



THE WAY I SEE IT by Genevieve Schmitt

Organized Motorcycle Tours: Be Prepared

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IT'S KIND OF AN OXYMORON. Be prepared for an organized motorcycle tour? "I thought the tour company does all the work for me. I just show up and ride." Well, it should, but you must do some homework to

make sure what you're expecting is what's delivered.

In the last 15 years, there have been a lot of motorcycle tour companies opening their doors. This coincided with the availability of rental motorcycles. The concept of motorcycle rentals didn't exist much before 1996. No one had ever heard of the concept of renting a motorcycle. Harley-Davidson then got into the business of renting bikes from select dealer locations. Other rental companies followed, opening up all over the US and offering everything from off-road and dual-sport bikes to BMWs.

With motorcycles readily available for rent, it's relatively easy for an entrepreneur to get into the motorcycle tour business. In the past, a tour company owner had to buy his own fleet of motorcycles, making entrée into the world of motorcycle touring cost prohibitive for most people. Not so anymore. With the costly part of owning a fleet of motorcycles now being contracted out to dealerships, more entrepreneurs are getting into the touring business, so it's important that you ask a lot of questions to make sure what's promised is what you get.

A motorcycle tour company is doing the work of planning your two-wheeled vacation for you so all you do is show up and enjoy the ride. However, what sets one company apart from another is how much it exceeds your expectations. A first-class guide knows the area and gets treated like a local at all the places you visit because he has been there countless times before.

Here are some questions to ask:

1. What's included in the price of your tour, and, more importantly, what is not? Alcoholic beverages and fuel are usually not included, but what about meals? Some include just breakfast; others include dinner and breakfast with lunch on your own. I've found there's no real standard here. If you're on your own, you should expect your guide to give you personal recommendations in the towns you stop in so you're not left wandering around looking for the best lunch or dinner.
2. How is the riding structured? An organized tour means you'll be riding in a group. Some are the "follow the leader" type, with the group always staying together on the road, while others allow riders to go ahead to the next stop at their own pace. I've been on both. I'm always leery about riding in a group of three or more when I don't know the skill level of those riders, or the tour leader for that matter.
3. How much experience does this tour operator have in this business? Don't ask how many years he's been in business; ask how many tours he's led. There is something to be said for experience leading a group of motorcycle riders and understanding the needs of discriminating travelers. Find out if the tour leader has gone through road captain training and group rider training. You assume the leader and his support staff have experience leading a group, but if the company is new, he may not have much. If he hasn't, then the ride is

no different than riding with a bunch of people and one person designating himself the leader.

4. How does the tour company plan to cater to your needs? Will there be a support vehicle to carry luggage (or not), and is there a trailer with an extra motorcycle to replace and transport one that breaks down on the way? What kind of cell service coverage is there along your route if being in touch is important to you? An experienced tour company will give a questionnaire when you sign up asking questions like how many years you've been riding, how many miles you've ridden, any special food requests, food allergies, or medical issues. And these are just the basics. A good tour guide anticipates your needs before you realize you have them.

5. Ask for a detailed itinerary ahead of time. What kind of roads will you be traveling on. Does the tour stop often to take roadside photos? If you're a woman rider, will there be a female staff member on the tour? Having a woman on the tour means the group is generally more intuitive to the needs of women riders. There is a difference.

6. Ask the tour operator if you can speak with previous customers or read a review done on the company in a magazine. Surveys and rating systems the tour company puts together itself are biased; and testimonials it puts up on its web site are obviously going to be hand-picked to make the company look good.

A tour can be a wonderful thing, but it requires a bit of research on the tour participant's part. The tour is only as good as what you find out ahead of time. **AIM**

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