

RawHyde Adventure Rider Challenge

Motorcycle Masochism and an American Classic

BY JC HILDERBRAND

PHOTOS BY RAY GAUGER



"And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave." – Edgar Allan Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum*

Surely, less eloquent versions of Poe's words ran through terror-stricken minds at the RawHyde Adventure Rider Challenge. Participants witnessed the newest version of the Adventure Rider Challenge, the only competitive big-bike event in the United States, as it continues to evolve in only its third year. Competition is in the form of brutal obstacle courses that inflict physical and mental pounding on man and machine. Until joining the fracas atop Southern California's Grapevine mountain pass, we'd never seen anything like it. Two days later we were convinced that for anyone who considers himself a true adventure rider, there's nowhere else you'd rather be.

Adventure riders are the most multi-faceted breed of motorcyclists on the planet. Their idea of a good trip incorporates elements for dirt bikes, curvy sport-bike highways, butt-numbing distances and navigational challenges; they need to be fit, skilled and self-reliant. These men and women are the Swiss Army knives of our sport, and their equipment has to be just as versatile. Meeting such widespread needs has led to a diverse spread of technology from different bike makers, but if these machines have anything in common, it's size. None of them are small, and that's exactly why RawHyde Adventures founder and ARC originator, Jim Hyde,

started this thing in the first place.

Riding huge, heavy bikes through gnarly terrain is big time work – and big time fun if you have the right attitude. You have to embrace that it's supposed to be hard and that you aren't going to finish without some scratches, but not everyone wants to mercilessly beat their machinery for the sake of competition.

"People like competition, they either like to watch it or be in it," Hyde says. "These GS bikes are like modern day cowboy stuff."

That's why Hyde designed the ARC to welcome all riders with open arms. Roughly 500 miles of paved and dirt roads were spread out over

the two days. Each night featured a Rodeo section – The Pit and The Pendulum, respectively. Over the years, Jim has developed a five-tier categorization of terrain for his adventure rides and it's safe to say that the competition portions are pure Cat-5. Participants are able to register as an Adventurer and simply ride the prescribed routes, or as a Challenger if they're gluttons for punishment and want to compete in the Rodeo at day's end.

"The Challenger is a guy who hangs it all out there and risks life and limb to show everyone how good he is," says Hyde. Of the 197 entries, the majority of which were riding bikes from title sponsor BMW, 40 of them registered as Challengers to test their mental and physical strength against what Jim called the most difficult courses yet.

Above: Jim Hyde gave every rider a personal send-off to get the 2009 event underway.

Right: The brave men of Team Size Doesn't Matter (left-right) JC Hilderbrand, Joe Egan and Chad Yoshitomi.

Opposite: The F800GS was a good match for the Pit where its narrow engine layout was far superior to BMW's traditional Boxer configuration.

The Pit

Most of the adventure riders on hand elected to camp at the RawHyde facility where provisions were made to comfortably accommodate the throng of motorcyclists. Of Oceans and Dirt was the theme for the weekend and the camp awakened to a 300-mile counterclockwise loop toward Santa Barbara and the cool weather of the Pacific Ocean for Day 1. Our troupe followed maps and GPS coordinates along scenic ridgelines and riding through swarms of mating ladybugs – the fornicating insects crawling maddeningly across goggle lenses, down collars and inside helmets. Once the trail dropped down out of the mountains, however, sunshine and crashing waves were the worst of it.

Adventure riders share a strong identity with one another, many travelling together or at least connecting with a fellow voyager somewhere along the way. Day 1 closed with a team challenge emphasizing cohesion necessary for the completion of the task. Scored on time, the fastest team from Point A to Point B wins – the only problem is that everything between lies down a steep, rocky ravine with nothing more than a few wooden boards to span impassible gaps. Del Christensen spends most of his time as a RawHyde rider coach and guide, but he's the man responsible for developing the hellish ravine. Perhaps he's a connoisseur of American literature because standing at the top, the Pit certainly invokes an idea similar to Poe's abyss – an embankment so steep many riders bulldogged their machines to the bottom.

Easy laughter and subdued excitement filled the outdoor tent as we gathered for the rider's meeting. Del's assurance that even BMW's largest machine could pass seemed to be good enough for riders who were anxious to get underway. The majority had already formed three-man teams so those of us who hadn't were put together to make a trio. I was joined with Chad Yoshitomi and Joe Egan who, like me, were first-timers at the ARC. Baseline scoring is determined using one big bike and one small bike per team. Larger bikes are obviously a disadvantage in this situation, so teams with two big bikes were given a two-minute deduction and teams with only small bikes were penalized. Anything that's not a 1200GS, GS Adventure or comparable older model is considered small. Armed with my F800GS, the choice was between Chad's heavily armored R1150GSA, which would give us a standard setup, and Joe's Honda XL650. Bolstered by Joe's disregard for mechanical damage, our makeshift squad opted to travel light – penalty be damned, we'd throw that bike across the finish line if need be.





RawHyde Adventure Rider Challenge

As the group broke and made for the staging area, we had little idea what was in store. All we knew was that the entry was so steep that a rope was run through a snatch block and around a tree limb to help lower the bike into the crevasse. Chad was to be our runner, controlling our descent as we rode the bikes down and then following on foot through the two-thirds of a mile to provide assistance. The only rules were that both bikes and all three members had to cross the finish line - working machines optional. I lined up first, my entire confidence split

between a 47-year-old auto technician from Alaska and a slightly frayed climbing rope. I shouldn't have worried as both did a fantastic job and kept me from rocketing headlong to the bottom with a simple, controlled landing. Before the rope was halfway up the hill to start with Joe, I was already forcing my way down the trail, bouncing off the sides and down dried rock waterfalls.

Worried that I hadn't seen Joe in awhile, I stopped and headed back on foot. I only made it a short distance before the 34-year-old software engineer tottered across one of the slapdash bridges, his grin showing from beneath his helmet. A special surprise waited at the final obstacle where strategically placed ambushers pelted us from above as they launched water balloons like

hand grenades. A cool splash of water was nice when facing the off-camber rock shelf with an abrupt log crossing, but for a few tired men, the loss of traction from wet tires caused more trouble than it was worth. We managed to get everyone out with relative ease. A few hang-ups, blisters for Chad from running in his boots and some simple tip-overs for Joe, who only had 10 months of dirt riding experience, and our Size Doesn't Matter team was in far better shape than some of the others. Sitting in the shade and watching other teams come down was almost as much fun as riding it, and we witnessed skidplates and crash bars held on by a few bolt threads - some carried out by hand.

RawHyde Adventures is the official BMW Off-Road Academy so it's no surprise that a pair of Jim's certified instructors were fast enough for second place. As a measure of fairness, the Platonic Spooning Buddies were disqualified. Two Kabooms slipped into the vacated spot which left the final podium step for Two Jerks and a Squirt. Once the time adjustments were made, it was the Knights of the Flaccid Lance claiming the top spot with an impressive time of 5:52. By the end of the first day, all competitors had a much better idea of what they were in for, but the anticipation of the event's headline challenge loomed overnight.



"In other conditions of mind I might have had courage to end my misery at once by a plunge into one of these abysses; but now I was the veriest of cowards."



“To the right - to the left - far and wide - with the shriek of a damned spirit.”

The Pendulum

The second day's ride headed east, a shorter loop than before, but this time away from the cooling ocean breeze and into the scorching desert. Riders endured triple-digits temps as they followed one of several optional treks. A full day netted roughly 200 miles with shorter variations available. Randsburg was the refueling stop for man and machine as the party passed through for lunch in small groups. Again, in order to be back in time for the evening Rodeo, competitors had to cut out early and return to base camp. Being a team player is one thing, but motorcycling is ultimately an individual sport and so the second challenge was designed to test each competitor's skill on their own machine. Some riders already had a reputation after successful (or not) performances in years past. Others, like me, were eager to see where we stacked up in the world of big-bike wrangling. Ultimately, this was the opportunity to demonstrate what we could do.



Aside from the name, this year's event actually shares nothing with Poe's classic. Inspiration can come at any moment, and while most of the two-wheeled treachery spawned from the depths of Jim's imagination, the initial seed was actually planted by the movie *First Knight* where Richard Gere negotiates a deadly pendulum. From the saddle of my F800GS the course looks more like something out of an Indiana Jones flick — piled logs, sand traps, wood ramps and mud pits. About halfway through, the pendulums hung in pairs of two from large wooden scaffolding, four sets spaced just far enough apart to get the largest bikes stopped before hitting the next. They comprised one of 10 sections, each worth 200 points. Nine were scored using a version of trials rules — foot dabs were worth 10 points, getting hit by a pendulum docked 25, out of bounds snared 50 and a crash was a devastating 100 points. A perfect run would net 2000 and infractions were deducted from the point totals which were sorted for individual placing.

As with the day before, a steep descent was first out of the gate. The entire track was built on the side of a hill and onto the flat ground below, so riders dropped into the course like a massive dirt half-pipe. By the time I slipped my Beemer's front wheel over the edge it had turned into a single dry rut. My Dunlops scraped for traction, found little and the bike slithered in barely

controlled chaos down the hill. As merely a transfer from staging to the actual course, survival was the goal here, but some riders would never make it to the first segment. Those of us who did found the sole timed portion where riders raced around a motocross-style layout. One uphill, off-camber left turn was particularly bothersome, another example of how the course became increasingly difficult as powerful engines and wide tires started to break down the soil. The eventual winners were some of the first riders out, proving that although sometimes going first is a bad thing, having a fresh track turned out to be a major benefit.

From there the course entered Pucker Hill, and then onto other sections like Thunder, Gopher Track, Headwall, and, of course, Pendulums. From a distance, the long pipes wrapped in foam looked fairly simple, and my confidence was high. However, as I stared lengthwise down the heart of it I was informed that it too was a no-dab zone, and stopping was impossible, as the futility began to sink in. From behind tinted goggles, the late-afternoon heat pounding my shoulders, my eyes struggled to focus, preferring to take it all in as a criss-crossed latticework of rope, wood and swinging metal.

RATING THE RAWHYDE ADVENTURE RIDER CHALLENGE

ROADS ★★★★★

As far as the regular adventure ride goes, there was a very solid mix of pavement and dirt. Riders who wanted to do the competitions had to use cutoffs which led to a lot of pavement miles, but Jim does a great job of providing options for everyone and every bike. The challenges were awesome! Some sections could have been more challenging, but considering there were guys on 1200GS it was a terrific blend that taxed everyone along the way. This event is extremely well planned and executed — and ultimately it's all about the ride.

SCENERY ★★★★★

By heading in different directions each day, the ARC provided completely alternate scenery. Day 1 was highlighted by coastal views as the route wound along mountain ridges, greenery and abundant wildlife. Day 2 bailed into the vastness of California's high desert. Rickety mining towns and dusty solitude are soul food for real adventure tourers.

ACCESS ★★★★★

RawHyde Adventures is only minutes off Interstate 5. It's within an hour from much of the Los Angeles metropolitan spread. Jim and crew provide a top-notch facility that caters to rough-n-tough campers or adventure riders with more need for comfort.

FOOD ★★★★★

RawHyde provided three meals each day which were filling and of good quality. The entry fee includes tickets for beverages, including beer! RawHyde lives by the theory that draining your body with hard work and play requires equal amounts to be put back in. They have a certified chef on staff and an overall love of good eats.

BIKES ★★★★★

BMW offers a wide variety of adventure bikes, but the first time we rode the F800GS it instantly became our favorite. This bike is the best blend of big power and comfort from the 1200 line and the nimble, manageable stature of the 650 machines — and it walks all over its siblings in the dirt! The only bike we can imagine possibly wanting more for this event is the Xchallenge, which BMW no longer produces. The 800 gave us the challenge of riding a “big bike” while still proving entirely capable and didn't cause any hernias trying to lift it over obstacles. BMW has made an excellent adventuring companion with this one.

"The agony of suspense grew at length intolerable, and I cautiously moved forward, with my arms extended, and my eyes straining from their sockets..."

I revved the Parallel Twin, wagged my clutch fingers and lurched into the mayhem. The first clipped my rear end as I tried to halt in the now seemingly tiny space between. No good. The next banged into the Beemer's front end and I was 0-for-2. This ineffectual cadence continued for the remainder of the section, and what I thought would be an interesting chore wound up just pissing me off. Unfortunately, there are no second chances, and though I wanted to turn around and try again, I was waved forward by the RawHyde staff and sent through the remaining tests, irritated that the Pendulum had won.

In Poe's version, the subject narrowly escapes the pendulum and then is forced again to face the abyss. Fortunately for us, after the second challenge was finished the only thing left to conquer were some ice-cold kegs of beer.

Be it masochism or simple RawHyde loyalty, the men and women around

camp seem unanimous in their intent to return. From a participant's standpoint, the whole thing works very well as a long weekend event, but as Jim explains it, fine tuning the Adventure Riders Challenge has followed the arc of his infamous pendulum. Riders complained the first year because there wasn't quite enough regular riding. Then, with three days of seat time in 2008, for many it was simply too much time away from work. But this year the public reaction has leveled out, a testament to RawHyde's ongoing efforts at perfecting the blend.

"I think this is the best we've done so far," Jim says, reflecting on the solid turnout and his developing network of repeat customers. "I'm strongly inclined to do exactly the same thing except change the layout a little. It's very real world, these are the types of things these riders will face."

Pausing, he adds, "It's also a lot like childbirth, you forget the pain."



AIRPORTS

Los Angeles International Airport (LAX)
The largest airport in the region, LAX offers 88 airlines which fly at virtually any time and from any location. International and domestic flights serve the greater Los Angeles area as a primary hub of commercial flight on the West Coast. Transportation options from the airport include road and rail. RawHyde Adventures is roughly 60 miles north along I-5.
www.los-angeles-lax.com

Meadows Field Airport

Bakersfield, CA
Airlines: United, US Airways
www.meadowsfield.com

BIKE RENTALS and TOURS

BMW Motorcycles of Ventura County
(805) 499-3770
www.bmwventura.com

We Rent Motorcycles

Newport Beach, CA
888-849-4098
www.werentmotorcycles.com

ATTRACTIONS

Six Flags Magic Mountain
(661) 255-4100
www.sixflags.com/magicmountain/

RESOURCES

www.adventureriderchallenge.com
www.rawhyde-offroad.com
www.bmwmotorcycles.com

GEARBAG

Klim F4 Anniversary Edition Helmet - \$400
Sidi Crossfire TA Boots - \$450
Klim Chinook Pant - \$130
Klim Revolt Jersey - \$40
Klim Mojave Glove - \$26
Thor Ally Goggles - \$65
Ogio Flight Vest - \$130 

RAWHYDE A.R.C. INFORMATION:

RawHyde Adventures • PO Box 244 • Castaic, CA 91310 • 213-713-5652
www.adventureriderchallenge.com Email: info4rawhyde@earthlink.net

For more information, visit www.motorcycle-usa.com - Search RawHyde Adventure Rider Challenge