

TRAVELING ACROSS AMERICA BY MOTORCYCLE...

The words conjure a romantic image...a lone rider crossing the plains, battling the elements, experiencing epic adventures along the way. But, I asked myself a year or more ago as I contemplated life and such a two-wheeled trip, *how exciting would it be for an 11-year-old boy to live that adventure, too?*

Pretty dang exciting, I had to admit. So this past July, my son Micah and I did just that. I bought a used Yamaha T7 ADV bike, packed it like a mule, and headed out with Micah on the back on a 6,600-mile, 18-state trek on backroads, dirt roads and trails over the course of nearly four weeks, and no interstates at all. It was a trip of a lifetime that, hopefully, would continue for him (and me) as he grew up. Before we left, Micah asked me, "Dad, how did you come up with the idea for this trip?"



MICAH AND ME

SHARING A MONTH-
LONG CROSS-COUNTRY
MOTORCYCLE
TREK — AND SO
MUCH MORE — WITH
MY 11-YEAR-
OLD SON

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
AARON STEVENSON





Left to right: Micah dangling his feet over a Canyonlands, Utah, precipice; I watched his confidence grow with each passing mile. A big thumbs-up after a tricky water crossing in Utah. Wild mustangs in Wyoming. Two-up on our school's GSX-R1000 at VIR. Micah and me, playing in the dirt. Main image: Micah's first view of Big Sky country, and a South Dakota road stretching to the horizon.



MY GOAL WAS TO EXPOSE MICAH TO PARTS OF AMERICA THAT MOST FOLKS NEVER GET TO EXPERIENCE. TRAILS HIGH IN THE ROCKIES; HIGH-DESERT PLAINS AND DIRT ROADS; CANYONS WITH 1000-FOOT DROP-OFFS; WILD HORSES AND ANTELOPE RUNNING FREE.

Whew...lots there to unpack there, for sure.

First off, there was my dad, a Depression-era child and Korean War veteran who worked hard and provided for his family...and growing up, I wanted desperately to spend time with him. Sadly, it didn't happen much. So when I was blessed to help deliver my son, and held him in my arms for the first time, I vowed to be the type of father I never had.

In 2021 I became gravely ill, and my future looked bleak. I thought my 9-year-old would grow up without a father. Fortunately, a good team of doctors returned me to full health,



that 11 was the right age, so I planned for summer 2023.

GOALS AND QUESTIONS

My goal was to expose Micah to parts of America that most folks never get to experience. Trails high in the Rockies; high-desert plains and dirt roads; canyons with 1,000-foot drop-offs; wild horses and antelope running free...all images that would be seared into his mind and never fade. All the while, it would give me time to create a deeper bond with my son, and create in him a greater love for motorcycling. God forbid I leave this earth before filling his heart and mind with great memories of Dad and the sport we all love.

But could he hold up to back-to-back 400-plus-mile days on the back of a motorcycle? And would Mom approve? Luckily, she was pretty comfortable with him riding pillion with me, as during my many years as a riding and racing school owner and instructor (Cornerspeed and Cornerspin are my companies), Micah had done numerous 100-plus-mph racetrack laps with me on my school's 2-up GSX-R1000, starting at age 5. Plus thousands of 2-up street miles. So really, I wasn't too worried about him going the distance behind me...but we'd certainly see.

Before we began our journey, a friend suggested we document our trip, so I purchased two small journals to carry with us. In the evenings we'd



and during that dark time I made myself a promise: If I could get healthy, I would take my son on the cross-country trip I'd envisioned all those years. As I'd told my son many times, "The true treasure of life is not in money or possessions, but the experiences, memories and time we spend together."

The last part of the answer was the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, which had a profound impact on me when I read it, but which became all the more impactful after I became a father. The story centers around a father-and-son journey across America by motorcycle, and in the book, the author's son is 11...old enough to develop solid core memories, but young enough to not be caught up in teenage angst. I made the decision

WE HAD NO REAL TIME FRAME FOR THIS JULY JOURNEY; WE JUST NEEDED TO BE HOME BY AUG. 1. THE GOAL WAS TO CRISS-CROSS AMERICA FROM NORTH CAROLINA TO MONTANA TO ARIZONA, AND THEN HEAD HOME.

Wyoming's BDR. Many days like this we'd not see another soul.



sit and write about our day, what we experienced and how we felt.

We'd also use helmet communicators while on the road, which provided not only written dictation directly to my iPhone, but the type of human communication I'd hoped for; day-long conversations with my son. There were long talks, and many a quiet moment, too, some of which were broken up by me breaking into song, followed by his helmet smacking into the back of mine as a sign of displeasure, or a punch to my shoulder. Yeah,



dad humor rules! By the end of the journey I'd compiled over 20 pages of active dictation, and the result of this technology was solid gold.

We had no real time frame for this July journey; we just needed to be home by Aug. 1. The goal was to criss-cross America from North Carolina to Montana to Arizona, and then head home. By doing this we'd



see Americana: farmland, small towns, desolate areas where I would say, "We're in the middle of nowhere." Micah was quick to correct me and say, "Dad, it's somewhere for the folks that live here." Touché!

Before we left, I told Micah, "The first three days and the last three days will be the hardest. We'll ride 400-500 miles a day to and from home. We want to maximize our time out West." And that proved true when we entered South Dakota, with the road unfolding like a ribbon into the distance. Cresting a butte, Micah squeezed



me around the waist and said, "Dad, thank you for taking me on this trip." Wow. Just wow. After three 450-500-mile days including a full day in the rain, it was a *big* dad moment.

AND SO IT BEGAN...

As the sun dropped low on the horizon we arrived at Badlands National Park, we set up our tent and snapped a picture of our first night of camping. Before we left, I told Micah, "The sights we see are just a small part of our trip. The people we meet and the friends we make on the road



will be every bit as special."

Pulling into a gas station one afternoon, we parked next to a line of Harleys, walked in to purchase a snack, and walked out to find several of the guys checking out our bike. Looking at our North Carolina license plate and Micah's small stature, one asked him, "You guys rode all the way out here together?"

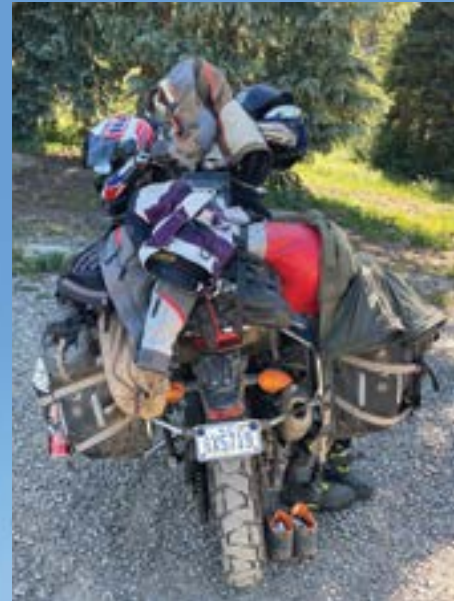
"Yes, sir!" Micah replied as he extended his hand. Ever since Micah was old enough to talk, I taught him to extend his hand, make eye contact, introduce himself and *always*



say "Sir" or "Ma'am" when meeting an adult for the first time. I could see heads nod in approval from the men, and I stood back to watch the conversation unfold. Micah began telling them about our first three days of riding; the endless miles of corn as we traveled through Indiana and Illinois; and the 300 miles of rain through Iowa ending our day in South Sioux City at a very expensive resort hotel. "Dad didn't even ask about the cost of the room," he told them. "He laid down his credit card and said we earned it."



Left to right: Yo, Wyoming! Visting with the Kinzlers at Lightshoe HQ, Black Hills, SD. The Yamaha Tenere 700 carried the two of us and all the gear flawlessly for a month. Great scoot. Snowball fight in July, Clay Butte Trail, Mont. Bison herd in Yellowstone National Park.



Conversations like this would happen all over the country during the following weeks, with adults of different ages and from all walks of life offering one piece of advice to Micah. “Cherish this time with your dad,” they’d say. “You will never forget it.” Most times he would just nod as kids sometimes do. But as time went on, and as the experiences and adventures piled up, I could see the phrase beginning to have real meaning. So when he heard it yet again, Micah would look into the eyes of the speaker and respond, not with an annoyed adolescent retort like “yeah, I know,” but with sincerity to say, “Yes sir, I know.” A simple moment that spoke volumes for my son’s character.

Our plan was to camp two to three days and then grab a hotel to clean up and wash clothes, a schedule to which we adhered. Our trip was also broken up by three different families that hosted us for a night over the course of our journey.

RAINY DAYS AND MONDAYS

Our first big day of sightseeing came in South Dakota. After hiking the Badlands, taking in the sights of Mt. Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial along with a good bit of off-road riding through sand washes and loose dirt, we arrived early evening in Deadwood, S.D., at the home of my friends the Kinzlers, Gary and his wife Kelli. Gary is the owner of Lightshoe (they build the best flat tracker steel shoes), and they treated us

to burgers and a truly unforgettable night on their rooftop patio.

Late that night a storm rolled through, dumping an inch of rain. The following morning we said our goodbyes and hit the road. I set the GPS for backroads and dirt roads. Turning down a dirt road, the warning sign read, “Impassable When Wet.” Micah pointed this out just before the dirt began to soften, then visibly became darker and slicker. Taking a slow turn, the front tire began to slide, and down we went at about 10 mph. Covered in mud, I stood up to the chant of “Impassable When Wet” and “I told you so!”

There was no mud on Micah, as he’d dismounted like a gymnast on the way down. The 500-pound T7 with 100 pounds of gear lay flat as a flounder. I’d brought a portable winch for emergencies such as this, but with no purchase in the mud, it wasn’t helpful. After our fourth or fifth attempt to right the bike, I could see Micah getting visibly upset. I told him, “This is part of the adventure. There will be times when we are detained, but we are not stuck.” A life lesson in patience and tenacity. On the sixth try we had the bike up and were on our way. Another adventure complete.

Heading west across Wyoming we stopped at Devil’s Tower. While the monolith was impressive, Micah found walking through the prairie dog town watching little furry heads pop up and down much more entertaining.

With the sun in our eyes, the silhouette of Cloud Peak at 13,171

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Micah's Zen moment, exiting a northern section of the Utah BDR. After miles of stream crossings and rock-strewn trails, Micah was ready for some asphalt. Drying his boots in the sun, he takes a moment to relax and find his inner peace before Dad begins canyon carving down to Kamas, Utah, for an amazing breakfast at the Mirror Lake Diner.

ROLLING SOUTH THE FOLLOWING MORNING
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feet rose in the distance, Micah's first view of the Rockies. It was a Keanu Reeves *Bill and Ted* moment as he exclaimed, "Whoooooaaa!" Yes, *Dad and Micah's Excellent Adventure*. Classic!

Taking a tip from the Kinzlers we stopped in Buffalo, Wyo., and stayed at the Occidental Hotel, a period-correct 1880s hotel. That

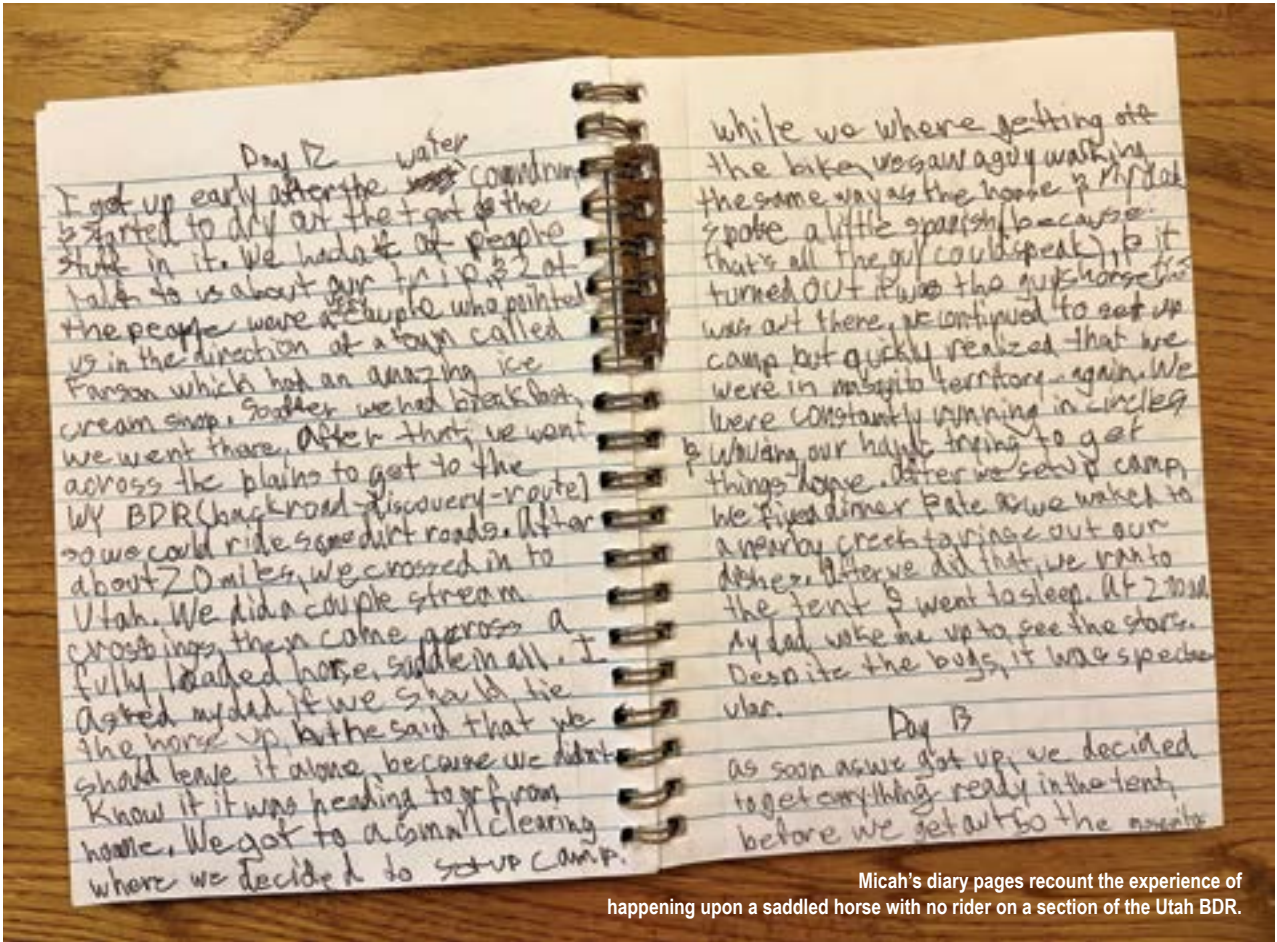
At a gas stop, a trio of ADV riders from Idaho pulled in. "You have to ride the Bear Tooth Highway," one said to us. Mental note...ride the Bear Tooth.

YELLOWSTONE, YES!

Rolling westward past Cody, we entered Yellowstone National Park through the East entrance, the least-crowded entry point. Within

ear, "Aren't you glad we stopped?" A small nod back sealed the deal. He was all in. Ready for adventure. From that point on, whenever I suggested a detour or a stop, Micah was quick to agree.

Exiting Yellowstone we took the advice we were given earlier and rode the Bear Tooth Highway through Cook, Mont., toward Red



Micah's diary pages recount the experience of happening upon a saddled horse with no rider on a section of the Utah BDR.

evening while having dinner in the saloon, Micah took in stories from locals, including tales of 19th century cowboy gunfights as they pointed out bullet holes in the walls. The following morning we loaded up to hit the road, but not before breakfast at the Busy Bee Cafe. That name sounded familiar, and as it turned out, Buffalo is the backdrop for author Craig Johnson's *Longmire* books, and why there were so many Longmire references on the menu! Of course, we had to order "Longmire Special."

minutes we happened upon a long line of parked cars and a crowd forming on the side of the road. Micah, being tired and hungry, said, "Dad, let's just keep going to the campground." I replied, "Something is going on. Let's stop and check it out." Kickstand down, we walked up to the activity, and, in a meadow a safe distance away, was a grizzly bear. A tourist offered Micah a look through his tripod-mounted telephoto lens camera. As Micah took a close up look at the bear, I whispered in his

Lodge. But why just pavement? We took a side road high into the mountains. Switchbacks on a dusty yellow clay road led to the top of Clay Butte trail, where we found actual snowbanks. It was there that Micah was able to check off a requirement from his trip list: a snowball fight in July. We did. I lost. Taking the Chief Joseph Highway south, we returned to Cody just in time for the Cody Stampede Rodeo, another first for Micah. Bull riding, calf roping and barrel racing, along



with rodeo clowns being chased, kept us entertained. But when the PA blared out a call for kids to compete in the calf chase, Micah, clad in full riding gear, boots and all, sprinted down the steps into the arena along with 75 other eager chasers. The lure of free candy and prizes kept the energy high as I watched a wave of swirling colors ebb and flow as two calves darted amongst the sea of sprinting kids. Empty-handed and out of breath, Micah returned with a huge grin. Even after a full day of riding through Yellowstone and Montana, the kid had gas left in his tank.

ALONE WITH NATURE

Rolling south the following morning, we picked up the Wyoming Backcountry Discovery Route (BDR) we'd follow into Utah. On long desolate stretches of rocky dirt roads, we never saw another vehicle. Herds of antelope and wild mustangs ran beside us. It was as if we had stepped through a time portal back into the old West. I'd hoped we'd see at least a few images like this on our trip, but the abundance of good fortune and opportunity provided more than I could have ever imagined.

While technology can be a good thing, it's only as good as the user. With BDR and TransAm Trail (TAT) tracks of the western U.S. loaded onto our GPS device, we grabbed various sections throughout our journey. Late in our journey while riding up the Million Dollar Highway north of Silverton, Colo., the Garmin alerted us to an intersection of the Colorado BDR. "Ready for some dirt?" I asked. "Sure" was Micah's reply.

Turning onto a dirt road, it suddenly turned into a two-track trail, which



quickly became single track, which then became *really* unimproved. So while I was paying attention to the deteriorating conditions, I wasn't paying attention to the GPS screen alerts: *25 feet off course. 100 feet off course. Etc.* Didn't I say the tech is only as good as the user? Recognition of my error came a little late as we had begun a descent down a boulder strewn rutted trail with a water crossing at the bottom. I could see lots of movement in the water, which helped me judge its depth, and it wasn't too terribly wide, so crossing it wouldn't be a problem. As we descended, fully loaded with all our gear and my son on the back, I said a short prayer, "Lord, please let me ride this without making mistakes. Amen."

Doing my best impression of trials ace Toni Bou, we bounced down the trail, made the water crossing and ascended again into the mountains. Still riding on really rough terrain near the backside of Richmond Pass, we found a main trail and worked our way down to a camping area. Now that we had our bearings, I asked Micah if he would like to go off-road over the pass to Silverton. "No!" I had my answer. This was the only time in the trip that he said "No" to detours and new challenges.

In Lander, Wyo., sitting at the Gannett Grill, languages from around the world engulfed us. German, French, Swedish and more. We'd happened upon one of the largest gatherings of rock climbers from around the world, the International Climbers' Festival. Lander, Wyo., is a climbing mecca. Now, we know.



Left to right: Micah taking refuge in the tent from the black flies and mosquitos. Enjoying the sun at Arches National Park in Utah. Sunset in Shononi, Wyo. Stopping for ice cream in Aladdin, Wyo., population 15. Post-tent setup in Badlands National Park. Rainy Day near Onowa, Iowa. Main photo: Shaffer Trail, Canyonlands National Park, Utah. Breathtaking.



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Left to right: Campfire at 11,000 feet with new friends near Cinnamon Pass, Colo. Rope swinging to cool off at Kellog Park on old Route 66 in Missouri. “Baby Scoop” yumminess in Fargo, Wyo. Micah doing art with Terri Cates Peña, the result of which hangs in our home.

**FILLING OURSELVES
WITH HUCKLEBERRY
ICE CREAM ON A
100-DEGREE DAY
WHILE CONVERS-
ING WITH FOLKS THAT
INQUIRED ABOUT OUR
NORTH CAROLINA
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TOLD STORIES OF OUR
ADVENTURES.**

We were told the best place to camp was City Park. We found a nice tent space there, but at 3 a.m. I woke to a rhythmic sound...which I quickly recognized as rain and, when I rolled over, discovered an inch of water inside our tent! Unbeknownst to us, we had set up next to the timed pop-up sprinklers, 10 feet from our tent. We moved a 55-gallon trash can between us and the sprinkler, and used bicycle shorts as a chamois to get things somewhat dry, but drying out completely would take the following day.

ICE CREAM MEN

Taking tips from an elderly local couple as we dried things out the following morning, we were directed to head south through Sinks Canyon to Farson, Wyo., on our way to pick up the southern section of the WY-BDR. Why Farson, Wyo., population of 211, and which consists of a four-way stop sign, a gas station and a three-story building with a sign that boasts “Home of the Big Scoop?” How about an ice cream shop in the middle of nowhere. “Somewhere,” Micah reminded me. Obviously, it was somewhere, as the parking lot was full and had patrons lining up out the door. The elderly couple looking out for Micah did not steer us wrong! Filling ourselves with Huckleberry ice cream on a 100-degree day while conversing with folks that inquired about our North

Carolina license plate, we told stories of our adventures. And our journey was not even half over. We filled our tanks, human and machine, then headed into the wilderness.

After two days in the wilderness of the UT-BDR, fording streams, camping in Aspen groves in bear country, and even coming across a fully saddled horse with no rider (not kidding), we were ready to find civilization again. Descending to Mirror Lake and into Midway, Utah, we had our last family stop with our friends the Peñas. Fresh sheets, a comfortable bed and an amazing dinner was the start. Gracious beyond words, renowned fine art painter Teri Cates Peña spent an afternoon giving Micah art lessons in her studio. Producing his own abstract art oil painting under her tutelage, it now hangs in our home, a constant reminder of adventure, hospitality and friendship.

Just south of Blanding, Utah, with temps exceeding 106 degrees, we stopped at a reservoir to swim. A Central American family with relatives attending their reunion from as far away as Australia had stopped for a picnic and swim. Invited to join them, we exchanged stories in English and Spanish and shared photos while cooling off. As we waved goodbye, in the distance the sky began to darken

until it was an ominous black. Riding into the storm, we took shelter in the little town of Helper at a gas station while the heavens dumped volumes of rain on the small town. After a long day of extreme heat, swimming and riding, the gas station burgers tasted like five-star cuisine.

STORM OF STORMS

While every road held a story, Colorado 10 had to be the most intense. More so than descending the Canyonlands rim road to the valley floor, Colorado 10 is a straight stretch of road from Walsenburg to La Junta. A wind farm and several ranch homes are the only signs of human existence on this desolate 72-mile blacktop. Dead flat on the Colorado plains, it's lined with barbed wire and scrub bushes. No trees. No turn offs. Just a blacktop funnel to the town of La Junta.

With the only hotel in Walsenburg sold out and night falling, we had two options: get on the interstate to ride south 40 miles to find a hotel, or take Highway 10 to La Junta, 72 miles away. Of course, we opted for the backroad! “It’s getting dark. Are you up for making the run?” I asked. Always the trooper, Micah responded, “Yes sir.”

So with a full tank and after a call to Mom to say goodnight, we set off into the dying light. To our right the sky was a beautiful cobalt blue. But to our



STANDING IN AN OPEN MEADOW BY OUR TENT WHILE STARING AT BILLIONS OF STARS, MY SON HUGGED ME, AND THE ONLY WORDS HE SAID WERE, “I LOVE YOU, DAD.”

Epic views and sheer drop-offs on Utah's Shafer Trail (above) made things extra exciting. Micah walking the scary razor's edge in Badlands National Park, S.D. Below, Micah bending backwards on the Four Corners. Father and son, Handlebars Food and Saloon, Silverton, Colo. The elk burgers were awesome...much like our entire trip.



left it turned black, and within that darkness we could see massive and jagged bolts of lightning appearing more and more frequently. I've been in western storms; they are no joke. As I watched the approaching storm, I could feel my right hand twisting the throttle harder. "Keep an eye out for wildlife, buddy," I said as our speed increased in an attempt to outrun the approaching storm. Rolling fast at night is something I never like to do, but circumstances demanded maximum concentration with prudent quickness. I continually looked for any place we could pull off for shelter. Nothing was to be found.

The two or three ranch homes we saw in the distance were all guarded by bull gates, so asking for shelter was not an option. The GPS didn't yield information, either; no crossroads or pull offs. Surely we'd see the lights of a town soon, I thought, but nothing appeared on the horizon.

Meanwhile, the storm seemed to stalk us, taunting us with high winds but never crossing our path. We reached the end of Highway 10,



an unlit pitch-black T-intersection with no markings. As I sat there befuddled, I noticed a faint glow to my left. Turning left towards the storm, we rode towards the light. And as if the heavens parted, we saw the green and white glow of Holiday Inn Express. Not only did they have available rooms, the desk clerk, a young Navajo woman, smiled at Micah and said, "The pool is supposed to close in 10 minutes, but

I think I can leave it open for another hour." It's amazing how jumping into a pool can wash away all the intensity and fear from dodging a lightning storm.

GRAND CANYON

Our longest day was not by design but just happened, as things often do. Leaving Kayenta, Ariz., at sunrise we rode 200 miles to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon on scenic Highway 64. Temps rose quickly, but by then we were accustomed to the desert. At the South Rim on a 104-degree day, a family from Laos adamantly insisted we join them for lunch and cold bottles of water. Fresh fruits and Asian sandwiches rejuvenated us for the 200 miles back to Kayenta.

We arrived late in the day, and pulling into the parking lot of a small weather-beaten building, we wondered if the food would be good. It was amazing! After a delicious meal at this hole-in-the-wall restaurant, *The Three Amigos*, I looked at the time. Could we make Four Corners before closing? We decided to make the 72-mile run to Four Corners for the iconic photo that every kid wants, a



touch point for all four states.

Our arrival time was cut even closer as we descended into Monument Valley on Highway 163, while noting the sign "Forrest Gump Hill." Arriving at Four Corners only 10 minutes before closing, the Navajo woman at the ticket booth was gracious to stay open long enough for us to take numerous photos. As we left, I found a hill near the Ute Reservation to take one of my favorite sunset shots of my son sitting on the bike looking into the distance on what was soon to be a starry night.

Riding into that night we found our

way to camp just outside of Mesa Verde National Park. We set up in the dark, not realizing that this day with all the sightseeing included over 600 miles in the saddle. And the best was yet to come. The most memorable moment of this trip came to me on that clear night near Mesa Verde, Colo. Standing in an open meadow by our tent while staring at billions of stars as the Milky Way revealed itself, my son hugged me and the only words he said, "I love you, dad."

By then, this "*On the Road*" Kerouac-type experience of self-discovery had taken on an almost

surreal feel. My son living the first act of his life, while I am in my third. Having lived this long and experienced many of my own adventures, to experience more of it through my son allowed me greater insight to become a better father.

Before we left, a major question was, "Can Micah hold up to 400-plus-mile days on the back of a motorcycle?" Sometimes in burning heat. Sometimes in pouring rain. Not sheltered by a windshield and a metal cage, but in the elements; feeling, smelling, hearing and absorbing everything Mother Nature gave us.

The answer? Yes! Rarely a complaint was uttered from the pillion.

Two things that made the long days possible and tolerable were padded cycling shorts and our helmet communicators. The sights were amazing, but much better were the hours of conversation made possible by helmet comms as we rode mile after mile.

We are home now, but the best part of our journey together has yet to begin. **AMA**

