos, and spires carved by freeze-thaw cycles that resemble rows of melting wax candles. In contrast, the Grand Staircase-Escalante was a testing stretch of winding, twisty roads framed by massive, blindingly pale cream and white slick-rock waves, deep slot canyons, and petrified Navajo sandstone that looks like a frozen ocean.



As we moved into Capitol Reef & The Great Warped Wall we rode through a massive, unbroken barrier reef of rock with jagged triangular cliffs. The rock faces exposed violent, skyward-tilted layers of deep red, maroon, and yellow like a giant cake. A final stretch, through the Grey Canyon, forged our way through towering grey stone. The rock formations completely change character from side to side, looking like folded elephant skin on the left and layered jelly on the right.

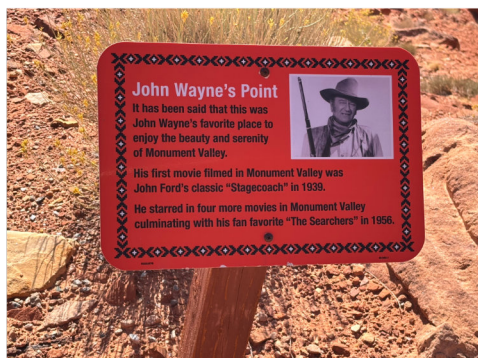


Amongst memorable pitstops during the day, we visited a restroom at Capitol Reef which comprised a deep, echoing pit toilet in the mountains that makes you appreciate basic facilities—though you definitely want to secure your phone before using it!

Lunch was kids' meals again for us in a diner by the fuel stop. (American portions really are gigantic and we always looked for manageable quantities where possible!) We then had 125 miles of deserts and nothing else, not even a fuel station. Even here though, the last gas station did not venture above the usual \$5 a gallon. In some places on our trip fuel was even cheaper – we did see \$4.59 - equivalent to 93p per litre and when we embarked on our trip from the UK it had been £1.70 per litre at home. Blimey! An exhausting day all in all, but truly memorable! We were pleased to reach our overnight stop at Desert Rose Resort & Cabins in Bluff.

Our day 4 of riding, quite frankly, did involve some very long straights of boring riding in the desert and on Highway 163 to knock down the 230 miles south from Bluff, but this was more than compensated for by some key sights and stops en route to our final overnight stop at the Grand Canyon.

Our first stop was easily recognisable for film buffs – the iconic Forrest Gump Point. This is situated on Navajo tribal land in Monument Valley and the very long straight is made more interesting not only by the familiar sandstone buttes on the horizon, but also by the clear traffic of pedestrians and cars ahead. They broke up the perspective and drew your eye to the popularity of the location since Tom Hank's iconic character hit the screens.



After the obligatory photo stop, we drove further to the Monument Valley Tribal Park, where we had wonderful views of the terrain that became famous for many of director John Ford's best-known films. Critic Keith Phipps stated 'its five square miles have defined what decades of moviegoers think of when they imagine the American West.' Certainly, from the terrace at the tribal park, we could spot a favourite viewing point of John Wayne. Its marker said that his first movie filmed there, the classic 'Stagecoach' in 1939 was followed by another four, culminating with his fan favourite 'The Searchers' in 1956.

There was also an excellent exhibition about the native Indian tribes and their history, including the contribution of the Navajo Marines to the success of many operations during WW2. The Navajo Code Talkers provided a secure means of military communications during the war in the Pacific. The idea of using Native American language, which could not be deciphered by the enemy, was not new to WW2 and had first been used during WW1, although this is less well known. The story of their WW2 success is immortalised in the 2002 film Windtalkers, directed by John Woo and starring Nicolas Cage, Adam Beach, Christian Slater and Roger Willie.

Monument Valley is on the border of Utah and Arizona, and it is fair to say that when slipping into Arizona there was a definite deterioration in American driving quality. With our wits about us, we kept going across fairly desolate desert until we reached the Grand Canyon. About 277 miles long from rim to rim and 10 miles wide, the canyon rightly receives nearly 5 million visitors a year and was very awe-inspiring though no more, in our view, than its smaller but equally beautiful Utah cousins. The paved road around the rim of the Grand

Canyon offers marvellous vista points. We stopped at three viewpoints on the South rim which gave excellent panoramic views with clear sightlines to the Colorado River and across the rim's Cape Royal. A couple of brave individuals again hopped on to lower ledges for photo opportunities – definitely not for the faint-hearted.

It was a relief, after a full day's riding, to get to the Grand Canyon Plaza Hotel for our overnight stop.



Day 5 of riding - Grand Canyon to Kingman, started interestingly as we immediately saw three elk just sauntering along the sidewalk, apparently quite a common sight in the area. Because elk are not native to northern Arizona, they are not well adapted to the dry climate and, as a result, they often depend on human sources of water, drinking from puddles underneath bottle-filling stations and grazing on watered vegetation around homes and buildings.

Today's ride took in some of the most famous towns and attractions of Route 66 at this part of its route, starting off at the small western town of Williams which is 6,758 feet above sea level. We bought several gifts/T-shirts, ensuring that the



centenary featured on these, and loved exploring the town. We then rode on to Seligman which we found even more interesting. There was a great range of shops and quirky places, starting off at Snowcap ice cream parlour where the lady servers were hilarious! Another highlight is the historic Route 66 Gift Shop of



Angels, which was the very first gift shop on Route 66. Although he is now in his 90s, the founder Angel Delgadillo is still a huge character/part of the town and indeed of Route 66. He started as a barber in Seligman in 1950 and was the moving force in the founding of the Historic Route 66 Association of Arizona, often styled as the 'guardian' of the route. The gift shop is where Angel used to run his barbershop and its décor has not changed in 50 years.



Our last stop before travelling to our overnight stop was the Hackberry General Store in the former mining town of Hackberry—a quirky Route 66 store packed with memorabilia and vintage gear. Inside, the walls are completely covered in thousands of signed \$1 bills left by global travellers. This tradition stems from old-timer miners who would pin up a spare dollar to ensure they always had money for a drink or a return visit. Today, this living guestbook pairs perfectly with the store's outdoor oddities, which include a collection of vintage cars, a mock garage, and a meditation garden.



Route 66, originally opened in 1926, was one of the original highways in the US highway system, running between Chicago and Los Angeles 'more than two thousand miles all the way' in the words of the R&B anthem 'Get your kicks on Route 66'. Sadly, the US Government has now decommissioned Route 66, because the construction of the modern Interstate Highway System rendered its twisting, narrow alignment obsolete. This means that the route is no longer maintained by central government and despite sponsorship of segments and lots of lobbying and effort by local areas, it is evident in the broken condition of parts of the route.

This was most obvious on day 6 of our riding as we left our accommodation to make the 250 miles from Kingman back to Las Vegas for the end of the first half of the tour. It was an amazing day! However, on our way to Oatman, it also brought a whole new meaning to the afore-mentioned story: 'Helluva place to meet a cow' (a deliberate rephrase).

We had already familiarised ourselves with the American road signage, from the risky 'All Way stop' (where drivers have to decide who goes first at a crossroads. With a group of bikes, this is very tricky to get across. Also, unlike in the UK, every junction has a STOP sign, even if you can see for miles.

One of the signs we frequently met on our travels in the rural and desert areas was 'Open Range' which we soon came to realise meant riding with due care of wild animals on the road. At this juncture of our journey to Oatman, we freaked out when – it seemed out of nowhere - a giant bull cow suddenly appeared from the side and was across our leader Jeff's bike with a hair's breath to collision! The guys following not only saw the way Jeff had to weave out of its path (and its treacherous horns), but also the bull tried to chase his bike again as it was obviously distressed and angry. We think it had been annoyed by a female tourist who had stopped her car to get in the face of the bull for photos and, when he was evading her, he clearly took out his anger on Jeff! Not surprisingly, Jeff stopped a little further up, got on his knees in the dust (almost in silent prayer) and then wandered off for a short bit to have a draw on his vape. It was such a shock for us all and yes, the 'helluva place to meet a cow' became a story which he repeated several times to tourists on the following days of our tour.



From this inflicted stop, we then rode on. Route 66 surprised us with unexpected mountain passes leading into Oatman, shattering our expectations of purely straight, flat roads. Reaching elevations of up to 6,000 feet, the route became precarious and dodgy. We encountered broken road edges and rough, hastily concreted patches over the worst sections. It was an achievement and a relief when we arrived at the old western town after 191 curves in 8 miles.



Oatman is another really eccentric, traditional cowboy town, named in honour of Olive Oatman, a young Illinois girl who had been taken captive by Apache during her pioneer family's journey westward in 1851 and forced into slavery. She was later traded to Mohave Indians who adopted her as a daughter and tattooed her face in the custom of the tribe. She was discovered and released in 1856 at Fort Yuma, Arizona. The town is really quaint and interesting, but perhaps also best known for the donkeys that walk freely on the roads to and from the town as well as on its streets. Beautiful animals if a little smelly – some days the aroma of ammonia can be quite overwhelming we were told. And yes, we did encounter a few donkeys on the road too, just to add to our hazard perception awareness after the earlier confrontation with a bull!



After lunch, our final interesting stop was Hoover Dam. Sitting in the Black Canyon of the Colorado River, between Arizona and Nevada, it was huge (about as tall as a canyon). Lake Mead, the basin

it created, is the largest reservoir in the US by volume and surface area (covering roughly 247 square miles). By this time, it was also very hot! So we did not linger too long before the journey to Vegas where we would have a much-needed day off the bikes and meet up with the rest of our fellow travellers for the final part of our Wild West tour.

