



Damage to the Sportster was minimal. Dented tank, grazed clutch lever and broken gear lever. Fixed and back in action within 36 hours.

It's the first morning of a dream holiday. In the next 13 days we'll do a figure-of-eight through four states and will ride some of the best roads I've seen in 30 years and half a million miles. We'll see every picture postcard landscape in the western US and return to England babbling like teenagers about the best two weeks on a bike ever (and, as a journo for most of the last 20 years, I've been lucky enough to ride some amazing roads all over the world).

But right now, there are different feelings. How did we get separated from the group? Why didn't they wait (the only rule on the tour is that we never make a turn without waiting for everyone so no one gets lost), why didn't we catch them and does anyone around here have a gearlever for a Sportster 1200?

I go through the events again in my head. One of the riders had a wobble in the mountains, ran off the road and dropped the bike at a standstill. Three miles down the road Tom, the tour leader pulls us into a diner's car park. Everyone assumes this is lunch so helmets and jackets come off, chins wag, riders start to wander. Then, without explanation Tom and most of the group saddle up and ride off leaving two of us frantically trying to fasten helmets and zip up jackets. By the time we're running, they're gone. No worry, the rule is that no one makes a turn without waiting for the group. We'll catch them. But we don't. Through two major junctions, no sign of them, so we go straight on. And then we hit a dead end. Now what? With no contact number for the tour guide, no idea where they



Getting to know you. The first few miles are tip-toed in tight formation.



Support vehicle, no less. Oh yes, this trip was stylish.

might have gone and increasing desperation we decide to head back to the first big junction. We know the van is behind us because he picked up Bob after his wobble, so we should intercept them at some point.

Except now, we have our own problem. The damage is minimal. Apart from the gearlever, there's a dent in the tank where the bars hit it and a scuff on the clutch lever assembly. If we were in the middle of nowhere on our own, I'd ride it. But we're on a big tour with a back-up truck so we'll wait for them to realise we're not there and let the tour guide sort it. Julie is shaken but not hurt and relieved that she wore the full face Shoei and armoured jeans despite the 125° heat.

Mark turns up in the van. The spare bike is another Street Glide – too heavy for a shaken Julie to ride, so we elect to leave the Sporty in Elsinore, put Julie in the van for today and tomorrow and get the bike fixed and brought to our hotel in Laughlin tomorrow night.

It's annoying and frustrating, but it's also one of those things. A big tour's first day can always be tricky as riders familiarise themselves with new bikes, new mates and the baptism of fire that is the LA freeway system (like the M25 on a Friday night, but six lanes wide, 20mph faster, guns in the glove box to settle disputes and legal to overtake on both sides). Four people on our tour will drop their bikes in the first 24 hours (one bloke twice), but no one is seriously hurt and everyone makes it to the finish with a smile.

Up till the crash we'd been having fun. The freeway is a laugh once you get used to it, even the trucks with tyre-slasher kitchen knife attachments on their wheel nuts (I kid you not),

55mph speed limit is about right for the twists and turns of Southern California's backroads.



Our man far right, not looking shifty at all. Bless him.

American radio is hilarious and as we get to the mountains, the anxiety disappears and the real riding begins.

Forget the straight-road clichés. America is covered in perfectly surfaced, beautifully cambered and thoughtfully signposted twisties. This is why you come on a guided tour. Tom, our guide has been riding these roads for 45 years. He knows every one of the back roads and in the next 2700 miles will take us the scenic and twisty route between every legendary monument and canyon in the west.

These ones are more curvy and bendy than twisty and corners. Fast and open, with good visibility. Tom keeps the speeds sensible because our train of bikes stretches back half a mile and we don't want to lose anyone else. It's a good way to settle the group. Not too much traffic, nor too challenging.

We're heading for Palm Springs and the drops, flops and chaos of the morning means we're running late. The drop from the mountains is stunning. For a few miles the turns become tighter and more frequent, made all the more thrilling by the fading light (we should have been here a couple of hours ago). By the time we bottom out in Desert Springs it is dark. Nine miles of traffic light junctions follow. It takes about one of those miles for the group to get completely strung out.

I'm lucky. Close to the front of the group I can see Tom and make the same lights that he does, but behind me I can see others jumping red lights and risking everything. Julie tells me later that the view from the van was terrifying as everyone desperately tried to keep up.

Eventually, we reach the hotel, but not before one more rider drops their bike. We're too late to see Palm Springs and everyone just grabs the first thing they can eat and heads for bed.

The hotel is superb and it's hard to be angry because in among the chaos today's riding has been amazing and, the benefit of being on a tour is that we know the damaged bike will get sorted and everyone will learn from today.

I'm writing this feeling guilty about giving the wrong impression, but if you are about to be inspired by the next three instalments (and, if I'm doing my job right, then you should be because this is a mind-blowing tour) you also need to be aware of the first day hazards (see accompanying boxout). If you know them, you can avoid them.



Now that's a lot of big metal with some great company. Just make sure the sidestands are set.



Plenty of palms, not much sign of a spring though. Mountain roads were awesome.

FIRST DAY SURVIVAL

Riding in groups is challenging. Especially when you are strangers. Riding an unfamiliar bike in a strange, busy country makes the challenge more difficult. But a few simple rules make it fun, not fearful.

The obvious one is take your time to learn the bike. All our topples apart from the Sportster were low-speed losses of balance. Harleys are different. The weight is in a different place, especially on the big Glides whose enormous handlebar fairing takes your control away till you learn only to stop with the bars dead straight. Low speed riding is easy, but shedding those last 5mph is where the wobbles strike. Harley indicators are different. Harley gearboxes are stiffer than Japanese ones and Harley suspension is soft. By the end of day two you won't even notice any more.

Out on the road, stay close to the bike in front. Riding staggered helps, but it's all too easy for gaps to grow and when you lose touch with the leader so does everyone behind you. When the leader is doing 60mph, the bikes near the back are generally doing 80mph just to keep in sight. There's probably a complex mathematical equation to explain this, but I preferred chemistry to maths at school.

So, stay close. And keep your wits about you. Don't rely on the bike in front to see the hazard. Ride for yourself. Listen to instructions, make sure you have an idea where you are headed and don't be afraid to use your horn to inform the leaders if people are getting lost.

Don't panic if you lose sight of the pack. Don't jump red lights and remember that the back up van is there to keep the stragglers on track. Don't get behind the back up truck.

Remember to eat and drink plenty. You'll be tired after the flight, jet lagged and swapping 15° and rain in London for 50° and sunshine screws up your metabolism.

Finally, ride smoothly. Keeping the pack together is easy when everyone sticks to the same speed, only brakes when they really have to and leaves enough room in corners for the others to plot their own line. When you brake, everyone behind you brakes too and in 10 seconds the pack stretches out an extra 200 yards. Everyone then accelerates to make up the gap and then brakes again when they get there, which starts the whole process all over again.