

Being Lucky—the 2003 Range of Light Gypsy Tour

by Mike Clark

Do you recall the Great Internet Bubble of the 1990s when it was possible to earn money by merely surfing the Web? Those days are gone, but it's still possible to make money doing something you would be doing anyway. Here's how it works:

This Labor Day weekend I went on the Range of Light Gypsy Tour, the annual event sponsored by the BMW Club of Northern California. If riding is what motorcycling is all about, the Range of Light Gypsy Tour is the essence of motorcycling. Forty-nine dollars buys three nights of fairground camping, two days of mapped-out poker rides on some of the planet's best roads, two tasty dinners along with a fully equipped cash bar, a truck to carry your extra luggage, and a trailer to retrieve broken down bikes. Overall, a fine deal. But, as I found out, if you play your cards right, you can come out ahead. Come along on the tour and I'll fill you in.

This year's tour started at Glenn County Fairgrounds in Orland, a few miles west of Chico. When you sign up that's all you know. Orland is close enough to the Monterey Bay to make a pleasant one-day trip and my whims took me along the coast, across the Golden Gate, through the wine country, past Clearlake, across Interstate 5 (stay off the Slab!) and along the levee roads east of the Sacramento River. Sutter Buttes were a mirage in the valley haze and cottonwoods along the riverbanks could have sheltered Huck and Tom, or perhaps Ishi's tribe on their way to trade with the neighbors.

At the fairgrounds I got the first day's packet comprising a commemorative pin, tickets for food and door prizes, directions for Saturday's poker ride, and a free beer! The destination was the Siskiyou County Fairgrounds in Yreka, 160 miles up the Interstate from Orland but the route laid out by NorCal's Russ Drake with the help of Bob Love and other hard-working souls wandered more than 300 miles with an optional "Big Dog" detour that raised the total to about 375 miles. A separate GS loop was also available but for reasons too complicated and boring to go into, I don't do Dirt. Not one mile was on the Slab—way to go, guys! The "poker" part of the run was simple enough, answer five easy questions. (Sample, what is the name of the Conservation Camp near this point? The answer was on a road sign, "Ishi"—see above.) For each correct answer (cheating was encouraged) you had the option of replacing one of the five cards you got when you checked in at the destination.

Some weeks before the tour, Russ Drake promised that we would be on roads we had never before traveled. A brash claim, considering the miles that BMW riders rack up. Not long into Saturday's tour it became clear that Russ was right.

Directly out of the fairground and over the Interstate, we were on a snaky little back road. If you stopped and listened, you could hear the susurrations of the Interstate but all around you was countryside that could have been central Wyoming. Much of the day's riding was like that. Traveling alone I was able to set my own pace, eat canned sardines and apples from my tank bag, and follow the detailed route description through Northern California. Since I opted for the extra-mileage "big dog" route I touched my toes down briefly in Oregon after traversing the Lava Beds National Monument.

Lava Beds NP is a poignant place with its history of a small group's futile fight for dignity. It was even more poignant for me on this trip as I remembered the last time I was there: September 11, 2001. On that day, park personnel were shutting down operations as they came to grips with the

horror of what happened on the East Coast. This time though the atmosphere was pleasant and the weather was warm. (Warm? Actually, it was hot. At times, very hot. In fact, the heat was my only real complaint about the trip—the heat was abated somewhat by getting an early start and wetting myself down when things got bad but it couldn't be avoided. It was hot.)

With more than 150 riders on the tour you'd think that BMWs would be everywhere. In reality, I saw few other riders all day long. We were all going the same direction at roughly the same speed so I usually only saw other riders at gas stations or when they stopped to answer the poker run questions. During the "Big Dog" loop through the Lava Beds and into Oregon, I saw no one at all and when I arrived at Yreka there were only a few riders on site.

The next day's packet showed our destination as the Trinity County Fairgrounds at Hayfork, an area I had passed through only a few weeks earlier but one well worth revisiting. I drew my cards for the day's poker hand; trying for a straight I ended up with an ace-high nothing. One of my tenting neighbors had managed four aces, which certainly held out hope for her. With 150 other seekers, I knew I was out of luck.

Soon after arriving, I settled in and pitched my tent in a secluded corner of the lawn only to be told we were restricted in our tenting options and I had to move. Unfortunately the fairgrounds' staff not only forced us into a small camping space, they also left the sodium vapor lights on all night. As the comic book characters say, "Sigh." When I moved my tent I landed among a rambunctious group I had heard the night before and thought prudent to avoid. Now that I was among them, I felt I had to overcome my innate abstemiousness to keep up with the Joneses. Some of you may have heard that the noise generated by our little group drew the ire of other campers. I hope those reports, including the one in the September NorCal newsletter, were at least a little exaggerated.

Sunday's route once again eschewed the Interstate and took us through the south end of Scott Valley, over the Trinity Alps and along California's Salmon River. We snaked the back roads through Forks of Salmon, Somes Bar, and Hoopa Valley. With sharp turns, no guardrails, and an impressive drop down to an impressive river, the path always had something to hold your attention. Russ wasn't reluctant to have us turn from a skinny road onto an even skinnier bit of pavement. In places the Forest Service road was about a lane-and-a-half wide with gravel delineating a double-track path. And then a sign would appear, "Road Narrows". Woof.

It was great riding, with a stop for lunch at a roadhouse complete with a local who, fairly far into geezerhood, shared his motorcycling memories. Something to do with quitting when his R80 fell on him as he tried to mount it on the back of his RV. I think I've got that right.

I wasn't among the first riders to leave the fairgrounds that morning but most folks stopped in Yreka for breakfast and I passed a few more on my way down the road so I beat the lunchtime rush and was among the first to arrive at Hayfork. I was glad to be out of the saddle; the last few hours had been hot and it was getting hotter. More than one rider stopped to cool off with a dip in Hayfork Creek before getting to the fairgrounds

Aware I had fallen amongst bad companions the night before, I found a shady spot well away from the center of things to pitch my wee tent. My chosen spot must have been enticing: before the afternoon was over, the same rowdies had set up camp around me and I envisioned another night of mayhem. I needn't have worried, though. They were a subdued lot that evening, in part because they were tired and a bit under the weather and in part because they had been Spoken To: *"...we haven't blackballed anyone from the club for over a dozen years but, considering your behavior ..."*

But I'm getting ahead of myself. As the afternoon wore on, our caterers, the Mule Fanciers of Hayfork (or something similar) had set up a bar (donations accepted, thank you) and started fixing dinner. We drew cards for the day's poker run and this time things were looking up for your correspondent. Starting with a pair of queens, I clawed my way up to a queens-over-jacks full house. We settled down for our second tasty and happily served meal of the tour.

After everyone was fed, we sat in the gathering darkness for the presentation of door prizes and poker winnings. Generous BMW dealers had donated some well-received prizes (Kari, the calendars were nice, but 2003 is more than half over.) Poker winnings were awarded for both days. Saturday's first prize (\$200!), not surprisingly, went to my camping neighbor with four aces. Second and third prizes (\$100 and \$50) went to hands superior to my Sunday full house and my hopes for winning some gas money dimmed. Sunday's hands, it turned out, weren't up to the previous day and when they announced that second place went to a worse hand than mine, I knew I was in. I waited until I was in the shadows before counting up those 10 twenty-dollar bills.

There you have it; the way to make money doing this is simply a matter of Being Lucky. That's been my plan from the beginning and it has worked pretty well so far. Thanks again to Russ Drake and his helpers; they braved snow and deep gravel and who-knows-what-all setting up the route, and they endured hours of driving the Slab in the support trucks during the tour. The routes they choose were a delight. The directions they wrote out were clear and easy to follow. The one sour note was news that Bob Love had gone down somewhere during the second day while following the GS route. I haven't heard how he is but certainly hope he's OK.

On Monday morning, I was in Hayfork and Hayfork is 330 miles from home. The prudent thing was to head east, pick up Interstate 5 and blast for home in time to beat the Labor Day traffic. So I headed west, adding an extra 90 miles to the trip but sending me through the cool early morning air on Highway 36, one of California's nicest motorcycle roads. The early hour permitted a good pace down the road with little traffic and good visibility. Unlike previous days, I passed a number of bikers traveling in my direction.

By the time I got to the Avenue of the Giants it was time for a break and I brewed a fine cup of coffee on a bluff overlooking the Eel river. Back in the saddle the threat of Bay Area holiday traffic kept me going down US 101. In spite of ominous road signs warning of holiday traffic jams I got to the Golden Gate in good time and crossed the bridge in light traffic framed by swirling fog. My ride down the coast was blissfully cool and the trip's only snarl was the usual tailback at Half Moon Bay. I got home in time for a cold drink and a therapeutic shower before dinner. It was a good trip with beautiful scenery and not one mile was spent on the Interstate. I might do it again next year. If I'm lucky.