

One man, one dream, two wheels



Since the end of 2007, Gary France has been carefully planning and bringing into being an epic trip across the United States. Spending nearly five months on the road, he will cover an awesome 15,000 miles on his Road King, named 'The Leading Ladies'. This June, he finally set off. Here's a brief outline of his story in his own words

THERE ARE MANY great things about Christmas – seeing family, taking a break from work, and then enjoying the New Year celebrations. Sadly, when the holidays are over, we go back to work and get back into everyday routines. Ho hum. Christmas 2007 wasn't as simple as that for me. Something was different. My 50th birthday had passed earlier in the year and I was feeling it was time for a change. It was time for an adventure.

I'd been in love with motorcycles since my teens, so it only made sense that the two had to be combined, but where would this motorcycling adventure take me? The USA fairly quickly became the favourite option. But there were so many questions – what route to take? Should I go on my own or in a group? Would I take my own bike or rent one? I was determined to make this happen, so I called upon some of the skills and experiences I had been using in my career for many years. It was time for some planning! In 2008 I spent a great deal of time working away in Moscow and Spain so much of that year was a write-off as far as planning but the time I did get to spend on planning only further fuelled my desires to do the trip I was dreaming of.

On a trip to France that I'd joined with Brettours I had made some new friends with whom I went off to California. We rented bikes and this proved to be a great experience. I learned a lot about spending a long time on the road and even more about riding in heat.

After that trip, what I thought would be one of the hardest decisions to make turned out to be easy. Would I rent a bike for the "big" trip or ship my own to ride? Since I was planning to be away for such a long time, I found a shipping company, that would collect, crate and ship my bike to New York and back for a price including all export formalities and transfer to the warehouse in New York, plus return export charges and customs clearance that made the cost of shipping my bike considerably cheaper than paying a daily rental rate for such an extended period. I was thrilled to find that shipping my bike was the cheaper option and that my bike and I could do this trip together!

I spent the rest of the summer planning my route in detail, getting my head around interstates, turnpikes, freeways and highways. The anticipation that built from just desktop and armchair traveling from state to state was magnificent. At every turn my trip began to feel like it was a little bit closer, not far around the bend.

At the end of 2009, I had six months to go before I was to set off on this epic journey I was planning. My preparations were on track, the route had been decided, all my dates were set, my hotel for Sturgis was booked and the bike shipping – perhaps the biggest organizational challenge! – was sorted. At home in London, the snow was falling thick and fast, and my bikes were tucked up for the winter. Once again, the tour felt a long way off, but I knew the next six months would fly by.

In January, I nearly got caught out with a visa issue. I'd visited the USA many times over the past 38 years and knew that the UK has a reciprocal visa programme with the USA. I figured I was fine to do this trip without making any other special visa applications or arrangements. I was wrong. As I was planning to stay in the US for more than 90 days, I needed a visa. Getting one involves completing a comprehensive application form and an interview with a consular official. Luckily I discovered this in time to get all of that sorted. With three months to go, I only had to organise temporary insurance and buy some summer biking boots that would do for walking as well as riding. I'd got my satnav system and had finalised the routes through the 23 states I was going to cover. »



H.O.G.® UK Events



My itinerary looked like this: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, Wyoming. Plus, a very brief ride into Canada.

With one month to go before I departed, I was down to doing last-minute jobs. I had purchased some brilliant new lightweight boots and gear that would help me survive the heat. I needed to get the bike serviced and shipped and finalise my packing. I bought my Road King from Warrs Harley-Davidson and I've built up a great relationship with them ever since. Within five minutes of riding into the dealership, my bike was up on the ramp. I had a day in London, returned to the shop in the afternoon and the bike was ready to go. After some last-minute checking to make sure all my gear would fit in the panniers, I took the bike to Heathrow so it could be flown to New York. It was nerve-racking – I hoped they would look after it! But then I realised. The next time I saw the bike, I'd be in New York. How cool...

And indeed it was. Still suffering with jet lag, I'd spent my first day in Brooklyn panicking about horror stories I'd heard about how long it might take and how difficult it might be to clear customs, and that I could pick my bike up and find it had been emptied of fuel. I needn't have worried, it was all very easy. I found the right building with no problems – the woman at Continental Airlines Cargo was very helpful, the Border Protection Customs guys were great (and very interested in my tour), the foreman at the warehouse helped me uncrate the bike and there was enough fuel to get me back to Brooklyn. I'd ridden my first 14 miles on my bike in the USA. As I rode them, I realised: my tour had begun. And I assure you, there will never be a feeling like it again.

To find out more about Gary's ride and keep up to date with his travels, visit garysusatour.blogspot.com