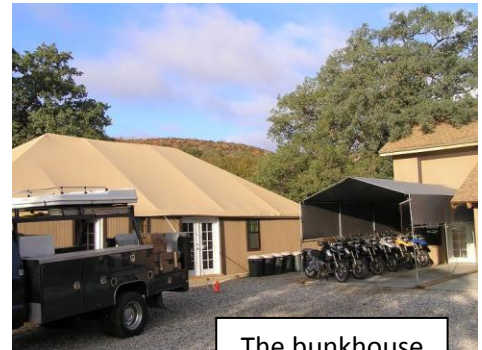


ONE MAN'S FOUR DAY AFFAIR WITH A BMW 650 GS

With my 40th birthday rapidly approaching (and leather jackets and convertibles declared as forbidden by my wife), my family were wondering what to get me for the big day. Luckily for me I'd read an article about this place called Raw Hyde Adventures, where you get to do tough, manly things like drink beer, eat great food, and (of course) ride around in the dirt on some kick-ass BMW GS motorcycles. I'm a computer programmer by trade, and topping up on the masculinity every now and then is a good idea.

So, a week before my birthday, I follow the instructions and show up at the ranch on Friday night, not exactly sure how it's all going to work. I meet the crew, have a beer and a great dinner with the other guys, and then head to bed in a large circus-tent bunkhouse. Despite the huge amount of drool on my pillow (it's hereditary), I sleep well. The morning arrives and I'm lazing about, wondering just how much of a fool I'm going to make of myself this weekend, when the owner – Jim Hyde – comes in saying that my wife had called and I need to call her back.



The bunkhouse

It's 6.15am – the internal klaxon winds up.

I call her back and, sadly, the sirens were correct. My wife was NOT calling to ask me what I was wearing, but rather to inform me that she'd fallen down the stairs and broken her ankle. So I drive two hours back home and have a very different weekend than anticipated, though at least it wasn't ME hobbling to hospitals and doctors...

Flash forward a few months and I'm back again at Raw Hyde Adventures for my do-over (special thanks for your understanding, Jim). At home, my wife has strict instructions to stay downstairs for four days, and the kids have been told to tackle her to the ground if need be. And the lads at the camp have something to rib me about.

We do our introductions – there's an ex-Hollywood driver, a gynecologist, a couple of Steady-Cam operators from SNL, an engineer, some small-business owners, ex-pats from Zimbabwe, England and France – basically every walk of life from every part of the planet. Most guys have very little off-road experience, but the love for riding motorbikes exudes from every pore (in a sticky, sweaty, oozy kind of way). Apparently it's an unusual group because there are no girls attending – usually there are at least a couple – but otherwise we're about as diverse as can be. We also meet the instructors – they are all strangely excited and they smile a lot. It occurs to me that it's probably because they're looking forward to seeing everyone fall the next day.



The Chef

I mentally dub them The Smiling Assassins.

Time for dinner. Johnny, possibly the most cheerful professional chef on the planet, whips out a lazy meal of grilled salmon and roast veggies. A very nice chardonnay makes its way around the table, and we all forget about our concerns for the evening...

We sleep. There's more drool, the odd snore, but this time there's no early morning phone call. ☺

We have a great breakfast of blueberry pancakes and sausages – that damn Johnny fella is STILL happy – and I summon the courage to call home. All is well, though I did wake them up.

I get my boots on and head down to my rented BMW 650 GS. It's beautiful and I am especially happy to see it already has some scratches on it. Unfortunately for my self-esteem, however, I am forced to admit that the 800's and 1200's are prettier still. I attempt to not let the relative sizes of the other bikes shrink my nether regions. I partially succeed.

About two-thirds of the guys have also rented their bikes, either because of their distant location, a lack of ownership, or a desire to make their mistakes on someone else's bike. The others have brought their own bike in, thinking that it's better to be trained on the bike you actually own and ride. I immediately admire (and fear for) the guys who brought their own bike.



After some limbering up exercises (both mental and physical), we are unceremoniously broken into two groups -> Team Bravo and Team Charlie. I am in the former group and immediately assume that we're the stronger team. I've neglected to mention thus far that I am an Australian and therefore suffer from unhealthy levels of both optimism and bravado. While neither has killed me yet, they do occasionally get close.

For the first morning we work on slow-speed drills -> standing on the pegs, turning, braking, etc. Our lead instructor, Mark, demonstrates the correct way to do things and then we give it a go. This works fine and, despite the mandate to "check our egos in at the door", the group waits tentatively for the first guy to drop his bike. It's not until we're doing the front-brake-only drill, where the goal is to stop as quickly as you can on gravel, that it happens. And it's me. ☹️

Yep, after seeing Mark totally nail a front-tire skid in the example round I just can't stop thinking about it. I've done a couple of increasingly aggressive front-brake stops and I think I am ready to give the skid a go. I line it up, get balanced, and then deliberately pull on the front brake lever to get that cool little skid going. But, instead of a nice slide and a big cheer from the smiling assassins, the front wheel dives underneath me and I tumble off to the right, looking for all the world like a scampering monkey on the hot desert sand. The assassin smiles at me, gently suggests that locking the front tire should be avoided in future, and we move on.





The assassins do help you pick your bike up again...

The rest of the day goes great – I drop the bike a second time, but this time at about 0.05 miles an hour while trying to make an uber slow-speed turn – but pretty much everyone (bar The Camera Man and the Lion) has put the bike down by now, and we’re all just trying to absorb the instructions. It seems that guys really CAN check in the egos. Well, at least a little bit.

At the end of the day, one of the smiling assassins – Will – offers to take anyone interested in an extra-curriculum ride around some local trails and then down to nearby Castaic to get some fuel for the rental bikes. I immediately raise my hand and about 8 of us fly around the back trails of the ranch. Then we ride down a wonderful twisty paved road to Castaic and back. Unfortunately, on the way back we misplace a couple of guys (one trainer and one student) and spend 10 uncomfortable minutes waiting off-site for them to find us.

Full moons...



Will is still smiling but it’s pretty clear that losing people on after-hours rides is frowned upon. We eventually head back to the ranch and find that they bypassed one of the stops and made it back long before us. Everyone relaxes, and I head off for a shower on the outdoor deck. There’s something to be said about mooning the moon.

We sit down for another fantastic dinner, washed down with some delicious Napa Cabernet, then reminisce about our day in a “highs and lows” public forum. Everyone’s had a blast and learned something new but, sadly for Will, it seems that many of us loved the back-trail experience so much that we had to bring it up over and over, subsequently reminding Jim that we nearly lost some people today. Will, to his credit, takes the ribbing in the spirit in which it is intended, well protected by the classic no-harm no-foul defense...

Sunday morning begins with a refresher of the previous day, and it’s clear that Jim wasn’t kidding when he said we’re going to need several thousand repetitions to get the techniques ingrained. We’re also informed that the one-and-only competition between Teams Bravo and Charlie will occur this morning – in the form of a slow-speed race. While the no-competition / no-ego mandate is still officially in place, it was curious how both groups spent the bulk of the morning’s “refresher time” prepping for the big race...



The slow race battlefield

As the heats begin we attempt to strategize – based on our practice sessions the best guys on our team are the Frog and the Camera Man. We send our best guy off for the first heat, and he works hard against Big Mike from Team Charlie, but he puts a foot down and BAM, our best guy is out! Classic blunder! Heats 2 and 3 go similarly poorly and (before we know it) Team Charlie has 3 guys in the final and we have none. The instructors from Team Charlie make sure we know it... In Heat 4, the Camera Man comes through and (finally) Team Bravo has a representative in the final. I compete in Heat 5 and drift across the line in last position, thereby winning the race and getting a second Bravo guy into the final group of 5.



Team Bravo

I swing back around to the other end of the field and line up with the other guys for the final race. One of the Team Charlie guys – Fat Wallet – attempts to psych me out. I pretend it doesn't work and tell Big Mike that he is the unbackable favorite (which is, sadly, very true). The race is on and we... very... slowly... ride... across... the... field. For whatever reason, balance is with me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Big Mike drift left, and then right – at one point I swear he was coming right at me – and then the Frog yells out “he’s put a foot down, he’s out!!” I drift slowly across the line LAST. The Bravo guys surround me and, if I wasn’t a 230-pound guy on a 300-

pound bike, they may very well have lifted me on to their shoulders. Ah, sweet victory, and the title of “Slowest Man on Campus”. All done with no egos, of course... ;)

After lunch we do hill climbs and descents, and generally expand on our skills. Our speed increases and we ride a bunch of single-lane trails, honing our confidence and skills. I happen to be following The Camera Man when he finally comes off, but he’s quickly back up and carving up the course once more. Wicked fun. As the second day winds down we get one last burn around the surrounding trails, attempting to keep up with the instructors through ups, downs, the Ribbon Course, and any other place we get pointed at. We laugh in the face of steep descents, rocks, and sand. In short, we, too, are smiling assassins...



Splitting trees on the Ribbon Course

Sunday night is bittersweet – everyone tries to explain the camaraderie, the mateship, that we’re feeling after two days of increasing our riding skills OFF THE CHARTS with a bunch of strangers... But no-one knows how to get the words right. I think it’s something you have to feel in your gut – you learn a difficult skill in the full view of others, and you watch them learn right along with you. It’s like winning the Grand Final in a team rather than by yourself – you all share in the accomplishments of the others.

No, we don’t sing Kumbaya, but we are scarily close to it...

The next morning – Monday – most people head home. Nine of us stay on for Base Camp Alpha...

It'd rained overnight and the morning was cool. After the briefing – leave no man and no bike behind – we hit the road at 8.30am. It gets cold in the pass and the rain kicks in again. As I shiver my way along Highway 5, I have a sudden insight and can safely say that my life was saved by one of the greatest inventions of all time – the handlegrip warmers. (I ride a Honda CBR 1000, which is a beastly bike that I love but doesn't have those warmers).

(Most of) the Alpha Males



First stop – get acquainted with nature

Soon, we pull off the road and on to the dirt. We acquaint ourselves with Mother Nature (we all take a leak), and then start riding along a long, looping road that follows the aqueduct. We've been trained to stand up on the pegs and, at a spacing of a few hundred feet, we cruise into uncharted territory. There's a first crash – someone has to be first – and a short delay as we get everything ship-shape. Some of us acquaint ourselves with Mother Nature for a second time (remember, it was cold).

We stop at a fork in the road and our team leader Shawn – the smiling-est assassin of them all – points to one road as the “easy way” and the other as the “hard way”. Shawn demonstrates the hard way, his bike slicing and darting through some nice deep sand, and three of us follow. It's adrenalin pumping stuff, to have your bike suddenly want to be somewhere else rather than right beneath you, but we've all been trained well and everyone makes it safely through to the other side.

Some more dirt roads, some more fun, and then we're back on to the tarmac to get fuel and meet up with the support truck for lunch.

For those not used to riding with a support truck, I have to say that it's the ONLY way to travel. Your gear is carried for you, it's available for emergencies and, most importantly, it comes complete with a Built-In Cook (in our case, Jim's mother-in-law). We meet them at the base of this amazing red canyon wall and eat huge, delicious sandwiches while we rest our legs. And then the Built-In Cook comes around and force-feeds you freshly baked cookies. I tell ya, the support truck is goooooood.



Shawn says “Go that way”



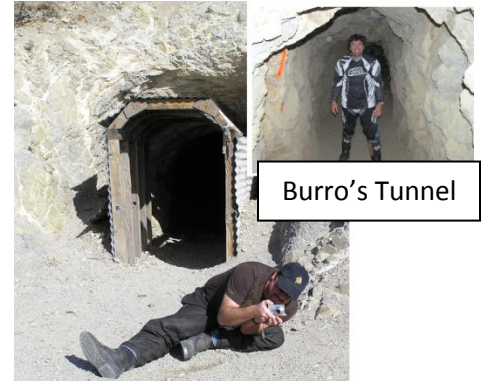
Lunch



Where are we?

Refreshed, we hit the road again and are soon back in the dirt. We begin a long steady climb of loosely packed gravel roads, intermittently filled with rocks that desperately want to take a bite out of your front tire. There are a couple of minor “off-bike adventures”, but overall we totally kick the road’s ass. Our bodies are starting to respond automatically to the conditions – lean back in the sand, put your weight on the outside peg for corners, don’t hold the handlebars stiffly. We feel like off-rovers.

We take some photos along the way and end up at Burro’s Tunnel – a half-mile long, hand-carved tunnel that one bloke dug out by himself over a period of 38 years. We walk through it as a group, joking about the guy’s sanity but still marveling at how a single man can apply nothing but willpower and sinew to achieve incredible things. Sure, the roof gets shorter as we get near the end, but none of us hold it against William “Burro” Schmidt. And we’re all keenly aware we’re visiting an “attraction” that most people NEVER see.



Burro's Tunnel

We ride back down and hit the tarmac all the way to Base Camp Alpha. It’s in a remote canyon, well away from civilization, and we set up our tents for the evening. On-site is a sea-container, holding everything needed to feed the ravenous hordes. Dinner comes out and, sure enough, the Built-In Cook has excelled herself once more. Hot beef stew with the tastiest corn bread this side of anywhere.



Frozen what?!

As dinner settles, the lads sit around the campfire and tell stories. Some are about the day, but most are about personal experiences and life events. Man, fire, and stories. And cold beer. It doesn’t get any better than that.

The story of the night has to go to instructor Shawn. If you ever get out here make sure you ask him about the Frozen Scuba-Diving Spider Monkeys story. I had tears in my eyes from laughing so hard. And no, I’m not lying about the name of the story – you simply cannot make this kind of thing up.

The next morning is chilly so we once again congregate around the campfire, but this time to sip at hot coffee and eat French Toast. Ah, roughing it in the desert – someone’s got to do it. We pack up the tents and throw our bags on to the support truck, then hit the road. After a short jaunt through town for fuel, we’re off-road again and this time in the Mojave Desert.

First stop is the Pinnacles formation, a seriously weird looking place they’ve used for films such as Planet of the Apes. We get some free time to explore, so Big Mike and I head up some goat trails between



Mmmm, coffee

the spires. We find some surprises – a fenced off sink hole that would have swallowed us whole, a boulder in the middle of the track, and a dead-end that required some, ahem, delicate turning-around skills. These are trails we all would have balked at just a few days earlier. The exploration, the freedom of going where you want, is exhilarating.

The instructors honk to get us to regroup and we're off on the infamous "43 miles" of sand and woop-de-doos. I say infamous because this section of the trip has spent the past three days getting bigger and bigger – it started off as "a few miles" and quickly increased to, well, 43 miles. Truth be told, it was closer to 60 miles of ball-tearing, front-wheel sliding bumpy FUN, but you'll have to visit it yourself to be sure. ;)



Up the goat trail

Riding away from the Pinnacles



Everyone survives this section with their dignity intact and, before we know it, we're at Jawbone Canyon waiting for Lance to arrive with the support truck and our Built-In Cook. We stretch our legs and start to feel the unwelcome approach of the end of our journey. Some of the guys start talking about their next trip – maybe Alaska, maybe the Great Divide – and my unrelenting grin prompts a few guys to ask if I'm going to trade my street bike in for a dirt bike when I get home. And I start wondering just how much I could get for my kidney on E-Bay...

Lunch arrives – bagel sandwiches with turkey and cranberry sauce – and we stock the bodies back up with fuel for the afternoon. In a blink we're suiting back up and heading off into the mountains on dirt. These roads are a bit different to the others we've ridden – they're hard-packed and well maintained, with just a wafer-thin top covering of loose rock and dirt. Of course, this empowers Shawn to open up the throttle...

Riding on gravel at speed can be very exhilarating (understatement) and it was great to again be pushed out of our comfort zone and into something new. The roads snaked over and around mountains, rewarding us with incredible views and heart-thumping riding. The highlight of this section, however, was coming around a tight uphill corner to find instructor Shawn flat on his butt. Shawn good-naturedly waited while I pulled out my camera and snapped his photo, proof positive that even the best of us can fall.



We have an assassin down...

We cross through the pass and get back on to one of the greatest, tightest, paved roads in all of America. I switch bikes with Big Mike to try out the 1200, then take off after Shawn and Mr St Louis down the road. There are no posted signs, and plenty of blind corners, so I stay as close as humanly possible behind them. I take a breath once every 45 seconds or so...

Top of the twisties...



Pretty soon we meet up with Highway 178, fuel up, and begin the 100-mile or so trip back to the ranch. Far from being a “commute”, there are even more twisty turns for us to throw the big off-road bikes around, and they handle like a dream. There’s one last pit-stop for fuel, and then we’re off the highway and heading back up the Raw Hyde driveway to end our trip.



My wife and two daughters are waiting to pick me up and I receive some enormous hugs in welcome. It was good to be back. Tired but jubilant, I park my bike for the final time.

And so endeth one man’s four-day affair with a BMW 650 GS...

FINAL ADVICE:

Don’t worry about:

- Your off-road experience
- Coming alone
- “Roughing it”

Do:

- Come hungry (for riding, for food, for fun)
- Bring your stories
- It.

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Nathan is a computer programmer who moved to California from Australia with his (trained chef) wife back in 1999. He grew up on a farm, riding old beat-up bikes on the dirt, and has been on a street bike for the past 15 years or so. He has two beautiful daughters – 10 and 5 – who he hopes will never grow up. And he only talks about himself in the third person on special occasions.