



150 and Counting

Rob Beach Rides his 150th Tour

Rob Beach, President of Beach's Motorcycle Adventures, has been riding for well over 40 years. His parents, Bob and Elizabeth, founded the company. So for Rob it's been a way of life for a long, long time.

This month Rob does his 150th Beach's tour. So we thought we'd sit him down and hear a bit about his first 149 tours.

Rob Beach ponders life with a European backdrop.

BMW Owners News: You are about to do your 150th tour. How well do you remember the first one?

Rob: It's funny, I don't. I was 14 years old, had a dirt bike in the garage and the idea of no parents for three weeks was more enticing than a trip to Europe. I didn't want to go, and don't remember much of the trip at all. My second trip, four years later at the age of 18, is one I do remember. I drove the luggage van on the tour – a baptism by fire. When the luggage was unloaded and Dad arrived, I could ride his R90S – a hot bike in those days. There I was, a kid on a fast bike in the mountains... yahooo!

BMW ON: What does it take to provide a great tour to your clients? What is the key?

Rob: Ever since my father started running the tours, the single idea has been freedom. While we do conduct "tours," every effort is made to give participants all the information they need to make their own day-to-day choices. We don't go down the road in a group. Everyone is free to depart when they please, ride the roads they choose, set their own pace, and choose their riding companions.

A group ride is little more than a bus trip with 15 drivers. Big groups require big parking lots and big restaurants, big spaces on the road, big everything. They stifle individual experience, which is what makes a particular trip magical and special.

Gentle guidance and information leave

the adventure to the tour members. We don't insulate or smother. We encourage exploration and discovery.

BMW ON: Have you ever had a tour where everything that could possibly go wrong, went wrong? If so, how do you get through that?

Rob: Of course we have; that is the nature of probability. Put enough variables into the mix (and each tour has plenty of variables!) and things sometimes go wrong. In reality it doesn't all happen at once, so getting through it means dealing with each situation as it arises, according to its severity.

I have observed that problems – real problems – are rather infrequent and generally have straightforward solutions. Hassles and inconveniences are far more frequent, and often are softened or eliminated by honestly answering the question – "is this really important?" Approach it one problem/hassle at a time and it isn't so overwhelming. Then, when it is all in the past, I mentally catalog the problems and do my best to keep them from happening again.

BMW ON: What's the strangest thing to happen to you or your group on a tour?

Rob: Wow.... "Strange tales of the road." Not only could it be a title for a book, but we have enough stories to fill it. I have a couple that come to mind.

While gassing up the bikes at a station in Maseru, Lesotho, I heard a "Rob, help" plea, and turned to find a man in a camouflage uniform pointing a pistol at David Hough, author of *Proficient Motorcycling* and one of our tour members. As I stepped forward to see what was happening, another man stopped me and told me that Dave was under arrest. I was told – in no uncertain terms – to stay where I was. When a man has a rifle like his and tells me to do something, I listen very carefully!

Dave was told to get on his motorcycle and follow a jeep with a few men in it. The fellow with the pistol sat backwards on the jeep and kept Dave in his gun sight. Off they went... to where?

When my heartbeat returned to normal, I set off to find the American Embassy in Maseru. There I met a man who explained that Dave had likely been arrested for photographing "an official vehicle."

Off we went to the police station. Dave's bike was there, but Dave wasn't. The "gentleman" from the embassy proved to have no grasp of Sesotho, the local language, and no tact at all. Ugly American is the only term to describe him, and after listening to him yell and scream at the police I told him to go away; he wasn't helping the situation at all. A more gentle inquiry after the embassy big shot departed got me information that Dave was "in interrogation" and no, I couldn't see him.

While waiting to see what developed I was speaking to a police officer on the steps in front of the station. A man came up and,

without a word, dropped a body bag between the officer and me, turned and walked away. The officer looked at the bag with an astounding lack of curiosity, returned his eyes to me and continued the conversation.

“I wonder if there is a body in that bag,” I thought. Then, “Dave is bigger than that – one man couldn’t have carried him so easily.”

Eventually the officer went inside; the bag stayed on the steps. I paced the dirt parking lot and mulled what to do next. An hour or so later Dave came out of another door with his story. It turns out that the young fellow in the jeep had seen Dave shooting pictures of a group of women in a trailer pulled by a tractor. It turns out that almost every vehicle in Lesotho is an official vehicle, even a trailer full of women.

Dave was presented – at gunpoint – to the commander of the police station and was accused of taking photographs! The interrogation centered around what Dave had taken photos of, as images of the King’s Palace, family, vehicles and quite simply, anything royal are off-limits. The interrogator demanded to see the photos – this is before digital cameras – and couldn’t understand why he couldn’t see them. He had no knowledge of cameras at all!

Eventually Dave persuaded him that he was a generally innocent fellow writing an article on travel in South Africa, and assured the officer that no photos of anything royal would appear anywhere. The officer’s status among his peers was in good standing, as he had spent hours interrogating the American; the various parties, tired, stressed but content, went their separate ways.

Then there was Fred, a fellow in his 80’s. There we were, in Johannesburg, looking at the bikes we were to ride for the next three weeks across South Africa. They were the then-new R80GSes, which had only recently been introduced in the States.

A problem. Fred was not a tall fellow. In fact, he was really short. Sitting on the bike, each of Fred’s feet had a solid 5” of air beneath them. This wasn’t going to work, but there were no options other than for him to travel in the support van. Having



Rob scouts another tour.

dreamed of Africa for most of his adult life, he was not about to be put off by an insignificant problem like this. He told me that I could do the balancing for him.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Just be there when I stop. You can hold the bike up,” Fred replied.

His vision of my duty was that I was to wait at each stop – and catch him when he came to a halt.

It was an interesting challenge, and to his credit, Fred could ride, and ride well. When we arrived at an intersection, a rest stop, a restaurant, or wherever, I simply stopped somewhere where Fred could pull up next to me. With precision he would do just that, each and every time. I would reach over, hold the end of his handlebar while he kept both feet on the pegs and the front brake applied, and balance the bike for him. When it was safe to go, he would effortlessly ride away from my hand. On dirt roads, sand washes, and thousands of miles of pavement, that is how we did it. I stop. He stops. I balanced. He rode away. I rode away.

It took a bit more coordination when he wanted to get off the bike, as I had to apply the front brake while he climbed (literally!) off the bike. But his balance was good, and he was nimble for a golden ager, so it didn’t

take long for that to become second nature for both of us.

So, strange but true, Fred rode a motorcycle for three weeks all over South Africa – without every putting a foot down!

BMW ON: Wow, that’s service. Fred picked the right tour. Is there one tour that is your absolute most popular?

Rob: That would be the Classic Alpine Adventure. Traveling through five countries, with the opportunity to cross as many of 75 passes as time allows, it is not only a great introduction to the Alps but a tour that one may repeat again and again and enjoy new experiences each time. There are so many dimensions to traveling in the Alps that it never gets old.

BMW ON: How do you go about creating a new tour?

Rob: First, find a destination with great roads, scenery to keep the passenger enthralled, excellent accommodation, food and amenities. Then choose overnight stops that allow plenty of options for rides of varying length each day. Finally, gather a great group of people to experience it all. It’s not at all difficult (laughter).

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BMW ON: Worst moment ever?

Rob: The worst moments are hearing that a friend has been hurt or killed in a motorcycle accident. Unfortunately, I know those moments. Fortunately not from first-hand experience on tours I was conducting.

BMW ON: Best moment ever on a tour?

Rob: That's easy, because it happens on most every tour. It's the "Aha!" moment when someone gets it figured out – whether the it is "two weeks really is the best length for a vacation" or "if I apply my brake right here it is easy to get around these corners" or "I am taking my time and heading off on my own today" or "Wow, so that is why they do it that way in Austria." There are so many new challenges and possibilities on an over-seas ride that when someone gets it, it is a magical moment.

Those moments are fulfilling for me. When "my vacation" turns into "my experience" the client leaves with a new understanding as well as memories, and I get to see it all through new eyes, which is very invigorating!

BMW ON: Did you know at a young age, that this would be your life?

Rob: At 20, when I was able to ride my first complete tour, I couldn't imagine anything better – and still can't!

BMW ON: What was your first bike?

Rob: It was a QA50 – the Honda mini trail. Dad bought it from an amusement park, where it had been installed on a merry-go-round.

BMW ON: Do you have a favorite bike, model, etc?

Rob: The new F800 series are very capable bikes and I quite enjoy riding them, but my tried and true ride is a 1989 R100GS/PD. My current bike has 270,000 kilometers on it, and is still (generally) running strong!

BMW ON: How many days per year are you on the road?



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Rob: For the last 20 years or so I have been away from home for six months a year. I am actually traveling on tour somewhere between 100 and 125 days annually.

BMW ON: Okay, loaded question: what's your father, Bob Sr., like?

Rob: There aren't enough pages in this issue to answer to that question! Dad was a traveling man. When I was a kid Dad was in sales of major amusement rides. His territory was everything east of the Mississippi. He often took me on the road with him when making sales calls.



Bob Sr. founded the company 40 years ago.

A pilot with a commercial rating, he owned a dozen or more airplanes. He would sometimes wake me up in the middle of the night with the question "Would you like to fly to Detroit? We will be back in time for school." Off we would go to Detroit, or Chicago or Albany.

Dad had ridden motorcycles since he was a kid, and when he was no longer flying as part of his employment, his interest in motorcycle touring increased. After buying a new BMW in Munich in 1969, he began crisscrossing the States. A coffee run for Dad was a four-hour round trip.

He taught me to ride his R69S when I was about 12. My mother wasn't too thrilled when we came back from a trip to Yellowstone and I happily told her I had learned

to ride a real motorcycle.

Dad is generally relaxed and patient. He dragged me, a sometimes uncooperative, bratty adolescent, some 70,000 miles around the country on the back of his bike, and delighted in showing me the out of the way places.

He let me stay up late on Thursdays to watch *Then Came Bronson* on TV. He took me to see *Easy Rider* when I was 14, but warned me "it probably is best if your mother doesn't know I brought you to see this." He introduced me to stories about motorcycles, travel and freedom, and let me form my own opinion.

An active, confident man, he was always involved in local clubs, events and causes. When the BMW MOA™ was formed, he jumped on board – his membership is #91. I remember the dining room table covered with pages of the newsletter – the forerunner to the BMW News, I think, that Chuck Smith was editing – and walking around the table collating them page-by-page.

That was also the time that he began conducting European tours – the traveler expanded his horizons. In spite of the new pressures, he remained laid back and easy going, and supportive of everything that I was doing.

So – what's my father like? A great guy – one who left huge footprints that I am still struggling to follow.

BMW ON: Could you ever imagine doing something else?

Rob: Oh certainly! I can imagine doing all sorts of other things. Then I make it to the top of a pass or come around a corner to find a view that takes my breath away, or run a stretch of road and get it all right and all those other possibilities are instantly insignificant.

BMW ON: What's the biggest challenge in what you do?

Rob: Helping people overcome fear and tension. These two emotions manifest themselves in so many ways, and riding in foreign countries can bring both to a boil. Easing tour members into the challenges

they will face on European roads, helping them become comfortable in communicating with locals, explaining how things are done here so they may assimilate—all help reduce surprise and, therefore, tension.

Another challenge is helping riders improve their skills so they become more relaxed, safer motorcyclists. Which also, coincidentally, reduces tension! Riders traveling the Alpine roads for the first time are quite surprised at how different things are than "back home." Working on both basic and advanced riding skills and techniques throughout the tour is good fun for me, a great use of the riding situation that is Europe, and very rewarding.

BMW ON: Did the economic downturn have much impact on you?

Rob: Yes, but after four decades in the business, it isn't the first economic swing we have had to work through!

BMW ON: What's new for 2013?

Rob: The season kicks off with fun in the sun, as we go south to Sicily on the Sicilian Sojourn and return up the Amalfi Coast.

In May we will be touring England and heading to the Isle of Man. The TT on the island is such an amazing motorcycle event. It really is beyond description. Logistically this is a difficult tour, so it doesn't run often. But every now and then I get a serious hankering to see another TT, and off we go!

We have been going to Corsica for years. In 2013 we will be combining a week in Corsica with a week in Sardinia in a great itinerary that begins and ends in Tuscany. Islands, mountains and Tuscan hills... on this ride the curves never end.

In late August a scouting tour to Romania will take us over the Transylvanian Alps. This new, exciting itinerary runs from Budapest through Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. Adventure beckons!

In between those are a couple of the venerable Classic Alpine Adventures, and the Alpine Adventure West, through the high French and Italian Alps. Fantastic riding from April to October. See why I do this? ☺