

## SADDLE SKILLS

# STREET SMARTS THROUGH DOING DIRT

*Steve Larsen*

Even with frequent (but sporadic) riding experience, I'm always looking for ways to improve my riding skills. Added together, my riding days' ledger would probably show more off-road than on, but most of that was over twenty years ago. My riding during the past five years has been more on the street. As a result, my reading and training have focused on the street aspects of riding. In fact, street riding is, up until now, the only area in which I've pursued professional education. David Hough's excellent book, *Proficient Motorcycling: The Ultimate Guide to Riding Well*, points to statistics that reveal much higher accident rates among those who are self taught. I figure the more statistics going in my favor, the better. So, I've taken all the riding skill-building courses possible. Last year it was the Minnesota Motorcycle Safety Center's Experienced Rider Course; this year it's been Keith Code's

California SuperBike School as well as the Motorcycle Safety Center's beginning rider course. However, every instructor mentions that the fastest way to build street confidence and proficiency is to spend time riding in the dirt.

So when Burt Richmond of Lotus Tours emailed me about an upcoming Dirt Ride in Arizona he had planned with Gary LaPlante of MotoVentures, I had to go. Like me, Gary grew up riding dirt bikes and has been riding for over 30 years. That is where the riding similarities between Steve Larsen and Gary LaPlante end. Gary was the Arizona State Trials Champion for six years and became nationally ranked in 1976. His "real jobs" have included key positions for several major motorcycle manufacturers and aftermarket companies while remaining competitively ranked as a Master Trials Rider and expert off-road/motocross racer. As a licensed MSF Dirt Bike Rider Training

Instructor, Gary teaches and demonstrates virtually any riding technique – and boy can he ride! His company, MotoVentures, is unique in that they offer dirt bike training prior to a tour.

On a snowy day in Minnesota, I boarded a plane for Phoenix and the Lotus Tours' "Arizona's Best Backroads by Bike Tour" — three days of riding the best trails in Arizona and getting tuned up on off-road riding.

Members of the group arrived within a couple of hours of each other at the Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport, and we hooked up in baggage claim. Burt is

Rancho Grande and checked in. As we headed to our rooms, we came across the MotoVentures van and a trailer full of Kawasaki motorcycles. Dropping our bags to inspect them more carefully, we were joined by the crew, including Gary's brother, Brian, an ex-pro dirt track racer, turned cowboy/trucker. Brian lives in Phoenix and can find his way through hundreds of miles of trails in Arizona blindfolded. Also joining us were two expert riders and multi-year students of the Arizona backroads, Bob Fallers of Peoria, AZ and Rick Hammer from Carefree, AZ. Each of these guys



hard to miss, a wiry 63 year old with the energy of a teenager. He captured the group and took us to find our limo (a large white van), and we headed off to meet the rest of the group.

Wickenburg, AZ is a rustic western mining town about an hour and a half north and west of Phoenix. The Phoenix sprawl had me thinking that the lights and edges of this metropolis were going to spread all the way to Wickenburg, but the last half hour was barren desert.

We arrived at the Best Western

seemed to have a navigation system tuned to Arizona deserts in their heads. An awesome team!

Every great ride starts with great food, so we launched ours at Cachina's Cantina for terrific Mexican food, cold beer and pitchers of margaritas. Ole! Wickenburg was filling up with people in anticipation of its annual Gold Rush Days, so after dinner we walked to a car-

**See the country.  
Literally.**



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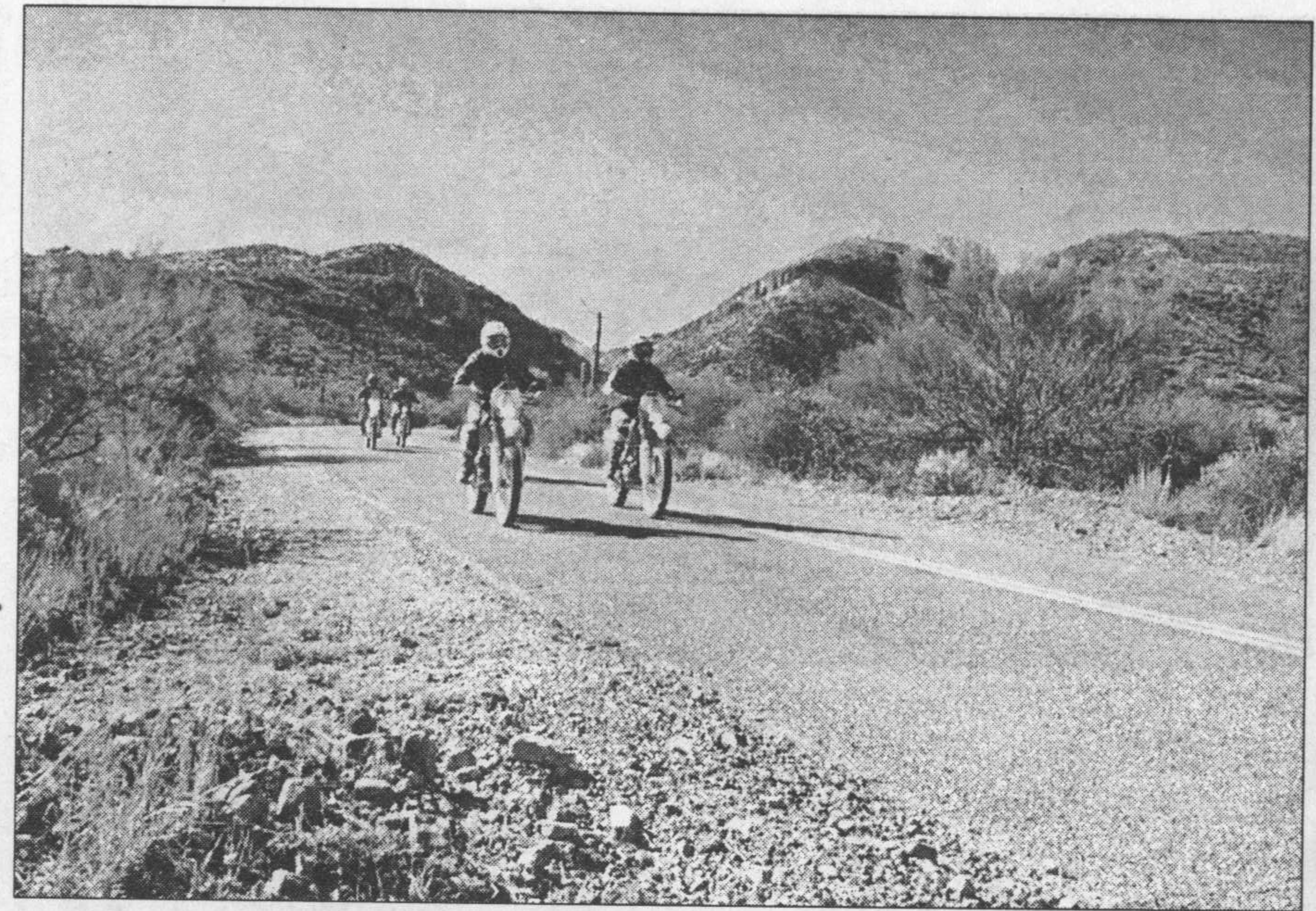
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nival with rides and game booths. Other than the people working there, we were the only ones over 20 years old. Strolling along, Gary and Brian told stories of their parents taking them to Gold Rush Days and panning for actual gold in sluices, which had been stocked with gold for the kids to find. Our early departure the next day cut the reminiscences short and off we went to bed.

Friday morning began with a hearty breakfast, a safety briefing and an overview of the bikes. Lotus Tours and MotoVentures have an outstanding safety record. A lot of this has to do with the

safety briefings held at the beginning of each day. While dinner the night before began to get us out of our fast paced, competitive frames of mind, the morning briefing took us the rest of the way. Burt and Gary emphasized that this was not a race. We would be traveling through some of the most beautiful scenery in the world, and while we might like to race, on the first day especially, we should take the time to see our surroundings and to stop and smell the roses – which in this case were mostly Christmas cacti.

Gary quickly introduced us to a fleet of brand new “out-of-the-box,” 2002 Kawasaki KLX300s. The KLX300 is a very lightweight (230 lbs) four-stroke,

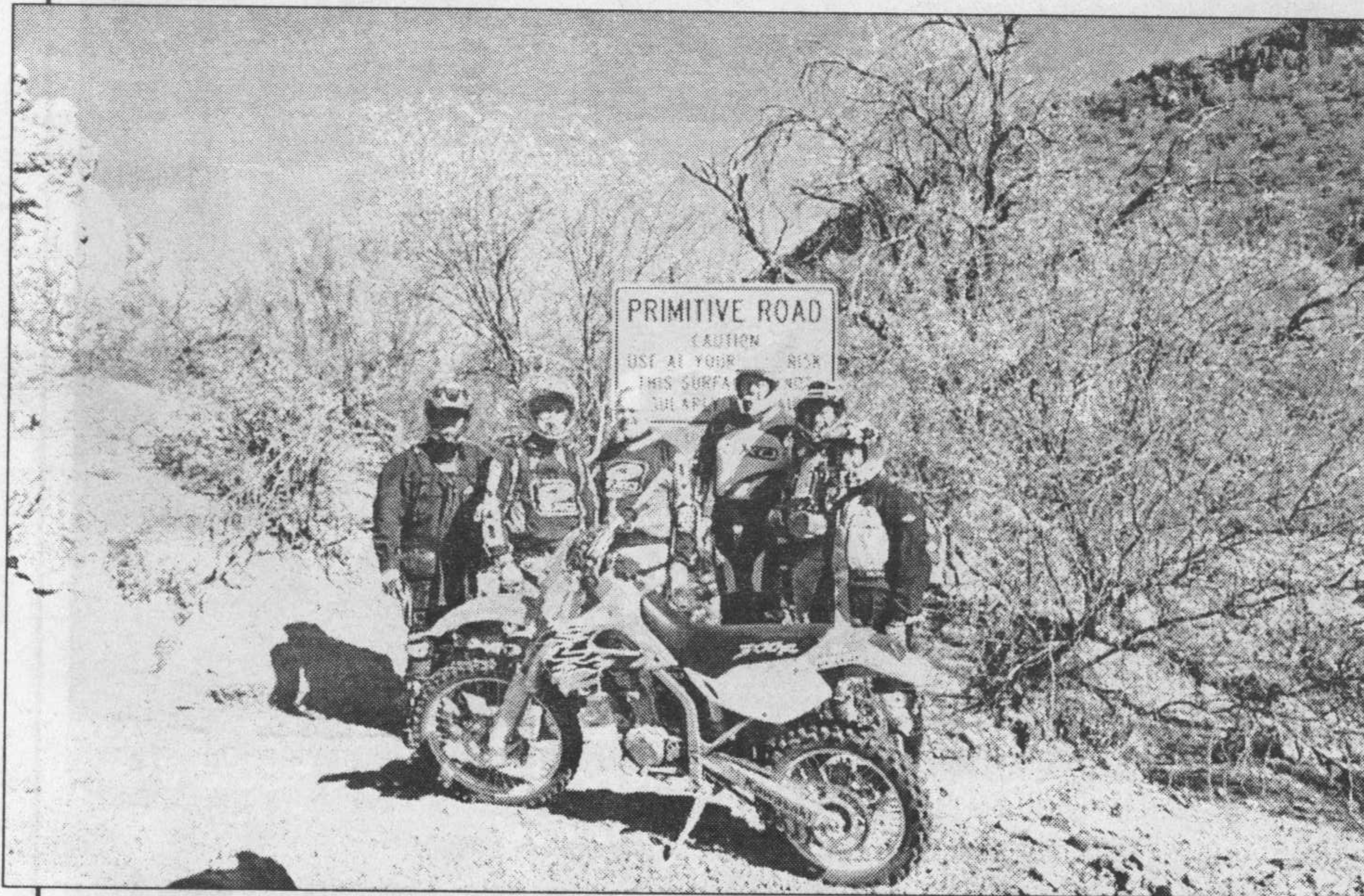


six-speed bike with two-stroke-type maneuverability. Being “inseam challenged,” I initially found the 36.4 inch ride height a bit intimidating, but after a few turns around the parking lot, it seemed fine. After a brief overview of where we would be going and the terrain to expect, we got into our gear. MotoVentures provides complete body armor, boots & gloves for all participants.

It was at this point that Bob finally admitted that he must have gotten bad oysters the night before. He was not feeling well. He had skipped breakfast, which made some of us suspicious, and as we prepared to mount up, we all noticed that he looked a bit pale. In ret-

rospect, this is where we made our big mistake of the trip. While Bob should have decided to ride in the truck for a couple of hours until he felt better, I think he felt that what he really needed was an early morning ride in the fresh air to put things right. Wrong!

We rode east onto mining roads and through desert sand washes. No more than an hour into our ride, on a good gravel road (soft on the outside, firm in the middle), I noticed we were missing a couple of riders. Not far back we discovered Bob, who'd gotten wide in a turn and lost the bike. Now, in addition to a queasy stomach, his shoulder didn't feel that hot. But he bravely climbed back on the bike and continued, albeit it



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at a slower pace. We crossed a few streams, tentatively at first, but after the third or fourth one, we looked forward to splashing through them. The morning continued on mining roads until we came across a big gold-digging river barge out in the middle of the desert in a dry riverbed. This seemed an odd site at first and we all had a good time speculating on how it got out there and what it was for – but finally learned it was a fairly typical procedure to excavate mineral-rich riverbeds.

Gary's coaching was invaluable during the next stretch. Extremely loose gravel requires very different techniques from street riding. The first is to stay light on the steering, aiming the bike down the road without becoming overly

concerned about precisely where the front wheel is or appears to want to go. Turning is through traditional counter steering (push the handlebar in the direction you wish to go), but with slightly less lean angle than the street. In addition, your body position on the bike is different and far more active than when riding on the street. With regards to the rear wheel, you become accustomed to it losing traction. After an hour or so, I was getting on the throttle in the turns and then, as the rear wheel began to spin, used my body a good bit more to maintain the proper bike position while sliding through the turn. What fun!

Just after the Cottonwood Creek crossing and prior to covering some pretty rocky pieces of road, Bob admit-

ted that he might want to break off at lunch and have a doctor check him out. We split up and Bob and Rick branched off toward the highway to meet the truck.

The rest of us headed southeast on the Great Western Trail, stopping at New River for lunch. At the tail end of lunch, Bob arrived with his arm in a sling and a report: X-Rays confirmed a cracked rib and separated shoulder. Unfortunately, this meant we'd lose him for the rest of the trip. Bummer. The lesson: if you're not feeling 100% up to snuff physically, stay off your bike, especially an unfamiliar bike in new and challenging terrain.

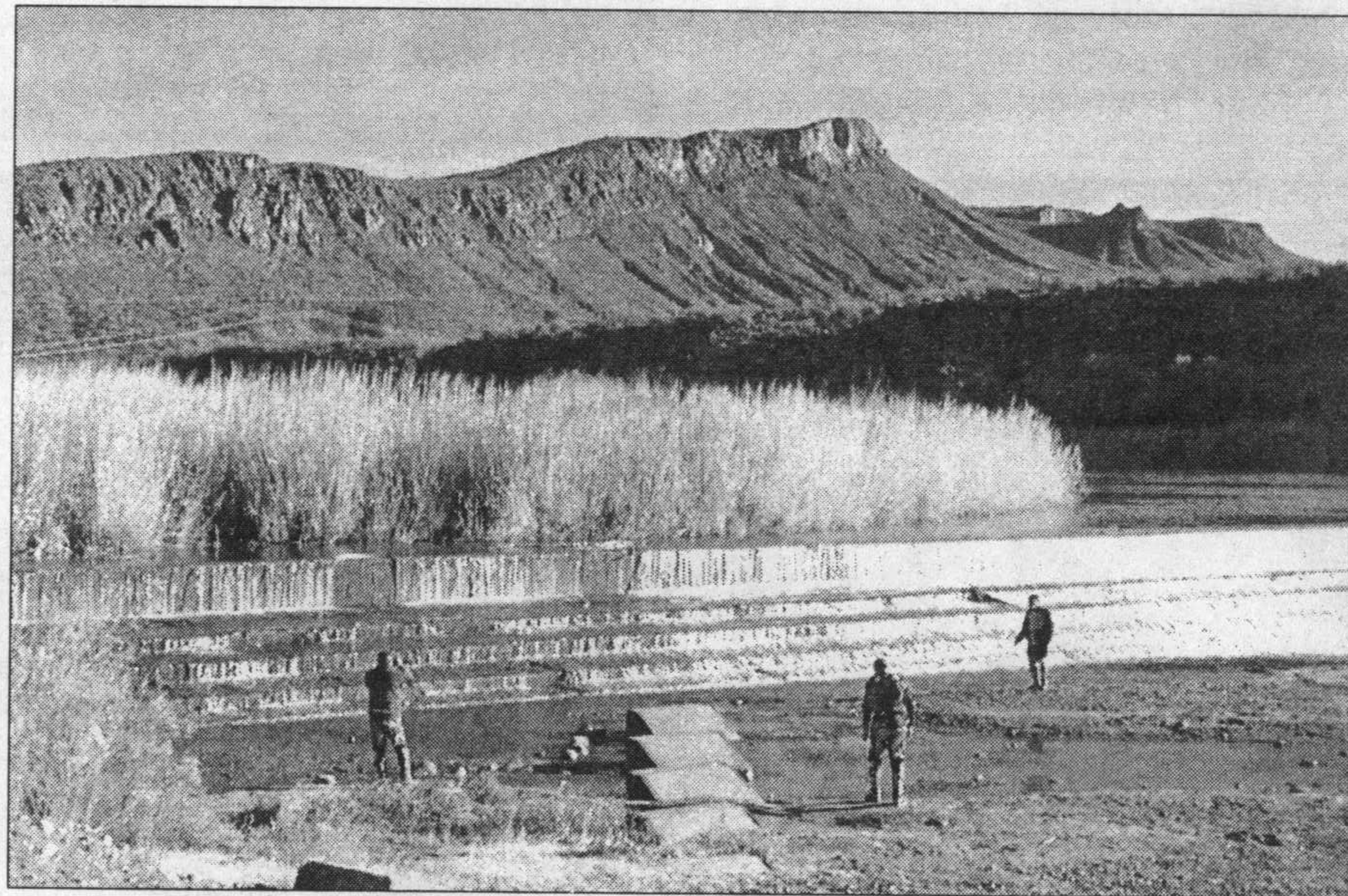
After seven hours and more than 100 miles, we arrived in Carefree, AZ. Our

overnight camp was a palace comprising several luxury condo units. After showers, we all convened for a few beers and motorcycle lies.

As we don't drink and drive (ever), we caught a cab into Carefree for a memorable dinner at Harold's Cowboy Bar. It was loud, packed and happy. Bob, Brian and Rick (the locals) made a good attempt at closing the place, while the rest of us headed for sound sleep.

After breakfast and a quick route briefing on Saturday morning, we steered toward Bartlett Lake. The plan was to cross the Rio Verde River and Sycamore Creek, ride over the top of the Four Peaks and then the Mazatzal Mountain Range in the Tonto National

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**BREAK THE STATUS QUO**

**BRANCHVILLE**



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Forest. However, to warm up for the mountains, Gary had us spend the morning doing technical riding on sandy single track trails with lots of deep whoops, deep sand turns and jumps. This was exactly what I needed.

One of the fastest ways to improve your technique is to ride with people more skilled than yourself: watch carefully and emulate what they do. One of Gary's pals on this trip is Rick Hammer. While I wanted to see Gary's instructions executed to the nth degree, I watched Rick. He not only rides faster than I through more difficult lines, he often does it riding on one wheel! Unlike the terrain on Friday, Saturday's roads were fairly flat and the rocks had been replaced with forgiving sand. By lunchtime everyone was completely



comfortable with a back tire that only partially bit in to find full traction — in fact, most of the time the rear tire was sliding and/or spinning. It's been quite a few years since I actually tried to get air on a motorcycle, so I approached the whoops cautiously at first. However, pretty soon it became clear that flying over some of these bumps actually smoothed things out. The combination of great suspension on the Kawasaki and the soft sand, made landing a simple matter. Flying soon became the norm and I felt like a kid again.

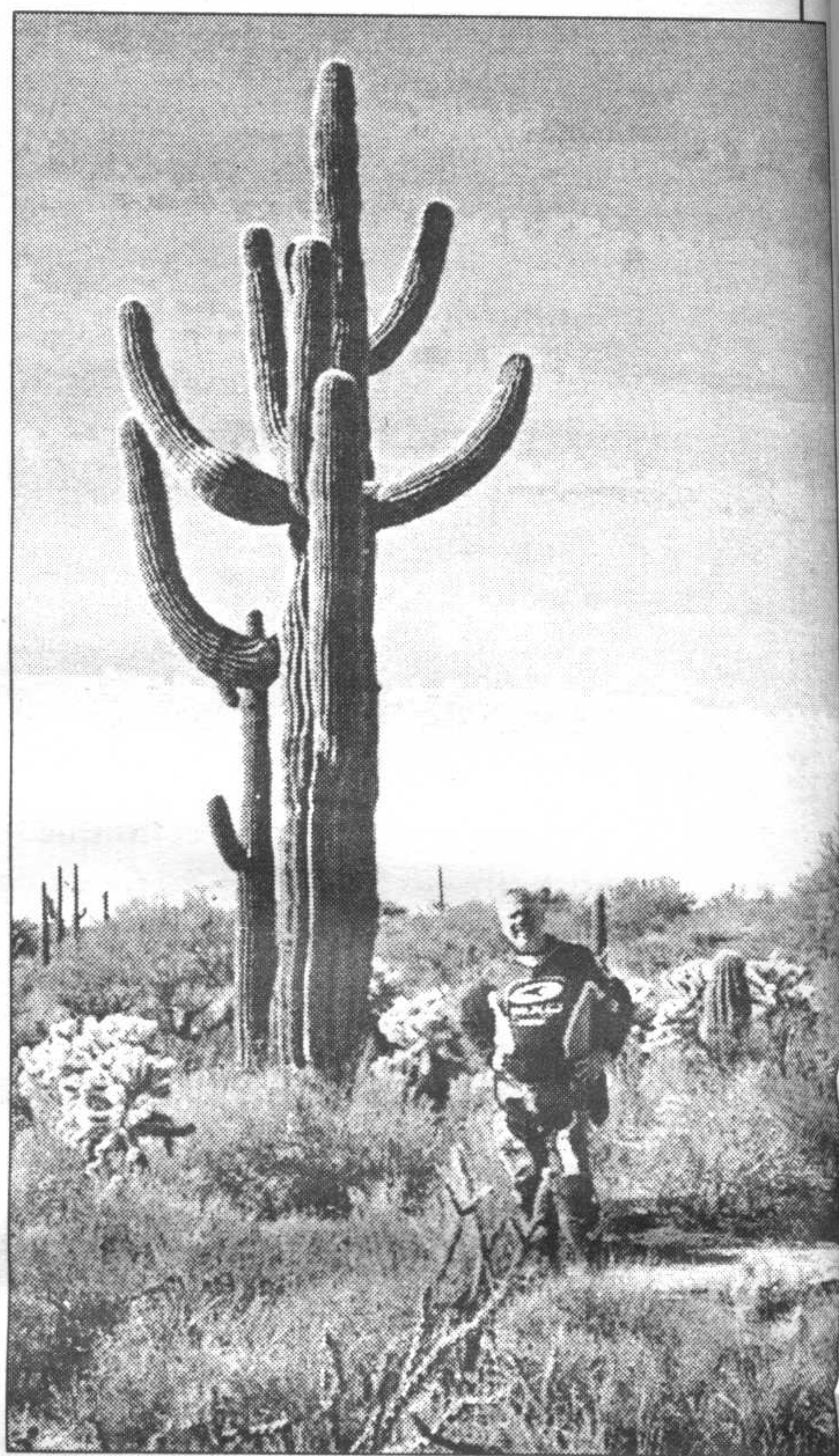
We hit some county black top to find the path that would take us from 1,300 feet to 8,000 feet for crossing the mountain range. This is an incredibly beautiful area of the world, with gorgeous vistas around nearly every turn. Above the

I DON'T THINK I'LL NEED TO





tas around nearly every turn. Above the



timberline, we encountered snow and patches of ice. A single day's terrain doesn't get more diverse: sun, sand, snow and ice! Even as a frequent Arizona visitor, I was unaware of these high Arizona altitudes and the beauty there.

At the very top of the mountain we stopped to appreciate Roosevelt Lake, a quiet and undisturbed body of water.

After coming down the other side of the mountain range, we stopped for lunch at Butcher's Hook restaurant located in Tonto Basin along the Tonto Creek. Then we followed the foothills of the Sierra Ancha Mountain Range to House Rock where we explored remote hilltop Indian ruins. The Sierra Ancha range is a rough set of mountains known for containing gold. We were back to riding on rocks but were thoroughly compensated by stunning lake views..

After checking out the Salt River and its lower dam, we rode into the small tourist village of Lake Roosevelt Retreat. It has a general store and a post office, but no gas station. This is truly a remote, off-the-beaten-path stop. Eight hours in the saddle and over 100 miles of tough trails makes a cold beer especially refreshing. Cleaned-up and hun-





gry, several tired riders really enjoyed the resort restaurant's prime rib special.

Sunday morning started with a ride to Roosevelt Lake and the Tonto National Monument. This site is home to 700-year-old caves high on a cliff overlooking the Tonto Basin. This was home to the prehistoric Salado people, named in the early 20th century after the life-giving Rio Salado, or Salt River. For three centuries, these people lived on what they could find and what nature provided in this mountainous desert terrain. "If the extraordinary views from the parking lot aren't enough, visitors can make a short climb to the caves for a close up view of the ruins and a breath-taking panorama of the lake. Damming the Salt River in the early 1900's formed the lake. About 10 miles of the original river is now lakebed, and in the other direction is Tonto Creek, which is flooded for

about 8 miles. Both the level and its length can be quite variable, and the size of the lake changes dramatically with the seasons. Rider Rick Hammer, worked on the rebuilding of a marina on the lake. He took us down and showed us how he built docks to compensate for water levels that vary by as much as 40 feet.

Following the caves, we stopped at the Tonto Basin Ranger Station and Visitor Center. Here we learned the incredible story of the Theodore Roosevelt Dam reclamation project. The dam's ability to stop flooding and provide a well-managed source of water to the Phoenix metropolitan area allowed the city to survive and grow. I wonder if the dam developers foresaw the golf and retirement mecca this valley has become.

Our next adventure was a ride over

the Superstition Mountains, home of the famous Lost Dutchman's mine. This legend began when a German immigrant, Jacob Waltz, arrived in Arizona in 1863 to prospect for gold. According to the stories, Waltz found (or possibly stole) gold from one of the very rich Peralta mines deep in the Superstitions. Try as he could, however, he was never again able to find the mine and prove his claim.

Because people mistakenly thought that he was from Holland, as his search continued, the story grew about the "Dutchman's Lost Mine." We did not find it, either. However, we did find some challenging single-track trails with

steep hills and tortuous downhill sections. If we had begun to get confident earlier in the trip, maybe even a little cocky with our returning skills, this trail quickly humbled us. While most of this was a mind game, it was hard to get comfortable on very steep, rough and deeply rutted downhill sections, especially with drops of a 1000 feet on one side or the other. The temptation was to get rigid with the handlebars, attempting to maintain control of the bike. The 36-inch seat height, coupled with my 29-inch inseam, kept me on the pegs and required a speed faster than I liked. Nevertheless, after only a couple of

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crashes and bruised egos, we were down the mountain, a clear testament to Gary's training and assessment of his riders.

The downhill sections convinced me that a session at Gary LaPlante's Ride-in Ranch near Temecula in southern California, would be a good idea. After watching me ride, Gary's prescription for a few days at the ranch would be to develop better skills for handling deep sand, learn to better "read the terrain" and to get more aggressive in shifting my weight and becoming more active in the saddle. He's right. I also want to not freak out when going down very steep slopes. A ranch session would also give me time on a trials bike, the best place in the world for a rider to learn balance that is directly applicable to all other riding circumstances.

After crossing the mountain, we rode downstream along the Salt River on the famous Apache Trail past three beautiful lakes; Apache, Canyon and Suguro. This was truly the most beautiful part of the ride. Quite unlike the rest of the trip, it was a wide gravel road, that offered a great combination of sharp and sweeping turns with an incredible climb out of Fish Creek Canyon and the opportunity to test whether spinning and throwing the rear tire out worked well at higher speed. It did. Our final seven miles



were on fantastic, undulating, paved and banked roads. In the twisties, we were all euphoric about our ability to fly around the turns as we covered the final stretch. It was a fitting end to a wonderful trip.

We finally emerged at the rustic Tortilla Flats, just Northwest of Phoenix. Tortilla Flats is apparently viewed very differently by two sets of riders. From the Phoenix end, Tortilla Flats was the last outpost of civilization and decent roads. For us, it was where the rough roads ended and we return to civilization. Tortilla Flats is a loose cluster of rustic, weather-beaten buildings, restaurants and bars featuring hamburgers and chili. It is a favorite destination for Phoenix Harley riders, who take Route A-88 up to this point and then stop, because the roads get pretty rough in the direction from which we just came. In Tortilla Flats we changed clothes, boarded our waiting van and headed to the airport.



Everything about this trip was wonderfully well done. The riding was superb, the accommodations were comfortable and convenient and the experts were true professionals in every sense of the word. I'd recommend such a trip for anyone who remembers the joy of riding a dirt bike and wants to refresh or refine their off road skills. This will help your street riding in ways you can't imagine until you try it.

***Bikes provided:***

- 2002 Kawasaki KLX300
- 300cc, (230 lbs) four-stroke, six-speed
- Dunlop tires
- Renthal handlebars

***Riding Equipment provided:***

- Smith Goggles
- AXO Boots, pants, pads, gloves, jerseys and helmets



***About Lotus Tours:***

Lotus Tours offers 4-15 day tours to unique and unusual destinations (Mongolia, Peru, Turkey), with dozens of options through their motoglobal alliance of motorcycle tour operators. Through Lotus Blossoms, they offer women motorcycle riders safe but challenging riding experiences in the U.S. and abroad. [www.lotustours.com](http://www.lotustours.com)

***About MotoVentures:***

MotoVentures offers guided, multi-day, dual sport motorcycle tours, specialized "trials" riding, and dirt bike rider training in Southern California, Colorado and Arizona. With this unique combination of high-quality services, MotoVentures has great options for all riders, from beginners to experts, and can satisfy anyone's time constraints, budget, or desire for a great adventure.

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