

The stunning quality and diversity of Northern California roads are legendary. But is it possible to stitch the very best of them together into a cohesive week-long itinerary and deliver the ultimate motorcycling experience?

Weeks of planning complete, nine riders from New York, Boston, Chicago, Seattle, Santa Barbara and Phoenix meet at Kuleto's in downtown San Francisco. We review with anticipation, excitement and some skepticism the planned routes for each day. The California coast, the redwoods, Lassen National Park, famous Highway 36, Lake Tahoe, Yosemite and Napa Valleys—it sounds pretty ambitious. Can we do it justice? Around 11 p.m. the west coasters retire for bed while the east coasters order another round.

Northern California Fantasy

Sharing the best of the best in the Golden State.

BY STEVE LARSEN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY "SEATTLE BOB" MEADOR

Day 1

**HIGHWAY 1 COAST RIDE,
SAUSALITO TO FORT BRAGG (195 MILES)**

Leaving Café Trieste in Sausalito after the frothiest and creamiest cappuccinos in all of the Bay Area, we salute San Francisco by riding to the top of Conzelman Road for what every local knows is the best view of the Golden Gate Bridge. We warm up our tires on the one-way road that winds through the Golden Gate Recreation area, past the bunkers and gun turrets built during World War II.



American Flyers of the new century looking not unlike their intrepid predecessors.

Exiting to Sir Francis Drake Boulevard from Highway 101 in San Rafael, we wind through deep redwood groves. Sunlight fights to reach the road through the dense forest canopy as we head for the coast. Tightly winding roads move us around trees and over bridges and serve as a precursor of what is to come. Stopping along the rocky vistas, we hear the sea lions and look for gray whales that migrate along this route.

Clean, almost-new blacktop leads us from one banked curve to the next. Just as we're finding our rhythm, we stop at Tony's Seafood Restaurant, a popular turnaround point for S.F.-based motorcycle day trips. We lunch on delicious barbecued oysters and fresh fish. While others end their rides and turn south, we are just beginning. We continue up Highway 1 through Bodega Bay and Mendicino and arrive at dusk in Fort Bragg.

Day 2

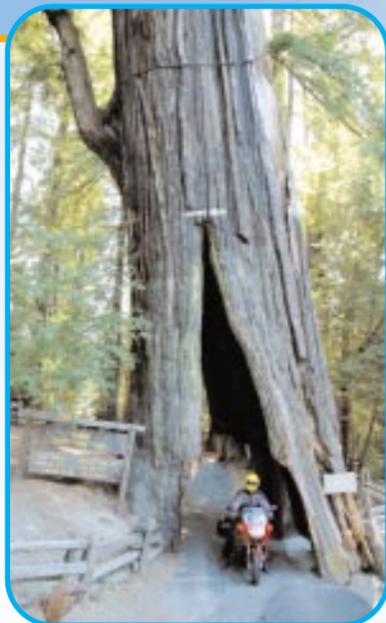
**AVENUE OF THE GIANTS AND LOST COAST LOOP,
FORT BRAGG TO BENBOW (202 MILES)**

Leaving Fort Bragg on Highway 1, we climb, descend and climb again along cliffs above the

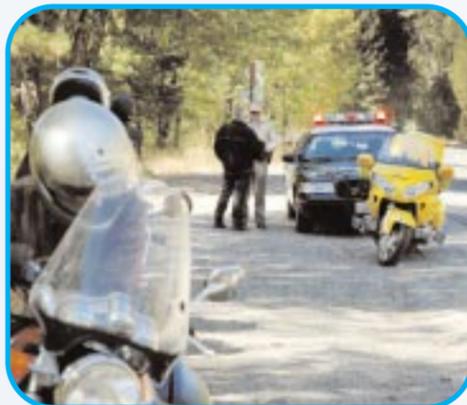
pounding waves of the Pacific Ocean. Moving in and out of fog, we alternate between full visibility and pea soup in seconds. After 90 minutes that seem like hours, we head inland. The temperature climbs 15 degrees in five minutes and the fog disappears.

Emerging on Highway 101, we ride 15 miles north to the Avenue of the Giants exit. We follow Highway 254 north as it meanders 31 miles under and through 17,000 acres of dense redwood forest. We stop frequently—sip coffee in a tree, drive through a tree and admire thousand-year-old trees. The size of these incredible plants forces a slow pace. Most eerie is the near total silence when stopped in the middle of a forest. It is so quiet. There are no birds chirping or tootling. Birds do not call this forest home because it lacks an important food source—bugs. Apparently, redwood trees offer little to interest insects.

At the end of Avenue of the Giants, we go north on Highway 101 past Rio Dell and take Highway 211 to Ferndale. From there we head toward the ocean and the Lost Coast Road—one of the loneliest roads in California. In Ferndale, we resort to the GPS to confirm the narrow, steeply climbing and abused-looking alley is truly Mattole Road. The road climbs and twists 2,000 feet before emerging from the woods onto windswept grass hills with a sweeping view of the ocean. We descend and follow the coastline, then turn inland and climb and twist our way back



The boxer's cylinder heads are in no way threatened by the redwood.



Not the group, just the lead dog gets the ticket—yours truly.

Day 3

**FAMOUS HIGHWAY 36 AND TRINITY LAKE,
BENBOW TO WEAVERVILLE (239 MILES)**

Leaving the Benbow Inn, we start north on Highway 101 toward Fortuna, turning west on one of the most exhilarating roads in the world for motorcyclists, Highway 36. On www.pashnit.com (a Web site documenting the best motorcycle roads in California), a contributor wrote about Highway 36, "...the absolute best ride of my entire life!" Suspicious of such superlatives, we are all now true believers. It is a thrilling road, with every turn linked to the next and the road hugging the terrain like honey on the back of a spoon.

Halfway to Red Bluff, we ride north on Highway 3 toward Weaverville. Highway 3 is no disappointment, providing an incredibly good ride. We grab a quick lunch at a bar that celebrates the California Gold Rush and cold beer. As none of us cares to drink and then ride, we make a note to return later and continue on Highway 3 to the Trinity Alps.

At 2,300 feet above sea level and boasting 145 miles of shoreline, Trinity Lake is one of California's largest lakes. We travel the well-paved, nearly empty road as it follows the contours of fish-rich Trinity Lake. This lake holds the record for the largest smallmouth bass caught in California but also contains catfish, kokanee, and rainbow and brown trout.

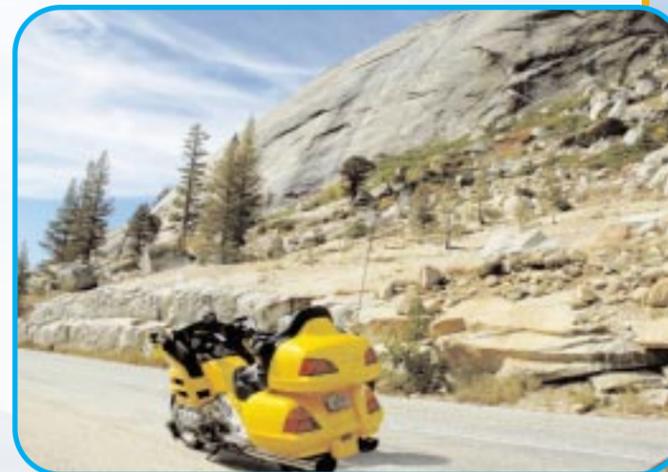
Day 4

**LASSEN NATIONAL PARK AND LAKE TAHOE:
WEAVERVILLE TO SOUTH LAKE
TAHOE (330 MILES)**

From Weaverville we head south on Highway 229, then turn east on Highway 44 to Lassen Volcanic National Park. What a find! Before we arrived here (about 600,000 years before, actually), the continental plates in this area collided and warped, resulting in 200,000 years of volcanic activity, scarring and transforming the landscape into incredible shapes. Stopping



at different points in the park, we see steam vents, boiling mudpots and diamondlike lakes with water so clear the reflections are like undetectable forgeries of the originals.



Only a biker would try to dress up Mother Nature with a motorcycle.

Through landscapes that seem to have come from another planet, the road over Mount Tehama takes us from 5,000 to more than 10,450 feet. Well-paved roads, twisty and glued to this odd terrain, carry us along. The temptation to rev-and-roll is constantly tempered by siren calls to the cameras in our saddlebags, so we stop often to click and clamor at the breathtaking views.

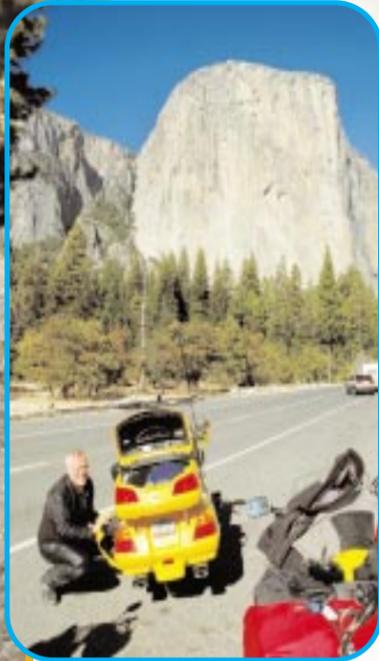
Leaving the park, we ride south on Highway 89. Through Mill Creek and Sierraville, this road offers much of what we loved about Highway 36, albeit a bit faster. In fact, this "bit faster" part results in the only speeding ticket of the trip and the claim to shame is mine alone. Crossing Interstate 80 at Truckee, we continue south on Highway 89 around awe-inspiring Lake Tahoe.

**YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK,
SOUTH LAKE TAHOE TO
SONORA (263 MILES)**

Day 5

After a quick breakfast, Highway 89 draws us south, down from dizzying heights to Mono Lake. Beautiful aspens shimmer in their gold coats and wave to us as we traverse the vast plain. We hook up with U.S. 395, gassing up at Lee Vining, before meeting Highway 120 and the entrance to Yosemite National Park.

Left: Twisty roads without autos are a hallmark of this trip.



A quick break at the foot of El Capitan humbles the hardened.

Yosemite is so famous I thought I knew it. Familiarity with the writings of John Muir and Ansel Adams photographs led me to believe I knew many of Yosemite's secrets. I am so wrong. No written description or photograph has prepared me for the sense of awe I feel upon seeing these wonders in person. Although I knew El Capitan from many photographs, standing at the base and staring up, I find it impossible to take in its immensity. Looking at the mountain, I am

astonished to hear there are climbers on the mountain and they are visible. "Visible" is a relative term meaning "with powerful binoculars, and then only when you know precisely where to look." When I finally got the loaned binoculars focused on the right spot, the figures on the mountain are still as small as ants.



Day 6

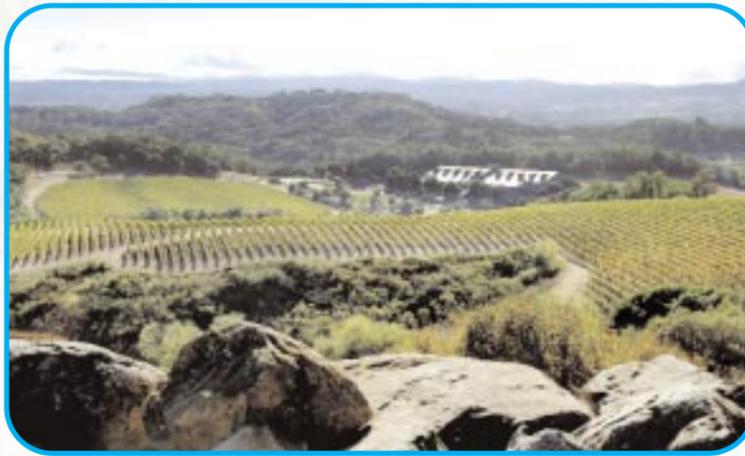
SONORA TO NAPA (212 MILES)

Riding north on Highway 49 toward Tuttle-town and Angels Camp, we stop in San Andreas and check out the museum and jail that held Black Bart, a renowned stage robber who taunted pursuers with poems left at the sites of his crimes.

Highway 49 is a terrific road, although its traffic load increases as it nears Sacramento.

After a brief stint on I-80 through the city, we catch Highway 128 west near Davis. We're thrilled to be on Highway 128 toward Napa Valley, as it marks our return to scenic, uncrowded roadways, unlike metropolitan Sacramento. We take the long way into Napa, going north on Sage Canyon Road and fol-

Below: Wine-country roads feature fairy-tale farms.



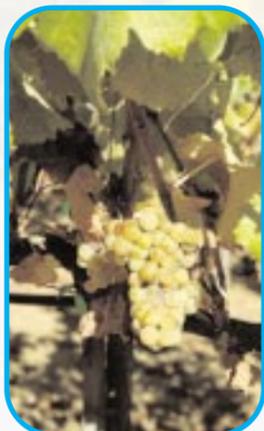
lowing it into Oakville. Here we turn south on the Silverado Trail to avoid the Highway 29 traffic and roll into Napa.

HALF-DAY NAPA LOOP TO LAKE BERRYESSA AND CHALK HILL ESTATES (127 MILES)

Day 7

In the morning Highway 121/Monticello Road takes us east from Napa. At Highway 128, we head north to Knoxville Road. Soon after seeing Lake Berryessa through the trees, we come across a visitor center, where a friendly and informative ranger provides an excellent overview of the lake. The center features exhibits of stuffed local wild animals with explanations of their feeding and habitat. The ranger offers terrific tips on the best spots to stop and photograph this beautiful lake.

The ride along the lake, again on almost deserted roads, provides ample twisty fun. As we reach the end of the lake, the road changes to Morgan Valley Road and heads west. This is the perfect wine-country back road, narrow and winding with trees pressing in and shading the road. We ride for more than an hour without seeing another vehicle. I feel the growing anx-



Left: Motorcycle views without car-window-cropping. Below: 1,200-acre Chalk Hill estate knits together 60 small vineyards.



The modern horseman pauses to experience expansiveness and let his horses cool.

iousness in riders behind me as the road narrows and the consistency of road maintenance drops off. Just before deteriorating to a cow path, Highway 29 emerges, and we take it south through St. Helena, Yountville and then back to Napa.

Our final trip dinner is at a nouveau-chic restaurant called Dry Creek Kitchen in nearby Healdsburg. At a big round table we toast the bikes, the scenery, the roads, the weather, the food, the wine and most of all, each other. We have all fulfilled a Northern California fantasy, but making new friends and renewing old ones is as significant as scenery and safe riding. ☺



Stop and revel in the beauty that is California.

