

FRANCE IN AMERICA



Riding his own motorcycle 21,475 miles on an American road trip had such a profound effect on Londoner Gary

France that he wrote a book about it and, by way of a quick taster, he's given us a glimpse of his epic journey.

After many years of waiting and hoping, the day had finally arrived.

For as long as I could remember, I had wanted to ride a motorcycle across America. Waking up in New York City on the day my journey would begin didn't seem real. Around me, my hotel room was full of everything I might need for a four-month US road trip and downstairs, in the basement parking garage of the hotel, was my own Harley-Davidson Road King, shipped all the way from London by plane, patiently waiting for the start of what would become a remarkable journey.

I had owned the Road King for five years and it had served me well. It was my main touring bike and having carried me successfully across much of Europe, there was no way I wanted to ride in America on any other motorcycle.

My intended route had been set out and I was full of anticipation, raring to go. My plan was to ride from the top right hand corner of the USA to the bottom left, but I knew I wouldn't ride in anything resembling a straight line.

I loaded the bike, turned out of the hotel and started a journey of discovery of America and at the same time, a journey of discovery

about myself. After a successful career in the construction industry, I had been lucky to retire early, but wondered how much my passion for motorcycling

would be part of the rest of my life. This long ride in America would no doubt have a major influence on that, one way or another.

Not many people can afford the time to ride in America for four months, so I was to ride the majority of this road trip on my own. However, a good friend, Paul, joined me for the first few weeks on a rented Electra-Glide, and the two of us rode along the Atlantic coast of the New England states. For the first couple of thousand miles, the norm became lobster fishing communities, boats, lighthouses and rock peninsula's sticking out into the Atlantic. There was a lot to see.

The area around Boston was full of towns with English names, reflecting the original country of the people that first settled in this part of America. We rode the full length of Cape Cod, the wonderful natural sand spit that curves 60 miles out into the Atlantic.

Much more sombre is the cemetery in the town of Salam, where the headstones of the so-called, but totally innocent, witches are tucked away in the corner of the graveyard.

Away from the east coast and heading north,

the state of Vermont was stunning, and its translated name of green mountain is certainly accurate. Describing the weather in the state, I was told by a local that Vermont has two seasons – July and winter, so I counted myself lucky that I had planned to be in these northern states in summer.

There are two very different sides to New York. There is the hustle and bustle of lively New York City that seems to never sleep and somehow

I had anticipated the whole state being the same. Instead, I found upstate New York to be a beautiful and remote place, geographically close to, but far-removed from the city. In the northern part of the state is the Adirondacks, a national park so vast it takes a



couple of days to ride across. Lakes, mountains and trees dominate with very few people allowed to live in the area and it is a paradise for lovers of the outdoor lifestyle. Long roads cut through the trees and while these are not great biking roads, I couldn't help but admire the natural beauty of the completely unspoilt landscape.

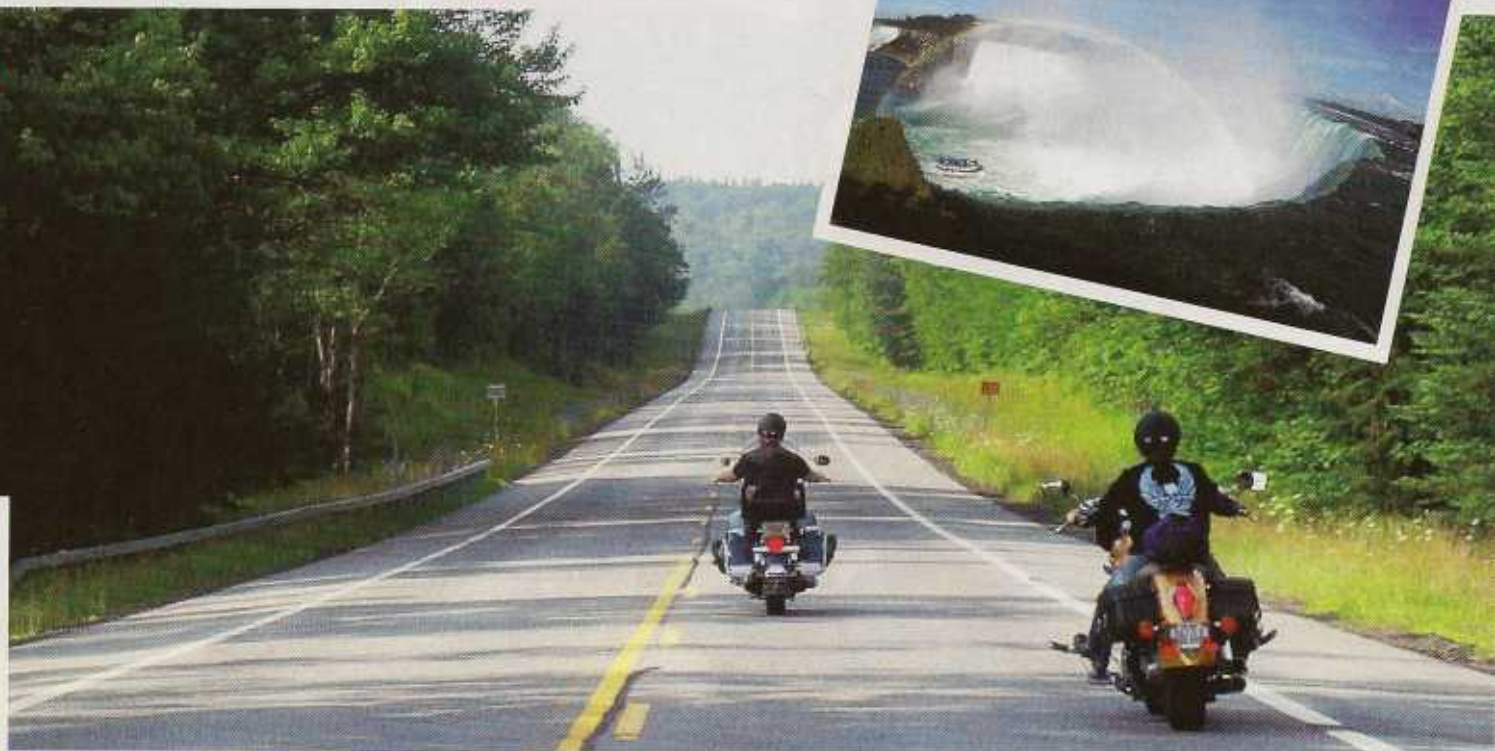
For me, the best time for riding on a road trip is the early morning, so I generally started riding by 7am each day. Favouring these early morning starts helped me choose the overall east to west direction of travel for my entire route, which would avoid me riding into the early morning sun. For the next week or so, I headed due west, hugging the edge of the Great Lakes. More like oceans than

lakes, these are so vast, they are patrolled by the US Coastguard and need lighthouses to warn wayward sailors.

Perhaps more spectacular than I had imagined, Niagara Falls is very impressive. The falls are very easy to find because the mist rises tall into the sky and is better than any signpost could ever be. On the day I was there, the conditions were perfect for a rainbow to form. The falls are a wonderful assault on the senses.

Keeping the lakes to my right hand side, I reached the 5,000 mile point of my ride in Chicago, one of my favourite US cities. Having briefly worked here in the past, catching up with old friends was a must and I stayed a few days, which also had the advantage that I was able to get my Road King serviced. Regular servicing was needed a few times in my 21,475

miles and on each occasion, telling a nearby H-D dealership that I was on a road trip and my motorcycle needed a service always had the same reaction – they bent over backwards to make sure I wasn't delayed and fitted me in straight away.



Riding to Milwaukee was one of those must-do things, as was visiting the Harley-Davidson Museum, which was far better than I had imagined. Seeing the early bikes was fascinating, so was learning more about the history of the company and how it had developed through good times and bad.

Now well into the mid-west states, I was into prime US farming country. Corn and cows dominated the landscape as I rode through

Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa. I crossed the mighty Mississippi River a few times and soon reached the states that probably first kindled my desire to see America, when as a small boy, I watched cowboy films set in Nebraska, the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana. As I rode through these states I saw names of famous cowboy towns such as Cody, Laramie and Deadwood.

My motorcycle carried me across the vast wide-open plains of Nebraska, where only a few cars can be seen on the near empty roads. As I neared South Dakota, I saw



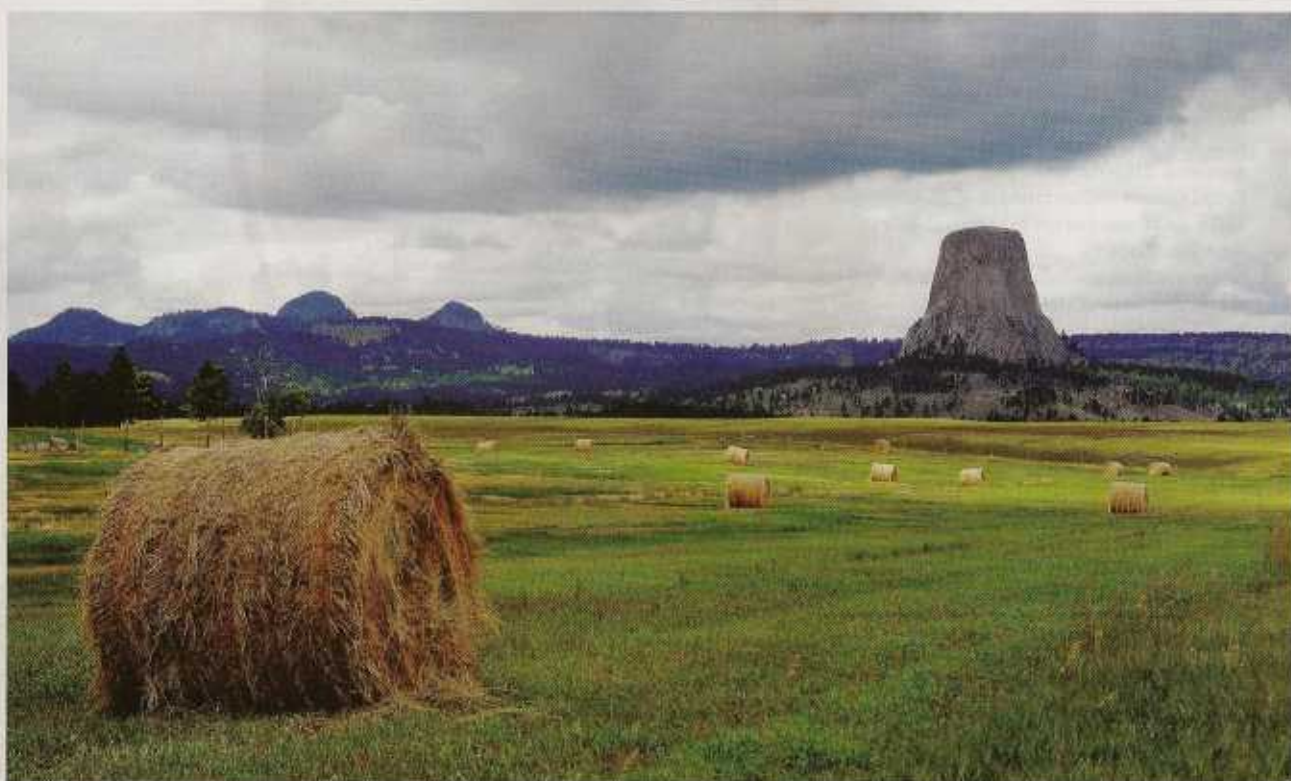
more and more motorcycles and it was clear where they were all heading. It seemed half of America's bikers had the same destination as me – the mother of all motorcycle rallies – Sturgis. Without a doubt one of the highlights of my trip, Sturgis was amazing. Nobody knows for sure, but it is estimated that six or seven hundred thousand bikers attend the rally and the sights and sounds of the place are weird, dramatic and so unusual, that everyone should experience the rally at least once. I couldn't get

rid of the grin from my face as I rode my own Harley-Davidson into the centre of town, parked and became part of one of the most famous motorcycle sights in the world – the rows of motorcycles on Main Street in Sturgis.

The area around Sturgis is known as the Black Hills and there are many famous places to see and some of the best roads in America to ride. The Badlands are as stunning as they are peculiar, Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial shouldn't be missed, the Needles Highway, Iron Mountain road and Spearfish Canyon must all be ridden. The towns of Deadwood and Custer are full of history and must be seen. There are so many things to do and see here, it is not at all surprising that Sturgis Rally is so popular. I have to return one day to enjoy this un-matched motorcycle spectacle.

I made on-board videos of some of the best places I visited and rode. These can be found on my website www.GarySFrance.com in the 'Gary's Motorcycling Videos' section. Riding the Needles Highway is one of those videos.

Just west of Sturgis was another must-see for me, the Devils Tower, in Wyoming. Featured in the film 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind', the monolith rises 1,267 feet above the surrounding land and is impressive to see. When I first glimpse it from a few miles away, it



see into a sat-nav. It was a system that worked well for me.

While I did know what route I would take in advance, I had no idea how far I would ride each day. Booking hotels / motels / B&B's was therefore impossible, but I need not have worried, as places to stay are available just about everywhere I travelled. Only in the most popular tourist spots was a reservation needed ahead of time.

The further south my journey took me, the more I enjoyed the states I was seeing, especially in America's south-west. Colorado, Utah,

made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

My pre-trip research meant I would get to ride some of America's most stunning roads. The Million Dollar Highway near Ouray in Colorado is spectacular, but the Beartooth Pass, on the border of Wyoming and Montana, is just breathtaking. Most American bikers would list Beartooth as one of the five best biking roads in the US, and many had suggested I ride it. The road crests at 10,947 feet and the views looking down on other mountains from the road are very impressive indeed.

For me, one of the great benefits of travelling is being able to see things I have never experienced before. Yellowstone provided these in abundance. Hot bubbling mud, steaming geysers and hundreds of bison were all watched, admired and photographed. Keen to get some great shots of the bison, a couple of times I got myself into situations of potential danger, like when getting pictures of one animal that had separated from the main herd to get a drink. I soon discovered I was right in its path as it ran back towards the herd!

For much of my trip, I relied on my sat-nav to take me to the places I had so carefully

researched in advance.

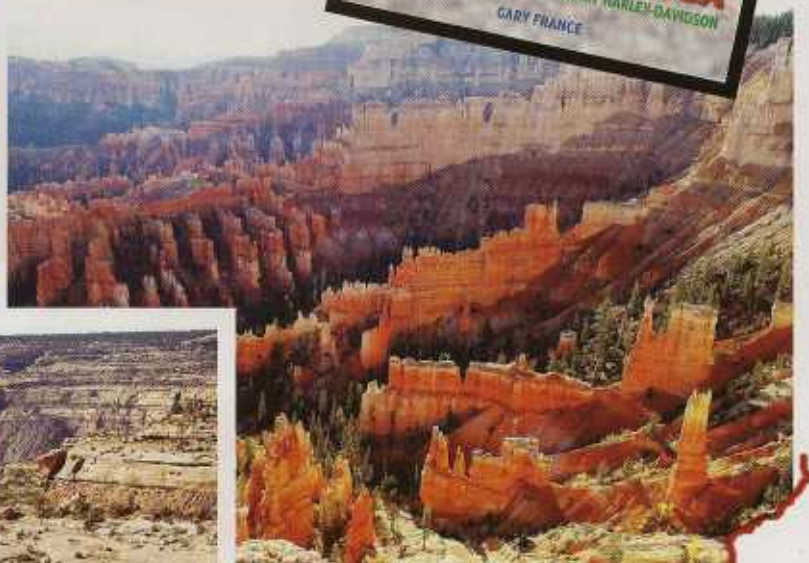
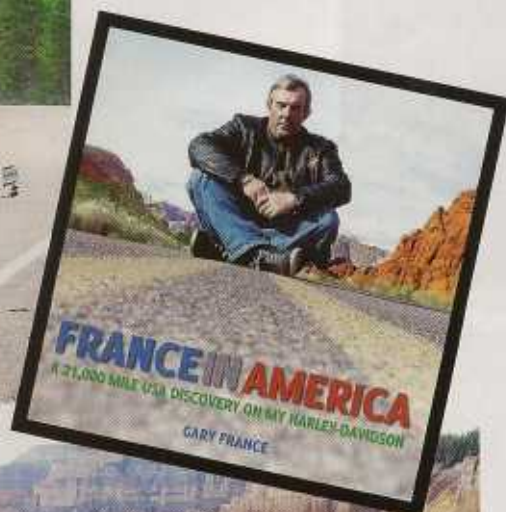
I know this is a method not favoured by all, but my rationale was I didn't want to miss something just because I didn't know it was there. Planning ahead was therefore very important to me, and it seemed sensible to enter those places I wanted to





Arizona and Nevada were my favourites, with so many places dominated by their spectacular natural surroundings. The Rocky Mountains are located close to deserts and this unusual combination is very appealing. High mountain passes, Death Valley, the Grand Canyon and my favourite of all, Monument Valley are all wonders not to be missed on an American road trip.

Near to Monument Valley is an old mining road with the peculiar name of Moki Dugway. Many riders of large, heavy motorcycles don't want to take on this steep gravel road that clings to the side of a cliff, but I revelled in the adventure of riding this challenging road.



On average, I limited my riding to less than 200 miles a day in order to really see the places and spend time meeting as many people as I could. I experienced the hectic pace of life of the big cities, visiting many, such as New York, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco and Los Angeles, but preferred seeing the wide-open plains, mountains, back roads and the small towns of rural America. Wherever I stopped, I enjoyed talking to the locals. America is amazingly diverse, with so many things to see and people to meet. Almost everywhere I went on my trip, people greeted me warmly and wanted to hear my story about travelling across their country. They were genuinely interested in understanding what an outsider thought about where they lived.

Sometimes the reality of achieving your dreams doesn't meet expectations, but my

once-in-a-lifetime trip went a long beyond what I could have hoped for. In California, towards the end of my journey, I was able to reflect on what I had experienced. Having ridden from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, I laid on the beach in my full biking gear, soaking up the warm autumn sun and felt very content. It was the moment I realised I was able to shake off the previous results-orientated professional approach to life and to begin the more next, more relaxed, phase of travel and enjoyment. Life felt good.

My pre-trip research had proved to be of enormous benefit, for I was able to see and ride some of America's most iconic and wonderful places. The trip was such a huge success that I wanted to record it in some way. My 400-page

coffee-table book 'France In America' is full of my own photographs of many of the best places I saw, along with maps highlighting the routes I took across twenty-seven of the United States.

It offers a unique mix of Americana, travel, motorcycling and is a useful guide to anyone thinking of taking a US road trip or for anyone wishing to discover more about life on the road in America. This is not only a detailed guide about where to go and what to see in the USA. It is also a personal story of one person seizing the moment – a living testimony to the maxim that travel is not so much about the destination as it is about the journey itself.

My Harley-Davidson Road King proved to be an ideal motorcycle for the trip and other than needing the occasional oil change and replacement tyres, performed exceptionally well. Having travelled so far on that one motorcycle, I could now never bear to part with it.

The book is only available from Gary's website www.GarySFrance.com