

## Spring break for sports bike owners

Patrick Onions, September 2004

If you are one of those unfortunate folk who do not have a bike for every occasion, who owns only a sports bike and has a desperate need to get out of town, here's a suggestion... just do it. And if you are an avid photographer, even better as there are some great images only a couple of hours away.

Spring on the Highveld is a fleeting few weeks when interest in work wanes, when harsh browns and yellows are softened with pale green and mauve, the weather is moderate and the countryside beckons to carefree motorcyclists.

By Wednesday last week my interest in business politics and financial affairs had reached zero. Perhaps it was the contrast between leafy trees outside and coughing colleagues inside that did it. There was only one solution - to take Thursday off. Now most people would use the opportunity to clean the garage or wander aimlessly around the mall. I had a different plan.

It was not difficult waking up early on Thursday, loading the tail pack with a camera and hitting the road by 6.30am. My only intention was to go where I had not been before. South seemed like a good idea, mainly because I would catch the least of the morning traffic by going that way. Taking the N1 down to Grasmere, I played things safe and paid the R4.50 toll fee. Slipping off onto the Golden Highway was a mistake as there are dozens of intersections and a lot of slow-moving traffic and pedestrians. I returned to the highway as soon as possible and shortly took the offramp to Vanderbijlpark and Sasolburg.



Open spaces such as these Free State farmlands near Reitz are welcome relief after the claustrophobic confines of the city.

The Ducati 748 felt quite responsive. A quick blast down the road brought up Heilbron in no time and I was refuelled and under way before 8am. Petrus Steyn and Reitz flew by and the view became more scenic. Photographs were in order, so a few kilometres out of Reitz I pulled up at the top of a rise and made my first unwelcome discovery. The Oxford luggage tailpack has a large capacity and good padding and it accommodated my rather well stocked camera bag with only a little encouragement. But the tripod did not fit, and I had happily fastened it on top with a bungee cord or two. Littered across the northern Free State you will now find an odd assortment of tripod handles and screws that managed to rattle loose. My recommendation to owners of sports bikes, anything with a sports suspension and twins like the Duke is to safely tuck kit away in bags.



The NG Kerk in Bethlehem. This fair sized town is a good base for adventures into the Maluti area.

Back on the road, the motorists I kept leapfrogging were starting to give me strange looks. I was not in any hurry, but that did not mean that I did not want to do the occasional 220 or so in-between snaps. The luggage and the bike could handle the speed and as long as the traffic was sparse, visibility excellent and the road surface good, why not?

Stone buildings and clean streets in Bethlehem were begging to be photographed. Photographers using bikes for transport do benefit from the easy mode of transport and the ability to get through traffic. The problem is that there is not a clean dry environment to change lenses and any workspace is limited to a pillion seat. My advice is to take a large transparent bag to work in if you are changing film or lenses. Once it is there, removing dust from your digital sensor, lens or mirror is impossible in the field and that may ruin otherwise good images.

The day was starting to get warm, so off came the jacket. Now my tail pack was starting to look like one of the buses from the rural areas, with chickens and furniture on top. If you are going long distance and do like to be comfortable, make sure you have at least some soft luggage and that it is not crammed to start off with. For a few hundred rand you can buy a tank bag, tailpack or saddlebags. Personally I don't like a tank bag as they usually end up scratching the tank if you are not careful, they must be removed to refuel and they can get in the way if you pack them too much. Most do offer a very useful clear pocket to slip a map into however and they are very convenient if you don't wish to get off the bike. All soft



Outside Bethlehem and looking towards Clarens, the Maluti mountains on the horizon.

luggage can store a surprising amount of kit in safety and usually come with a bungee cords and tie downs. Remember that superbikes are not designed to be loaded, and there may only be a few places to tie the luggage on to. Just be sure not to overload, to anchor luggage securely so that it does not touch the tailpipe, and to prevent movement. Shedding a bag into the rear wheel is guaranteed to be a source of stories for many months, most of them told from your wheel chair.

By 10am I'd had breakfast at the Wimpy and a refuel. A quick look at the map indicated some potentially picturesque routes down towards Clarens. Taking things slower, I stopped a couple of times at the base of the Maluti mountains to take pictures. Cliches like 'seeing forever' and 'big sky country' are entirely appropriate.



Ducati 748 on the road near Clarens and the Golden Gate. The chickens and paraphernalia on the tailpack are not recommended operating procedure, they was packed back inside once I had finished with the camera.

The area around Clarens and the Golden Gate National Park is great for photographers and for bikers who enjoy speed and curves. For the less reckless and more cultured, I am convinced this small town has more art galleries and estate agents per capita than any other on earth. It is far greener than the surrounding mountains, and the restaurants and bed & breakfasts seemed first rate. With the roads being in relatively good shape and impressive vistas, the area easily equals the Hartebeespoort-Magalies routes for fun. And if you have a passenger, the limited luggage should reduce any shopping for knick-knacks that invariably occurs in these places. An important incentive, I did not see one speed trap or lurking patrol car on the entire trip. It seems that N designated roads are more lucrative those with an R.

Unpleasant surprise number two kicked in after Clarens.

The twin started vibrating at speeds in excess of 160 as if a wheel had become unbalanced, and there was a noticeable reduction in power. Being on my own and facing a huge recovery cost if the bike broke down, I decided to cut the day trip short. The problem turned out to be water and sludge in the fuel. Apparently this is not-so-unusual in the smaller dorps. Bakkies obviously don't mind the flavour of their fuel too much but sports machinery unfortunately does. The solutions don't seem overly appealing either; fuelling up only at large new stations, sticking to the main roads or taking along a transparent two litre bottle to allow the muck to settle out before decanting into the tank. Or maybe I'll win the lottery and fork out for a more forgiving adventure bike to add to the stable.

Apart from the dirty fuel, the standard unmodified 748 was a strong performer in the mountains and on the flat stretches. It pulled hard at 220km/hr in 6<sup>th</sup> on the flats without crouching and was quite content at 200km/hr in 5<sup>th</sup> on the uphill and passes. Only worries about the untidy pack preventing more speed.

Generous torque from low down meant that only rare gear changes were needed to maintain speed, and mountain passes could be enjoyed rather than climbed out of. The pack and kit did not affect the handling or performance, so a pillion passenger with saddlebags on this bike should not ruin the experience. There was no apparent performance lag at altitude either. Cornering was exceptional and the bike tolerated a fair amount of bumps. With a hard suspension setting, road noise was however transmitted through the seat and handlebars and I had to adjust my riding position to one less prone so as to take the weight off my wrists.

Photographers who stop often are advised to take a water bottle, the nearest refreshment can be 30 kilometers and an extortionate number of Rands away. Choose your camera and accessories with care. Bright midday light means you don't need a tripod unless you intend using a telephoto at maximum. For SLR owners who don't need to snap birdlife or interesting people, I would also recommend setting the camera up with a wide angle and leaving the other lenses at home. On this trip I took a Nikon D70 digital SLR with a 12-24mm wide angle and a 28-300mm macro. More bulky than the usual automatic digitals, getting the camera out and returning it to the bag afterward was an effort. I would recommend making or buying a hard lining made out of plastic or cardboard for the soft luggage so that it retains its shape. Goodies inside are then easy to get in and out. Word of warning, soft camera bags without padding are a bad idea for expensive cameras with any vibration and bumps.



Maluti Mountains from a pass near Fouriesburg. The Drakensburg offer some of the world's grandest views and a bike is maybe the best way to explore the area if you love the freedom.

Less photography and a steady pace saw me back in Johannesburg by 2.30pm without incident. The trip took eight hours on the road and 6.1 litres per 100km over 717kms, most of it in the high-speed sections. The bad-fuel vibrations on the way back left me with sore wrists and a numb seat, but that was the sum total of any discomfort. The only changes on the next trip will be to take saddlebags, to pack more carefully and to take more time off.



On the road near Fouriesburg.

If you are planning to buy a bike and intend on travelling South Africa there are certainly more comfortable options, especially those offering hard luggage. If you already have a sports bike that you have bonded with and too few kilometres on the clock, go out and buy some good soft luggage or a top-box, bend the boss's ear and take a midweek break. It is way more fun than cleaning the garage, will cost very little and the family and work colleagues will appreciate your good mood. Just don't show them the pictures. Jealousy turns people nasty. ---