

Something for the weekend

After a short business trip to British Columbia, and a tantalising peak at the scenery, the obvious way to spend a couple of free days was to take a ride on a motorcycle. The hire was quickly arranged by H-C Travel, and a short taxi ride across town took me to the rental location. Now Vancouver is holding the Winter Olympics in 2010 so huge chunks of the town – and as I was to find out, all major roads in and out of town - are building sites. The rental depot is opposite one such building site – the future Olympic village no less, but right now it affords a great view of the downtown area and its mountain backdrop.

I had decided to hire a V-Strom 1000, for the slightly quirky reason that I have a certain antipathy towards Suzukis (long story involving two strokes a long time ago) but thought the V-Strom could be the right bike this time. Kitted out with small Givi panniers (larger Givis and topbox were available but a little unnecessary for my 2-day ride).

So, after a quick run through – those stupid starting procedures for example – I was on my way. First stop Stanley Park, one of the world's better city parks, surrounded by water and a great chance to get used to the bike. Despite recent storm damage there were still enough trees to keep a woodpecker happy and the changing views of downtown Vancouver never failed to impress. Vancouver is one of those nice, compact cities like San Francisco, restricted by water, and it must have more restaurants than anywhere I've been – it even has a restaurant for dogs! Definitely somewhere you could comfortably spend a few extra days after a bike tour.

Then it was over Lion's Gate Bridge to North Vancouver and the stunning Capilano Suspension Bridge, every bit as good as the pictures. I quickly found my way onto the Sea to Sky Highway thanks to H-C Travel's directions, and I was on my way. Well, not quite, as this truly spectacular road – think BIG Norwegian fjords – is undergoing serious roadworks for what seemed like 50 miles. I never got badly delayed but it was slow work and there was nowhere to stop and admire. Finally, after Squamish the road cleared. First amazing sight was Shannon Falls, not much volume but a hell of a height. The road surface was good, road traffic light and the next 100 odd miles to Whistler just seemed to flash by. Time for a bite to eat, and Whistler has more options than anywhere for 150 miles. Typical artificially developed ski resort, but nicely done.

Leaving Whistler the scenery remains just as impressive, past lakes and rivers as the road winds its way to Pemberton. Good road surface and great bends. At Pemberton we hang a right at the only junction as the landscape changes to a wide lush valley, but they still can't straighten the road. In fact, the surface deteriorates and can catch you out if you spend too much time gazing at the scenery – bumps before bends, the odd pothole, changing camber, gravel in the bends, they are all here. Then the scenery and temperature changes and we're in a land of roadside snow and glacial lakes, with the odd rockfall from high steep mountains either side.

Suddenly there's a pale blue lake to our left and ahead looks more like High Desert – think Utah – than High Rockies. Seton Lake's strange blue waters then run down through a salmon hatchery to the turbulent muddy Fraser River below, and we're in Lillooet, set on a plateau above the river, and gateway to Goldrush Country. The whole river valley has this different look, and is noticeably warmer. I check into my motel for the night – a nice traditional place, with a slightly bizarre shower plug – a Fiat radiator badge! The day has been so good, I just need more. So I head out of town across the 23 Camels bridge (yes there's a story behind it) and off along Hy 12, the start of the goldrush trail. Lovely sweeping bends along the side of the valley, with the railway as companion, the sun shining and the bare sandstone warming the air. After about 30 miles or so of this, I flash past the small town of Pavilion, and in front are the crystal clear blue waters of Pavilion Lake – no sign, no tourist information, you just have to know. I continued to Marble Canyon, hoping for some golden light but the evening clouds were already forming. So, back to Pavilion Lake and a chat with an Indian roadworker who explained that the lake is one of only two in the world that have freshwater coral – and that it's exact location in the lake is a complete secret to protect it. There's a shack on a small island and a couple of canoes on the still waters – just one of those moments you wait for. A couple of bikes spin past and a boy racer in his gold Chevrolet subcompact. This gives me an excuse to up the pace a bit – hey I know the road now!!!! – to catch them up. The bikers are just enjoying the ride, but Mr Chevy has a go but gives up after a few miles so I ease off as well and just enjoy.

Back in Lillooet – home to the biggest chainsaw in the world – I walk the length of the town, probably about a ½ mile, and it's time for a homespun burger in the best bar in town, and an early night.

Next morning, up bright and early, I head for breakfast at Rickard's hotel, as recommended by my friendly motel manageress Eun. And quite excellent it was too, Western style with free coffee and papers to read, and busy at 6.30 am. I check out before the office is open with the 'keydrop', and I'm on my way. It's still a bit cool, and I'm heading south in the shade, but the road is fantastic. Hugging the steep banks of the muddy brown, swirling Fraser

River a hundred feet or so below, the road twists and turns for 60 km, opening up into ranchland then closing down to steep cliffs, and I ride the whole way into Lytton without seeing a single vehicle on my side of the road, and only 6 coming the other way – yes, and there's time to take in the great scenery as well. The road is prone to landslides, which apart from the danger of rocks in the road also result in some nasty patched surfaces, just to keep you on your toes. I reach Lytton, a neat little town with several activities such as rafting available. As the sun is shining, it's bright and early, and the roads are nearly empty, then so it must be time for a detour. So, I head up the Thompson River on Hy 1, another warm, sandstone valley, railway on both sides, and the road switching with the railway to Spence's Bridge. The surface is by far the best yet and visibility through the bends is excellent, so there's plenty of opportunity to keep the pace high. Spence's bridge has clearly seen better days, even the church looks like its falling down, but the bridge is still there. Taking a right fork the road is again almost completely devoid of traffic – the standard 1 car per 10 km is again about right – the flattish valley road follows the meandering river to Merritt. Merritt comes as a bit of a surprise. This is the first town since Whistler with any hint of a sizeable population and traffic. I stop for a warming coffee at the Coldwater Hotel, an attractive wooden hotel in the centre of town. And then go for a wander to see what makes Merritt famous. And it is famous for – the Country Music Walk of Fame! Yes, here in the middle of the CANADIAN Rockies, hundreds of miles from anywhere, is a whole town that is a shrine to country music. The graffiti is in fact portraits of country music stars and 7" singles, and the downtown 'Walk of Fame' is a set of small 'sculptures' featuring the handprints of country music stars dotted around the downtown area – think the Hollywood walk of fame but without the crowds and surrounded by mountains.

Suitably refreshed, it really is time to head back to Vancouver. I hit the TransCanada highway and am reminded that it's 115 km to the next gas station – should be just about OK! Apart from a toll plaza placed quite bizarrely slap bang in the middle of this road and with no village or town anywhere along the road, this is quite a bizarre road through nowhere. The scenery is of course unnervingly spectacular, the traffic light, and as we approach the toll plaza and the Coquihalla Pass the snow builds up on either side of the road. It clearly gets a little cold in these parts! Then it's a relaxing ride down towards Hope, gently swooping through the generous bends. Hope is the beginning of the end as the confluences of the rivers gives rise to a wide flat valley that leads in an almost straight line to Vancouver, some 100 miles away. But before then, one more stunning sight, just 5 miles from Hope – the Othello tunnels. You may not have heard of them, but they were made world-famous by Sly Stallone in First Blood, which was filmed here. The tunnels – 4 of them – were blasted through 300 ft sheer cliffs for a railway line. But that's not the half of it – the tunnels are connected by bridges over a raging torrent of a river that has been squeezed through the cliffs in a series of tight S-bends. To survey and blast the tunnels the crews had to scale down the cliffs and hope they didn't fall into the river below. Rumour has it the trains travelled through the night so that the passengers didn't get scared by the precipitous drops here and elsewhere on the line. Now there's a pleasant half-hour walk along the old railway track (so nice and flat and shady).

Leaving Hope, I opted for the freeway again for a bit, but then crossed back to pick up Hy 7, which runs through pretty farming towns, and if you're brave enough takes you all the way through the suburbs to downtown Vancouver. I got fed up with the traffic at Hy 9 and got back on the interstate, but in hindsight Hy 11 was probably a better bet – the traffic was just getting too heavy. As I hit the outskirts of Vancouver, the traffic really started to build up, so a bit of lane swapping was called for. Taking the 1st Avenue exit brought me out on main St, just 3 blocks from the rental depot, and the adventure was over (certainly beats gardening).

The bikes

Suzuki V-Strom 1000, starting mileage 21531 km
With city panniers, full touring Givi 3-piece available

Good points

Comfortable seat (I'm 1.89m tall)

Great suspension and good handling for the uneven road surfaces, it absorbed the cracks and small holes without trouble – I wouldn't want a sports bike on those roads

Economical

Bad points – call me old-fashioned but:

Pulling in clutch to start

Unsprung sidestand

Rear brake, when used on its own – useful on the gravel – it was useless, the downside of linked braking system

Non-adjustable windscreen gave my head a bit of a battering at even slightly illegal speeds

Inaccurate fuel gauge – only 4 blocks to cover a range of possibly well over 200 miles is a bit 20th century
The engine could be given a bit more soul – it's a V-twin after all

BMW R1200RT

Good points

You know them all. I would pick out the heated grips in Springtime and the riding position
Surprised by how good the mirrors were given their bonkers Germanic position.

Bad points

Windscreen – still not enough adjustment for me, and on full adjustment it rattled around worse than the Suzuki -
not worth the money

Too much road feedback – I'm told this could be due to the suspension settings but I could feel every crack and
coin sized hole in the road

Total distance 871 km (c. 545 miles)

Suzuki fuel consumption 5.6 l / 100 km (c. 50 mpg)

Fuel cost average c. C\$1.29/l = c. 59p / l (and they moan like hell about it!)

How to do it:

Contact H-C Travel on 01256 770775 or email david@hctravel.com. Full details of their range of bikes for hire and
self-guided tours – a good option for a full holiday – are on their website, www.hctravel.com. They can also arrange
your flights, travel insurance, tailor-made itineraries etc., and offer some good advice and information.