THE HARD WAY

Twenty-four Hours of Trouble on America's Trans-America Trail

Words + Photos: Alisa Clickenger

At any other time on this trip I would have greeted the rain clouds up ahead with relief. We—my boyfriend Edward and I—had ridden into Nevada's Black Dragon Canyon several hours ago, and the relentless sun sent the mercury north of 100 degrees. The water in my hydration pack almost burned my tongue. The Trans-America Trail had thrown us some curves so far, but this was proving to be the hardest section to date. We later learned that many riders simply go around this section, especially those on bigger bikes. We considered ourselves "purists," though, wanting to ride every mile and see every bit. And after close to four and a half weeks of navigating the TAT, we weren't going to start bypassing anything now.

The gathering clouds were dark and angry, racing across the Nevada desert in our direction. But the real problem is that we were in a wash. Flash floods are a common occurrence in the parched landscapes of the West and Southwest US. A storm whips up, dumps a whole lot of rain on soil that is unaccustomed to precipitation, and the water follows the path of least resistance through canyons and low spots. And that is exactly where we were—a low spot.

The unflinching sun marked time and reminded us of our snail-like pace; we'd covered only about 12 miles, several of them backtracking as we navigated County Road 199, which was not a road at all, but rather a streambed between two canyons. The terrain alternated between sand, sharp rocks, baby-head boulders, and about half a mile of yet deeper sand.

We'd been riding since dawn, skipping breakfast and lunch since we'd made the mistake of not stocking up the last time we were in a town, and it was now two o'clock in the afternoon. Looking back, it's no wonder I'd already had four "get-offs," separating rather unceremoniously from my DR350. We had retraced our route—again—rechecked the GPS, and cursed the blazing hot sun.

The wash opened up into a canyon. We rode along a streambed, and suddenly the trail was the streambed, the riding surface covered in fine, sharp, slick shale. The front tires skimmed the surface while our rear tires bucked and grappled for traction in the finger-deep shale.

Over the canyon walls we could see the precipitation streaming down from the storm clouds. As the rain clouds streaked closer and closer toward us, we raced down the narrow trail, Edward in the lead, me following in a cloud of dust and kicked-up rock fragments. One minute we were rising, hopefully up and out of the canyon, and the next minute I was tumbling down the washboard in my seventh get-off of the day.

Edward heard my "oof!" and subsequent cursing through the headset, and circled back. The dust had not even settled by the time he came around the bend to see both the bike and me splayed out on our sides. He picked the bike up and urged me to get back on and keep riding.

"Cry when we get out of the canyon if you have to," he urged, "but we've got to get out of here *now*. Let's go!"

We raced another five miles and finally broke out of the canyon and back into wide-open desert. The storm suddenly took a turn to the south, leaving us with only the scent of rain in the air. To our immense relief, gradually the sky cleared. We reached a crossroads of paths, turned the engines off and consulted the GPS.

It was decision time. We'd traveled 150 miles, and my tank only had a range of 200. The question was, how much gas had I lost in all my tip-overs? We could take the fork to the north, do a few interstate miles—bypassing a scenic section of the TAT—and arrive safely to gas and food. Or, we could chance it and continue on the Trail, delaying our meal and perhaps having to walk a fair bit.

We opted to continue on the Trail without the detour for gas. "No more crashing for you," Edward teased me.

We rode for another 20 miles, the shadows getting longer in the late afternoon sun. As we negotiated through sections of trail where the storm had passed, we were grateful for the diminished dust and cooler air, but now the trail was covered with a thick film of slick mud that clogged our tires and impaired traction. Our average speed dropped to about 15 mph as we slid violently all over the trail.

From the plateau we descended and banked north, only to be stopped abruptly by an unexpected muddy and turbulent stream. "Don't do it," I shouted into the headset as Edward revved his engine. "I've read the brochures. It's a wash and it's dangerous. We have no idea how deep it is."

Normally Edward is the more cautious of the two, so the fact that he was even considering the crossing showed how much a long day in the sun—without food—could affect someone's judgment. We shut off the bikes, and he huffed to the edge of the water, sinking up to his ankles in the soft soil. "Now what?!" he roared in my headset.

Indeed, it was a problem. Another consultation with the GPS told us that I'd ridden past the point of no return for the highway bypass and gas. I no longer had enough fuel to retrace our route, so our only option was to go forward. But we couldn't. And we had no food and little water.

In fact, food was a constant issue for us throughout the trip, but only because we'd decided to camp the entire way, which is not how the TAT is laid out. Couple that with the vast distances in the West, and, well... let's just say next time we'll plan better.

There were no houses, no ranches—just miles and miles of desert landscape. Normally we'd relish the solitude of the wide-open spaces. Tonight, however, it was our nemesis. Almost dark now, we had no choice but to retreat to higher ground and look for a place to pitch the tent for the night, and hope that the water level in the wash would drop some overnight.

We rode the opposite direction of the wash for about half a mile, and found a flat spot on high ground to pitch the tent.

It was difficult to maneuver the motorbikes off the roadbed, as the desert soil had turned to slippery, deep clay after the rains.

Pitching camp was easy. With the clear skies we saw no reason to put the fly on the tent. We had no food to cook, but I did happen to have two tin-foil packets of tuna in the bottom of my dry bag. There was a reason those two packets were in there: Although I'd carried them with us over 3,000 miles, neither of us had wanted to eat them. This night they were a gourmet meal. Seated on our Suzukis to get out of the mud and elude the fire ants, we ate our packaged tuna overlooking the tent and vast desert plain.

The coyotes made sure we were up before dawn, packed before the sun came over the horizon. The water level in the wash had receded, so Edward decided it was time to attempt a crossing. Before he plunged in, we carefully walked each side of the wash, then down the "island" in the center, looking for the best path of travel.

Edward rode about halfway across when the bike bogged down in the silt, sinking up to the axles and bottom of the skid plate. After a lot of pushing, pulling and a few mouthfuls of mud, we got his bike up the bank and onto firm soil on the other side.

I decided to walk my bike across after watching Edward's struggles. Figuring that lighter was better, I stripped off all my luggage and carried it over. I trudged alongside the bike, using the gas and clutch to maneuver through the silty wash.

I still needed Edward's help getting up the steep bank, and once again we sank up to the tops of our boots in muck. Soon we were both safely on the other side, scraping the silt off the chains, gearing up and repacking the bikes.

I had very little riding experience before leaving for our TAT trip, so the past 24 hours had been the hardest, most emotionally taxing riding I had ever done. Now the relief of being out of harm's way and beyond the danger zone was enormous.

Almost as good as the feeling of moving across the vast desert plains once again.

The Trans-America Trail

Crossing the USA on All-Dirt Roads

Originally conceived and charted by Sam Correo of Tennessee, the Trans-America Trail (TAT) covers 4,800 miles of every type of dual sport terrain imaginable—hard-packed dirt roads, soft mud, deep sand, rocky trails, loose rocks, and soft loamy soil—traversing the United States from northeast Tennessee to the Oregon coast. Travelers on the TAT experience our amazing country in a way that very few ever do, and completing the Trans-America Trail is a major accomplishment—and a life-changing event.

TYPE OF RIDING

Approximately 80% dirt roads, 20% dirt trails. Mostly dirt roads, but quite a few rough 4x4 trails and singletrack. Some farm roads and National Forest roads. The entire trail is on public land.

CHOICE OF MOTORCYCLE

Smaller dual sport motorcycles (e.g., Suzuki DR-Z400 or DR650; KTM 640; Kawasaki KLR650) that are plated for road use. Most motorcycles will need to be modified to carry luggage, as well as extra fuel.

DIFFICULTY

Easy to difficult, depending on weather and road conditions. Some sections are technically challenging, but these can be bypassed. Mostly moderate, rutted dirt roads with loose gravel, embedded rocks and forest debris. Some sections of deep sand and large loose rocks.

RECOMMENDED RIDING SEASON

Late June through September. Weather will play a major factor in the success of your trip: If you go too early the snow in the mountain passes of Colorado will block your passage. If you go too late you will hit Utah in peak heat, which can exceed 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

RIDER GEAR
Wear riding gear that's suitable for *every* climate—from hot and humid, to cold and wet, to dry and extremely hot. Your gear also needs to include armor for impacts and abrasion-resistant materials for sliding on hard surfaces. Dress appropriately.

LUGGAGE
Soft, waterproof luggage is recommended. Hard luggage adds weight and tends to get broken when you drop your bike.

GPS
Highly recommended. Waypoints and routes should be preloaded into your device.

MAPS
With a well-programmed GPS, you may not need to review your maps—though they are good to have with you just in case.

FUEL RANGE
Most fuel stops are about 120 miles apart. The longest section without fuel, food and water is approximately 200 miles.

CAMPING GEAR
If you decide to camp, keep the weight down and pack small, ultra-light gear: tent, sleeping bag, minimal cookware, and a platypus for water storage.

FOOD AND LODGING
The Trans-America Trail charts you buy from Sam will have you start and end each day in a town with a hotel, gas and supplies.

TYPICAL DAY
Most days are long—an average of 200 miles per day, or about 8 to10 hours of riding. Factor in about 25 days total of riding.

RESOURCES
Trans-America Trail
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P.O. Box 96
Tillatoba, Mississippi 38961
Email: sam@transamtrail.com
Website: www.transamtrail.com
(Originator of the TAT and source for maps and roll charts.)

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