This most recent “no bad roads” tour challenge fell to “Seattle Bob” Meador, our photographer on the Northern California Fantasy Ride (Rider, January 2006). His mission: Plan seven days of spectacular riding and great scenery, superb places to stay and eat, and with no bad roads along the way. Perfect riding weather, an optional requirement since the location was the state of Washington in September, was a bit more difficult to achieve.
On a gray Saturday, in the way that only Seattle can be gray, three of us who arrived early ventured out for a pre-trip ride. The sky was gray, the water shimmered with silver gray and even the leaves on the trees looked gray under their canopy of green. As we left the city, buildings on the Seattle skyline had a beige-gray tint and all the cars that passed seemed to be gray too. This 210-mile jaunt circling Lake Washington, with lunch at a former Microsoft corporate retreat in the middle and short ferry rides book-ending the trip, had us anticipating the arrival of the remaining American Flyer Motorcycle Club members and the start of our journey like kids awaiting the arrival of Santa Claus. This being his home territory, Bob Meador faced high expectations from American Flyer riders arriving from Connecticut, Atlanta, New York, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, Phoenix and Chicago. Those riding in on their personal mounts—a BMW K1200RS, K75, R100, R1200RT and Harley Ultra Glide—were joined by the time-constrained Flyers, who rented bikes from Mountain to Sound Motorcycle Adventures (www.mtsma.com/rentals.htm); two Gold Wings, a Yamaha FJR1300 and a Honda ST1300.

Sunday and Monday comprised airport pickups, bike rentals and waiting for those who were riding in from San Francisco, Salt Lake City and elsewhere. We had a fabulous dinner at Wasabi Bistro in downtown Seattle on Sunday, and then the official ride-launch dinner on Monday night at Union Bay Café, normally closed on Mondays but opened privately for the Flyer gathering for their annual autumn outing. In a successful attempt to intimidate future Flyer trip planners, Bob and spouse Willo distributed a spiral-bound, 24-page, day-by-day itinerary of the upcoming ride, complete with sites, phone numbers, maps and GPS coordinates, followed by official hand-dyed Salmon Run T-shirts designed by Willo (you can see a pdf version of the trip at the American Flyer’s homepage: www.americanflyers.org).

WATER
On Tuesday morning, we began our trip riding north. Seattle felt like a spread-out Sausalito, California, with its steep hills dotted with houses surrounding beautiful harbor views. Our destination was Orcas Island. Crossing the floodplain of the Skagit River we headed west to the town of Anacortes and the San Juan ferry terminal. With the bikes stowed safely below (using side, not centerstands), the ferry spent more than an hour cruising past various tree-covered islands. Warm sun and clear skies allowed us to stroll the decks, and we ate a picnic lunch onboard. On Orcas Island we explored freely, knowing the island is small enough that no one can stay lost for long. The high point was a ride up Mount Constitution. A lookout tower gave us the chance to see the earth’s curvature, the San Juan Islands, and the coast of Canada. We spent a peaceful night at water’s edge at the Rosario Resort, which boasts a museum on the second floor with the history of the area.

MOUNTAINS
Our second day steered us away from the marine micro-climate of Puget Sound into the dense, thick forests of the Cascades. We explored the coastline and Larrabee State Park from Chuckanut Drive (yes, that’s its real name) then we headed over the mountains to the drier, eastern side of Washington. We picked up the South Skagit Highway that follows the Skagit River until we reached Highway 20, twisting east on the top-rated motorcycle road in the state.

This leg of our trip brought us to a high, Cascades cliff that overlooks Diablo Lake. The water is a strange, turquoise color that is unique to certain types of mineral elements. The wind was blustering, cold enough to zip up our jackets, but the whipping wind at that altitude had us zipping them up again soon and riding on. Over Rainy Pass and Washington Pass we descended to the old-west town of Winthrop and on to our destination for the evening, the Sun Mountain Lodge.

Sun Mountain Lodge, as with several of the places we stayed, is a destination in its own right. There’s nothing nearby but farms and views. We all made a mental note to come back and take advantage of the hiking, skiing, snow-shoeing and canoeing opportunities.

HIGH DESERT
“High desert” only describes the surface of what we experienced on this day of riding. We headed down from the mountains to the Okanogan River, then north again into alpine forest. We met some rain and everyone was glad to have a neck scarf, the rider’s lightweight equivalent of another sweater layer. Never underestimate the value of a scarf to turn a cold ride into a pleasant one.

Top left: Working our way into the North Cascades on the top-rated motorcycle road in Washington, the group heads east. Above: Grand Coulee Dam is the largest concrete structure in North America and the third largest producer of electricity in the world. Left: Descending to Banks Lake, south of Grand Coulee Dam. After lunch in the very small town of Republic, we enjoyed one of the most beautiful segments of the trip, a road following the shoreline of Lake Roosevelt that culminates at the Grand Coulee Dam. The dam is worth a long look. Tourists can’t get very close to it but even from a distance it looks huge. It is a mile long, 30 feet wide at the top and 500 feet wide at the bottom. The new addition is the size of four football fields.

We couldn’t dally over the “eighth
wonder of the world” because we still needed to ride past Banks Lake, Lenore Lake and Soap Lake on our way south to a welcome evening at the Cave B Inn. This comfortable resort is located on the grounds of a functioning vineyard. Acres of grapevines extend in all directions and our rooms look across a vast valley. The place is abuzz with a wedding party getting ready for the big event the next day.

DESSERT TO RIVER GORGE

We got our usual 9 a.m. start from the inn and headed south and west. The roads had been dependably excellent and Bob was earning points, as we had little freeway riding—today we only spent about 40 minutes on Interstate 90. Those in our chase vehicle enjoyed a leisurely stop at the Ginkgo Petrified Forest, but the riders made directly for the Canyon Road. This is the sort of route that wordlessly expresses the superior experience of being on a bike vs. watching the scenery from inside a metal cage.

It led us from Ellensburg to Yakima, which we skirted on an outer belt, then wound our way through the aptly named Horse Heaven Hills. We traveled from Mabton to Goldendale and paused for a bike group shot in front of the Stonehenge replica.

Our final segment for the day was along the breathtaking Columbia River. This river canyon is surpassed by none; it is just distractingly beautiful. We stopped for...
photo ops and to give ourselves a chance for a long inhale of nature’s beauty.—“Seattle Bob” kept shooting as we rode. This half-day of riding was the part that made my wife say, “Let’s retire here and never leave.”

Our night’s accommodations were at the Skamania Lodge. It is an expansive resort and well-known in the area for its outstanding Friday dinner buffet, called the “Gorge Harvest Buffet.” Both definitions of “gorge” apply here. Fellow-rider Arthur Einstein said it best: “We ate ourselves circular and spent the night.”

**VOLCANOES**

In the moist morning we re-evaluated our plan to head for Mount St. Helens. We wanted to follow the Wind River to Highway 25, rated the No. 4 motorcycle road in the state of Washington. However, at Mount St. Helens there was rain at the bottom, meaning snow at the top, so the road was closed. We flipped a coin and opted for the more adventurous 40-mile cruise through Mount Rainier National Park. In addition to the wonderful twisties, we were treated to significant changes in elevation. Periodic breaks from the cold drizzle were most appreciated.

Our week wrapped up with about 30 minutes of freeway traffic on Interstate 5, then a night at the Courtyard by Marriott on Lake Union. We returned the rented bikes to Mountain Cycle & Rental and celebrated our last evening together at Chandler’s Crabhouse, one more fine dinner in a series of memorable meals.

With boisterous enthusiasm, we toasted Seattle Bob and his wife, Willo, for their unmitigated success at delivering on the “no bad roads” promise. They went way overboard by also providing no bad lodgings and no bad meals. The state of Washington gave us a truly remarkable riding experience and many delightful memories.