

LIGHTNING AT FULL THROTTLE

BY JON GOSCH

CHASING STORMS ACROSS AMERICA'S SOUTHWEST



Like anyone who has ridden for years, I've had my share of close calls. Most of these incidents have been the result of inattentive drivers, but there have been other hazards that nearly brought me down. Gravel, dogs, deer. A tool set spilling sockets across the highway in front of me. A trucker blowing a tire.

Weather, of course, has been another major threat. Sudden rainstorms that diminished traction. Wind that howled and bullied me around my lane. Fog concealing the road. I've dealt with all these perils and more, yet the one thing I had avoided, until recently, was lightning. That was all about to change dramatically.



BUT THEN THE RAIN CAME. WE BEGAN TO SEE THE STORM CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON OF HIGHWAY 6, AND WHEN THE FAT WET DROPS BEGAN FALLING WE PULLED OVER AT A REST STOP BETWEEN MAPLETON AND PRICE.

approached.

"You're not headed for Moab are you?" he asked.

"That bad?"

"I just come from there. Had hail the size of plum pits. One of 'em cracked my windshield."

"Think we could make it through?"

He looked at the bike and back to me.

"I'd say you most certainly wouldn't want to try."

I hate an honest answer when it doesn't suit my wishes. Further, this man was suggesting we turn around and visit the Great Salt Lake instead. We waited for him to depart and continued on in all foolishness. And as so often happens to fools, we got lucky. The storm clouds broke and we arrived in Moab without so much as a scratch.

In the morning we toured Arches National Park and it was every bit as awesome as we'd hoped. The red sandstone had been sculpted by eons of weather into a playground of geologic

At the end of the summer, my girlfriend Logan and I had planned a grand three-week tour of the southwest United States and Rocky Mountains. For the trip, her parents had generously offered to loan us their BMW R1150GS with attached sidecar. We have our own bike, but with all the camping and hiking gear we hoped to bring, it was a welcomed offering. Adding to this decision was Logan's habit of falling asleep on long-distance travels, and my fear that one day she might slump over and bring our whole voyage to a permanent halt.

So we borrowed the sidecar rig, and on a sunny day in September we loaded up and rode east out of Spokane, Wash. As we rolled through Idaho and then Montana, I found myself in a state of motorcycle bliss. I had been worried that I wouldn't take to the BMW, but I soon realized I was straddled atop one heck of a machine, while alongside me Logan was already napping in complete safety.

In Missoula we exited from I-90 and began riding south on Highway 93 through the towns of Lolo and Hamilton. Our goal was to take backroads whenever possible, abiding by the belief that America was best seen off the interstate. Now my bliss became nirvana. To the west, the Bitterroot Mountains rose above the rangeland and farms, and as the sun set, their shadows lengthened like black fingers creeping across the land. At twilight we came into the small town of Darby and decided to call it a day.

That night, from the balcony of our hotel, we watched our first lightning storm of the trip. It was a dazzling and formidable display, originating beyond the Bitterroots and then advancing toward the town. Zags of purple lightning pierced the night and illuminated the mountains. Thunder rolled through the valley. I told

Logan I wanted to ride down the highway a couple miles where we could see it all better but she convinced me I was a lunatic. The lightning kept drawing nearer, the thunder now detonating around us. Then a strike hit a nearby ridge top, and a tree caught fire. We stayed up late watching the sky until the thunder finally rumbled away with sheets of rain following to extinguish the tree. That night the lightning seemed like nothing but a good show.

Logan and I spent the next three evenings reuniting with friends in the Tetons and then a night in Salt Lake City, but all along we were anxious to finally reach the national parks of southern Utah. For years we had craved to see these marvelous and exotic places. The names themselves said it all. Canyonlands, Arches, Capitol Reef, Bryce Canyon, Zion. In Provo we purchased some final supplies, including oil and a new faceshield, and then hurried on for the adventure town of Moab. We were ecstatic. We thought nothing could dampen our spirits.

But then the rain came. We began to see the storm clouds on the horizon of Highway 6, and when the fat wet drops began falling we pulled over at a rest stop between Mapleton and Price. As I stood outside scanning the sky for some leniency, a middle-aged man soon



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phantasmagoria, the rocks resembling a multitude of strange things. A globe of Mars held up on a skinny pedestal. Busted fists atop eroded leg bones. A skullcap too big for the rest of the face. I saw in that landscape all sorts of gnarled and arthritic anatomy while Logan saw palaces, thrones and an elephant. As with clouds, we often saw in the rocks what we wanted to see, and there really were no wrong descriptions.

The next day we visited Canyonlands National Park and then headed south on Highway 24 through the San Rafael Desert. We planned to spend the night in Goblin Valley State Park, but ahead of us dark clouds again marred the road. Logan and I shared a look of concern, but continued to zoom along at 70 miles an hour. Then we saw a bolt of lightning strike the ground directly above the highway and I pulled up onto a little promontory where we could read the storm. From that vantage, it was impossible to tell if the clouds were coming at us or moving sideways. Logan decided to call a hotel in Hanksville, the next town down the road, and ask their opinion on the weather. A lady answered the phone and she conferred with her boss.

"Where are they?" the boss asked.

"South of Green River."

"They're south of Green River on a motorcycle? Then tell 'em to get back to town!"

That night in the hotel I called my father, a veteran motorcyclist, and explained what had just happened. He seemed impressed that we had retreated from the storm.

"Just last week, a guy here in Washington got hit by lightning while cruising down the freeway," my dad revealed. "A direct strike through his helmet. Witnesses said he and the bike lit up like a Christmas tree. His hair was singed. His ears were burned. That's some bad juju."

"Did he survive?" I asked.

"Survive? Heck, he didn't even come off the bike. Afterward, he rode to the hospital. But I don't think it's wise to believe you'd be so lucky."

The next three days whizzed past in a blur of nonstop recreation. In Capitol Reef, we marveled at thousand-year-old petroglyphs of what appeared to be aliens. In Bryce Canyon, we stayed up late stargazing with the resident astronomer and then woke before dawn to see the

sunrise. In Zion, we watched California condors from the top of Angel's Landing, a hike so treacherous it had claimed the lives of at least six people since 2004. In the Grand Canyon, we listened to elk bugling not 50 yards from the cafeteria. We'd done everything we'd hoped and a whole lot more we hadn't even considered. The trip, however, had begun to take its toll, and Logan and I looked forward to a restful evening with family friends in Sedona, Ariz.

Through Flagstaff we began to encounter a light drizzle, and I stopped to put on my raingear. It looked like it might get a little sloshy but we were only 30 minutes out of Sedona, so Logan tucked the sidecar skirt up to her chin and we rode on. As we descended into the valley on I-17, the sky above grew black and forbidding and a fierce downpour commenced. Just when I thought it couldn't rain any harder, it did, and then it doubled that again until I could not make out my lane.

I saw the lightning, though. Over my left shoulder it flashed within a quarter mile. Then another, closer this time, and I ducked for all the good it would do me. I was truly petrified. I imagined that man in Washington being struck in head and I knew I would be next. I forced myself to breathe deeply, but it did nothing to calm me. All I wished was to get us under shelter, but there was nowhere to pull over. Ahead the sun was shining so I motored on. There was another flare of lightning, and then we were out from under it and doused with total sun. Within minutes we were dry as though nothing at all had just happened.

Two days later Logan flew home from Albuquerque, N.M. She had to begin her senior year at the University of Washington, so it would just be me returning the bike and gear to Spokane. I figured I'd take a week.

The first night I stayed outside of Taos, N.M., camping along a creek at the base of the state's tallest mountain, Wheeler Peak. In the morning, I began riding northwest on Highway 64, but when I again encountered lightning storms in the distance I beat it back to Taos and waited it out over a plate of enchiladas. My hope had been to camp in Mesa Verde National Park that evening, but with the long delay I set my new goal for a hotel in Durango.

The weather never totally cleared up, but I stayed reasonably dry and rolled into Pagosa Springs, Colo., with only one more 50-mile stretch to ride that day. I slurped down a cup of coffee and was off.

For as long as I live, I will remember that sunset. Fifteen miles out of Durango I came over a crest and what I saw was both thrilling and chilling. Straight up the road was the most perfectly terrible thunderhead I had yet seen, and the sun was falling right into it. All along the horizon, the sky was imponderably pink and fuchsia, and the thunderhead seemed to bleed these colors at its edges while its center appeared fiery and molten, something like a supernova ready to blow. The sight mesmerized me, but it didn't last long and soon the night went black.

Approaching the city, I saw lightning pop like a flashbulb, another squiggle along a ridge. Thunder began sounding from all directions like it was stereophonic. I prayed I would see an exit for Durango this very moment. Then the storm was upon me. I might have actually heard the buzz of electricity. My hair stood up tall. I could smell the ozone in the air. The lightning was honing in. Another bolt lit up the left side of my vision and the thunderclap was instantaneous and deafening and I did fear God at that moment as I jerked right and swung around the off-ramp at breakneck speed, turning into a parking lot, slamming on the brakes with a flurry of gravel, leaping from the bike and sprinting under the eave of some building. I did not care what it was.

Nearby a man had been sitting in the cab of a truck and now he watched me trembling. I realized this building was the property of a tow truck company and as the man came toward me I anticipated that he might reprimand me for trespassing. Instead he asked if I was OK. I nodded silently.

"That lightning was right on top of you," he said.

"It seemed like it. Do you mind if I just stand here for a bit?"

"Not at all."

It took a few minutes but eventually I stopped shaking and then I



felt embarrassed to have shown my fear to a stranger.

"What a wuss," I said.

"I wouldn't be too hard on yourself."

"I'm overreacting because of this story my dad told me the other day. Getting hit by lightning is still an extremely rare thing, right?"

The man scoffed.

"What?" I asked.

"Hasn't been rare for me. I've been struck by lightning three different times."

"Three times? For real?"

"Honest truth."

"Any of them on a motorcycle?"

"Nah. Once I was on a ski lift. The other two times, I was just sort of walking around. Guess if you're going to get struck by lightning, it may as well happen while you're doing something you love."

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