

By Lance Oliver

# DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS

## The keys to big-bore adventure touring

A quarter-century of street-riding experience is screaming inside my head, telling me to sit down and tuck my weight to the inside as I approach a curve in the trail.

Meanwhile, one brief morning of off-road riding instruction is whispering in my ear, suggesting that I stand up and keep nearly all my weight on the outside footpeg.

The trick, since I really don't want to be picking up 500 pounds of fallen adventure-touring motorcycle in a few seconds, is knowing which voice to listen to.

Fortunately, Jim Hyde is close by, shouting instructions and encouragement as I ride through the turn the right way—standing up, with the Buell Ulysses properly balanced beneath me.

I smile as I emerge from the turn with the bike fully under con-

trol. Because this is exactly what I've come to Jim's RawHyde Adventure Camp training school to learn.

Over the years, I've owned a couple of street-oriented dual-sport bikes and spent a little time on unpaved roads. Just a couple of months before arriving at Adventure Camp, I'd done a 1,500-mile solo tour through rural Mexico. But while I've taken several riding courses on the road and on the track, I'd never had any formal off-pavement training.

Judging by the growing sales of large, dual-sport motorcycles in this country, there are plenty of riders like me—people who aren't trying to become off-road motorcyclists, but who could use some instruction to help them get the most out of those machines.

The appeal of adventure-touring machines is obvious. The bikes

are big and comfortable for road trips, but still allow you to escape the crowds by turning down any road you find, paved or not. And for many buyers, it doesn't hurt that they project a rugged, world-traveler image.

Still, to use those adventure-touring capabilities, you're going to need some new skills, especially if you're a street-only rider or if your last experience in the dirt came decades ago on a long-gone childhood minibike.

Hyde's Adventure Camp is specifically designed to teach street riders how to get the most out of today's big adventure-tourers. So when Buell booked some training time at Hyde's ranch in the hills north of Los Angeles, with the plan of introducing some street-oriented magazine writers like me to the Ulysses' off-road



side, I jumped at the chance.

After all, who wouldn't want to go to Adventure Camp?

"Most of the world's roads are not paved," Hyde tells us during the first-morning orientation session at the ranch. "So if you want to see the world, and you have any desire to do it on a motorcycle, you're really limiting yourself if you don't ride in the dirt."

I don't need any convincing. My Mexico tour, which included some badly paved and semi-paved roads, made me a believer. The others in the group, like me, have little experience in the dirt. We all come from nicely paved riding backgrounds, but we're eager to expand our skill sets.

After Hyde's pep talk and a tasty breakfast, we head out to the waiting Buells. There's no time to waste, because we intend to cram into one day a condensed version of Hyde's usual two-day course.

The first drill sounds excessively simple, but only because you've never visited Hyde's 42 Bar Ranch. We saddle up in the gravel parking lot and ride to the end of the ranch's driveway and back, just a 1-mile round trip. But in that short distance we deal with crumbled pavement, packed dirt, gravel, potholes, tight turns, and uphill and downhill grades. Only one turn signal gets snapped off in a tip-over.

Then Hyde and the other instructors lead us through a number of drills that are part of his "Intro to Adventure" training. Each time, they explain what



For a street guy like me, getting the stand-up thing down took practice.

technique we're supposed to learn, then send us on a loop around a gently sloped old corral. Hyde and his fellow instructors, Cheryl Westfall and Rafael Bertolous, are spaced out along our path, giving us instructions as we wobble past.

Next up is a simple slow ride around the training area, getting a feel for clutch and throttle control and balancing the Buells. Since I'm not used to riding while standing up, my throttle control is awkward, and the bike lurches far too often.

In the next drill, we come to a stop beside an instructor, using the rear brake only, hold the position momentarily, then pull away without putting a foot down. Other drills have us learning to lean forward and back as we accelerate and

decelerate the motorcycle, and getting a feel for the point when the brakes, both front and rear, begin to lock.

Unfortunately, just before the lunch break, perhaps the most experienced street rider among us goes down with the kind of thud a big adventure-touring motorcycle can make when things go wrong. He's not seriously injured, but an X-ray reveals a broken collarbone.

Hyde uses the incident as a teaching opportunity. He notes that the rider committed sin No. 6 on his list of common street-rider mistakes, locking the front brake (See "6 Mistakes Street Riders Make in the Dirt," below).

Maybe it's a good time for the lunch break.



Stand up... knees bent... shift weight...

## 6 Mistakes Street Riders Make

Jim Hyde has seen enough street riders hit the dirt to know what's most likely to take down an adventure-touring newbie. His list of greatest hits:

- ▶ **Riding too fast.** On pavement, more speed equals more gyroscopic effect from the wheels, and that means more stability. On loose surfaces, balance and control, not momentum, plays a bigger part in keeping you upright.
- ▶ **Tensing up.** Relax. Don't let your death grip magnify the jolts to the bike.
- ▶ **Not standing up.** You can shift weight and control the bike better if you're on your feet.
- ▶ **Fixating on a target.** Worried about that tree close to the trail? Stare at it and you're sure to hit it.
- ▶ **Washing out the front.** In a turn, focus on weighting the outside footpeg to avoid the common lowside.
- ▶ **Locking the front brake.** Street riders expect lots of grip from the front tire for hard braking. On dirt, less traction means it's easy to lock the front.



Touring the backcountry was never such fun.

The point of these drills, Hyde tells us over lunch, is to learn, one by one, the basic skills of riding on rough terrain: how to control the bike, how to position your weight, how to feel what the machine is doing beneath you. Riding off-road consists of nothing more than picking and using the appropriate skill as changing trail conditions demand.

Before the afternoon is over, Hyde promises, we'll be stringing those skills together.

But first, we have a few more drills. We practice tight, low-speed turns, riding through a series of 180-degree curves. To teach us to weight the outside footpeg in each turn, Hyde encourages us to actually lift the inside foot completely off the peg mid-turn. After a few tries, I find I'm getting the hang of it (See "On Your Feet, Mister," at right).

But that drill is just a warmup for the most useful skill we'll learn: conquering sidehill, off-camber turns.

"This is the essence of back-country riding," Hyde tells us. "Everything is off-camber in the back country."

He leads us over to a foot-wide dirt path that winds its way in 180-degree turns up the side of a gentle slope. A few trees interspersed along the way give us some targets not to fixate on. Here, we have to combine our newly learned abilities at making tight turns with our fledgling skills at weighting the proper footpeg, depending on the camber and

slope of the trail.

A few more turn signals and control levers sacrifice themselves to the worthy goal of education. But fortunately, there are no more injuries.

Finally, it's time to string together some of the skills learned in the drills.

We ride up the hillside to a short trail loop through the woods and a set of humps Hyde has built—sort of a scaled-down version of Supercross whoops. I make several passes, getting a feel for controlling the speed with the throttle and shifting my weight forward and backward as I negotiate the slopes.

As we ride the trail loop several times, things start to fall into place for me.

I'm learning to avoid No. 2 on Hyde's list of six mistakes (tensing up), which is essential when avoiding mistake No. 3 (not standing up). I'm learning how to avoid lurching from rough throttle inputs by keeping my upper body loose, clamping my knees against the Buell's frame for extra support. I'm flowing with the terrain, instead of plunking my butt on the seat and riding out the blows.

I almost look like an adventure-tourer. Almost.

We finish the last drill of the afternoon as the sun dips toward the mountains separating us from the Pacific. Some members of the group head straight for the appetizers in the

meal room at the ranch. But for those looking for a little more, Hyde offers one additional riding opportunity.

Three of us take him up on it. It's just a short ride over old access roads on the ranch. But it's a legitimate test of our training.

The challenge comes when we have to climb a steep, two-track road. The surface is a mix of soft dust, concrete-hard dirt and fist-sized rocks, with a deep and

## On Your Feet, Mister

On pavement, you almost always have your seat planted on your motorcycle's saddle. The one skill I learned at Adventure Camp that gave me that "a-ha!" moment when things suddenly click, was getting used to riding standing up. Standing up lets you:

- ▶ Shift weight forward or backward as you ride up or down hills.
- ▶ Weight the outside peg in turns or the downhill peg on sidehill trails for more traction.
- ▶ Absorb bumps with your knees, as well as the bike's suspension.

The key? For me it was learning how to keep my upper body loose, so I wasn't lurching on the throttle, while gripping the Buell's tank with my knees for stability. Once I got the hang of that, riding off-road didn't feel so unnatural.

meandering rut cut down its center by occasional rainstorms. I don't have much experience to draw on when it comes to picking a line through the holes and crisscrossing that wandering rut, but I'm determined not to lose momentum. I know full well that if I stop on this hillside, I'm going to have a hard time getting the big Ulysses moving again.

Thanks to Hyde's training, I make it to the top, as does everyone in our little group. I feel like I just made the Adventure Camp honor roll. We shut down the Buells and listen to the wind gently raking the hills.

As far as we can see, the mountains of the Angeles National Forest file into the distance. The only evidence of humans is a distant sliver of Interstate 5, where tractor-trailers crawl uphill, too far away for the sound to reach us.

For a few moments, nobody says a word. It's the perfect way to end the day, putting to use our fledgling skills. It's also a brief taste of how an all-terrain motorcycle can take you to unexpected and satisfying places. And it leaves me eager for my second day at Adventure Camp, when we really get to ride.

The instructors have promised that although day one of our Adventure Camp experience may have felt like work,

day two will be pure fun.

After another creative breakfast by Adventure Camp chef Jeff Gallegos—really, I could imagine people coming here just for the food—we ride north from the 42 Bar Ranch on Interstate 5.

Humming along on a 60-degree morning, there's no penalty to be paid on the highway for the Ulysses' off-pavement capability. The bike has the comfortable riding position and hard-bag carrying capacity of a tourer, as long as you can swing a leg over the tall seat.

It's when we peel off at our exit that the Ulysses becomes an adventure-tourer. Hyde and the other instructors lead us down one dirt road after another into Antelope Valley, an area laced with trails.

Having had a night to sleep on it, I find that my minimal dirt-riding skills have sunk in a little. Today, standing up feels normal. The backward and forward shift of my weight happens naturally, as the Ulysses tracks over the ruts and holes in the hard dirt.

While we explore the old roads, Hyde, who usually rides a BMW R1150GS, takes the Ulysses for a test-ride on some of the more challenging trails. He comes back impressed at what a street-oriented adventure-tourer can do in the dirt.

After a while, we gather on a high ridge and unpack cold drinks and box lunches from the RawHyde van. We talk bikes and adventures. Here, not far from one of the world's greatest urban centers, we have this austere landscape to ourselves. It's just the wind and the sun and the Earth and the silence.

Everyone's relaxed and laughing. Hyde is smiling. And now I truly understand his enthusiasm. This is what adventure-touring is about. This is where it takes you.

On the way back to the ranch, the Buell folks are eager to let us experience the sporty street side of the Ulysses. After all, on the dirt-to-pavement spectrum of adventure bikes, the Ulysses leans well toward the pavement side, with its 17-

## What's this RawHyde Thing?

Jim Hyde is one-third kinder-gentler drill sergeant, one-third activities director, and one-third evangelist for the joys of adventure-touring.

If that sounds like an unusual mix, well, he's an interesting guy.

His company, RawHyde Adventures, is based at a 60-acre ranch Jim's parents bought more than 50 years ago in the hills north of Los Angeles. Today, it's surrounded by the Angeles National Forest, but lies just a few miles from Interstate 5, which makes it a convenient, tranquil retreat.

▶ **The drill sergeant part.** Hyde's "Intro to Adventure" camp includes two days of instruction and a half-day trail ride for \$1,095, which includes all meals and three nights accommodations. You provide your own bike. An advanced "Adventurer's Class" is also available.

▶ **The activities director part.** RawHyde Adventures organizes a few AMA-sanctioned "Adventure Rallies" and guided dual-sport rides each year. Expect to ride to beautiful and remote spots while still enjoying great food and comfortable accommodations in RawHyde's fully equipped support trucks.

▶ **The evangelist part.** That's full-time. The guy just loves this off-road adventure-touring stuff. Be warned, his enthusiasm is contagious. For details and schedules, visit [www.rawhyde-offroad.com](http://www.rawhyde-offroad.com) or call (213) 713-5652.

inch radials and suspension that's stiffer than typical dual-sport spec.

Naturally, Jim knows a way home that involves several miles of curvy pavement.

It's no surprise that the Buell, with the same, stiff fuel tank/frame as its sporty streetbike stablemates, carves the curves like it was born for this. The real surprise, though, is how well this package works on such a wide variety of surfaces. And how much fun all of it is.

Back on pavement after feeling out of my element in the dirt, my initial sensation is relief, as I lean the Ulysses through the paved turns, and everything comes naturally again.

Yeah, it feels good to be back in my native habitat.

But it feels even better to know that the next time I see an enticing dirt road leading into the woods, I can follow my whim, knowing I have my Adventure Camp knowledge to carry me though. ●

