

# HIGH-DESERT SKIRMISH

## EATING GOURMET DIRT IN NEVADA AND CALIFORNIA

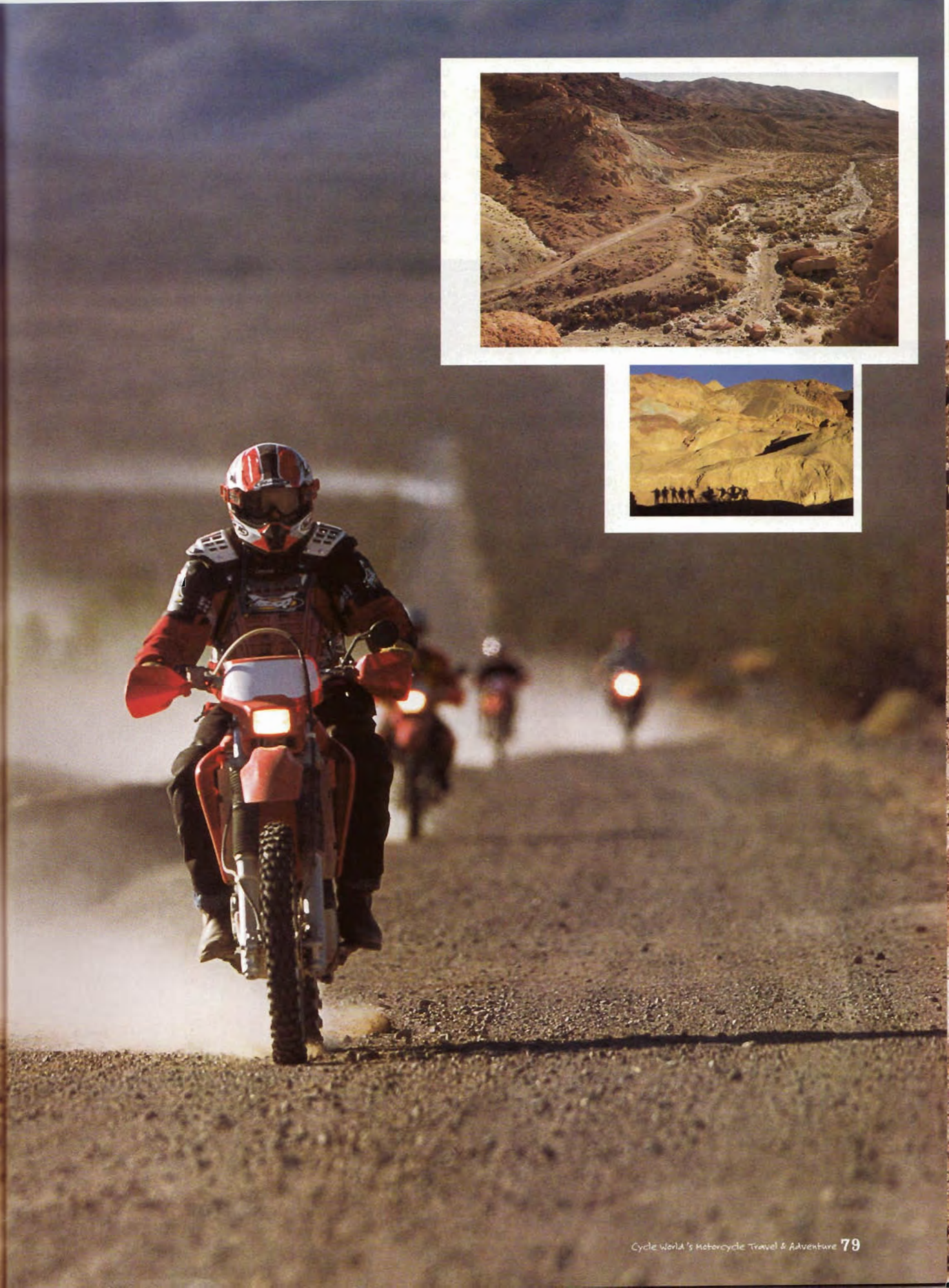
BY BEAU ALLEN PACHECO  
PHOTOS BY JEFF ALLEN

I lie sweating in soft, deep sand in the middle of a desert dry-river bed and wished to hell the sand were snow so I could roll over and take a bite. Except that I couldn't roll over, because the bike was on top of me. So I just lay there, sweating profusely after three hours of pushing, pulling, tumbling and occasionally riding through the outback of the American West. "I gotta ride in the dirt more often," I thought, as a couple of the crazy Montanans who were along on the ride finally lifted the XR650L off me.

This was the third day of a six-day dirt-riding tour with the Beach & Hyde Adventure Company on its Desert Grandeur ride. Photographer Jeff Allen and I—along with six avid dirt riders from Butte, Montana, plus a doctor from San Francisco—were experiencing the wonders of the Mojave Desert in all its varied, beautiful and terrifying terrain. The Montana guys were a closely knit group of friends who ride together regularly, and as a result, they cut no one any slack when it comes to riding. That evening around the campfire, I would hear about my atrophied dirt-riding skills.

After getting upright and checking for broken levers and lights, I continued mushing through six-inch-deep sand dotted with basketball-sized boulders. After five miles of this, the trail gave way to a deep wash that went on for another five miles, this time filled with rocks that were only soccer-ball and baseball-sized. Too bad those rocks weren't as perfectly round as their ball counterparts, or else the riding might have been easi-







er. But the trails chosen for this particular ride weren't for beginners, a fact that we knew going in. Everyone was expected to be experienced in off-road riding, and for the most part, everyone was. For some of us, though, that experience was a little far back in time.

The man directly responsible for my tour of terror is Jim Hyde. Separate from his own RawHyde Adventures company, Hyde has partnered up with Bob Beach of Beach Tours to form the Beach & Hyde Adventure Company. Beach still conducts his on-road tours all around the world while Hyde produces the Desert Grandeur off-road ride.

Hyde grew up in this area and has nurtured a deep love of it all his life. His goal is to introduce the real desert to dirt riders, no matter their riding skill. For novices, this involves a combination of pavement and well-maintained gravel roads. For the hardcore, it's single-track, white-knuckle, work-your-ass-off routes that give a whole new meaning to the phrase "Miller Time" at the end of the day. There is a silver lining to the hard work, however: If the ride is tough, the campsite is exquisite.

That's because Hyde has developed a couple of ingenious, elaborate support vehicles that elevate the art of camping (see "Hyde's Rides," pg. 88). I say "elevate" because the berths in which his guests spend the night in sleeping bags are about seven feet off the ground. There are two types of berths: enclosed, hard-shell cubicles that absolutely keep out the wind and rain; and tent berths that allow closer access to a view of the stars. Jeff and I slept in the tents and enjoyed them immensely, even though the temperature dipped down into the 20s at night. On a couple of chilly nights, we were so exhausted that we flopped into the rack in our riding gear minus the boots and body armor. Slept like a baby.

Some of the terrain was so technical that riders often looked like observed-trials competitors carefully picking their way along narrow, undulating single-track trails.

These spacious vehicles include a full galley, showers and even a lounge where weary riders may quietly enjoy a drink while sitting on soft benches. Also, each rider has his own locker that's about the size of a high-school athletic locker.

If this sounds too sissified for you hardcore purists, you should know that most of our waking camp time was spent around the campfire. Most evenings we pulled into camp at or around sunset, shed our gear and gathered around the fire while waiting for dinner. And oh, my god, was the food sublime.

Hyde thoroughly understands what militaries have known for-





ever: Good food makes hardship bearable. No matter what the temperature might have been in the morning, we were sent out on the trail only after having eaten a superb breakfast of fresh fruit and a variety of main-course eggs and meat. For lunch, Hyde's gourmet chef, Genevieve "GeGe" Engwald-Parry, provided us with huge, freshly made sandwiches, fruit, freshly baked cookies and various kinds of packaged nourishment bars. Dinners were an out-and-out extravaganza, with everything on the menu prepared fresh from scratch. Even the chips for the appetizer salsa were made early each day. Never, on any motorcycle tour, including many in Europe, have I eaten food that was so consistently delicious.

The Beach & Hyde dirtbike tour started at Hyde's ranch just outside the Southern California town of Castaic. Heading east from there, we briefly followed the old Grapevine road (remember the Fifties' song, "Hot Rod Lincoln"?) that traverses the mountain pass between the Los Angeles basin and California's Central Valley. The road is still passable, although the pavement is broken in many places, and is a powerful reminder of how quickly nature reclaims her own. I can remember as a child in the early Fifties riding in the back seat of my father's Chrysler as he negotiated this serpentine road. I don't remember it being this narrow and twisty; but then, the interstate system has straightened out and flattened most of the exciting roads in





my memory. There is no way that most modern semis could negotiate some of the turns on that old, famous road.

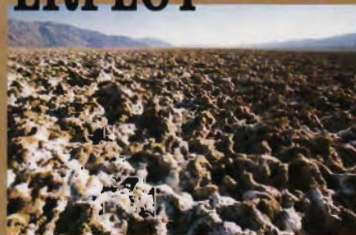
After an hour or so on the old Grapevine, we jumped off into the raw California desert and the first of the big puckerups. "When you get to the top of the hill," said Hyde, "be careful, because just over the horizon, the trail turns sharply left."

No kidding. Imagine taking any of the old wooden roller coasters in America and putting it on top of a mountain. Now replace the tracks with a dirt trail, but only half as wide...and then ride it. You know that first big hill on a roller coaster that the pulley brings you up, and at the top it either turns left or right or goes straight back down again, but you can't see which? And on either side you see nothing but eternity? Okay, well imagine gathering the momentum on a motorcycle to go up that hill, stopping at the top to figure out where to go next, and then riding the tracks for the rest of the coaster. Now put 20 of those roller coasters together end-to-end. And whatever you do, don't look down.

This is no exaggeration. Chugging up that first hill and looking down at either side, I wondered, if I fell, how long I would roll down until I hit the bottom? Not smart to look down, but I was mesmerized by the danger of it, sort of like staring transfixed into the barrel of a shotgun. When I got to the top of the hill, I did indeed stop, and I did make the turn to the left, but just barely. Had Hyde not warned us about this particular hill, I probably would have gone straight over the other side and would still be tumbling down the mountain, trying to dodge the motorcycle thrashing along behind me.

Before the ride, Jeff Allen had suggested I eschew the heavier adventure bikes, like the Triumph Tiger and the BMW R1100GS, in favor of a lighter and more-nimble machine like the Honda XR650L. This very first bit of off-road terrain confirmed the wisdom of his advice. The 650L had all the grunt I needed to haul my lard ass around the desert, and at the same time it was light enough not to be a burden so I could enjoy the scenery a little.

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Dumont Dunes, 30 miles due south of Death Valley, is the desert equivalent of the Vail ski slopes immediately after a fresh snowfall. Just twist the throttle wide-open and cut 'er loose to your heart's content. Yee-haw!





And the scenery was spectacular. I had grown up and done my very first motorcycle riding in the northern Nevada desert around Reno. The sagebrush is sweeter there, and the weather isn't nearly so hot in the summer, but the terrain is similar to our route on this ride. That made riding in this desert seem like a homecoming to me. Everything felt comfortable and familiar, even though I hadn't ridden in such terrain for almost 40 years.

There are some folks who definitely wouldn't like it out in the desert, and I've even heard some people call this landscape ugly. But it's far from ugly. It may be barren and stark, and it may be a bit monochromatic, but there is an undeniable beauty here that isn't apparent at first glance.

Which, of course, means you'll never see its beauty while driving through on the interstate. You need to immerse yourself in this country, and ever so gradually, it will reveal itself. Like in the mornings and evenings when the sun reflects off the sand, bluffs and ridges, painting them a vivid gold and purple. Artists spend lifetimes trying

to capture the brilliant, subtle colors of desert sunrises and sunsets. What was once dull and gray in the shadows becomes brilliant in the morning and evening light.

To my mind, the most appealing aspect of the desert is its solitude. Unless there is a storm blowing through, the desert makes virtually no sound. At midnight or noon, there is absolute peace here. For the person seeking seclusion and respite from a world moving at the speed of modems, cell phones and gigabytes, this place is perfect. Unless you have a satellite phone, no one can reach you here, as cell service is just a dim memory. And Hyde's trailers, for all their modern conveniences, offer no communications hookups whatsoever, meaning the internet is out of the question. For those who are hassled up to their necks in technology and intrusive communications, this desert tour is the perfect getaway. It's even fun for those who live out in the country, such as the crazy Montanans who participated.

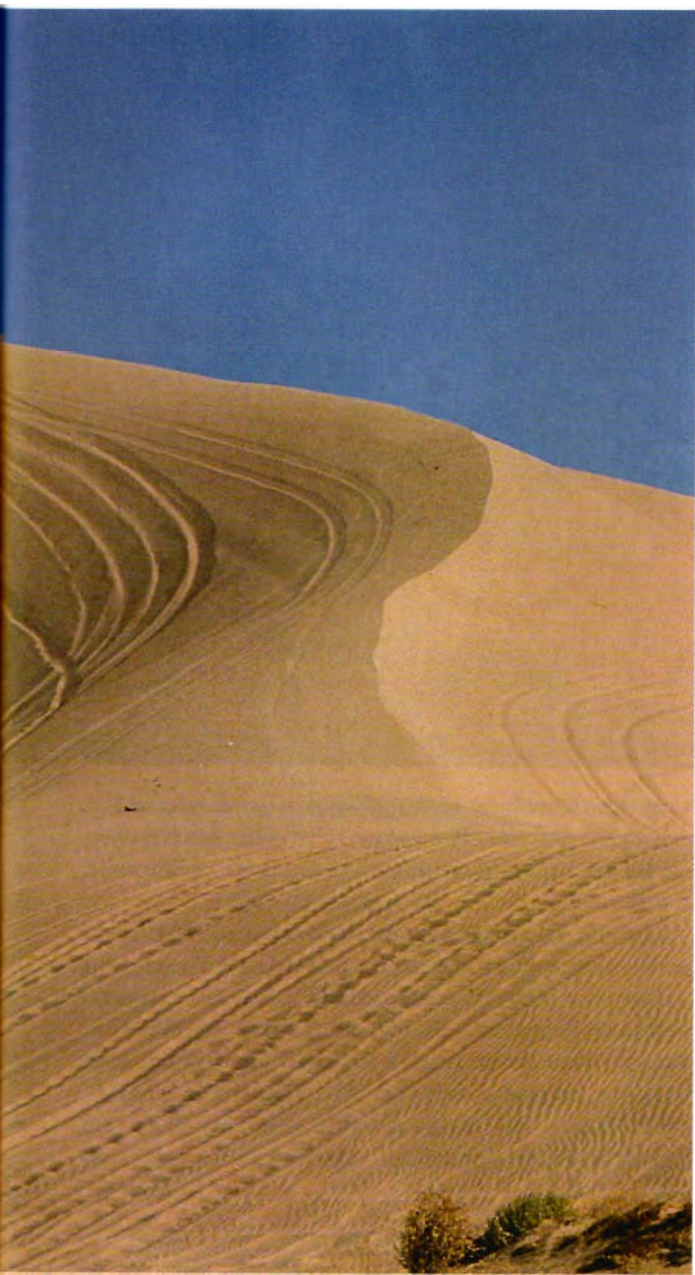
This was the second time those guys had done this same ride with Hyde, and it was evident in their riding skills: They all were very good off-road riders. They had driven to Southern California from Butte in a motorhome, towing their bikes in a trailer. After being cooped up together in their mobile tin can for a day, they were raging to ride.

I had a little fun with one of them the next day as we approached the ghost town of Ballarat. We were riding in the dark, crossing a semi-dry lake bed, when we came to a gully filled with loose mud the consistency of chocolate pudding. The tactic for crossing it was to haul ass in second gear, dive into the gully—at which time the bike would sink up to the footpegs in the mud—and hope momentum would propel you to the other side. It worked for everybody except one of the Montanans, Randy Farrow, who sank up to his rear fender in mud. I got a digital picture of him surrounded by fellow Montanans helping him pull his bike out of the bog. That night around the campfire, that picture was the hit of the evening, and Randy caught endless amounts of ribbing for being the only one who got stuck.

I would pay for that picture the next day when Randy got even with me concerning the jets.

I love to watch jet fighters, and have since I was a little kid living in Nevada out by Nellis Air Force base in Las Vegas. When we got to Ballarat, Hyde told us how the jets from Nellis dogfight and do mock bomb runs on the locals, sometimes even buzzing people on motorcycles. I looked out in the valley and saw, down on the flat level ground, a small radar station used to monitor the jets' performance. As we spoke, some young hotshot in his F-16 came screaming down the valley right on the deck, putting my heart in my throat. I told Hyde I'd stay in camp the next day so I could interview Desert Donna (See "Deleted Scenes") and watch the jets. Everyone else on the tour would ride up into snow country.

I waited all day but saw only one jet, and it was at high altitude. As jet-viewing goes, the day was a bust, which, from the account I got from Randy, was in stark contrast







to the almost constant combat they witnessed up on the mountain. "You should have seen them," gushed Randy in his slight Norwegian-cum-Milwaukeean-cum-Canadian accent. "They came so close to us, you could actually look down into their cockpits and see their hands on the controls. One of the guys had on red gloves." I was apoplectic because I'd barely seen any jets at all.

"Remember that one guy who kept waving to us and wagging his wings?" said Randy. "You bet," answered Tom Radoman. "He was the only one not wearing sunglasses. I loved it when he would zoom down the backside of the valley, then go straight up and disappear into the

clear sky." Now I was getting pissed.

"Right," answered Randy, "with that other guy hot on his tail like he was gonna shoot him down. Geez, the noise was terrific."

Dammit, I'd missed a great, spontaneous sir show by not going riding, and I had so badly wanted to see the jets.

Later that night around the campfire, Radoman sat next to me and whispered, "Bo, yoo didn't miss a ting. Randy was just razzin' ya because of da pitcher ya got o' him in da mud, and because ya didn't go with us and freeze yer ass off in da snow like da rest of us."

Touché, Randy. Touché.





Snow was falling on the South Park Loop above Ballarat at 8000 feet. The next day, we descended to the heat of Death Valley, 239 feet below sea level.



Big equipment, too, like crushers, rails, ore carts and sifters, and that was just getting the equipment up so the real work could begin. It boggles the mind of the modern city-dweller to imagine the amount of work these men did in trying to find gold. And the amount of work their animals did. I'm not sure, but I don't think I could have done that.

We rode up to 5000 feet to see the mines above Surprise Canyon and walk inside the old shafts where the actual mining work was done—picking, shoveling, loading, unloading, drilling, dynamiting and more shoveling. This wasn't so very long ago as history goes. Many of the old mines were active until a just few years ago when the ore markets went to hell and the miners abandoned all their equipment where it lay.

One miner by the name of Schmidt came out West at the advice of his doctor, who told him that his tuberculosis would soon kill him, so he might as well go where he would be comfortable for a while. Schmidt ended up in the California desert near a mine, and the mine owners wanted badly to have a tunnel through the mountain so they wouldn't have to send the ore over the mountain pass. Schmidt thought he might as well do something useful while waiting to die, so he started drilling through the rock. The more he drilled, the better he felt, so he kept drilling. Death finally caught up to him, and he died just a week after the tunnel was completed—but he had worked on the tunnel for 38 years! The tunnel is still intact and strong, and visitors still wander through it. Legend has it that actor Steve McQueen used to come here on his dirtbikes to get away from it all and conduct his renowned binges.

Of course, where there were mines, there were mining camps, and this area is rife with old towns, both dead and dying. One of the latter is Trona, a California town that used to be a center of mining and refining activity but whose fortunes have dwindled over the last 20 years. Houses sit abandoned, and once-thriving chain and franchise mercantiles have given way to second-hand stores and all manner of small business ventures and coffee

The next day took us to the mines. If it weren't for the mining exploration that had gone on in this desert region, it's doubtful that anyone would know about this part of the country; it's a dangerous place to be in both the heat and the cold. But because of the mining, there is a plethora of roads winding up into the mountains. Many of the roads are now passable by four-wheel-drive vehicles, but back in the 1800s, the miners came up here by mule and horse. I've visited lots of mines in the American West from Helena, Montana, to Leadville, Colorado, to Dawson, Alaska, to these in Nevada and California, and I'm always amazed at how those miners got their equipment up into these hills.





The group stops for a photo at Schmidt's tunnel, where the late Steve McQueen allegedly would come to conduct his binges in total seclusion.



shops with maladroitly hand-painted signs. Anyone looking for bargains in California housing will find something to fit their budget in Trona.

The aforementioned town of Ballarat sits with its one denizen (again, see "Deleted Scenes") amid a few old, decaying buildings. Ballarat was once a supply town where the hard-working miner could find just about anything he needed, including some reasonably priced female companionship. But those days are gone. And should mining ever return here, newer, cheaper and more-transient buildings, probably mobile homes, would take their place.

After the mines came the hills of insanity where my pucker factor hit max. One hill we descended was so steep that it reminded me of the time I was in 9th grade living in Lake Tahoe, California, and took a dare to ski down a ski-jump slope. I figured what the hell, I've been skiing for three days now and know all there is to know about the subject, so I gave it a shot. I stood in my skis at the bottom of the jump ramp, trying to look down the slope, and beheld an amazing sight: The hill was so steep that my ski tips hovered in mid-air. All I could see was the vast valley below; the actual slope was under my ski tips, out of sight. After a 20-minute contemplation, I let go and skied down the hill just fine, but I didn't know how to stop. I flew across the landing area and into the parking lot where I crashed into the driver's side of a 1960 Chevrolet Corvair. I was unhurt, but the door was caved in.

I was in the same situation here, sitting on the Honda and trying to see the slope, but it was too steep. The technique for me was kill the engine, put it in first gear and advance down ever, ever so slowly on the brakes. If the bike and I gained enough momentum to where the engine was doing the braking, I was dead meat. It took me 10

minutes to inch down the hill, but I made it, and felt pretty good about it until I saw Jeff Allen come dancing down at 15 mph, no sweat.

But then again, Jeff cheats: He has somehow found the key to levitation. So where I was struggling in the deep sand and rocks, he floated across the terrain at an altitude of, oh, about 14 inches. I don't think he ever really touched the ground, and in my mind, that's cheating. That kid can ride. Ain't so bad with a camera, either.

The next-to-last-day of the tour brought us back to civilization, and we stayed the night at Whiskey Pete's in Stateline on the California-Nevada...uh, state line. The tour ended the next day at the fanciful Excalibur hotel in Las Vegas. The rooms were nice, but the food at the finest restaurants in the hotel paled in comparison to the fare prepared by Genevieve on the tour.

As you might have gathered by now, I really liked this tour. Immensely. The accommodations were excellent, the company was congenial and the food was exquisite. The riding pushed my limits, but I was a far better rider at the end of the tour than I was at the beginning. Yes, I was stiff and sore, and yes, I had a few bumps and bruises, but that's entirely my fault for not being prepared. It's important for you to know, however, that Hyde will match the difficulty of the terrain with your level of riding skill. He's in business to show people a good time, not to make them crash.

If you've always wanted to explore the desert by dirt-bike, this is the way to do it.

Just don't fall for the fighter-jet scam.

## BEACH & HYDE ADVENTURE COMPANY

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# HYDE'S RIDES

## CAMPING IN THE LAP OF LUXURY

**W**hen Jim Hyde decided to build the most advanced, specialized camping rigs the world has ever seen, he spared no expense. Altogether, he spent more than half a million dollars on his trucks and trailers, all to provide his guests with a luxury base camp that would rival what most hotels and resorts could offer.

Hyde gained lots of experience with custom trucks during his previous career, which was designing mobile cat-scan rigs for hospitals. Once he got into

the motorcycle touring business, he designed precisely the kinds of rigs he wanted, then turned his concepts over to Custom Trailer Works in Salem, Oregon, and Performance Trailers in Madera, California. Nine months later, his dream machines were rolling reality.

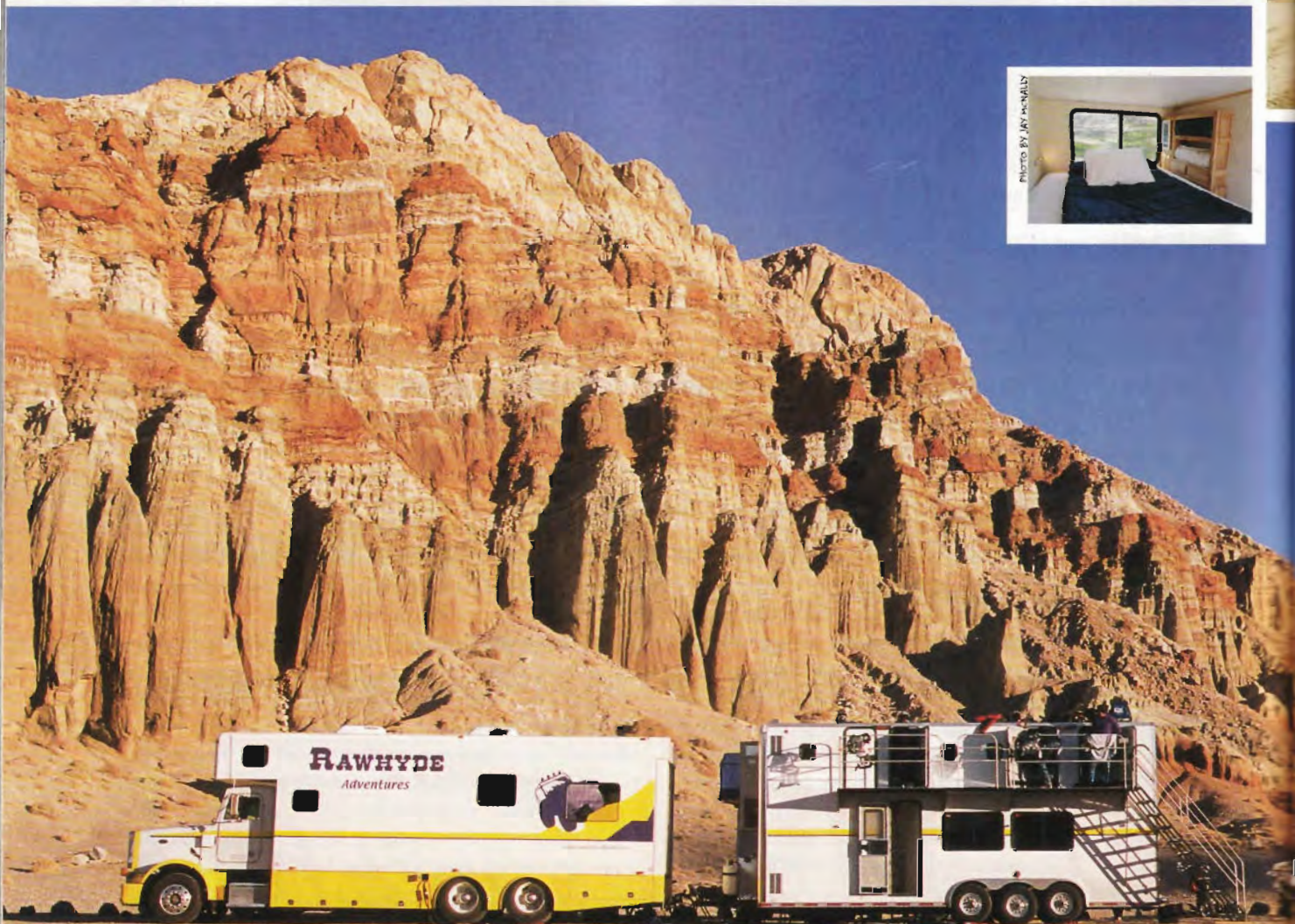
The motorhome-like rig is the kitchen truck, which rides on a Peterbilt chassis with a 350-horsepower turbocharged Caterpillar 3406 motor and a nine-speed Eaton transmission hooked up to tandem-drive

Rockwell axles. He needs all that power for the high tonnage of gear he hauls. Inside is a full-service commercial kitchen that features two of everything: two freezers, two refrigerators, two dishwashers. The stove has double ovens and eight burners. He hauls 400 gallons of water, and his generator is a diesel unit that cranks out 12 kilowatts of power. Also on his main truck is a complete living facility for his chef, including bunk, wash basin, toilet and shower.

This monster rig pulls one of

the two trailers that house the lounge, full bathroom, dining area and four bedrooms. His second trailer contains the six built-in, collapsible tents and personal guest lockers, and is pulled by a box van built on a GMC chassis powered by a 3116 Caterpillar diesel. When a tour is over, or when the need arises, this entire outfit can also stow 17 dirtbikes for transport to wherever they are needed.

Maintaining such an operation is daunting, and much downtime is needed to maintain





all of this equipment. Hyde figures it takes a full five days to replenish and repair his trucks and trailers after a tour. He apparently does a great job of it, because the equipment has been in heavy use since 2002, and everything still looks brand-new.

We've never before seen anything like Hyde's support gear, but those rigs alone almost make the trip worthwhile

—Beau Allen Pacheco



The elevated hardshell "apartments" (left) keep out wind and rain, lending a feel of luxury to nights spent in the wilderness. The tents (above) can be a bit chilly at night, but they offer excellent ventilation in hot weather and a magnificent view on starry evenings.



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