



ADVENTURE

ROCKING

# MOAB

A six-day trip to Utah hones offroad riding skills and refreshes the soul.

> Story by **Steve Larsen** and Images by **Susan Dragoo**

The color of Southern Utah is like nowhere else and the riding is superb for adventurers.

**H**onoring a pledge to attend at least one motorcycle training event every year, to learn a new skill or hone existing ones, has had substantial payoffs. My goal is to avoid having “one year of experience, repeated 30 times.” Unless we’re always learning and practicing, our skills won’t improve, but more likely, will atrophy. Age and being off the bike for extended periods cause skills to get rusty faster, and we’re all losing the aging battle.

I recently traveled to Moab, Utah, to attend a small-group adventure tour offered by MotoDiscovery, which has been organizing guided tours around the globe for 36 years. Smart riders often desire a skills enhancement session before a trip, so MotoDiscovery teamed up with Drago Adventure Rider Training (DART) for the instructional portion.

Familiar with the excellent off-road riding programs conducted by Rawhyde Adventures in California, my expectations were that it would be similar. In some ways it was, but in others, it was very different. In Bill Drago’s definition of adventure riding, an event that comes off precisely as planned, with no surprises, really isn’t an adventure. Adventure begins when plans go awry.

As a result, Drago’s training features not only the fundamental techniques of riding motorcycles through challenging terrain with plenty of time to practice these skills, it adds a healthy dose of what to do when you end up in a tough situation you really don’t want to be in. What if you slide out in mud and need to pick up your heavily loaded bike by yourself? Do you know how to tow a nonrunning bike with another bike? You thought you could make it and are now stranded close to the top of a big rocky hill, what’s next? Drago addresses these situations and more, while communicating a way to creatively solve problems that arise when taking your bike far off the beaten path. Combining two intense days of learning new skills, with four days of off-road riding to cement the new expertise, results in a tremendous boost in rider confidence.

### GETTING STARTED

Riders trickled into 3 Step Hideaway near Monticello, Utah, the day before training started. Most relied on MotoDiscovery to provide late model Suzuki DRZ400s and a Honda CRF250s, and began examining their rides. The setting is unique, remote and for the most part, off the grid. Electricity is a precious commodity, provided by solar and a couple of backup generators. Forget about cell coverage. The cabins were comfortable, the food incredible and the hosts extremely friendly and helpful. 3 Step Hideaway sits along the Trans-America Trail, so “3 Step Scotty” has a garage full of tires, motorcycle parts, and the necessary tools to get people on their way. Riders often ship tires ahead and book a day or two here before continuing.

### FIRST DAY OF TRAINING

Bill Drago follows a proven process for teaching new skills:

- A. Explain the concept, how it’s done and why it’s important.
- B. Demonstrate what was just explained.
- C. Students perform the exercise with critique and encour-



**Two days of instruction followed by four days of exploring helped to sharpen some rusting skills and we added new ones to our toolbox as we encountered easy, enjoyable stretches, as well as rougher segments that tested our mettle.**

agement, until a satisfactory level of mastery is achieved.

Each new skill builds on the last and difficult or scary exercises are alternated with ones that are more fun.

The seven riders in the group had a wide range of skills, and we started with the basics: proper body position, keeping the bike in balance, the importance of peg weighting and clutch control. One exercise involved walking beside the motorcycle with the motor running, maintaining balance and forward motion using clutch and throttle finesse, which is harder than it sounds.

After graduating to riding the bikes, we put our skills to work in low-speed exercises. Standing on the pegs, we “slow raced” and did tight circles, while keeping the bike “in tension.” It kept our bodies in tension as well, so we welcomed the day’s finale, a 20-mile ride on a trail adjacent to 3 Step. Dirt roads through the sagebrush lead across the valley and along a high, rocky shelf, where we loosened up a little, riding through patches of sand and negotiating some mildly rocky sections.

By day’s end we were a tired bunch, but Scotty grilled steaks to fortify us, and delighted us with a dessert of berry cobbler and ice cream. Around the campfire, after dinner, Drago told a tale or two from his adventure archives, then, early to bed.



The 850-mile tour included scenic and spirited cruising, steep elevation changes and tricky water crossings.

## SECOND DAY OF TRAINING

Braking exercises got our blood flowing on the second day, and we quickly graduated to a variable-terrain challenge, maneuvering tight turns and loose hills while standing on the pegs. Later, we headed to the trails again, to work on more advanced skills, including the “hill fail.”

Riding to the crest of a steep slope, we dumped the clutch to kill the bikes, then learned how to escape this predicament. Our final exercise of the day was towing. One motorcycle towed another, with a strap attached footpeg to footpeg. It is easier than it sounds, unless both riders end up in a massive prairie dog hole. The first rider to assist also fell in the hole, making the whole affair quite humorous.

A few of the more aggressive riders stayed to play in a sand wash while the rest of us returned to base camp, to prepare for the next day's departure. After dinner our MotoDiscovery guides laid out the plans for the tour. We'd make an 850-mile loop from 3 Step Hideaway, on and off pavement, across the Manti-La

Sal National Forest, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Capitol Reef National Park, Green River, San Rafael Desert and Moab, before returning to 3 Step.

## THIRD DAY: THE TOUR BEGINS

Late September weather is crisp in southeastern Utah, and a frosty 34-degree morning greeted us, but we donned layers and pulled out early. Our goal was to catch the 4 p.m. ferry across Lake Powell at Hall's Crossing.

Following our guide, Naggan, we rode toward the southwest, stopping briefly to see Newspaper Rock, a large petroglyph panel in a narrow canyon along Utah Route 211. There was early snow in the La Sal Mountains, so we avoided the highest elevations, but enjoyed spectacular views while riding dirt switchbacks with precipitous drop-offs. Lunch was a quick sandwich in a sunny, tree-lined meadow. Moving on, we skirted the Needles district of Canyonlands National Park. The spires of Monument Valley were visible in the distance as we traveled west toward Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

We made it to the ferry crossing by 3:30—with ample time for the 30-minute, three-mile trip across the lake from Hall's Crossing to Bullfrog. Our bikes tucked amid pickup trucks, the blue waters of Lake Powell seemed incongruous amid the red rock formations lining the shore. The lake hides in its depths the magnificent Glen Canyon, inundated when the Colorado River was dammed in 1963. Houseboats dot the lake, giving a post-apocalyptic air to the view.

On the opposite shore, perched on a red sandstone overlook, we spied our home for the night, the Defiance House Lodge. The hotel is named for an ancient Puebloan ruin in Forgotten Canyon, now accessible only (for all practical purposes) by boat. In the Anasazi Restaurant adjacent to the hotel, we watched the sun set over Lake Powell through a perfectly placed wall of windows, capping a sensational first day of touring.

## DAY FOUR: DEALING WITH MUD

It rained overnight and the next morning we were greeted with light showers.

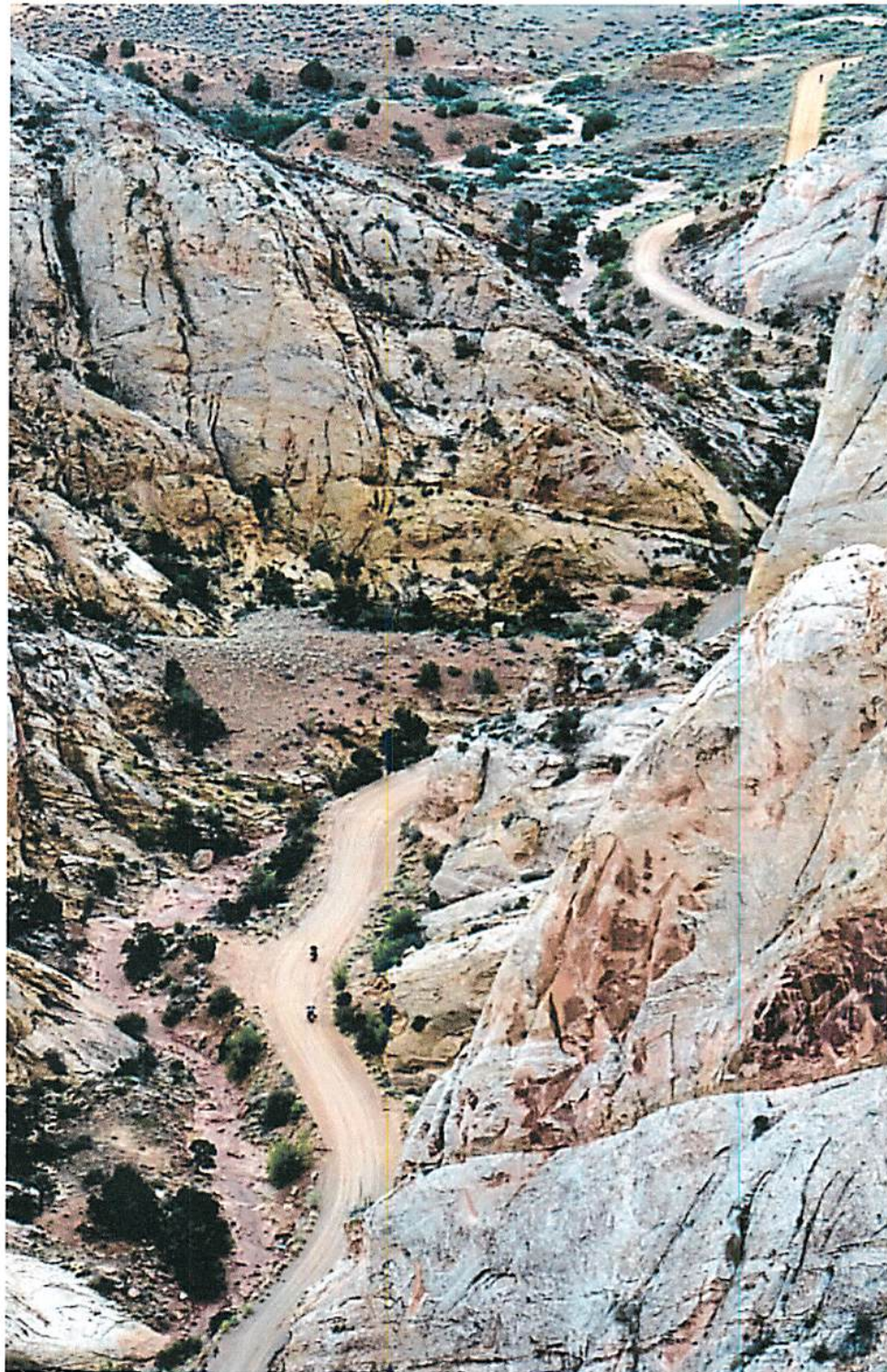
We began to understand how well the knowledgeable Naggan adapts the route for changing conditions. First, we headed down the road for breakfast, because power was out at the hotel restaurant.

After dining, we traveled off pavement along the Notom-Bullfrog Road, heading north for the Burr Trail under cloudy skies. The jagged and otherworldly Waterpocket Fold soon came into view, and we rode the length of this 100-mile long bend in the earth's crust. Then, we crossed the boundary into Capitol Reef National Park and saw the sign for the infamous Burr Trail Switchbacks.

Up we went, ascending 700 feet in about a mile, each tight turn revealing an ever more magnificent view of the broad valley below. We caught our breath at the top, then headed back down, continuing north along Notom-Bullfrog Road. Thanks to the rain, we encountered some sticky mud and I fell, my riding gear was covered in bentonite clay mud. Bentonite has been used for every purpose from sealing underground structures against water infiltration to curing constipation. It will also stick a front tire to the fender in less than 100 yards, and left a beautiful patina on my jacket and pants.

The Fremont River runs through the area along Utah Route 24, and Naggan led us to an out-of-the-way ford, so we could practice stream crossings. This crossing requires entering the river, turning downstream and riding along the rocky bottom, then turning up onto a sandy slope on the other side. Dragoo described the best way to approach the crossing and demonstrated, then we each took a turn. It was pure fun splashing through the river and we worked on making bow waves as we powered through. As the only mud-caked rider, I enjoyed the free bath. Dragoo also demonstrated crossing two-up, with a fellow rider on pillion. They were successful, but no one else volunteered to follow.

A few riders broke off with Naggan and Dragoo to ride a dry wash near Caineville, while others headed to Hanksville to rest up at the Whispering Sands Motel. There are few lodging options in this



**This kind of natural beauty, found in the canyons of Utah, is best experienced on two wheels—with an experienced guide to get you to your destination, of course.**

vast, seemingly empty landscape, but the Whispering Sands is clean and directly across the street from the Hollow Mountain Store, a convenience store carved into the rock.

After playing in the wash, Naggan's group took a rough dirt road into Capitol Reef National Park's Cathedral Valley district, leading to the Temples of the Sun

and Moon—red rock spires that seem to pierce the overcast afternoon skies.

We enjoyed dining at Duke's Slick Rock Grill, named for actor John Wayne and full of appropriate memorabilia and menu items such as "The Rio Bravo" (a ham and cheese omelet) and "True Grit" (oatmeal). We even partook of a couple of local wines, which were fair to middling.



Some of the advanced riders had a ball carving up the soft sand washes that stretch for miles across the Southern Utah plains.

#### DAY FIVE: PLANS GO AWRY

Continuing rains prompt Naggan to announce that the third day's ride would be on pavement, to avoid getting mired in mud. We rode north to I-70 and stopped at Green River, where we ran into filmmaker and moto-personality Brad Barker

of "Ride of My Life" fame.

At Highway 191, we turned south toward the off-roading mecca of Moab. On the way into town, we passed the entries to Dead Horse Point State Park, Canyonlands National Park and Arches National Park. We reached Moab in time for lunch and checked into the upscale and excellent Best Western Canyonlands, centrally located in downtown, leaving the afternoon to enjoy independent side trips.

I left for Dead Horse Point, a short pavement ride with breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. Some headed to Arches to hike, and another group rode out to Hurrah Pass. The return of the latter group was delayed by a flat tire on Drago's bike, which gave him an opportunity to demonstrate in-field tire repair. All returned pleased with the adventure, as plans went awry.

Our last evening together, we assembled in the Best Western for a video presentation of MotoDiscovery's South American tours. Following that inspiration, Drago distributed certificates in a graduation ceremony. We were congratulated on our accomplishments

and charged with acting as ambassadors for our sport. A final dinner celebration at nearby Pasta Jay's capped off the event.

#### DAY SIX: FINAL THOUGHTS

We left Moab on Sand Flats Road, a mixture of groomed dirt, washboard and silky-smooth asphalt, winding around the famed Slickrock Trail, heavily traveled by dirt bikes, mountain bikes, Jeeps and other ROVs. A shroud of mist engulfed us as we ascended, stopping at Porcupine Rim Overlook. Our view of Castle Valley was completely obscured, but the experience was magical, as we seemed to be floating on an island in the sky.

Peering over the edge, a rainbow crescent splashed across the cottony formations below. Often called a pilot's halo, this phenomenon was iconic of the personal-expansive undertakings those past few days. With fresh snow covering the La Sals, Naggan routed us through lower elevations, back to 3 Step, where we packed our gear and said our goodbyes.

Our immersion tour, as Drago calls it, was truly a memorable experience and more than fulfilled my annual rider training pledge. The combination of two intense days of training followed by four days of applying those new skills was highly effective. Our toolkits are busting at the seams with new capabilities that have already been tested over the rocky terrain of Southern Utah—a highly recommended experience. **MCN**



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