

Haul Road

The Haul Road, also named the Dalton Highway, is the roughly 500 mile stretch from Fairbanks to Deadhorse, near Prudhoe Bay in Alaska. It remains one of the great challenges to motorcyclists.

The seed of the idea to ride to Alaska and do the Haul Road was planted while listening to tales from legendary BMW riders like Anton Largiader, Jim Mulcahy and John Ryan. The impossible distance of 5,000 miles from Philadelphia, the savage wilderness, and the unpredictable hazards of Alaska's dirt and gravel roads all began to ferment and germinate in my imagination until the urge to ride became irresistible.

My motorcycle riding is unfortunately limited by a demanding day job, from which I could only possibly squeeze eight more days of vacation for the current year. But combining these with the July 4th holiday and two sandwiching weekends gave me a 16-day window of opportunity if I left on the eve of the holiday weekend and returned to work by July 17. Furthermore, other veteran riders like Ken O'Malley advised me that Alaska's rainy season often starts in the last two weeks of July, so that early July is the ideal time for motorcycling on the rough dirt roads there.

Many dear friends begged me to expand this expedition to at least two months, and to enjoy the scenery at more leisure. I'm not getting younger and I feel that opportunities not seized are most often lost. I also rejected good advice to ship my bike to Montana and start the ride from there, for the simple reason that I like to ride. So my theme for the trip was also kept simple: ride to Prudhoe Bay, have a swim, and ride home to

Philadelphia.

I am not really an experienced rider, having started anew only five years ago with the purchase of my brand new 2002 R1150RT sport touring bike. I found long distance riding so thrilling that I quickly put 88,000 miles on the odometer. I am no Iron Butt rider: these guys are in a completely different league from me. They hold certificates proving their insanity, while I remain completely uncertified. I did benefit from many slow school sessions and an excellent dirt track course provided by SuperCamp.

The R1150RT is clearly not the ideal bike for rough and muddy roads. The low suspension and street tires are the greatest disadvantages. The Metzler Z6 tires had almost 4,000 miles on them at departure. The plan was to swap them out on arrival in Fairbanks. But this bike is perfect for long distance riding. The large fairing, adjustable windshield and heated grips protect the rider from weather extremes better than any other bike. It is a relaxing ride on the highway, yet wonderfully responsive and maneuverable in the twisties. I have always found the stock seat to be comfortable all day and all night. I haven't added the

luxury of highway pegs that allow you to stretch your legs. I was to find that after a week of riding with the standard pegs my knees were no longer hurting, though I'm not sure this was a good thing. A week after the trip I am still having a little trouble straightening my legs.

I minimized equipment to what would fit in the two system cases and one top case: basic camping gear, 20 pounds of tools and spare parts, and cold weather clothes. I chose my winter weight Joe Rocket Ballistic riding gear as the safest protection from falls and cold weather, but I was to suffer in 100F heat during the ride through the Midwest. A last minute purchase of a BMW one-piece rain suit was to prove very valuable.

I departed at 4 a.m. on a Saturday morning, my sendoff being cries of, "Please don't do this!" from family, friends and girlfriend. Five days later on Wednesday evening I arrived in Fairbanks, on the tail end of a torrential rain-storm that flooded part of the city.

Adventures and hardships along the way:

Three-hour traffic jams and a 10-mile tollbooth backup near Chicago, in swel-

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