

Seven-Thousand Miles
across the country on a Kawasaki Concours 14

*open road beckons
the roar of wind unending
infinite choices*



It's a journey to be enjoyed, not a race to be won.

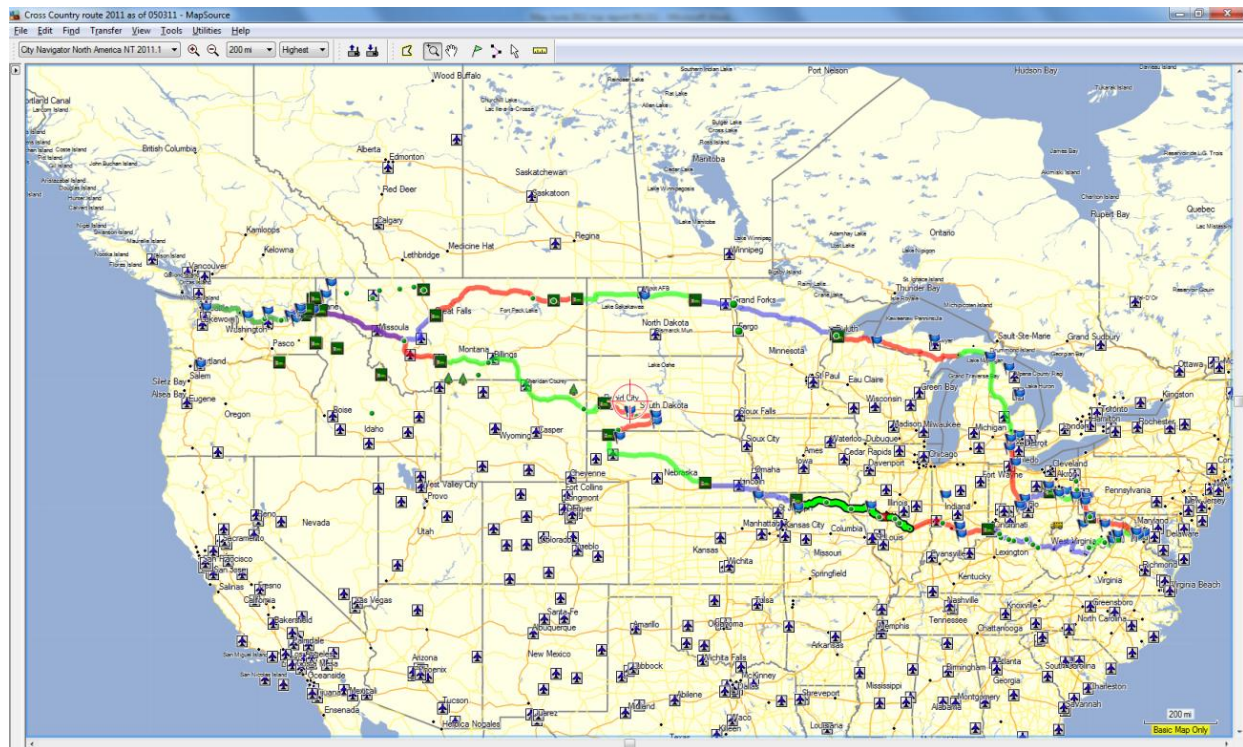
PREPARATION

Preparation is part of the journey. I began thinking seriously about a retirement trip in early 2010 even though I didn't start this trip for nearly a year. After researching a lot of bikes, I decided that my retirement bike would be a new Kawasaki Concours 14 ABS. The improvements Kawasaki made to the 2010 Connie 14 and the availability of ABS and traction control, along with the other touring-oriented features on the bike, were key factors. I bought a beautiful, dark metallic blue Concours 14 ABS at Lake City Powersports in Seattle in June, 2010. It turned out to be the perfect choice.

A 1600-mile trip from Seattle to Sun Valley and back in August, 2010, gave me a preview of life on the open road with the Concours. What worked well and what didn't? What accessories should I add to the bike? What kind of risks should I prepare for? The layers of thought associated with a long cross-country trip take place on time scales that range from months of preparation to day-by-day decisions about weather and routing to the second-by-second process of actually riding the machine. For a safe and successful trip you need to make intelligent decisions in every layer. I must have done alright and been reasonably lucky, because I had no accidents, no near misses, no tickets, and only one minor equipment problem in over 7,000 miles of riding. Here's what I experienced, and what I learned.

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THE RIDE



Facts and Figures

- Left home May 4, 2011
- Rode 7,072 miles
- Traveled through 18 states
- Averaged 324 miles per day (excluding local riding)
- Total length of trip – 38 days
- Total riding days – 23
- Total days riding alone – 20
- Highest temperature – 93 degrees in Missouri on June 3rd
- Lowest temperature – 28 degrees in Montana on June 9th
- Total days riding in serious rain – 5
- Shortest day's ride – 111 miles from Galloway, Ohio, to Millersburg, Ohio
- Longest day's ride – 539 miles from Rapid City, South Dakota, to Bozeman, Montana
- Arrived home June 10th

Balancing the desire to ride twisty, scenic secondary roads with the need to make time toward a destination was a challenge. Sometimes weather and road conditions forced me to stay on major roads. Some days I just wanted to make progress, especially on the ride home. I wasn't able to ride some of the best roads in Montana and Wyoming because of snow, both going east and coming back west.

Most of the trip east was on US 2 through Washington, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, but I took a more southerly route home. Generally I was able to avoid Interstates and urban areas. Overall the best riding roads were in West Virginia, but there were certainly other good riding roads. US 2 in the Washington Cascades is an excellent motorcycling road that I've ridden many times, and there are more intriguing motorcycle roads in the Black Hills than I had the time to ride. US 50 in West Virginia and Virginia would be a great motorcycling road if the road surface in West Virginia were better. Nebraska Route 2 from Grand Island to Enterprise (The Sandhill

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Journey Scenic Highway) was an enjoyable cruise. In fact, I'd classify most of this ride as cruising rather than sport touring because so much of middle of this country has such straight, flat roads.

In twenty-three days of riding I ran into bad weather on only five days, including one day of mixed rain and snow in the Bitterroot Mountains. There were a few rain showers on days other than these five, but the rainfall was light, and it didn't affect my riding. On the other hand, three of the bad weather days included a nasty mix of cold temperatures, heavy rain, high winds, lightening, road spray, and/or fog. Having a bike with adequate wind protection, good tires, and heated grips, as well as a heated vest, waterproof boots and gloves, and an Aerostich riding suit allowed me to continue riding on those days.

One thing that made this trip special was the many pleasant stops along the way. By far my best experiences were visiting family and friends, including my aunt and uncle, my niece for her college graduation, my sister and her family, and my friends John and Petra Holt. I'm not going to write about those personal visits here, but I *am* going to describe some of the stops that motorcyclists might enjoy.

BEST STOPS



The Canal District in Duluth was a surprisingly pleasant stop. It was my first day off after five days and 1800 miles of riding. The weather was cold and wet, but the people were warm and the surroundings were fascinating. The Canal District has a good dozen restaurants, the ship canal, the Aerial Lift Bridge, and the Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center, along with a lot of interesting shops, all within easy walking distance of the waterfront hotels. The Aerostich Rider Wearhouse, a magnet for motorcyclists, is a couple of miles away and is a wonderful place to spend hours checking out motorcycle gear.

The Barn Inn in Millersburg is in a picturesque setting in the heart of Ohio's Amish country. My sister arranged rooms for us at this B & B situated on a country road a few miles outside of Millersburg while we were in Ohio for my niece's college graduation. This well-kept inn is on a quiet road frequented by Amish carriages. Our hosts were warm and friendly, and they made a special effort to arrange parking for my motorcycle. Their country breakfasts included Amish-made sausages and jams, stuffed French toast, apple crisp, freshly baked maple-pecan rolls, fresh fruit, and more. Wireless Internet access was a surprise in this out-of-the-way spot.



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Snowshoe Resort sits on a 5,000-foot ridge in the heart of the highlands of West Virginia in the middle of the best motorcycle roads in the U.S. The extensive resort facilities are on top of the mountain with views of tree-covered ridges stretching to the horizon. Looking around 360 degrees, you see few, if any, signs of civilization. There are great roads elsewhere in this country, but I haven't found so many superb roads concentrated in a relatively unpopulated, motorcycle-friendly area anywhere else in this country. Riding with the excellent riders of the Chicken-Run made this part of the journey truly special.

R & R Powersports in Effingham, Illinois, turned out to be a real find, and thanks to some pointers from Gary Rogers, the owner of R & R, I found Effingham to be a great place for a stopover. R & R ordered a set of Metzler Roadtec Z8 Interact tires, and had the tires mounted, balanced, and on the bike within 24-hours of my call from the road. They also completed a full 7,500-mile service with very short notice, when I suddenly realized that the odometer on the Connie was showing almost 8,000 miles. Randy, the service manager, did all the work himself, carefully documented everything, and on top of that cleaned up the bike. R & R Powersports fit all of this into an already full shop schedule, demonstrated exceptional competence, and offered great customer service. Gary even drove me to and from my hotel. I'd put R & R Powersports on my "highly recommended" list of motorcycle dealerships. I can't thank them enough for getting me home safely!

I rode out of Effingham on Friday morning with the bike running perfectly and the new Metzlers feeling great. The gas mileage on the Connie improved markedly after the work that R & R did. The fuel consumption averaged over 50 mpg in Nebraska and South Dakota, and I wasn't riding slowly!



**Mt. Rushmore
Memorial
from
Iron Mountain Road**

The Black Hills of South Dakota held interesting destinations, gorgeous scenery, and excellent motorcycling roads. The climate was pleasant in June, and the twisty roads were well maintained. I spent a worthwhile non-riding day enjoying a well-guided Gray Line tour of this area. Highlights included

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Mt. Rushmore, the Crazy Horse Memorial, the 1880 Railroad, Custer State Park, the Coolidge General store, Iron Mountain Road, and the Needles Highway. The Crazy Horse Memorial was fascinating. It's easily ten times the size of the Mt. Rushmore Memorial, and the visitor's center museum contains exceptional displays of Native American culture. Next chance I get I'll go back and ride Iron Mountain Road and the Needles Highway.

BIKE AND ACCESSORIES

The 2010 Concours 14 ABS model performed flawlessly and didn't miss a beat for the entire trip. Great performance, excellent comfort, superb braking, and good handling with average fuel consumption of over 45 MPG for the entire trip, were a winning combination. In 6th gear the Connie cruises effortlessly at fast freeway speeds with the tach showing 3,500 RPM or less. From 4,000 RPM to the 10,500 RPM red line the ZX-14 engine pulls hard, then harder, then hard enough to jerk your arms straight and slam your butt into the step in the seat, making passing incredibly easy and other traffic on the road seem stationary.



A new Concours 14 doesn't need much, but a few carefully chosen accessories made the trip safer and less stressful. I mounted a Garmin GPS on a Kawasaki-provided bracket above the steering stem and an Adaptiv TPX radar detector on a quick-detach bracket bolted to a RAM mount attached to the right handgrip hardware. The three-LED warning light for the TPX unit was mounted on top of the Connie's LCD display panel.



GPS was a no-brainer. Since I already owned a Garmin Zumo 450, all I needed was a Kawasaki bracket, and a Garmin motorcycle mount and power cable to have all the navigation capability I needed. If I could add only one touring accessory to a bike, this would be it. I left this unit on the bike, both riding and parked, in all kinds of weather, including heavy rain and snow, and it performed flawlessly.

Adaptiv TPX Radar Detector I've used radar detectors over the years, not as a license to speed, but more as a reminder to be prudent. It's safer to ride a little above the speed of other traffic if for no other reason than to stay away from the cars, trucks, and cell-phone-using drivers, but it's easy to let speed creep up a little too much on a bike like the Connie. The bright red, flashing LED Adaptiv warning light on top of the instrument panel slowed me down many times on this trip and probably saved me from a couple of tickets. The TPX is the only radar detector made specifically for motorcycles. It's water-resistant, shock-mounted, and stood up to plenty of rain, heat, and hard bumps in 7,000 miles.

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Kisan Headlight Modulator Kisan makes a nice unit that plugs neatly between the headlight bulbs and power plugs. The pulsing high beams are activated by the high beam switch in the daytime. A photo sensor disables pulsing at night, allowing the high beam switch to serve its normal purpose. I've lost count of how many times people have done a double-take and stopped before pulling out in my path of travel when the modulators were pulsing the high beams. In years of riding I've only had one driver pull out in front of me when I had the modulators on, and that was in Nebraska on this trip. It was a sobering reminder that you just never know what other drivers might do.

Custom Seat Rich's Custom Seats in Kingston, Washington did a fantastic job building a custom seat for me last August. It was built and fitted in about six hours while I waited. The process is so precise that Rich insists that you wear your normal riding clothing for the fitting. I asked Rich to lower the seat so that I'd be more comfortable handling the 690-pound Concours plus the travel load. The orange gel insert is equivalent to 2 ½ inches of foam. The leather cover is exquisitely made and fitted, and it looks great. I credit Rich's for the fact that I didn't have a sore butt, back or neck in 7,000 miles of riding.



Kawasaki Top Box



At the time I bought the bike, I ordered a large Kawasaki "top box" to fit on the rear luggage rack. The top box load limit is 6 ½ pounds, so I used it to store light, bulky items including jacket liners and gloves. This unit was the only thing that gave me a problem on the entire trip. The lock/latch mechanism is poorly designed. It's difficult to lock and unlock, and the weak latch popped open several times on the way east. Fortunately, nothing bounced out of the trunk even with the lid flopping open. My solution was to order an adjustable ROK strap from Aerostich while I was staying in Northern Virginia. For the rest of the trip I used it as a safety strap that went around the luggage rack and the entire top box.

RIDING GEAR

Riding Suit I have one word for you. It isn't *plastic*, it's *Aerostich*. My Aerostich Roadcrafter one-piece riding suit was an ideal solution for commuting to work over the course of the last four years. It also was an excellent riding suit for this trip. It's wind-proof, waterproof, breathable, armored, and abrasion-resistant. It has adjustable vents, and you can put it on or take it off in less than thirty seconds.

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Cold Weather Gear I used an Aerostich Kanetsu Airvantage heated vest with zip-off sleeves under the Roadcrafter in colder temperatures, and it was a lifesaver. This vest can be inflated to hold the heating elements closer to one's skin and to provide additional insulation. This feature works well. I stayed warm enough in some chilly weather just relying on the insulating air layer with the power turned off. There's no way I could have ridden for any length of time in temperatures ranging from the upper 20s to low 40s without an electrically heated vest and the heated grips on the Concours.

Hot Weather Gear For hot weather I carried an evaporative vest, which I wore under the Roadcrafter suit with all the Roadcrafter vents wide open. I stored the vest inside a nested pair of 2-gallon Ziploc freezer bags. When hot weather was in the forecast, I loaded the vest and inner Ziploc with ice in the morning. When temperatures climbed above 85 degrees or so, the evap vest was a godsend.

Gloves I'll always carry these four pairs from now on no matter what the season: 1) regular armored riding gloves w/ long gauntlets; 2) Held Gore-Tex rain gloves w/ medium gauntlets that fit under suit sleeves; 3) vented hot-weather gloves with no gauntlets; 4) insulated Gore-Tex winter gloves.

Shoei RF1100 Helmet I find that Shoei helmets fit my head shape better than other brands I've tried, including Arai. I wore a relatively new Shoei RF-1100 on this trip. It's a comfortable helmet with nice, plush padding and good ventilation. I closed the vents on the upper, front part of the Shoei in cooler conditions and opened them when it was warm. Wind noise increases markedly with these vents open, but the improvement in cooling is worth it. Using 33 db disposable foam earplugs helps a lot with the wind noise, and I wear them on any ride longer than a couple of miles.

Alpinestar Gore-Tex Boots and Assorted Socks I own two pairs of Alpinestar Gore-Tex boots, and like them both. On this trip I wore the lighter Alpinestar Soho boots. They were comfortable, easy to put on and take off, and totally waterproof. I took two pairs of lightweight boot socks, one pair of medium-weight motorcycle boot socks, and one pair of heavy wool-blend boot socks and used all of them.

CHALLENGES



The Straits of Mackinac Bridge soars 200 feet over the boundary between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron.

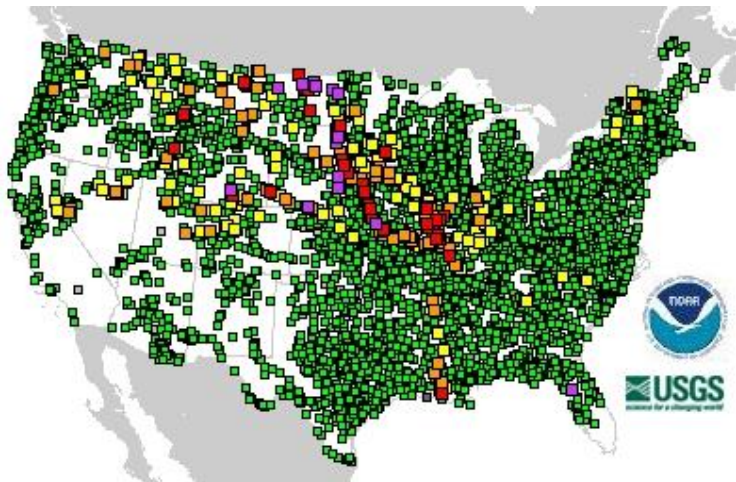
Crossing the Straits of Mackinac Bridge in high winds on wet steel grating was the most frightening motorcycling experience I've ever had. This five-mile-long, four-lane bridge on I-75 in Michigan has the longest suspension span in the western hemisphere and the third longest in the world. The road surface on the ramps that climb to the 200-foot-high suspended section is concrete as are the outer lanes on the suspension span. The inner lanes on the suspension span are steel grating, and maintenance on the outer lanes forced all of the traffic onto the steel grating when I crossed the bridge.

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I made the decision to cross the bridge because I was on a schedule and assumed that if conditions were bad enough, they'd stop vehicles at risk. I had no idea just how bad it would be. Apparently a small car was blown off the bridge some years ago with obviously fatal results. On a motorcycle wet steel grating 200 feet above the water is scary on a calm day. I rode across in gale-force winds behind a line of thunderstorms. Although I can normally keep the Concours on a steady track a foot or so wide, I could barely keep the bike in my lane. The wind was blowing from the east and I was heading south. Every time a northbound truck went by the wind was blocked. If you ride, you know what that does to a bike. One second you're leaning far to the left to stay on the road, the next second you're slamming the bike upright to keep from hitting the concrete lane barrier, and the second after that you have to slam the bike back to the left to keep from running into the road construction zone.

Missouri Heat The worst day of the trip for me was a 378-mile ride from Effingham, Illinois, to Bethany, Missouri with high humidity and temperatures in the low nineties. I let myself get hot and dehydrated and started to lose concentration while riding secondary roads through a ridiculous bunch of road repavement work in Missouri. Toward the end of the ride I had to use half of the water in my water bottle to soak the evap vest. Then an hour or so away from my destination I hit an exceptionally nasty stretch of road covered with fresh oil and gravel with no pavement markings or shoulders. I was so wiped out at the end of the day that I ordered pizza for delivery instead of going out for dinner. For the rest of the trip I packed the evap vest in ice every day that hot weather was predicted.

The worst areas of flooding are shown in purple and orange – right across my route.



Extreme spring weather across a lot of the country made history in the spring of 2011. There was heavy snowfall in the mountains in the winter with subsequent heavy rain and melting snow causing record flooding in the spring. I had to detour around snow-covered roads and passes in Montana and Wyoming. I rode in snow at 28 degrees on I-90 in the Bitterroot Mountains on June 9th. There was flooding in North Dakota, on the Ohio River, and in the Missouri River basin. There were severe thunderstorms and a large number of tornados all over the Midwest and east as far as Massachusetts. A flood map in USA Today showed flooding across most of the routes I was considering. The only clear area was around Omaha, so I crossed the Missouri a bit south of Omaha. The river was high and fields were flooded, but the roads were okay. A combination of planning, timing and a lot of luck got me through all of this unscathed and with very little impact to the trip.

LESSONS LEARNED

Plan ahead. I put together a detailed plan for the trip east well in advance because I had a schedule to keep. Although I made some last minute changes because of snow on the roads in Montana, the advance planning kept me on schedule and made the trip less stressful. I used Garmin Map Source to

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find all the waypoints I could think of and to map out the initial routes and then downloaded everything into my Garmin Zumo 450 GPS unit. Very convenient and very helpful!

Try before you go. Go on several shakedown trips before you do the real thing. Day trips are fine, but make them real rides on roads like the ones you plan to be on. Pack the exact load and wear the same gear you'll wear on the actual trip. Make sure it all works and get used to the way the bike feels with that kind of load. Get rid of anything you don't really need. Dial in the suspension settings with the full trip load on the bike.

Hotels fill up. On the trip back home, I had no particular route in mind and just rode day-by-day, sometimes making the next hotel reservation 24 hours ahead of time, sometimes just finding a place to stop wherever I was. Hotels near major roads and popular destinations filled up early, particularly on weekends. Lower cost places like Motel 6 seemed to fill up first. On weekends and holidays especially, make advance reservations, or at least try to finish each day's ride no later 4 PM. And pay attention to time zones. Some time zone boundaries don't follow state borders, and you may suddenly find it's an hour later or earlier than you thought.

Check road conditions and weather every day. Every state I checked had a DOT website that showed current road conditions, and it's easy to check weather online, especially with an iPhone/iPad app. State DOTs in the west typically provide detailed pass conditions. I would have been in serious trouble on snow-covered roads in the mountains if I hadn't checked the road conditions regularly.

You can't miss with Holiday Inn Express hotels. They were the most consistently good hotels I found on this trip, although their rates are a bit higher than many of the other chains. Don't get me wrong – there were other good chains and one-off places. Comfort Inn and Suites and Best Western hotels are usually pretty good, but occasionally you run into some decidedly mediocre properties. The same goes for Motorcycle Travel Network. One of the MTN houses I stayed at was fantastic, but another one wasn't really prepared to host anyone.

Plan reasonable daily riding distances. Unless you're an Iron Butt rider or have some other pressing need to get somewhere in a short time, forget the 1,000-mile days. I tried to keep daily riding distances around 350 miles, give or take, so I could enjoy the journey and ride alertly. This was particularly important on the first few days of the trip, when I was still adjusting both mentally and physically to long days of two-wheeled travel. You can increase daily distances when riding on Interstates, but doing so on technically challenging roads is not a good idea. Where's the fun, really?

Plan at least one non-riding day every week. Rest. Do laundry. Do some sightseeing. It makes the trip much more enjoyable and allows you to learn something about the area you're in instead of just blasting through it. It also puts some padding in your schedule in case a mechanical problem or weather delays you unexpectedly. I had a lot of fun taking a day off in Duluth visiting Aerostich, sightseeing, and dining in an excellent café, and I really enjoyed a Gray Line bus tour of Mt. Rushmore, the Crazy Horse Memorial, and other lesser known sights in the Black Hills on a non-riding day in Rapid City.

Watch distances in the west. It really hit home as I was riding through Montana and Wyoming that motorcyclists need to be careful to take into account the sizes of states in the western U.S. The map scales change as you shift from one map to another. Food and fuel become scarcer. Lodging options become limited. I had trouble finding gas on I-90 in Montana and ran the gas tank very low on my second day out. Once in Montana and once again in North Dakota I couldn't find restaurants close to where I'd hoped to stop for meals and had to dine on a protein bar from my tank bag.

Plan tire change and/or maintenance stops in advance if possible. The Concours wore out a brand new set of Dunlop Roadsmart tires in about 5,000 miles – over 2,000 miles from home. I also hit the 7,500-mile mark on the odometer in Ohio on the trip home – time for a major service on the bike. On the road and with short notice, I had a lot of trouble finding a dealer willing and able to get new tires for me. I

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was fortunate enough to find R & R Powersports in Effingham, Illinois, and they took care of tires and service quickly and well. You might not be so lucky.

Pack light, but smart. On a long cross-country trip just assume that you're going to see rain, snow, high humidity, high winds and temperatures ranging from below freezing to 100 degrees. Prepare accordingly. That means heated vest or jacket liner, evaporative vest, multiple pairs of gloves, etc. Pants, shirts, t-shirts, and underwear should all be made of light, high-tech, wicking fabrics that work well in both heat and cold and dry quickly. Two or three of each of these items is plenty, since almost every hotel or motel has a guest laundry, but I'd recommend taking three or four pairs of socks in light, medium and heavy weights. Take something you can wear walking around if the weather is wet or cold. One "luxury item" that I took along was a pair of lightweight shoes; it was great to get out of riding boots and walk around in comfortable footwear at the end of each day.

Pay attention to your hands. At Aerostich in Duluth I bought a beautifully made pair of waterproof leather/Gore-Tex insulated gloves to replace my old winter gloves. Then I made a tactical error by sending both pairs of winter gloves home when temperatures reached the upper 80s in Columbus, Ohio. I ended up riding in rain and snow at 28 degrees in Montana on the way home wearing uninsulated Held rain gloves – excellent gloves, but not intended for those conditions. The Connie's heated grips allowed me to continue riding for an hour or so, but if things hadn't warmed up, my numbed hands would have forced me to stop. My hands were the only part of my body that got really sore on this trip, a common complaint among riders of sport and sport touring bikes. Changing gloves as temperatures warmed up or cooled down allowed me to change pressure points on my hands over the course of a typical day. Every little bit helps. I'll always carry four pairs of gloves from now on.

Stay connected. I absolutely loved having an iPad with 3G wireless service and a Zagg-mate Bluetooth keyboard on this trip. From almost anywhere I could check weather, make hotel reservations, and update my blog, use email, plan routes, move money around, and pay bills – you name it. I uploaded the latest photos from my digital camera every day, and sent some of them to Facebook and my blog, sometimes after editing them with an iPad app. All the Ruby Tuesday's I dined at had free AT&T Wi-Fi that my iPad connected to automatically. Fantastic device! I wouldn't leave home without it.

Ride with a few compatible friends if you can. I rode by myself on most of this trip. Some compatible riding companions would've been nice. I've ridden many miles with friends like John Holt and Forrest Walls and always felt comfortable with our consensus on routes, stops, lodging and so on. Riding solo made decision-making easier, but sometimes I found myself pushing either speed or distance more than I would have if I'd been riding with friends.

Remember what you've learned. THINK. Look where you want to go. Watch corner entry speeds. Make late-apex turns. Cover your brakes. Don't assume that anybody on the road sees you or that they'll drive safely and sensibly if they do. Don't get angry and let emotion take over your riding. Take a break if you feel tired or even if you don't. This is supposed to be fun!

PARTING THOUGHTS

Most of us think nothing these days about flying alone across the country, but few people would drive alone across the United States, and far fewer would ride a motorcycle on such a trip. A long motorcycle journey requires skill, discipline, and mental toughness. Motorcycle travel is an intense experience, a way to see, smell, and feel the world that you simply don't get enclosed in a sheet metal cage. For me the rewards far outweighed the difficulty of the trip. In fact, the difficulty was part of the reward. I felt a great sense of empowerment after finishing this ride, a feeling that I could do almost anything that I really set out to do. It's an exhilarating feeling.