

Ride Report Kinzua Skywalk October 7-10, 2022:

I ain't superstitious but a black cat just crossed my path

(a song written by bluesman [Willie Dixon](#) and first recorded by [Howlin' Wolf](#) in 1961)

Not everyone has the riding experience or the mental and posterior hardness for a trip like this. Four long days on vintage bikes on treacherous back roads does not and should not appeal to everyone, but for others, the appeal is irresistible. This time around, five of us decided to have a go. Four of us made it safely back home; adventure does include the element of risk. From the RetroTours waiver form:

"I am a risk taker and I knowingly expose myself to these extreme hazards. Bikes may crash and bones may break but I will not sue _____ (signature here) .

Day One: Fred, Ed, Jack, and Tim are all relatively local. Tim came the furthest, from Philadelphia, about 40 miles away. They all arrived by 8:15 for coffee and breakfast. We ate well, not knowing exactly when lunch might come, did a very brief riders' meeting, in light of the fact that these are all repeat offenders: not their first RetroTour. It didn't take long, therefore, to get outside and pack, followed by orientation to the bikes. Jack started on the flashy red 52,415 mile 1973 Norton Commando Fastback. His orientation focused on kick start procedure and friction point characteristics. With a certain technique, kickstarting is quite consistently good, and the quick, sudden clutch engagement point is soon learned. In any event, the more one stalls the engine because of the sudden clutch, the more adept one becomes at kickstarting. Jack is a fast learner and had no issues.

I had extra gear and supplies which loaded nicely on the large-ish luggage rack affixed to the bright yellow 1976 18,000 mile Honda GL1000. I was looking forward to the quiet, ultra smooth ride. We decided to hold the 1978 36,000 mile Honda CX500 in reserve as a spare bike in case needed, while Ed fired up the lusty, grey, 27,500 mile 1977 Yamaha XS750. The lure of the triple being twin-like torque character with in-line-4-like power and revs. The muffler has numerous welded patches and several unrepaired holes, so it growls authoritatively when the throttle is opened. I would buy an aftermarket replacement—can't find NOS or good used original—but why spend \$300 or \$400 for a non-stock system that would be just as loud as the rust perforated but externally good looking original? Besides, the sound is a bit addictive. Fred opted for comfort and familiarity, starting out on the 1978 29,500 mile BMW R100/7 which we call 'Brownie'. Fred owns several Bmers himself. Tim decided to go slightly more modern, choosing the 8700 mile 1983 GS550ES, the least elderly bike currently in the fleet, and a favorite. In fact, one rider whose name will go unmentioned (Fred) liked it so much that, after sampling this model on a previous RetroTour, he bought not one but two of them. *Lip the dog performs a safety inspection.*

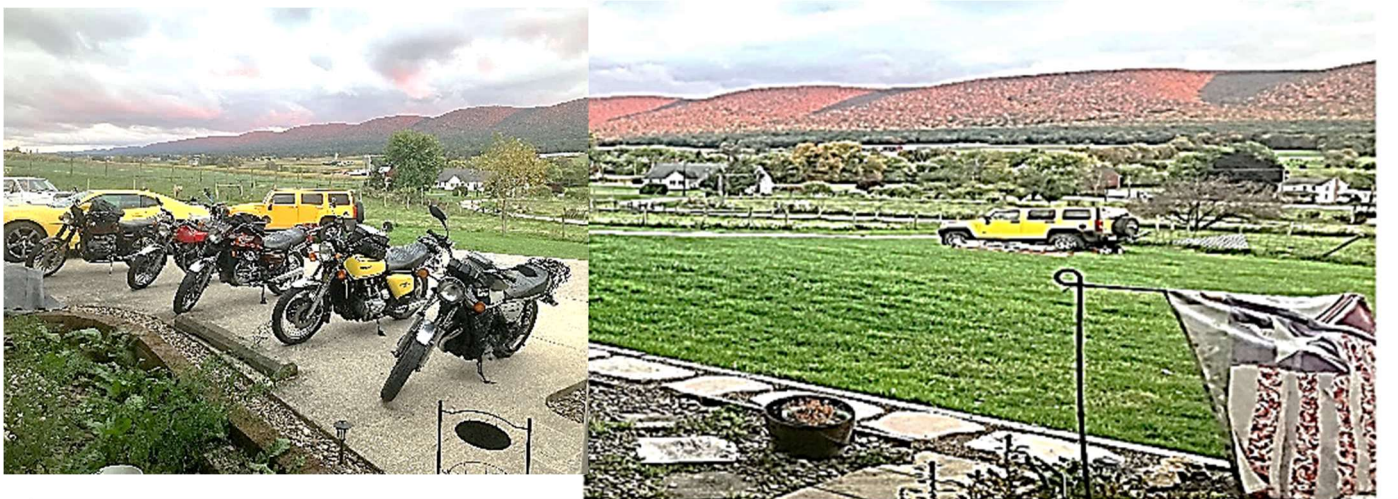


I like to start off by turning right three times which is smoother on a strange old bike than turning left, not to mention that it avoids crossing a lane of moving traffic. My 5-mile-long orientation route also includes a straight section where we can bump up to 70 mph briefly, a tight curvy section, and several higher speed sweepers, as well as 2 stop signs so riders can get a feel for bikes they have never ridden before. On this day, we didn't even complete the 5 miles. I noticed on the third leg of the quadrangular route that there was no one behind me. Fearing the worst, I turned back and found everyone OK but the GS550ES stopped on the shoulder with a flat battery. This was the second time this had happened on this bike. It was eventually discovered that the charging system worked fine, but the Lithium-Ion battery was acting up. The only good thing about the situation was that we were only 1 mile from home. It didn't take too long to fetch a battery that allowed us to get the bike back and swap to our standby: The ultra reliable CX500. Inconvenient, yes, but I wish this were the worst thing to happen on this tour. Thusly mounted and orientated, we headed north and west, using a few miles of dirt farm road to skirt Kennett Square, then following the peaceful Brandywine Creek on no-traffic twisties past Modena and Coatesville until crossing the Octorara Trail to pick up zigzagging 897 North to Schaffersstown, and Route 501N. There is a nice lunch restaurant at the junction, formerly known as 'Kum Essen': Pennsylvania Dutch (which is actually German by the way, 'Dutch' being a misnomer for Deutsch) for Come Eat. The name has changed, but the food is still great, and it is in the exact right spot, 100 miles from home at a major intersection. While we chowed down, we cooled down and got to know one another a little better.

Just a few hundred yards down the road we gassed up and switched bikes before heading up grade. Getting up onto the Appalachian Ridge involved a few hairpins and some splendid views. Through Ravine and across two small mountains, snaking through coal country, and terminating in Shamokin. We used more backroads to get to Sunbury, famous (sort of) for the Edison Hotel which was the first building to be electrified in the US. Thomas Alva Edison did the work himself, using the abundant nearby supply of coal to run his AC generator.

"LET THERE BE LIGHT..... AND THERE WAS LIGHT."

Friday afternoon always means traffic once we cross the Susquehanna. This contrasts sharply with the wide open roads through Middleburg. Then, past The Cruisers Café and on into Juniata. A sharp eye is needed to find Elk Drive, where The Bison Farm is located: our stop for the first night. This is a perfect B&B for our purposes. There is a decent little restaurant a mile down the road. The décor is hunting lodge/party house, with shaggy animal heads on the walls, a bar, heated floors, and yes, a massive Bison in the pasture outback, along with several elk. The sunset lights up the folded mountainous ridge that recedes to the horizon. We fill our bellies and our fuel tanks just up the road, returning after dark for a much needed restful sleep. In the AM, the owner pops in to make us breakfast. This really is a special B&B.



Day two starts out on the cool side. We are heading north and west through some very pretty Pennsylvania farmlands. In between farms and mountains are scenic towns like Troxelville, Mill Hall, and Lock Haven where we cross the river, take a short 'nature break', then head onto the Coudersport Pike (start by saying 'cloud' without the 'L' or "Cowdie" for short). Broad sweepers carry us through the thick forested mountains. As elevation increases, the temperature drops; we are pretty bundled up, and getting a little hungry to boot. Just before mid-day we come into Haneyville, where, just by chance, there is an Autumn Festival happening at Mountain Top Provisions, the local restaurant and pub. The restaurant doesn't open for another 30 minutes or so, but we happily amuse ourselves by standing near the roaring fire out back, and wandering around the vendor displays of arts and crafts. There is music and good looking women. The atmosphere is country mountain friendly. The air is cool, the sun is brilliant. The food is terrific and really hits the spot. Two cups of hot chocolate and I am feeling more than human:



LIFE IS GOOD!

After lunch we continue

for 7 more miles then turn onto Hyner View Rd which takes us over the mountain. I'm thinking: "This road is really narrow and curvy" when I see a sign: "Road Narrows Ahead". Seriously? Oh yes it does. When we turn up grade to Hyner's View, the road gets even tighter, and a bit slimy as well, so we take it easy ascending to this 2,000 foot high cliff overlooking the Susquehanna. A great spot to take in views and also for hang gliding; Ed and Jack are both experienced hang glider pilots BTW.



We descend rapidly to follow the North Bend of the river west into Renovo where a quick stop at the local hardware store nets us a substitute footrest rubber for the Norton and a replacement rear frame bolt for the BMW; it's raining parts! North again at Kettle Creek onto Route 144N takes us through some serious forest lands and past Cross Fork. We stop at Cherry Springs State Park where star gazers gather to look up at the sky. This area is as remote and wild as it was 2 centuries ago, and its dark skies make it a haven for astronomers. From here, it's a short hop to Route 6, which stretches east to west all across PA: The Grand Army of the Republic Highway. We are nearly done for the day. A few miles west and we pull into The Westgate Inn where we will spend the night.

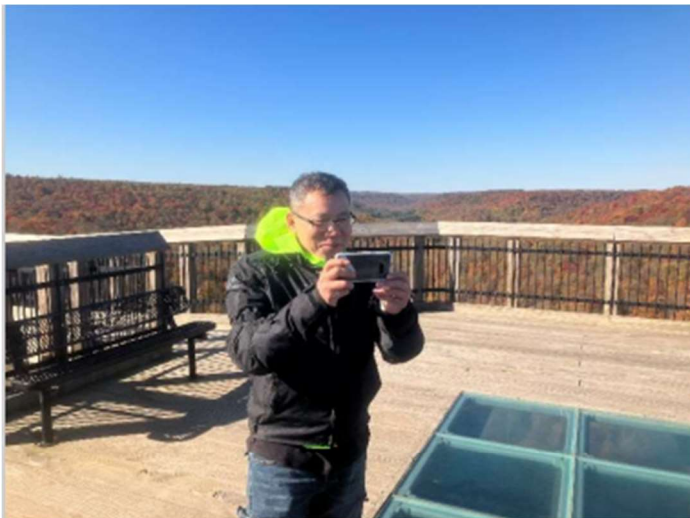


A half mile walk into town lets us see the sights which includes the Eliot Ness Museum; who knew? Cowdie is really a cool and very cute town. As always, there is a Chinese restaurant. Here we enjoy a great meal before walking back and socializing with other guests in the hotel lobby before turning in.

Jack and Ed at the China Garden restaurant in Coudersport. 5 stars! (the food, not us)



Day three begins with frost on the seats. We enjoy a 'pre-breakfast' in the hotel lobby, then bundle up and proceed to the covered car port where our bikes are parked. The altitude adds to the cool temperatures but also to the broad scenic vistas, as we head west through Port Allegheny. We stop every 10 or 15 miles for a few moments to recover a bit of body heat. I pull into a gas station to pretend that I didn't miss that turn a mile back and we top up our tanks before reaching Smethport. It's just 35 miles all told from our motel to the Kinzua Sky Walk. The sun is finally up over the mountain. We have endured the cold so as to arrive here before the crowds, and to get an early start on this longest day of our adventure. We spend an hour and a half, walking out on the ruined trestle, once the longest of its type and touted as the 8th wonder of the world. With the Autumn foliage on full display, the feeling at the precipice is awesome; akin to flying. Pictures could never do it justice.



Tim/left, Ed/below, Red Fred/right. Jack above, maybe thinking hang gliding anyone?



The gnarled remains of "The Eighth Wonder of The World" remain at the bottom of the Kinzua gorge. It stood over 300 feet tall for over 100 years until a tornado brought it down in 2003.

From Kinzua, we ride another 45 miles with growling stomachs, over a mountain, into Emporium. Here we find my favorite log cabin restaurant closed. Damn it, they didn't survive Covid! Searching for food, we encounter an apparent right wing conspiracy theorist who lives next to a closed pizza restaurant. He is kind enough to direct us to the Last Chance Diner located in 4 converted vacant motel rooms, just across town. Incredibly, we find it and the food is decent greasy spoon fare. Suitably refreshed, we follow a fork of the Susquehanna for 60 miles, enjoying broad sweepers and little or no traffic. The river lazily flows on our right. The sun is out, the sky is blue. The left side alternates between forest and rock cliffs where the river has carved its niche. Eventually, we pull into Renovo, this time from the west, then turn south. Just outside of South Renovo, the twisty ribbon of a road begins to climb into state forest lands. At a pullout, we see only trees all the way to the horizon. Several decades ago, the view was only mud, all the way to the horizon. The forests were totally decimated for lumber and only a very aggressive re-forestation campaign has allowed for the new growth that blesses us with beauty and shade. This state forest is larger than a few of the smaller states. It is Zen-like to be riding through it on this Sunday morning. Lunch comes eventually at a gas station/variety store with outdoor tables.

Pressing ever onwards, we ride through Bellefonte, admiring its stately mansions. Center Hall and Potters Mill are next to fall as we enjoy a short rest stop followed by a stretch of wide open highway. We have miles to cover, and we use this bit to make up some time, cruising along at 65 mph. At Lewistown we take to the small roads again. We have already covered over 200 miles, and still have 100 to go on a technical road, with some gravel in the middle of tight curves, some with decreasing radii. Sometimes we can see the highway traffic off to the left, and we try to keep pace which is not really possible. Other times, we race a train on a parallel course. Fred and I are riding together, with Ed and Jack a bit further back and Tim maintaining rear guard. Going around a smooth, long hairpin, bordered on the right by a nasty looking guard rail, I flinch as a black cat darts across the road right in front of me. Fred is close enough to see it too. A few miles later, I notice that there is no one in my mirror and Fred and I slow down, troll along for a bit, then stop to wait for the others. The others are not forthcoming.

I ain't superstitious, but a black cat just crossed my path. We turn back as a feeling of dread begins to creep down my spine. At the black-cat-hairpin my worst fears are realized. The brown BMW is *stuffed* under the guard rail and Tim is sitting on the guard rail with his helmet off. Jack and Ed are holding traffic and tending to Tim, and this looks very bad. Ed tells me Tim thinks he has a broken leg. The bike is a total disaster and obviously not rideable any time soon. Tim is not showing any signs of being in pain, no doubt due to being in shock. 911 is called and an ambulance is dispatched. Tim is tended to by the first responders who get there in under 10 minutes (THANK YOU GUYS). We begin to attempt to extract the bike, but we need to partially disassemble the front end to get it unstuck. It starts and runs, but the frame is obviously bent badly, the fuel tank is bashed in, the forks are bent, and one lower fork leg is broken in two.

Tim is off to the hospital. We speak to the very sympathetic and helpful gentleman who lives across the street. He agrees to allow us to stash the broken bike in his yard for a few days. We basically drag it over there. There is nothing else we can do but continue on. We do what we have to do: compartmentalize our anguish. The ride is now quite somber. What would have otherwise been a very pleasant ride through lovely countryside has become an endurance test. We stop for gas in Ickesburg and it is becoming apparent that we will need to finish the day in the dark; not the ideal situation. I drop my pace considerably. This is deer country, and this is the time of day when Bambi begins foraging. We are a bit chilled by the dropping temperature and also by what has just happened. Navigating becomes difficult in the dark because I cannot read my route sheet so I have to stop every 10 miles or so under a street light

or neon sign to check directions and avoid any wrong turns. I also need to keep our little group together as we navigate these back roads, finally reaching route 322. I caution everyone to stay close: getting separated on a divided highway in the dark is best avoided. We make our way cautiously down a short section of super-slab, then veer off onto back roads for the back way into Hershey, PA. I surprise myself by finding our motel with no errors. We check in and have pizza delivered then turn in for the night.

Day four begins with a long walk as we struggle a bit to locate a breakfast restaurant. The food hits the spot though, and soon we are ready to finish our journey; this is the shortest day of the tour. It's a 15 minute cruise to the Antique Automobile Club of America's Museum. Here we meander about looking at displays of antique cars, buses, and motorcycles. It is a decent display and well worth a visit. Fred even manages to find a Ducati powered midget race car!



Those 4 bikes in the parking lot (ours) are among the most interesting.

I have no clue what it is, but Ed seems interested.



Lynn and I had one of these little Suzukis in the 70's.

We called it 'The Mosquito'. Wish I had it now; so much fun!



The ride home from Hershey is short and easy. We pass through some familiar Amish country: Lititz and Intercourse on the way. The farmlands are bucolic, and the countryside is peaceful, but our minds are not calm. The crash and Tim's injuries have traumatized us all to some extent. We enjoy the dinner that Lynn has prepared—always a real treat—and Fred and I make plans to retrieve the BMW over the next day or two. Tim will be moved to a different hospital with a more extensive trauma center where his leg will be put back together and he will undergo a long recovery period. Over the winter, the BMW will be resurrected with a replacement frame, forks, headers, and much more. Ed, Jack, Fred, and I will all go on to do more RetroTours. Because he was riding alone at the rear, none of us knows exactly what caused Tim to crash. I believe he may have just lost concentration for a moment, gotten in a bit too hot, and failed to negotiate the turn. In any case, I suppose things could have been worse. We all know this can happen, and we consciously accept the risk in exchange for the reward: the joys of motorcycling. I spoke with Tim many times during his recovery, and I do hope to see him again soon, if only to say hello and to recollect the best parts of our adventure.

