Stepping onto the wooden porch of the Crowbar Café and Saloon in Shoshone, California, after breakfast, first we hear it—a highly tuned engine pulling hard near redline, a quick up-shift, then another. The sound finally mellows as it reaches top gear. A few seconds later the purple VFR appears in view at the top of the hill and arcs through the long sweeper leading to the stop sign. There’s a T in the road; the bike can only go north or south.

We’re glad to see it turn north, toward us and the dozen buildings at the crossroads of Highways 127 and 178 that is Shoshone, because we’re curious. The rider’s black leather riding suit comes into focus and soon the bike pulls onto the gravel in front of the Café. When the gloves come off, we can’t miss the fingers with long purple-painted nails reaching up to pull off the purple helmet. With a shake, reddish brown hair tumbles over the rider’s shoulders. Who is she? How fast was she going through the final turns that led down the hill? Why is she riding a purple VFR with pristine white wheels, and who did that incredible paint job? What is she doing alone in the middle of Death Valley at 9 a.m., 150 miles from anywhere?

When we assembled at Buck’s Restaurant in Woodside, California, several days earlier, none of our Death Valley ride expectations had included a red-headed woman on a purple VFR. Buck’s is the famous launching pad for startup companies; it’s where PayPal got its initial financing. But no plans were pitched this early Monday morning and napkins remained free of diagrams. Instead, bikes were inspected, tire pressures rechecked and coffee cups drained in anticipation of a week away from the office, a Monday-Friday route on some of the best California motorcycle roads through Death Valley, ending in Sequoia National Park.

SAN LUIS OBISPO

Countless commuters clog the highways into Silicon Valley, but we ride in the opposite direction. Our plan is to be in San Luis Obispo by nightfall so, of course, we head in nearly the opposite direction to Patterson by way of Mt. Hamilton and a stop at the observatory perched on top. Highway 130 from San Jose to Mt. Hamilton is a fabulous road filled with tight technical corners and plenty of opportunities to slide off the seat and push a knee toward the pavement. The narrow road hugs the contour of the land with so many switchbacks and direction changes that the indicator on the GPS never stops spinning.

After a quick break at the observatory, we follow Highway 130 down the back side as it becomes Del

Death Valley has some of the most surreal topography on the globe—and some that is on for hundreds of miles while salt flats that are blinding even behind extra-dark sunglasses, sculptured hills and badlands laced with rushing water, and multihued canyon walls.
Puerto Canyon Road and drops us into Patterson. This 100-mile section offers compressed, non-stop twists, endless sets of banked and off-camber turns. It is easily as interesting as the more popular westward routes from Silicon Valley up to Skyline Drive and down to the coast. But this road always has far less traffic, and on this Monday morning, we have it to ourselves.

FT. HUNTER LIGGETT

Full documentation (driver’s license, proof of insurance and bike registration) is required to enter the Ft. Hunter Liggett military base. At 165,000 acres, it is the largest U.S. Army Reserve post anywhere. It contains Junipero Serra Peak and the headwaters of the Nacimiento River. But, we’re only passing through a portion of the base.

Dinner in San Luis Obispo is at the Tsurugi Japanese restaurant on Higuera Street. This is a highly anticipated pilgrimage for two members of our group, who soon fill the table with incredible sushi and sashimi. While they rave about the uni (sea urchin), the niguri and kohada sushi work for me.

In the morning we ride to Buttonwillow for breakfast, taking a short jaunt north on Highway 101 and then the beautiful ride on Highway 58 (California Canyon Highway) over the mountains and the north edge of the Los Padres National Forest. After breakfast we cruise through Bakersfield and down into Mojave, where we leave Highway 58 and take Highway 14 north to Death Valley.

FURNACE CREEK, DEATH VALLEY

Death Valley is hot. Everyone knows that. What is hard to appreciate is how hot. We arrive at our hotel in the aptly named Furnace Creek with time to soak in the spring-fed pool. Furnace Creek recorded the second-highest temperature in the world, 134 degrees F, in 1913. The Sahara Desert managed to top it, but only once, in 1922 by two degrees.

But air temperature is only one part. The ground temperature is much warmer—as much as 80 degrees F hotter than the air. A ground temp of 201 degrees F was once recorded. On average, the valley floor is 40 percent higher than the air temperature. Don’t walk to the pool barefoot!

Why so hot? Death Valley is a long, narrow basin up to 280 feet below sea level and walled by high, steep mountain ranges. With clear, dry air and virtually no plant cover, sunlight heats the surface of the desert relentlessly. The heat radiates and becomes trapped in the depth of the valley.

On our first day we seek out the healing waters of the hot springs in Tecopa. Half of the group stays for a long soak. The rest of us head to the date farm at China Ranch, ... area, provided me with the GPS coordinates, which got me right there (35 degrees 48.00.36’N, 116 degrees 11.42.45’W).
CHINA RANCH
Part of what amazes first-time visitors to Ranch is this amazingly lush oasis in the middle of the desert. While open and welcoming to visitors, it’s a working date farm. The date grove was planted in the early 1920s. Even without the delicious date shakes (made fresh to order with thick vanilla ice cream), China Ranch is worth a visit.

SHOSHONE, A WOMAN AND A HONDA VFR
Riding two hours for breakfast is a vacation thing, and then, probably only in places like Death Valley. Our early morning trek south on Highway 178 from Furnace Creek to Shoshone had been uneventful. With the Black Mountains in the distance, the morning sun causes the brilliant white salt in Badwater Basin to shimmer. It is easy to imagine it full of water. Reaching Shoshone, we’re hungry. After breakfast, emerging from the Crowbar Café, it is the characteristic sound of the VFR’s VTEC engine that first catches our attention. Then it was the bike and helmet, and finally, the red-haired woman who climbed off. Jon Ezequelle was the closest and approached first, but soon we were all admiring her, um… bike.

Our mystery rider says her name is Diane. She is taking one of her first long solo rides from her home in Pahrump, Nevada, after an accident. While healing, a friend found a ’98 VFR advertised in the paper. She funded having it stripped and painted purple with powdercoated white...
wheels. Rising early and taking a 150-mile solo run in the desert is one of her favorite things. She's since replaced the wrecked '04 Hayabusa with a '06 model and longs for another Ducati. After a few more minutes chatting, she turns around for her ride back to Pahrump and we head toward Zabriskie Point. Before heading back for more pool time and the Wrangler Buffet, we ride through Artist's Drive. This spectacular loop is 15 miles south of Furnace Creek on Highway 178. When the sun strikes the rocks, the minerals reveal yellows, oranges, deep reds and even greens. Not far away is an overlook providing a view of the Devil's Golf Course, 200 square miles of salt residue from Death Valley's last significant lake which evaporated 2,000 years ago. Even the off-road tires of the BMW R 1200 GS would do poorly in the gnarly salt clumps and spires, if it were allowed, which it's not.

THREE RIVERS, SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK

There's no better way to conclude a trip to Death Valley than to experience the extreme opposite of hot and flat—the snow and peaks of Sequoia National Park. We leave early and stop for breakfast in Ridgecrest, then head over Walker Pass up to Isabella Lake and a bit of coffee. A variety of winding mountain roads brings us to our stop for the night in Three Rivers, about 10 miles below the entrance to Sequoia National Park.

In the morning we begin our final day's ride into the park on Highway 198. We climb over 6,500 feet and see snow on distant peaks. Stopping for lunch at Wawachi Lodge, we pause to get pictures of the bikes against the snow in the parking lot and throw snow-balls at each other. Giving a mother black bear and her cub a wide berth, we point the bikes down to Squaw Valley. Sequoia is such a vast and wonderful park, it deserves its own destination ride and its own article. Skirting south of Fresno to avoid the traffic, we cross the central valley. In Hollister, I stop at custom motorcycle seat manufacturer, Corbin. While we have lunch in their cafeteria, they install a new seat on the V-Strom. It takes a bit of caffeine, but we make it safely back to the bay area and home. All-in-all, a great way to spend a week.

In the 1960s, Honda launched their motorcycles in the U.S. with an advertising campaign saying, “You meet the nicest people on a Honda.” They probably weren’t picturing the amethyst-colored bike/helmet/nails ensemble on the VFR I’d met in Death Valley. But from now on, I will.