

Three Days to Southwest Florida

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In early September 2005, fellow rider Mike Berard and I decided to tempt fate and ride to the Ft Myers area in southwest Florida. As many people know September is in the middle of hurricane season and 2005 was record setting for hurricanes. But when you plan to ride, you ride. So early in the morning of September 8 we left northern Virginia for what turned out to be a 1200 mile journey over three days while never hitting a hurricane (although we had to modify our route to avoid one) or using an interstate highway - well we did ride on some interstate spurs for a few miles. Mike was on his 2000 Heritage Softail and I was on my '96 Dyna Convertible.

To make the start of the ride a little more scenic, we decided to go west to the Blue Ridge Parkway. At a scenic overlook, we met an "older" couple on a Goldwing Trike. They were serious riders with over 98,000 miles on their trike and they spend the majority of their time seeing America on that trike. After sharing pleasantries with the trike riders, we got off the parkway and headed south on Route 220 just north of Roanoke, and followed 220 into North Carolina where we spent the night outside of Greensboro.

Riding through the rural south contrasts greatly with riding in Northern Virginia - some people don't consider Northern Virginia even to be a part of the south. One is an urban suburban area of great economic growth, while the other, off the ribbon of the interstate highway system, mirrors a depressed economy with a much smaller population. I was especially touched by scenes of mom and pop restaurants and motels boarded up and overgrown with weeds and bushes. This is not to say we didn't find small towns with a lot of activity and local color. There was a mixture of both.

The second day brought us into Georgia and perhaps the most interesting experiences of the trip. We continued south on Rt 220 to 1 to 601 as our goal for that night was Waycross Georgia and the northern tip of the Okefenokee Swamp. Why Waycross you might ask? Well mainly because of the Waylon Jennings country song about that "Waycross Georgia farm boy" - we thought we might run into him - and we did, but not in Waycross. We were getting gas in a little town over the Georgia line where there were only two gas stations. Most of the stations we stopped at didn't have "pay at the pump" so we went inside to pay - which was always a rewarding experience. Riding into a small town on Harleys can attract some attention and this particular town was no exception. We stopped at a gas station that also served as the general store, bait shop, hunting supply, and mid afternoon town social center. Out came a 6'3" 250 pound plus Georgian who met us with an "I see you boys are ridin' real 'motorsickles'." Fortunately for us he was smiling and friendly and he told us a little about the area and himself as well. His job was to keep the logging roads clear and his passion seemed to be diesel equipment. He also had a story to tell about an out of town crotch rocket rider who came through for gas several days before we did. As he described it "I told that boy, boy you ain't ridin' s**t! And that boy said how d'you mean; I paid \$20,000 for that bike. And I said well boy, you got ***ed!" It's tough to top a story like that so we said our goodbyes and pressed on.

We stopped in a little town south of Waycross for the night. Our plan was to stop earlier, but on the roads we were traveling it was not easy to find a motel when you were ready to stop. We spotted a small motel behind a "Quickie Mart" gas station, pulled in, parked the bikes, and walked in to register. First thing we noticed was that the guy behind the desk was also behind security glass like you would find at a bank. He did come out from behind the glass

and told us not to worry because it was a safe area and gave us a room for \$44. We moved the bikes in front of our room and met a guy getting out of a pick up who went on to tell us that he always carried a two by four with him in this area in case there was ever any trouble. We now had to decide if we could fit both bikes into the room – we couldn't so we ended up stowing saddlebags and windshields in the room and hoped the bikes would be there in the morning. In the parking lot across from the motel was a Huddle House restaurant. We noticed two law enforcement vehicles parked in front, so feeling a little more at ease we offered greetings to several older gentlemen who were sitting on rocking chairs on the porch of the Huddle House and stepped inside for something to eat. Eating at a place where local law enforcement eats says good things to me about the food at a restaurant. When we left, a sheriff and a police officer were chatting with the folks on the porch. We exchanged greetings and asked the sheriff about a route out of town we needed to find.

The sheriff proved to be friendly and asked us if we were truckers (there were a few truck rigs in the motel parking lot). We got his interest when we told him we were “bikers” and especially when he found out we were on Harleys – as luck would have it he was a Harley rider himself. So we talked about our trip and the sheriff asked “Are you boys packin’?” (Seems like we were “you boys” to everyone we met on this trip). When we said no, he went on to tell us that it would be a good idea to be packin’ on some of the roads we were planning to be on. He also let us know that if we were staying in the motel behind the Quickie Stop we should not open the door if someone knocks on it during the night. Twice during that week a guy knocked on the door and when the travelers inside opened it to see who was there they were robbed at gunpoint – another reason to be packin’. But the sheriff said not to worry as he would ensure no one bothered us that night and that he would keep his eye on our bikes as well.

Well we picked up a six-pack at the Quickie Mart and settled in for the night. About midnight we heard a knock on the door and bolted out of bed. Of course it turns out to be our friend the sheriff who spends the next hour shooting the breeze with us about bikes and life in general. It was a weird scene I'm sure, two guys in shorts with a sheriff, two Harley's, and a Crown Vic yakking it up in a motel parking lot behind a Quickie Mart at midnight – it was just that kind of a ride.

Day three got us into Florida with a plan to spend the night in St Augustine, see the sights there, and continue on to Daytona Beach on Day four – but Hurricane Ophelia had other plans for us. It turned out that Route A1A through St Augustine and Daytona was underwater because of Ophelia so we changed our route to take us through central Florida using Routes 301/441, 27, and 29 to La Belle where we picked up Rt 80 into the Ft Myers area to end this journey. We celebrated by eating at our favorite joint in the southwest florida beaches – Doc's. This is a Jimmy Buffet biker friendly beach bar and restaurant in Bonita Beach, midway between Naples and Ft Myers on Bonita Beach Road. They have “reserved” parking for bikes, a friendly laid back staff, and a view of the Gulf that is out of the movies.

One suggestion on this central Florida route, once you get a little south of Ocala, don't use Route 27 – use Routes 301, 98, and 17 into Punta Gorda. This is a much less traveled way to go as the route out of Ocala that we rode had much traffic and traffic lights. It was a great trip all in all, no problems at all with the bikes, but in future trips like this one these “boys” will be packin’!



Doc's at Sunset



"The Boys"



Starting Out