

July 21, 2004

There's always a moment of weightlessness. It's very brief, just a portion of a second. For a moment, I was flying, I was floating, with nothing but the sound of the wind rushing by my ears. I felt one with the birds. Like them, I was a creature that had slipped the surly bonds of earth. I soared. I glided. Then, Wham! I crashed back to earth.

"OK," I thought, 37 is a little too fast for this bike. Another launch - soaring, gliding, weightless. Wham! "Well then, 35 is also a little too much" I decided. "How about 33?" Launch, soar, Wham! "Hmmm, I pondered, perhaps the concept of getting this 800 pound combination of man and machine to fly was a bit preposterous in the first place. Let's try 31." Launch. Soar. I grimaced in my helmet, awaiting the impact, fully expecting the rear shock to break the frame and drive right up through my seat. Crunch! Loud, harsh and on the borderline of suspension abuse, but at least not on the out and out path to chassis destruction like the previous asteroid-style descents back to Terra Firma. "I think I've found the limits of the suspension," I concluded, and happily motored on.

We were riding down a rocky mountain fire road and launching off of water bars, large angled humps formed in the surface of the road to divert water and control erosion, as if any would be possible in this surface of boulders and bare rock. I was pushing the limits of the elephantine BMW R1150GS because I didn't want to hold up the two guys I was leading on this unpaved route from Canada to Mexico down the Continental Divide. Right behind me was Brent Ross, ex-road racer, -factory development and test rider, -world GP 250cc crew chief, -moto-journalist, -moto-editor, -moto-rider-model, -moto-photographer and general all around fast guy on anything with two wheels. Behind him was Bob Mueller, who I'd ridden thousands of miles off-road with in Baja and California and who I couldn't keep up with on a fire road if I was in a Cessna.

So there I was, trying to maintain a speed that would get us the 2,500 miles to the Mexican border in the time we had available and in one piece, yet keep up a pace that wouldn't push these two guys over the edge of frustration and have them kick me off a mountain to eliminate my rolling chicane clogging up their track and fouling their plugs from too much idling down the trail. Unfortunately, I was the only one with a GPS with the route loaded and a map case large enough to hold the detail route maps we were using, so I was stuck in the front. All in all not a bad thing for me, as otherwise I would be riding this route alone, watching their dust disappear into another area code every morning.

Just about the time I was feeling pretty good about being able to run 30-35 MPH across the water bars, along came Brent past me, doing at least 45, the long travel suspension of his Suzuki DRZ400 soaking up the landings. He looked totally relaxed, like he could be reading the paper or standing on the seat doing stunts. He was truly flying, soaring off of each water bar, effortlessly forming high parabolic arcs with long periods of weightlessness at each peak.

Wham! Meanwhile, I was scraping along the bottom of the atmosphere, Wham!, skirting the edge of the GS's relatively limited suspension capability. Wham! Every landing brought back visions of our friend Gary's blown out rear shock while we were riding through Botswana last year. He blew his Öhlins shock apart in a comparatively tame pothole. I'd been pounding my Stig Pettersson prepared Öhlins shocks for almost two thousand miles across terrain orders of magnitude tougher than anything we saw in 6,500 miles of sub-Saharan Africa. Wham! With every landing, boulder, rock face, erosion rut and elevated cattle guard I was thanking Stig for whatever magic he'd done to keep my shocks together. Crunch!

e-Postcard from Grants, New Mexico

After an hour or so, the water bars were replaced by rock climbs and other forms of suspension challenge that were not so chassis life-threatening. We rode on through pine forests, mountain passes, high alpine ponds, and mountain meadows. Finally, after hours and hours on the trail, we reached pavement. While we motored the few miles into town, our thoughts were on only one thing: food. We filled up the bikes with fuel and rode over to a local café to do the same for ourselves. As we collapsed into a booth, shedding our helmets, jackets and Camelbacks onto a pile on the floor, we exchanged those unique glances of satisfaction and exhaustion that all riders share who have ridden long hard hours over tough, challenging terrain.

The hot food was amazingly restorative, and we savored the ice water that accompanied it. But we didn't dawdle long, for we had only covered 140 miles so far. Although we'd started at 7:30 AM, it was already 2:30 PM, and we had 120 miles of the longest, toughest and most challenging off road section of the entire Continental Divide Ride in front of us.

We filled our Camelbacks with water, suited up, strapped on our helmets, and headed south.

[Bob, Brent and Doug finished the ride's most challenging off road, 120 mile long section at 7:30 PM. The section included a flat tire, bad waypoints, plenty of rock, 12" deep gravel, deep silt, deeper sand, countless arroyo crossings and Doug's triple horizontal layout dance across a boulder filled ravine. But that - is another story.]

PS – some photos of the last half of the trip follow



Typical Wyoming vista. Southern Wyoming.

e-Postcard from Grants, New Mexico



The Continental Divide riders convention, 2004. We came across these two groups of bicyclists riding the route. One group was headed north, the other south. They average about 5 liters of water per day. The northbound group was headed into a section where there was no water available for at least two days at their rate of travel. Southern Wyoming.



Brent Ross riding through a grove of aspens. Southern Wyoming.

e-Postcard from Grants, New Mexico



Brent Ross negotiating a water crossing. Northern Colorado.



Typical Colorado view. Northern Colorado.

e-Postcard from Grants, New Mexico



Colorado valley at sunrise. Northern Colorado.



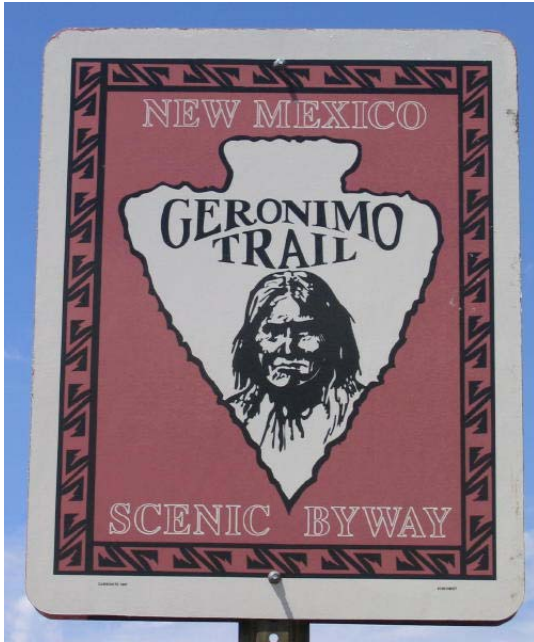
In front of an abandoned log cabin. Northern New Mexico.



Attention all southern California homeowners. 20+ acres from \$19,800. Central New Mexico.



Thistle blossom with bee. Southern New Mexico.



Southern New Mexico.



Brent Ross passing under a fallen tree. Southern New Mexico.



There was no indication of how many points you earned for each cowboy shot. Southern New Mexico.



Bob Mueller in the Yucca forest. Southern New Mexico.

e-Postcard from Grants, New Mexico



With Bob Mueller at the Mexican border. Bob and I have ridden thousands of miles off-road together, mostly in Baja California, Mexico. When he contacted me about doing the CDR, I thought it would be a good way to kill a couple of weeks between two months riding around the Middle East and a couple of months riding around Japan and China. Instead of mere filler, the CDR turned out to be one of the best rides of my life.



And so it ends. In nine days we traveled 2,545 miles from the Canadian border down the Continental Divide via as many unpaved roads and trails as possible. And if you think that's impressive, a few weeks ago, a guy did the same route in 16 days. On a bicycle.