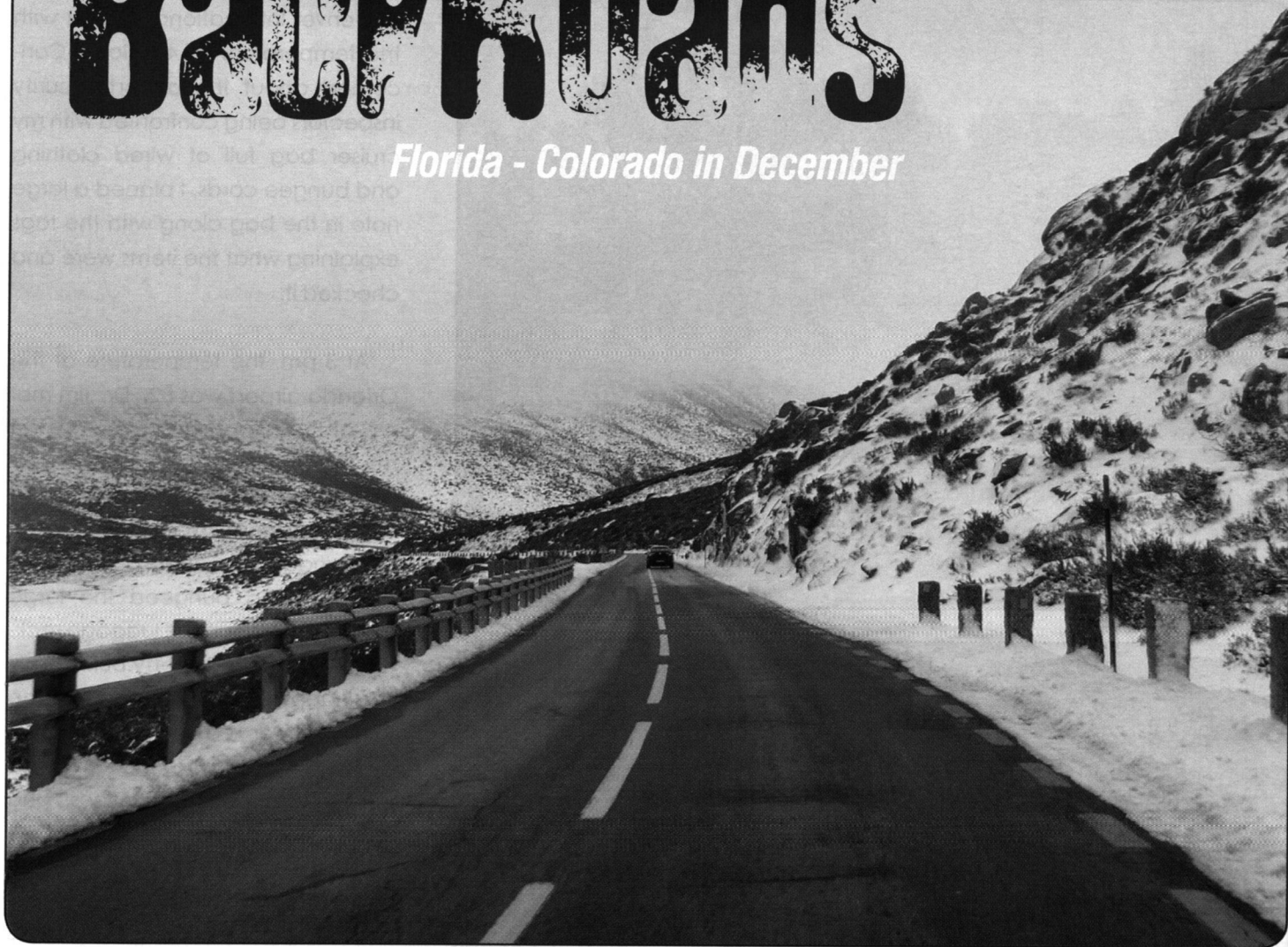


Back Roads

Florida - Colorado in December



Are You Nuts?

Tom Matthews

The e-mail read: "as a retired psychologist, how can I put this delicately? Florida to Colorado in December. Hmm. What are your plans for the eight-foot snow drifts in western Kansas? Hope you have electric underwear."

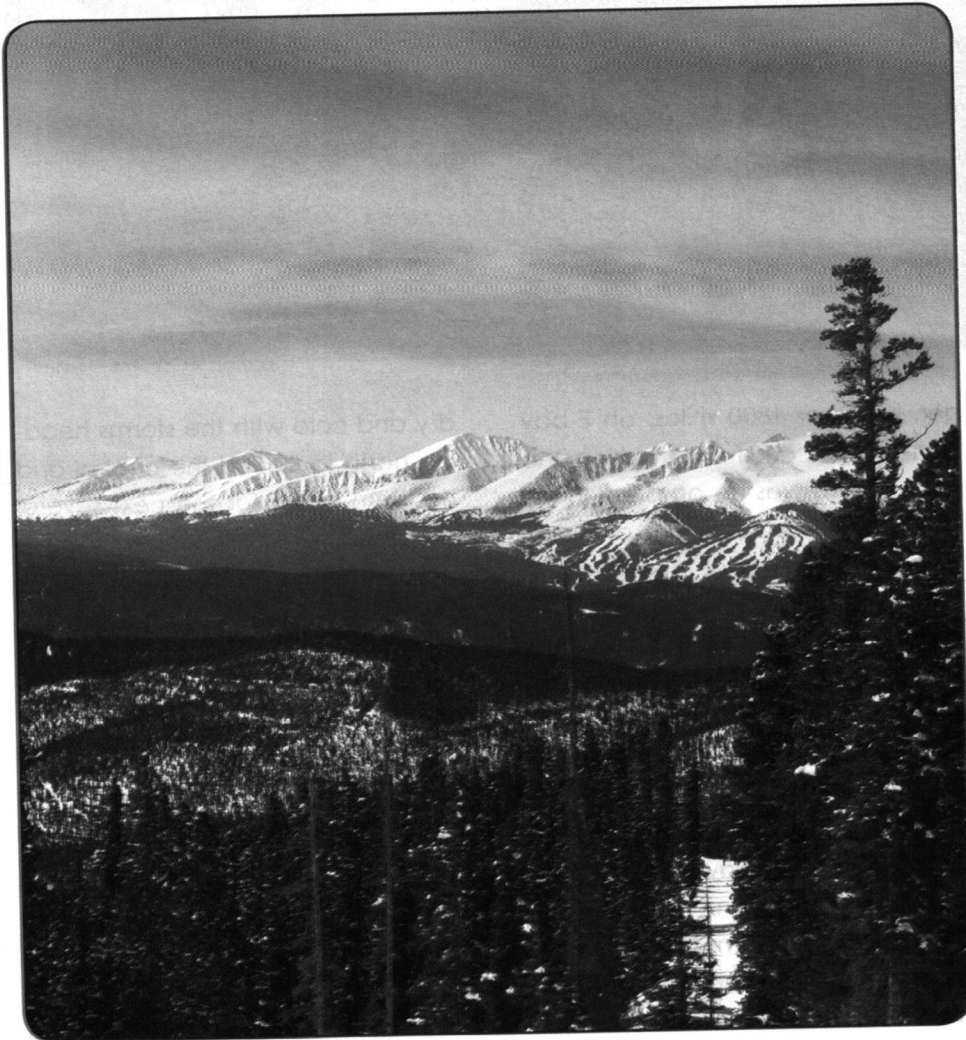
That was the second voice of doubt about the trip, the first being my dear wife, Lynn. It would not be the last.

I found the silver used 2006 Ti-

ger, just over 1800 miles, on E-bay and was successful in making the deal. There was no question in my mind that I would fly out and ride it back to Colorado. The decision was made easier as my editor had just arranged a Gerbing Cascade Extreme Jacket and pants to do a cold weather riding review for the magazine. To me, it seemed the timing was perfect. After getting on the web and studying the weather maps and the 15-day weather forecast for the southern tier of states, Texas and Northern New Mexico, it was clear that the best window was sooner than later. It would be

dry and cold with the storms heading north to pound the central and northern plains for the next several days. The Great Plains and Kansas were not on the route.

After a quick test of the suit on Lynn's Beemer all was a go. Motorcycle insurance purchased, flight reservations made, gear packed and arrangements made to Meet Jim at the airport in Orlando. Now the only worry was getting to the Denver airport. November 29, Wednesday morning and 12 inches of snow in the driveway. At 5 am on Thursday we were in the truck heading



to Denver International Airport with the temperature at 4 below. Concerned about the airport security inspectors being confronted with my cruiser bag full of wired clothing and bungee cords, I placed a large note in the bag along with the tags explaining what the items were and checked it.

At 3 pm, the temperature at the Orlando airport was 82. Dr. Jim met me at the airport and we drove an hour to his home to the west. He repeated the question he posed in the original e-mail. We went over the bike, made the deal, packed the panniers and bungeed the large cruiser bag flat on the luggage rack. The Gerbing suit is pretty bulky and I was happy to have the big bag. The Triumph Tiger is a tall bike, comparable in many ways to the BMW 1200 GS. Three cylinders, 955ccs, and rated at 106 HP.

After leaving Jim it was north on I-75. I try to avoid the interstates whenever I can but this trip was about time and distance with no time for seeing the sights. Here's a great quote about the superslab

"Thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel across the country from coast to coast without seeing anything. From the Interstate, America is all steel guardrails and plastic signs, and every place looks and feels and sounds and smells like every other place."
-- Charles Kuralt, On the Road with Charles Kuralt

I wore the Gerbing jacket without the heated liner. It was the only jack-

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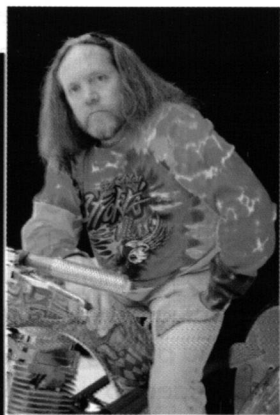
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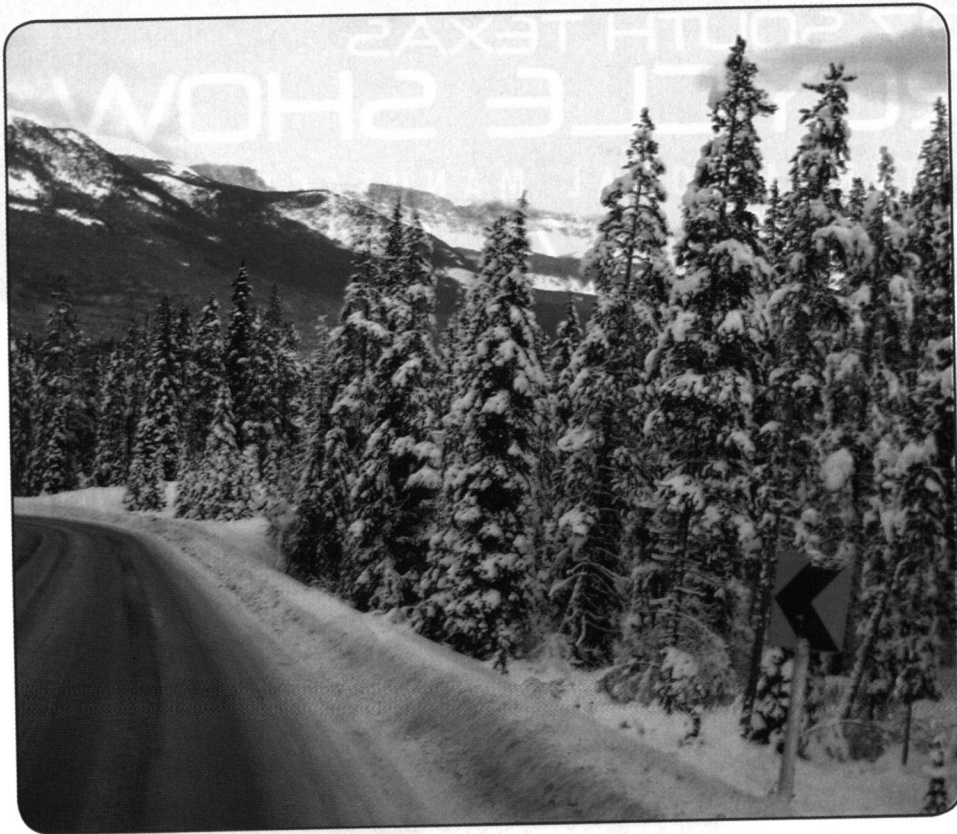


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et I had and found it to perform quite well keeping my upper body dry through several rain squalls. I settled in on the bike with the hope of making 400 miles to my sister's house in Gulf Breeze, just south of Pensacola, but as darkness fell the rain picked up. Riding in the rain is ok as is riding in the dark but the combination can reduce visibility to almost nothing and is just a bad idea. A room and a hot meal and about 280 miles short of the goal for the day. But all in all a good first day.

Friday, December 1st was cloudy and cool. Leaving Lake City, Florida just before dawn heading west on I-10 took me through several rain squalls and some drizzle before the sky opened up just before Tallahassee. Off with the jacket and into the one-piece rain suit. The skies began to clear as a large high-pressure sys-

tem moved in. As it cleared, it got cooler. Turning off the interstate, smell of the salt water was in the air. Inhaling deeply it was off the interstate and south on Highway 281. I had the road to myself across Pensacola Bay on the Garcon Point Toll Bridge to Navarre. With more time, it would have been great to get down to the beaches and ride along the Gulf of Mexico.

It was central time now, gained an hour. Arrived at my sister's house around 11:30 and visited a while. I got the tour of the repairs from Hurricane Ivan two years ago and saw unfinished roofs, some still with blue tarps, in the neighborhoods. Martha made oyster stew and a great salad for lunch, and as it turned out, this was the best meal I would have during the ride. After a quick trip to the motor vehicle office to get a le-

gal temporary tag for the Tiger I slid the liner in the Gerbing jacket and headed back north to I-10. Ever west, I crossed the Perdido River into Alabama. On to Mobile across Mobile bay and through the tunnel under the Mobile River.

Into Mississippi, there were three wild pigs on the side of the road. I thought about dropping down to Highway 90 and checkout the sights along the Gulf at Pasagula but stayed on the superslab and blew on by to the Louisiana line. It was painful to pass up a visit to New Orleans but no time in the schedule. I-12 bypasses the Big Easy to the north. Through Slidell and into Covington, LA for the night. From the interstate, there was little evidence of Katrina. The sun was down and it was getting cold.

Saturday morning, half an hour before dawn, it was 30 degrees with frost on the grass. Two guests were leaving the hotel and stopped to talk as I was packing the bike. They were concerned about how cold it was. They had not heard of heated clothing before and seemed not to believe such a thing existed. I asked them if they had ever known me to lie to them before. They laughed and wished me well.

It was cold enough to power up the Gerbing clothing. The Gerbing dual heat controller required a pigtail to connect to the Triumph BMW style accessory plug on the Tiger. A quick test showed pilot lights on the controller. I decided to ride about 10 miles and see how well the jacket and pants performed without the

heat before plugging in the jacket and pants. So, two exits down the road, suitably chilled, I pulled over and plugged the jacket and the pants into the controller and twisted the dials. The lights on the controller went out, the clock on the dashboard went dark. I found out a few minutes later the heated handgrips were gone as well. Obviously, I was not happy at having blown a fuse on the bike. It was sunny now and warming up so I decided to ride on without the heat.

I-12 was indistinguishable from I-10; four lanes through the trees. Not much to see until a town or a river. I-12 rejoins I-10 just south and east of Baton Rouge. Crossed the Mississippi on the Horace Wilkinson Bridge. The river is impressive wherever you cross but this close to the Gulf it is amazingly wide. No place on the slab to turn out and snap a photo. Soon the highway rose and became the Atchafalaya Swamp Freeway, a continuously elevated 18-mile highway across the Atchafalaya Swamp and Lake Bugeux just west of Baton Rouge. The elevated roadway runs almost to Lafayette. The roadway is on concrete pilings about 30 feet above the swamp and river. Interesting to see the houses in the swamp below and to think about the engineering that went into this structure.

The miles went by. Being on the road, being on the bike, interstate or not was liberating. No radio, no I-Pod, just the road, the bike and the next turn, the next bridge, the next mile. Thinking about those who questioned my sanity for undertaking this trip, I wished they could be



here now and know just how free and how good it felt.

Just north of Lafayette, I-49 peels off to the head northwest to Shreveport. The road runs through forestlands and past Turkey Creek, Louisiana. Very different from Turkey Creek in Colorado. Here and there, wafting up was the unmistakable smell of paper plants. I pulled off near Natchitoches, LA for coffee and a burger. It was cooling down so I decided to bite the bullet and see what was going on the Tiger's fuse box and get the heat working. The Burger King parking lot was a busy place. A high school marching band was staying at the Comfort Inn next door and a steady stream of uniformed musicians tromped back and forth. I didn't take time to enquire where they were from but got to work on the bike.

Turns out that Triumph designed the electrical wiring such that the

heated grips, the clock and the accessory plug share a single 10-amp circuit. It was no surprise that the fuse on the Triumph blew when any load was added. (Triumph must have hired some old Lucas guys to design the circuit.)

Fortunately, I brought along the Gerbing wiring harness that came with the jacket. With the harness wired directly to the battery and the wiring routed to bring the Gerbing plug up at the front of the seat. A replacement fuse installed in the bike and the clock and heated grips came back to life.

The BMW plug was stashed in the panniers and the plug remained unused for the rest of the trip. Sounds like a discussion with Triumph. Tools stowed and the seat back in place it was time to test the suit - heat. Back on I-49, the light traffic was moving at a steady 85 to 90 miles and hour. The Tiger has plenty of go and felt solid



at well over the ton mark though it seemed imprudent to push my luck with the local constables.

North of Shreveport and onto I-20 towards Dallas. The temperature was in the 40's now so I turned up the grips and dialed in a bit of heat. Wonderful, "This will be easy now." Traffic was heavy as closer to the DFW metroplex. I found my way onto Highway 287 north and rode onto the high plains. Closer to Wichita Falls, there was more evidence of a recent snow. The temperature was falling with the setting sun but inside the jacket it was toasty, except for my feet. I rode north in the fading light with the orange sun on my left shoulder and the almost full moon on my right.

There was a bit of snow in the shadows along the frontage road in Wichita Falls as I grabbed a sand-

wich and checked into a motel.

Along the route, Lynn was manning mission control back in Conifer. Checks of the weather showed snow in Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico ending Saturday night with bitterly cold temperatures into Sunday morning. Sunday and Monday would be clear. Lynn gave me the road reports – slush and snow pack on Raton pass and icy through Colorado Springs. The storm had made it into Colorado a day and a half early but as it worked out, this fit well with the first day's shortened ride. An extra half-day on the road was no big deal.

Sunday morning in Wichita Falls was cold. I cranked up the heat and rode off into the darkness towards Amarillo. My feet were cold – I need the heated socks. In the dim light, I mistook cotton fields for

snow although there was plenty of snow along the highway ditches where the sun doesn't reach. The ride was more of the same. Off the interstate now on 287 but I was still riding on a 4 lane. Occasional traffic lights and 45 mile per hour zones indicated small towns and easy access to more coffee and fast food. In Amarillo, at almost 3,700 feet, there was evidence of more snow with small areas of slush on the sides of the highway ramps and ice in the parking lots at the gas stations.

I stayed on 287 north to Dumas, Texas then north and west to Dalhart on Highway 87. From Dalhart, a quick run to Texline and into New Mexico. Now Highway 64 to Raton. The distant peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains came into view. Seeing the mountains lifted my spirits.

Back on Mountain Time again and picked up an hour. It was 2:30 pm and about 250 miles from home. Coffee and a bowl of red chili in Raton and a call to Lynn for a weather and road check. It did not sound good. The CDOT website was still reporting wet and slushy conditions on I-25 north to Colorado Springs and on Highway 285 from Denver to Conifer. The big concern was that any snowmelt on the highway would refreeze into black ice. Lynn also reported that the road up to the house from 285 was snow packed.

We decided that 7,888-foot Raton Pass would be better riding in the afternoon than in the morning so I hung out at the restaurant a while then rode the 28 miles to Trini-

dad Colorado. On Raton Pass, I saw the first scenic overlook of the ride. Once in Trinidad it was nerve-racking navigating the expanse of ice and snow packed parking lot at the Budget Inn. It was Sunday night with a fast food burger and the Denver Broncos on TV.

Monday morning, I slept in until almost 8. No reason to get out early as it would be a short ride and it would be good to wait for things to warm up. Riding the bike back across the icy parking lot concentrated the mind and it was good to be on dry pavement on I-25 north.

The temperature was 19 degrees and got colder dropping into the Arkansas River Valley at Pueblo. Even though there were 220 miles to ride, it felt good, this is my turf and it felt like home. The never-ending construction in Colorado Springs was a mess as always. The snowplows had pushed snow against the concrete barriers and the sun had caused it to melt and run down on the roadway.

It was early enough to beat the lunchtime traffic and Colorado Springs was quickly in the mirrors without incident. Monument Hill was crossed in a flash and soon and it was west on C-470 south of Denver. It was warm now, in the 50's, and I turned off the heat in the suit. Even my feet were warm. Through the Hogback on US Highway 285 towards Conifer and soon, through Aspen Park. Through one last bit of construction and one last half-mile of snow packed dirt road and the bike was in the garage at 12:15. Total miles were 1941, three and a half

days on the road.

So, would I do it again? Yes, in a heartbeat but with a few adjustments. Electric socks are a must have when it gets into the 20's especially on a bike with no protection for the legs and feet. I would also think about electric gloves. Heated grips are great but don't do much for the back of the hands. Wearing winter gloves tends to insulate the hands from the grips and the fingers get cold. Maybe gloves with a thin palm and a thick top would work, anyone make these?

The Tiger is equipped with an after market windshield and an air deflector but I still caught a lot of wind. I'll be researching windshield options for the Tiger and I'll be visiting with the folks at Clearview Shields www.clearviewshields.com to see what they can come up with.

The last thing is head protection. I wore a half helmet with the zip-on ear/neck flap in place and a neck gaiter pulled up over my chin. A clear flip up shield completes the lid. This worked well until the temps got down in the 20's. A lot of air found its way up around my face and under my sunglasses. I tend to feel a bit claustrophobic in a full-face helmet but it might be a better idea in very cold temperatures.

It would have been preferable to spend a little more time with the Tiger - things like testing the accessory plug and knowing how to get the seats on and off to access the battery before taking off but the timing of weather was the critical factor.

All in all, a great ride and a great way to break in a new bike. Running a motorcycle tour company, group rides are the norm but a long distance solitary ride once in a while can be enjoyable. Planning, the right equipment and excellent support from Lynn in Mission Control made it almost easy.

Beside, a cross-country motorcycle ride in December is also a good way to cement my reputation for being, hmm, how can I put this delicately?

Tom Matthews
Turkey Creek Tours
Conifer, CO

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