

## FLORIDA AIRHEADS IN ALASKA

This was serialized in the Airmail back then and is a part of our history. Other current Flairheads have made the trip but we haven't been able to get them to document their experiences.

### Alaska- Ft Myers to Wasilla

Airhead BMW's have made this trip many times over many years. There is nothing special about this one other than this is 2007. Mike and Dave each ride a 1978 R100. Tom's is a 1986 R80RT. We met via the Airhead chat list.

Dave and Tom met in Gainesville, FL. Tom's wife and brother came to see us off. Mike was waiting for us at an exit north of Macon, GA, and the first night was at Dave's daughter and son-in-law's home, north of Atlanta.



Tom G on left and Dave P in Gainesville, FL

Tom's left head gasket developed an oil leak. Matt P. in Colo. Sprgs had a gasket waiting and the job was taken care of in short order. Took it for a warm-up ride, removed valve cover to re-torque head and found needle bearings. The left exhaust rocker had lost it's bearings. Again Matt saved the day with a replacement, and the next morning we were on the road again.

CO Rt 50 crosses over Monarch Pass at 11,312 ft and on to Grand Junction, where Airhead Steve Inglis had offered us his hospitality. Steve and his friend Valerie gave us a cookout that couldn't be beat, washed down with 2 kinds of home brew, of the four brews on tap in a neighborhood garage.

Crossing Utah on Rt 40, we were hit with strong cross winds, heavy rain, and snow in Daniel's Pass at 8,004 ft. Mike's daughter and 2 grandkids live in Sandy, UT. Mike decided to stay here while Tom and Dave rode on.

ID Rt 55 follows a narrow steep-sided valley with a river down the middle, the road on one side and RR on the other. Next day we entered BC at Osoyoos, and followed Rt 97 to Prince George, then west to Kitwanga and the Cassiar Hwy.

The Cassiar is a wilderness road, 450 miles from Kitwanga to the Alaska Hwy. On the lower half, between Kitwanga and the Stewart Hwy, we saw 16 black bear, one grizzly, 2 moose, one ptarmigan and a partridge with her brood in a pear tree. Not quite. There were few critters seen on the rest of the road. The road is a lot of gravel with chip seal surface covering more of it each year. In one section, the loose gravel over the hard packed surface was like riding on marbles. At another place, half the road was washed out. Workers were already on it. The region had heavy snowfall last winter, and was having huge runoffs. We heard Rt 16 between Kitwanga and Prince Rupert had a rock slide, closing the road. Two people in a car were buried.

Gas stations are few and far between. The one at the intersection with the road to Stewart and Hyder, was out of business. We took the 38 mile side trip to Hyder, arriving at lunch time. The proprietress at the gift shop as you enter Hyder is a Dulcimer musician. Her instruments each are a story, AND, she has an unofficial stamp for your passport. We chose to not get Hyderized as that involves 190 proof Everclear. Not this time. The scenic road follows a narrow valley with avalanche signs, steep walls, waterfalls, and a glacier. On the way out a grizzly was barely off the pavement, and when Tom went by it looked up. When Dave followed, it was watching, so Dave went to the far side of the road, imagining it taking a swipe, knocking him off and scratching a claw in the air, and shouting "two points".



White Pass to Skagway is memorable, the higher part being in the clouds. There were 5 cruise ships in the harbor and the sidewalks were rolled out. Tom bought his ferry ticket for his return. Our camp on the Klondike Hwy was at Stewart Crossing, YT. Whispering Willow Restaurant and RV Park was welcoming, the food was good and the owners shared some BT with us after closing.

Dawson City is kept looking much like the gold rush town of old. Only the front street is paved. The other streets must be fun in mud season. Next time, an overnight will be planned so to see the shows. On the Solstice, there is a gathering on a dome top hill outside of town. Later we heard from riders wearing shirts saying "Dust to Dawson" there were 120 people there.

The south side of the Yukon starts the Top of the World Hwy. On the Canadian side, it is a mix of gravel and chip seal and, being dry, was fairly good. At the border, an officer looked at our tires, which were street tires with good tread, and told us they were marginal for what lay ahead. He told us of 3 serious MC accidents in the 2 weeks before us.

Coming around the last right curve where Chicken, AK comes into view, at maybe 20 mph, Tom hit a patch of silt about 2 ft wide and 8 feet long. He couldn't avoid it and when his front wheel

got in it, he couldn't control it. He low-sided on the left. The bike rotated 270 degrees in the slide and got two holes in the valve cover. Being the master improviser he is, he turned the cover over and plugged the holes with poplar sticks. He even found a way to reattach the mirror.

Day 15: We arrived in Wasilla, AK where Dave has friends. Tom got JB Weld and did a hard repair on the valve cover. 6400 miles from Ft Myers. Early the next morning Tom left for the ferry at Haines to go to Bellingham, WA. Dave has two weeks before departing and starts removing the corrosive concrete-like Calcium Carbonate deposits from the bike with a stiff brush.

Tom caught the ferry from Haines to Bellingham WA and enjoyed the inside passage for the beautiful scenery and abundance of wildlife. He rejoined Mike in Sandy UT for the return to FL via Rocky Mt. Nat. Park and an air museum.

Alaska -Wasilla to Trail's End

Tom left for the ferry at Haines.

Dave continues: When I didn't continue on, exhaustion overtook me. I was 2 days recuperating. Then one day I saw touring bikes on the Parks Hwy and felt the urge to move on.

At a rest area near Talkeetna, with a clear view of Mt McKinley, I met Wally on his LT. He recommended taking a flight to the mountain, so I did a credit card splurge at Talkeetna Air Taxi and flew up one glacier, crossed a col to land on Ruth Glacier. McKinley is clouded in 255 days per year, and only 30% of tourists get to see the summit. I got to see it cloudless 2 days in a row.

For the best wildlife viewing in Denali Nat'l Park, locals advised me to be on the 0630h bus/tram. They go in 60 miles. On the tour, we saw Moose, Caribou, Woodland Elk, a Pica, a Red Fox, my first Golden Eagle, a Gyrfalcon, Bighorn Sheep, and a large grizzly sow with a yearling cub.

The first 78 miles of the Haul Road/Dalton Hwy to Livengood are paved. After some gravel, is a 5 mile section of pavement. It is smooth and instills confidence, but it ends abruptly as the road goes over a rise where you cannot see the gravel beyond. This is where Cheri Hibbs had her accident, described in the Sept 2006 ON. Beyond here, the road is rough. I bottomed out the forks hard 3 times forcing oil past the seals. In the construction, they were laying down basalt rock that crushes into right angles with sharp edges. Somehow, I was spared any flats. At Finger Mtn, I replaced the clutch cable. One saddlebag was just spares and tools. Maybe excessive, but it paid off.

The Arctic Circle for the Solstice was a primary goal. A better view of the midnight sun is from 17 miles N at Gobbler's Knob. Here the N facing hill is high and a large area was dug out for

road fill. About 20 people were there, including Wally on his LT. His web site with his story and pics are at [www.gingerich.net](http://www.gingerich.net).

On the Dalton Hwy, one rain cloud passed over, leaving about 2 miles of wet road. I slowed a bit, and felt the rear tire slipping as I got up one long steep hill. At the top, I went to stop and even a light touch of brakes caused wheel lock-up. When I put my foot down, it slid. The bike and I were doing better with wheels turning, so I let out the clutch and kept going. It is like riding on grease. A more open tread pattern would help, I'm sure. The dry weather I experienced is very unusual. Later, I was told the rain that started the day I was leaving was still coming down in mid-August.

Back in Fairbanks, I found George at Trail's End BMW. He told me I was the first airhead to stop by this season and seemed surprised I didn't need anything. My carbs were close but not quite, and he said "Arg! You sound like a Moto-Guzzi. Let me balance your carbs". He has the old mercury vacuum 4 tubes on a board balancer. When he finished it was spot on and remains so today. Thank you, George. He gave me my most prized tangible souvenir of the trip, his Trail's End BMW license plate frame.



Alaska- Fairbanks to Wasilla to West Bend

Before going to the Kenai Peninsula, locals advised me to see Alyeska, Hope, Portage Glacier and Seward and to skip Homer, to see the best the Kenai has to offer. Portage Glacier has been receding since the last ice age and this is now accelerating. It was one of the routes over the coastal mountains for the gold seekers. White Pass and Chilcoot Pass are two others that saw more traffic and became legend. The 18-mile road to Hope is a great ride with turnouts and good views of Turnagain Arm. Seward is a small town with a campground at the harbors edge. Some campers were young folks working in the tourist industries. At the small boat harbor, you can get a ride to the fjords and glaciers. Homer is on the drier west side of the Chugach Mtns. I started in that direction but the land is flat and less interesting. At an RV park/coffee shop, over a latte, a couple told me that last year the parks were 95% occupied, this year they are only 25%. Fuel prices are deterring R/Vers from making the long trek. This will impact Alaska's economy.

Returning to Wasilla, John and I bought supplies and left for Chitina and his homestead. We crossed the Copper River to go E on the McCarthy Road. Salmon wheels were set up on the river's edge. John went on ahead to the turn off and waited for me. Along the road, I had to stop for a moose. We watched each other for 3 minutes until he moved off and disappeared. John homesteaded along here in 1968 before the area became Nat'l Park. His nearest neighbor noted she is seeing more motorcycles than ever before. I explained the popularity of AK as an adventure destination, and this road is getting known. The next morning, I rode out to McCarthy and the Kennicott Copper Mines that closed in 1938. The NPS is restoring the buildings and conducting tours. McCarthy is a frontier village with a hotel, a store and a saloon. After too much fun, I had to get back to the homestead. Fearing an incident that could strand me for the night on this lonely road, it took me 1.5 hrs to go 35 miles, then crossing over the mile of muskeg, a root took my front wheel to the right and the rear dropped into a deep rut and I fell over. No harm done, but I became more aware of how easy it could be to get into real trouble out here. On the way out the next morning, the front wheel dropped off a root and the bike landed on the left crash bar. Inspection found a bent shift lever and foot peg. Later, I found a broken H4 bulb.

In Glenallen, I straightened the shift lever being careful to avoid breaking it off. After lunch, it was time to leave for Haines and the ferry to Prince Rupert. The last night in AK was raining steadily for the first time, and for the first time on the trip, I stayed in a motel in Beaver Creek, YT.

The Haines Hwy is designated a scenic hwy. Chilkat Pass, at 1065m, is a plateau with snowfields, then a steep downhill into Haines. This is a quiet town due to it voting against hosting the big cruise ships.

The ferry arrived shortly after 0200 of 7/2 with a scheduled departure of 0400. Approx. 10 bikes boarded. We lashed along the side. Bring your own tie downs as the ship provides only thin twine. There is a rail on the side and deck pad eyes to tie to. I used 2 web ratchet straps and loaned another to Julian for his LT. The Alaska Marine Highway ferry system is reasonable and

comfortable, relaxing, scenic, social, and the only way to see the Inside Passage with its abundant wildlife and spectacular views.

Prince Rupert is the wettest city in BC, so I rode E on Rt 16 along the Skeena River, through the coastal mountains to Kitwanga and camped at the dryer Cassiar RV Park. My valve train was getting excessively loud, so in the morning, I removed the valve cover and found needle bearings. Many calls later, I learned of 2 western Canada shops that service Airheads. Shail's in Vancouver had a new rocker assembly and Anderwerks, in Calgary had a new set of bearings. I had the rocker assy shipped by the quickest method. It still took 2 ½ days, but I am grateful to them. Kitwanga has a large First Nation population. The owners of the RV Park were very friendly and accommodating, making it a memorable experience. They showed me around the area and introduced me to friends. In Calgary, I prepared the bike for a hard cross-country run. My thanks to Anderwerks for accommodating this traveler.

The remainder of the trip was eating miles, Calgary to West Bend in two days to camp at Airhead Central at the National. I submitted my mileage for the North America Tour Award. The second place winners beat me by less than 30 miles. My total mileage from Ft Myers and return was 13,927 miles.

Final thoughts:

I rode well nearly 400 miles on gravel roads, including several construction zones. Next time I will ride a dual sport. Wet gravel roads are like riding on grease.

The most commonly seen bike was the BMW R---GS.

I was told mosquitoes are in 7-year cycles. Last year was bad. This year was mild. I only used repellent a few times, and never used my head net.

Expect rain. It will rain.

May and June are the best months to be there. May will have some frosty nights, June is the driest month. Mosquitoes are hatching, depending on the rain but are not biting as severely as they will later on.

The next time I am in AK I will: take a boat to a glacial fjord; ride the Skagway-White Pass Railroad; ride the railroad from Anchorage to Seward; return to John's homestead and McCarthy; think about getting Hyderized, go fishing, and stay a night in Dawson City.

On the ferry, we heard of a possible adventure. To disembark at Wrangell, take a barge up the Stikine River to Glenora, on Rt 51, and then ride via Telegraph Creek to Dease Lake on the Cassiar Hwy.