

1 Rawhyde Adventure Off-road clinic for the d

I've often said that if you ever see me riding a motorcycle off-road, I apparently have just made a *huge* mistake! Okay, I have done a little dirtbiking, but very damned little, and that was at least 30 years ago. I've logged hundreds of thousands of miles on dozens of motorcycles since then, but with the exception of the occasional excursion along a graded dirt road (usually to access a campground or as the result of a road-construction detour), all of it has been on pavement.

Many riders are in that same boat with me: They have lots and lots of miles on the asphalt but very little or no experience on dirt. Most of the time for most of those riders, this poses no problems; they have no need for off-road-riding skills. Adventure touring, however, can change all that. Riders who want to explore the world on two wheels but hope to avoid the routes taken by the Winnebagos and minivans are likely to end up with dirt under their tires. Reaching some of those destinations often means spending more time riding on dirt than on pavement. And the increased popularity of adventure-touring bikes in showrooms indicates that many more people are developing an interest in this kind of riding.



Camp

rt-riding' impaired

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PHOTOS BY JEFF ALLEN





So, if joining the ranks of the adventurous appeals to you but you lack off-road-riding skills, how do you learn them? Some people merely purchase the adventure-tourer of their liking and learn how to ride it off-road by...well, by riding it off the road. For others, the answer is to buy an inexpensive dirtbike and do some off-road playing on weekends.

Jim Hyde suggests yet another way: Go to school. Hyde is the owner of RawHyde Adventures, a company that conducts a variety of off-road tours in and around the American Southwest. Like many other operators of off-road tours, Hyde often had to deal with riders who struggled or were unable to complete the ride because they lacked the skills needed to negotiate the terrain. Trying to learn those skills during a formal group tour is not fair to anyone—either the rider in question or the others in the group.

In an attempt to remedy this problem, Hyde created the RawHyde Adventure Camp in Castaic, California. This two-and-a-half-day, \$1095 seminar is designed to allow a neophyte dirt rider to become a reasonably confident and capable adventure-touring pilot in a safe environment under the guidance of qualified instructors. Hyde's intent is not to turn anyone into a national enduro champion or the next winner of the Dakar Rally; it's simply to teach riders enough dirt-riding fundamentals to cope with the kinds of terrain they're likely to encounter in a typical off-road tour. Actually, Hyde does conduct clinics for aspiring rally and enduro racers, but those are separate from his "Intro to Adventure" seminar, which is the basic off-road riding class.

Nestled in the foothills north of Los Angeles, close to the Angeles National Forest, Hyde's operation is ideally located for teaching students the essentials of off-roading. The setting is on a couple of hundred acres of private ranch land laced with natural terrain and plenty of specially designed learning areas; there is never a worry about intrusion by other vehicles. You can take the course on a dual-sport or adventure-touring machine, but ideally, you should do it on the bike you intend to use for your off-the-beaten-path

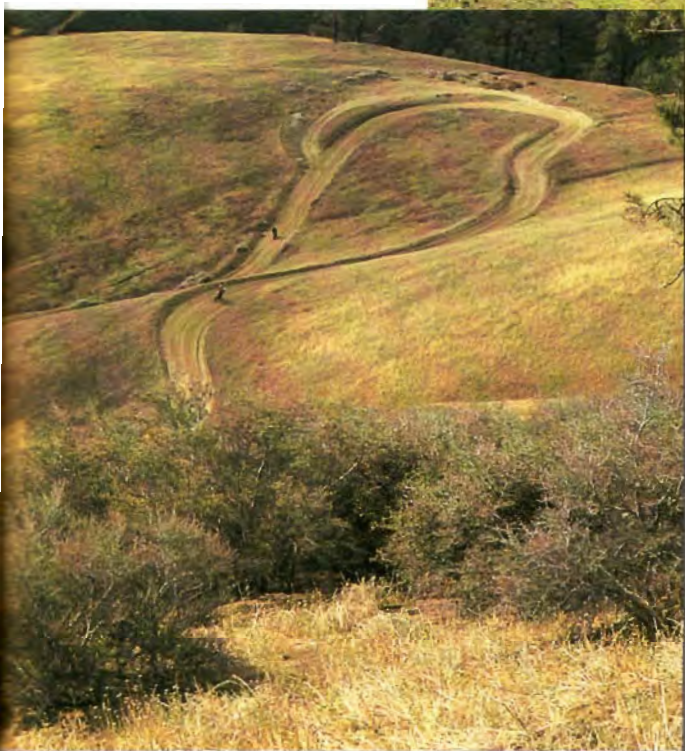


explorations. For those who aren't able to provide their own bike, Hyde also has motorcycles for rent. Though the instruction is valid for dirtbikes of practically any size and type, it is primarily targeted for owners of bikes like BMW's R1200GS and F650GS, and KTM's 950 Adventure, and it follows the same curriculum as that offered by the BMW factory in Germany. The program involves two days of on-the-bike lessons and a half-day trail ride.

Being a true dirt donk, I was a perfect candidate for Hyde's training, so I signed up for the Intro to Adventure class. I don't own an adventure-touring or dual-sport bike, but with the help of the *Cycle World* staff, I borrowed a BMW R1200GS and rounded up some suitable off-road gear. Thus equipped, I headed to Castaic on a Friday afternoon in December, accompanied by ace staff photographer—and accomplished dirtbike rider—Jeff Allen.

Things got under way about 7:30 that evening with a fine sit-down meal. The group involved eight other students (the program can accommodate up to 12), plus Hyde and his wife/gourmet cook Stephanie. Aside from me, our class consisted of three riders from Northern California on new R1200GS's and a collection of fathers, sons and cousins from the southern states who would ride dual-purpose ATKs provided by our host. After dinner, Hyde gave a 20-minute introductory presentation that outlined the program and





No, we're not acting out the "I'm a little teapot" rhyme (far left); stretching exercises are the first order of business every morning. Riding The Racetrack (left) is a lot of fun, even on big adventure-touring bikes. Hyde teaches the technique for turning around on a hill (above), starting first on a shallow grade to minimize potential damage caused by failed attempts.

niques, including hill climbing and off-camber turning.

By late afternoon, Hyde felt it was time to try some of our newly acquired skills by taking a ride on dirt roads to the top of nearby Whitaker Peak. We all made it without incident and were elated by being able to navigate roads that would have been daunting just one day earlier.

After returning to camp, we ate another fabulous meal, then indulged in some re-hashing of the day's lessons—and, naturally, a bit of obligatory lie-swapping—before turning in for the evening. Our sleep was interrupted in the middle of the night by a pounding rainstorm that would provide a whole new set of challenges on Sunday.

By sun-up, the rain had moved on but the clouds would remain for the rest of the day. After breakfast and some stretching, we headed out to the paddock to repeat the previous morning's drill sequence. Although the practice area had become muddy and slick, everyone actually enjoyed the challenge of riding on the wet stuff, thanks to the greater confidence level we all had gained the day before.

Hyde next had us ride repeatedly through a series of closely situated "whoops," which stressed the significance of target fixation. By looking well ahead to the last whoop, it was easy to attain a rhythm that allowed successful completion of the sequence; but one glance down to where the front wheel was going would screw up the timing and cause a trip off-course.

We then took a damp, graveled route uphill to a spot known as "the racetrack." This loop of narrow, up-and-down single-track paths again allowed us to test our newly acquired capabilities. We had lots of fun playing follow-the-leader, all the while gaining speed and self-assurance with

its goals, and then the beginners were asked to talk a little about their on- and off-road motorcycling experience. Only one class member had a serious dirtbiking past, so it looked like the rest of us were facing a steep learning curve. After a bit of banter and chat, it was off to the ranch's comfy accommodations for a good night's rest.

Saturday morning started with a hot breakfast and a brief talk by Hyde regarding the top five issues we should focus on during our training: knowing your personal limits; the pitfalls of target fixation; remembering to stand up on the footpegs; acquainting yourself with counterbalancing (weighting one footpeg or the other) in corners; and, if your bike has ABS, remembering to turn it *off* in the dirt. Hyde then had us do a series of stretching exercises, explaining that we were about to assume a riding posture different from the one we street riders had become accustomed to using.

We then climbed aboard the bikes and started practicing hard acceleration on loose surfaces, braking while sliding with a locked wheel (yes, the front one, too), counterbalancing and other disciplines. After a few hours of this routine, we took a break for a hot lunch, then went back to practicing more tech-

The combination of wet leaves and newly fallen snow proved too much for the students to overcome, even with help from fellow riders. At this point, Hyde decided to go no farther, choosing instead to stop for lunch.



each lap. This also was the site of a sizable sand pit, which, although still damp, presented quite a challenge to navigate properly. A few runs through the pit really opened my eyes to the concept of keeping the throttle on so the front wheel basically floats over the deep sand.

While returning to the ranch, I suffered my only “oops” of the weekend when the front wheel slid into a rut on a downhill covered with slimy mud beneath a gravel surface. Though the Beemer fell over, the only damage was to my pride. Hyde, who had been riding right behind me, said it was the most delicate step-off he’d ever seen. I had been determined not to fall while taking part in the class, but tip-overs are almost inevitable for dirtbike rookies riding on loose surfaces. Besides, I wasn’t the only “victim” of the weekend.

After lunch, the Southerners had to depart, leaving only us BMW riders to finish the remainder of the school. Before we remounted for more riding, Hyde delivered some tutorials on the use of special equipment, including satellite phones, personal locator beacons and tire repair kits—all of which could prove invaluable when venturing out into the back country.

We then were off to a steep hillside to learn the technique for safely turning around a fully loaded bike on a relatively narrow pathway. This is a skill that can really save your

bacon, should you need to abort an attempt to climb a sheer slope before reaching the top. After that, back in the paddock, riding over some railroad ties helped us learn how to loft the front wheel over obstacles—a valuable skill when a tree limb or hidden rock suddenly appears on the trail. We then negotiated more whoops, practiced weaving between

cones to learn the art of steering by weight shifting, and finished by climbing a steep, slippery hill with a blind crest. The climb was pretty scary on the first shot, but no one chickened out, and after a couple of trips to the top, everyone seemed to enjoy the experience.

With daylight running short, we decided to have a little plain old fun by parking the big boomers, firing up the now-unused ATKs and going for a real off-road romp. We ended up on some very rutted, mud-holed, challenging terrain that was big-time fun on the lighter bikes. It also was very tiring at the end of an already long day, so after dinner, it was lights-out early in anticipation of a planned 60-mile journey the next day.

Monday morning broke cloudy and cold enough to freeze standing water, but we were well-rested, well-fed and eager to get out on the dirt and ride the big GSs the way they were intended to be used. Hyde had laid out a route designed to give us a lot of varied terrain, but even he wouldn’t be ready for the surprise Mother



RAWHYDE ADVENTURE CAMP

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Intro to Adventure Seminar: \$1095

Nature had in store. We donned our gear, stretched our muscles, mounted up and headed off on our escapade into the back country.

Retracing our itinerary from Sunday's final ride put us onto the old Ridge Route highway, and negotiating that aging, broken, deserted stretch of pavement now seemed a piece of cake compared to the first time around. After a few miles, we turned onto a National Forest access road that threaded its way into the Los Angeles Mountains, which were shrouded in low-hanging clouds. We were on a nicely graded passageway that wended its way up into the pines when all of a sudden, in a shady spot ahead, what's that? *Snow*?! I don't recall any mention of a winter wonderland in the curriculum. We all decided to bite the bullet and try to negotiate our way on through it. After all, we were about to become Adventure Camp graduates, and this snowy landscape would serve as a wonderful final exam for testing our newly learned skills.

As the elevation rose above 6000 feet, flurries gently floated down as sporadic patches of snow gradually became a solid white blanket. We pressed onward slowly and cautiously, making steady progress until we got to an uphill turn covered in snow so deep and furrowed that we couldn't go any farther. So, we just parked. Hyde pulled our lunch fixin's from his panniers and we enjoyed our noon snack surrounded by the beautiful, snow-hushed forest. Words can't do justice to the experience of kicking back and enjoying the quiet solitude of a wilderness snowfall that was reached on two wheels.

With our planned route cut short, we had no choice but to return to civilization by backtracking downhill through the powdery stuff. When we hit dry ground, everyone hauled ass back to the ranch, knowing that the seminar was over. After a round of handshakes and good-byes, the guys from Northern California packed up their bikes and took off for home, and Jeff and I headed back to Orange County.

As we motored down Interstate 5, I couldn't help but remember how apprehensive I had been when driving to the camp on Friday. But by Monday afternoon, I was able to ride quite comfortably in conditions that would

have intimidated the hell out of me before the school. So, for me, Hyde's class was a complete, unqualified success. Best of all, the training has made me a better rider not just in the dirt, but on the street, as well. I heartily recommend the camp to any inexperienced dirt rider who is seriously thinking about setting out on a true adventure tour. Actually, even riders who already are experienced on unpaved surfaces could no doubt learn a few things that would enhance their skills. Heck, the half-dozen or so gourmet meals alone are almost worth the tuition.

I no longer fear the dreaded "Pavement Ends" sign. I now have the option of pressing on regardless, knowing that I have what it takes to handle just about any kind of passable topography.



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