

Road Motorcycle TOURING & TRAVEL RUNNER®



DESERT RIDING

in the Southwest

Shamrock Tour®
FLORIDA'S PANHANDLE

SOUTH AFRICA
Rainbow Nation Excursion

NEW ENGLAND
Exploring our
Industrial
History



COMPARISON:
BMW F 800 GS vs. TRIUMPH TIGER 800 XC

2014 HONDA GOLD WING VALKYRIE



HARD Lessons Learned

Text and Photography:
Alfonse Palaima

The third annual Taste of Dakar rally came and went this past February while much of the country was still shoveling snow. Meanwhile, the deserts of the southwest sang with the sounds of adventure bike throttles and campfire tall tales. It was hosted by Seattle-based, hard-parts manufacturer AltRider and sponsored by the Jimmy Lewis Off-Road Riding School as well as a handful of other parts and gear makers. The event was held at the Wine Ridge RV Resort & Cottages in Pahrump, NV, to a full roster and included more than just a few self-led GPS jaunts in the desert. Motorcyclists from across the country brought little to big bikes, DRZs to water-boxers, and a whole lot of passion for desert riding despite the threat of rain.

Friday's optional and abbreviated instruction day with Dakar Champion Jimmy Lew-

is began on the dry lake that straddles the California and Nevada border. As lunchtime arrived, so did the raindrops, and within minutes the otherwise bone dry playa became a slippery mess. With riders scrambling and toppling their way off the course, the spirit of the class never broke. Just another taste of Dakar, as they say! Afternoon instructions continued in a nearby gravel pit giving Jimmy's students the opportunity to learn more about off-road riding.

On the Gas

With more than a healthy bite of the Dakar-like environment from rocky snow-capped mountain passes to challenging sand washes and dunes, this year's course was split into three self-guided paths. With GPX routes provided in advance (and paper maps on site), nearly 200 miles were offered. Getting lost and back-track-

ing added more. Attendees were urged to team up into small groups and help each other enjoy the day. A rider club and motorcycle storage company from New York City made the trek all the way to the west as well, and they brought their 40-foot toy hauler filled with motorcycles and plenty of wild stories.

For the admission price of \$200, the weekend included the use of the RV park's camping grounds, all the meals from Friday night to Sunday morning, adult beverages at the Dakar Bar, and an evening presentation after dinner Saturday (as well as an event T-shirt, stickers, and info packet). Last year's guest of honor was Honda Racing's Johnny Campbell, in 2012 it was Dakar privateer Manuel Lucchese, and this year it was the KTM superstar Chris Blais.



AltRider's Jeremy LeBreton leads us on a ride not soon forgotten!

On the playa, Jimmy Lewis teaches where the pavement stops and life begins.

Three things to remember from the rider meeting: this isn't a race, don't crash, have fun!



In the Pits

Chris and Jimmy share a special history together as well as the same record at the Dakar—they are the only two Americans to podium at the famed race, according to Jimmy anyway. He goes on to point out that Danny LaPorte was a French passport carrier at the time of his win; racers will always be competing with one another! And with that introduction, Chris told his particular story of inspiration and heartbreak, growing up in the shadow of his father's Honda dealership, then Johnny Campbell's race team until he made a name for himself.

From lot lizard to mechanic to Dakar champ, his blood ran Honda red from birth, until he got passed up by Honda for their rally crew, twice. After tearing himself away from the Japanese maker, he finally made the squad for KTM on an LC4. He ran in the Dakar

three years (2005, 2006, 2007) and finally took third place in his third year. Listening to Chris for more than an hour, we got to hear about a few of the major lessons he learned the hard way—like smooth is fast. And either bring lights ... or go faster!

His contract with KTM was to run two more Dakars when his riding career was unfortunately cut short on a pre-run between Vegas and Reno in 2007. It was then that his life took on a new path in management and bike building—something he had been doing for KTM while he was competing, and he still does at Blais Racing Services in Apple Valley, CA, (specializing in Hondas and KTMs, of course.) He also supports youth riders with sponsorship programs and has eight team members (with one having gone pro so far) and giving back what Johnny Campbell gave to him in the beginning—a chance.

Throttling Back

In what has become a tradition at the Taste of Dakar, and what I consider a highlight of the event, is the post-ride slideshow on display during dinner. Attendees email or download their camera cards for overhead projection and share with the audience the great scenery and action shots they picked up that day. Those brave enough to record with an onboard video camera bring the loudest applause, especially the crash videos. Who doesn't love those?!

One dune rider bringing back the experience learned to crest a peak the hard way when he separated from his bike and flew 30 feet into the sky while gravity did its thing on both him and the machine. The short video showed climbing a field of sand, then suddenly sky and a pair of boots looking back at the flying motorcycle. And as



For those keeping score ... Mud: 1
Knobbies caked with mud: 0

quickly as the sand disappeared in the video, it reappeared in the lens of the helmet-mounted camera. A moment of pain for a greater moment of shared experience on the big screen. This guy took home one of the many door prizes—this one for “going the biggest” of course. This year’s door prizes included ICON riding gear, RotoPax fuel cells, and for the photo challenge winner, a set of Kenda Big Block tires. Honors went to the tough luck award, biggest wheelie, greatest hero, most enthusiastic, and so on, but they change yearly, so don’t come next time expecting to win by simply being the best at crashing a motorcycle.

Late-night campfires kept the stories flowing well into the night with beginnings like “I barely survived this...,” and “You would never believe” Adult beverages flowed nearly as deep as the tales being told.

For the first time, the event concluded with a second Jimmy Lewis class for those that were not able to attend on Friday or simply decided on Saturday that there might be something new to learn about riding off-piste.

While I personally didn’t get to complete the entire route for accidental reasons (video set to private), I still had a great weekend. Just remember the attendance is limited to only 100 lucky individuals, so sign up early and be prepared. As one of three signature riding events for AltRider, the Taste of Dakar might be the closest you’ll ever get to the real race. **RR**



A hill climbing demonstration becomes showboating, and Jimmy shines even on a cloudy day!

This cast-bronze reminder of Chris Blais’ 2007 third place in the Dakar will never fade away.

Always bring a buddy! You never know when you might need a rescue ride home.