

RetroTours Ride Report: Japan Meets West Virginia: April 29-May 1 2011

The first scheduled ride of 2011 was a study in **contrasts** beginning with the original theme of the ride: Oriental culture verses Appalachian back woods, East meets West, Ying and Yang.

The days before our Friday morning departure were hot and suggestive of summertime. We were all totally psyched for the adventure and very optimistic about the weather. Except for Doug who is obviously more grounded in reality, no one took winter gear. I left my electric vest at home even though I had made certain that all 7 bikes were wired to run it. This would prove to be a mistake.

The sidecar stayed home. Had there been just one more rider, it would have been needed, but as there were 7 Japanese bikes prepped and ready and 7 riders all told, the sidecar stayed at home and the bikes were loaded with our riding gear and luggage plus a couple of sleeping bags. We packed our stuff where ever it fit best: big bags went on bikes with big luggage racks. Bikes with broad flat tanks got tank bags mounted up. Lynn, as usual, sent us off with a delicious breakfast. We managed to get everything loaded on time and these are the bikes that rolled out from the RetroTours garage at 8 AM that morning:

1973 TX750
 1976 Kawasaki KXZ750 twin
 1974 Kawasaki 650 W3
 1976 Yamaha RD400
 1975 Suzuki T500
 1977 Yamaha XS650
 1978 Honda CX500



This represents an incredible array of equipment: push rods to double overhead cams, two strokes to four strokes, water cooled to liquid cooled. All together, these 7 machines REEK of the seventies (come to think of it so do most of the riders), and we (actually the bikes) got plenty of looks and comments everywhere we went. Despite their age there were no mechanical problems at all after 800 miles in three days. They just kept running and running. The Japanese know a thing or two about reliability.

Local repeat riders included my partner and co-leader Doug, Bob, Eric and Jon from PA. John from Delaware was on his first RetroTour as was Mike from NYC. We wobbled away just after 8, feeling out our bikes. The temperature was in the low 50's where it would stay for the day. When the anticipated warm up never happened, we began adding clothes, slowly emptying our bags by the end of the day. We successfully avoided highways but this added to the mileage total for the day which ended up at 325. With frequent stops, it took until 7 PM to cover that distance. While the day was on the long side, the roads were very entertaining and I heard no complaints. Naturally, 7 riders make a slower pace than 1 or 2 and in any case the opportunity to just look around is greatly appreciated sometimes. I love the rebirthing of the earth that is Spring, especially when experienced from the seat of a fine running big twin!

We dipped close to the Delaware border before angling northwest to cross the Susquehanna River at Conowingo, MD. A short stop at newly refurbished Chesapeake HD let us warm up and use the clean restrooms not to mention free hot coffee and lots of motor stuff: shirts, underwear, coffee mugs, jewelry; hey, they also sell motorcycles! We followed the reservoir north through Amish farmlands to Delta, MD to pick up route 851, one of the favorite non-highway ways to get west. Hitting this route at about 10 o'clock meant little or no traffic and we really enjoyed bending the bikes through the curves. At scenic Railroad, PA we turned north crossing the Seven Valleys on 616 to find route 234, another of the 'old roads' that runs towards the west.

While waiting for a red light in Biglerville I got a pee stop request and I heard the KZ burble and stall as if the choke were on. Since we hadn't eaten in 5 hours, I made a quick unscheduled stop right there. There was a historic general store on the corner that is usually closed. I went in for a quick look then had to run out again and get everyone to check the place out. When RetroTouring it often happens that the best finds are totally unplanned. Like this one.

Mrs. Harbough is a well known local lady in her mid eighties. Her father had opened the general store about 100 years ago and from all appearances, there was a sample of everything that they ever sold still in stock. Thousands of antiques and paraphernalia covered the floor and walls on three levels. Bob even managed to find a pair of old fashioned long underwear. They only cost \$4.50, with no extra charge for the yellow stains (from water leakage?).

At least he would be warm for the rest of the trip. There were ancient sleds, toys, cloths, kitchen miscellany, books, bedding, jewelry and more. In a back room were cans of paint from the early 1900's. Newspaper articles described a visit by then President Dwight Eisenhower. Fascinating cabinets with weird triangular drawers held hardware from the last century and probably from the one before that!

The real piece-de-resistance however had to be Mrs. Harbough herself. She is really an amazing woman with many fascinating stories to tell. These are captured in a book which she is nearly done writing by the way. She was dressed in elegant period garb with an over the top long blond hair wig and copious amounts of makeup. At first I honestly thought she was a mannequin. She never left her seat as we stood around slack-jawed while she wove her historic tales. Finally, I had to tear myself away, and we rode about a mile further to a local eatery for lunch and to discuss what we had just experienced. If any of us ever passes this way again will Mrs. Harbough still be telling her stories? One could buy the book I suppose, but would that be the same?

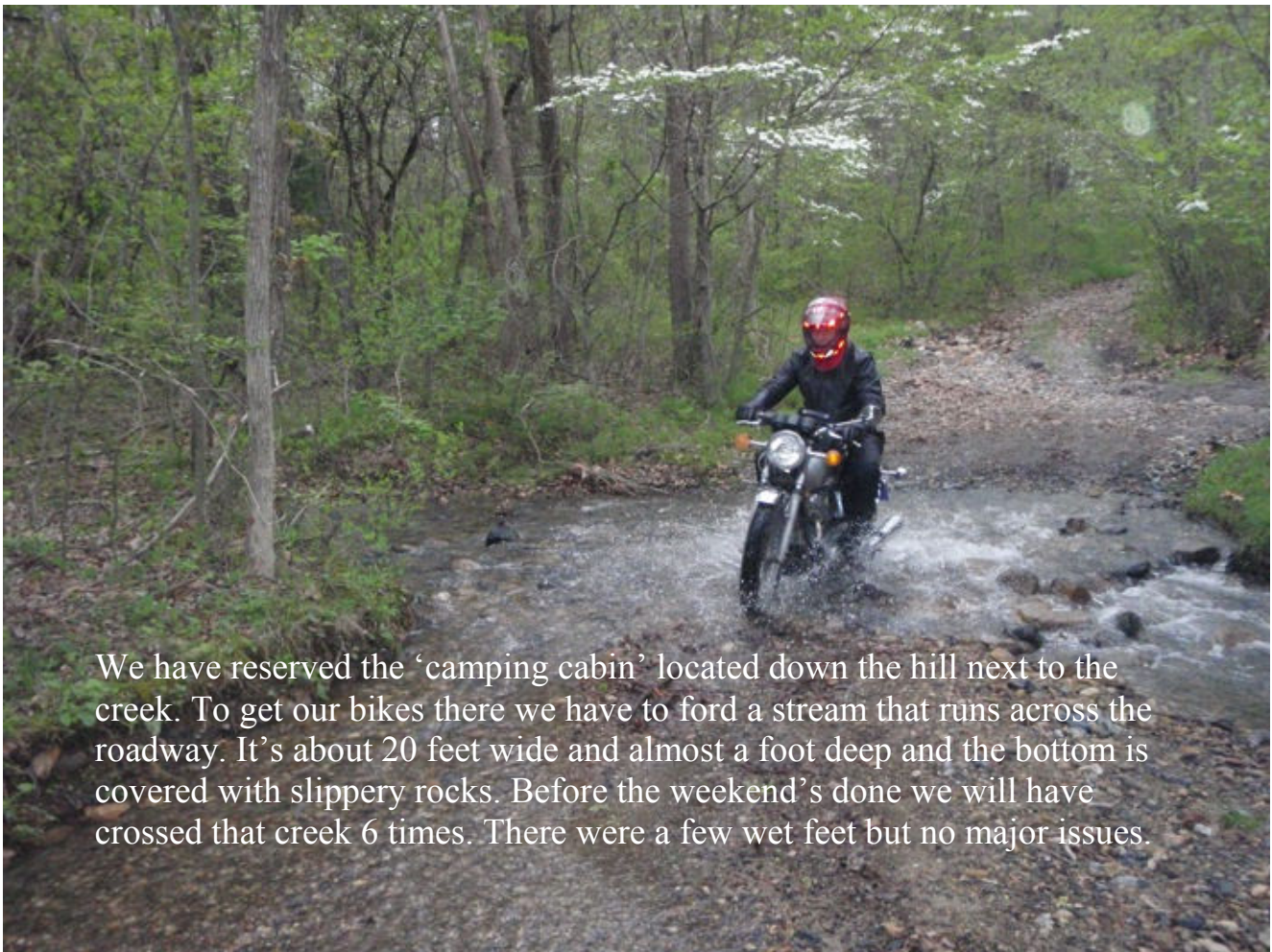


We deviated to the south on several lovely back roads to reach route 233 which we followed into the Mischeaux State Forest. In between South Mountain and Alto we came across a foot race and picked our way carefully around dozens of hardy runners who were in the process of conquering the mountain. We were beginning to feel the cold a bit more now and the last few layers of clothing were added as we turned southwards again on 456, crossing into Maryland then turning west on old route 40/144/scenic 40. This route parallels highway 70/68 but the old road winds up and down wooded mountain sides with big sweeping curves, cresting at the 3 state overlook in Town Hill, PA before plunging back down into MD, crossing route 68 and turning to dirt as it enters Green Ridge State Forest. After ascending through numerous curves and narrow bridges, the dirt road widens and flattens as it follow a high ridge across this, the narrowest part of Maryland; Pa becomes MD then WVA over 12 miles of incredible views of the lush mountains on either side enfolding the Potomac River.



Back on the pavement and a bit dustier and warmer, we turn east for just a bit, crossing into West Virginia at Paw Paw. In minutes we cross again into Virginia and follow roadways that progressively become narrower and more beautiful. County Route 600 takes us straight south along the east side of the Appalachian ridge to route 55W, which crosses that ridge on the way to Wardensville, West Virginia. Before the crest we turn onto a narrow dirt road that takes us into the woods for a mile and a half to our destination.

Pembroke Springs is a family run Bed and Breakfast. The family originates in Japan and the tradition of hospitality is evident. We check in at the top of the hill overlooking North Mountain. Here is where the plush, upper crusty Bed and Breakfast rooms are located, along with the sitting rooms, food prep and dining area. On the lower level there is another sitting room next to two private Japanese style baths: oversized hot tubs with ultra clean chemical free water which is filtered and heated after being brought in from the on site creek. Kimonos can be furnished and bathing time may be reserved by signing the log at the check-in desk. This sounds like a great place to bring your wife, no? What are a bunch of tired old bike riders doing here?



We have reserved the 'camping cabin' located down the hill next to the creek. To get our bikes there we have to ford a stream that runs across the roadway. It's about 20 feet wide and almost a foot deep and the bottom is covered with slippery rocks. Before the weekend's done we will have crossed that creek 6 times. There were a few wet feet but no major issues.



The cabin is very rustic. We all sleep in what is basically one big room. The bed arrangements are pretty comfortable, but non-snorers can definitely grow resentful of snorers in these types of situations. Most of us hike back up to the main facility to enjoy a splendid hot soak. Personally, I have been focused on a steaming hot bath for the last several hours of our ride. I really need this hot bath to totally eradicate the chill and relieve all stress. 104 degrees.....

Ahhhh.....that's better. I reflect upon the **contrast** between our rustic unheated cabin and the plush B&B at the top of the hill.

In the AM we awaken early and refreshed and eager to sample an authentic home cooked Japanese breakfast in the dining area atop the hill. Following tea and coffee in the sitting room with a floor to ceiling view of Great North Mountain is followed by a very colorful and tasty breakfast: little morsels of different food including sea weed, an omelet and delicious fish, it leaves me feeling very charged with energy but not stuffed at all. In **contrast**, the less adventurous among us opt for American style.

We saddle up without our baggage and head over the mountain to Wardensville, WVA where we meet local rider Justin on his rare Vincent Black Prince. Justin knows these roads better than anyone and has planned a 200 mile route for us that crosses the mountains between Virginia and West Virginia at least 6 times. As we follow him up into the mountains several of us are thinking: *"This is the best motorcycling day of my life!"*

The **contrasts** between Japan and West Virginia, between plush B&B and 'camping cabin', between rice and seaweed vs. bacon and eggs are very real, but pale in comparison to the start of our second day on the road vs. the end of our second day.

The sun was shining brightly and temperatures were well into the 60's; 70 degrees a promise being held in reserve. The bikes felt great and the road was calling our names; we answered the call. Heading west on route 33, we droned along an 8 mile straightaway just west of Rawley Springs, pushing the rapidly warming air aside as we headed for the mountain pass to West Virginia. I knew that the road would head upgrade very soon, sweeping through a series of amazing banked curves before cresting at a beautiful overlook. I was riding tall on the tail, with Doug and the others following Justin in the lead. As I came around the first left hander I spotted a strange, very bulky black object on the right shoulder of the road. As I slowed down, I realized it was a helmeted motorcyclist and he was not moving. I stopped and put on the flashers to warn other traffic. The rider was breathing but non-responsive. I quickly recognized that it was one of ours, and the Yamaha 650 was a bit further on, also facedown at the side of the road. As the rider came awake and we inventoried his body, it became apparent that his weekend ride would be over and that a trip to the hospital would be a necessary precaution. His wrist was very swollen, his back was sore. We dispatched him in an ambulance and now suddenly the events were making new plans for us. How quickly things can turn around: **contrasts**.

With our rider in the hands of experts, the next order of business was getting the motorcycle to a safe stash spot. I managed to kick things straight and removed the brake pedal which was bent downward at an impossible angle. We leapfrogged the bike to a nearby gas station and then rode into Harrisonburg for lunch before visiting the hospital to check on our mate. He and the doctors agreed that after a stay of a day or two he would be fine to travel home (but not by motorcycle) where treatment might be prescribed. With that settled, we returned to the cabin by a scenic route, arriving at 7 PM.



Tonight we dined on a full blown home cooked dinner: Japanese style curried beef. It was divine! Another bath would insure a most restful sleep, but Doug and Eric and I had to attend to some details first. The Yamaha 650 which had been crashed and stashed was still about 80 miles south of the cabin.

We put on everything: I wore riding jeans, camping trousers and rain suit pants on the bottom, supplemented by 2 pairs of heavy socks, riding boots and rain boots. On top I was wearing 4 shirts, a leather vest, my leather jacket and rain jacket. Why didn't I bring my heated vest? The allure of summer's imminent arrival had seduced me! On these wide open unfaired-upright-seating-position motorcycles, cruising at 70 mph in 48 degree temperatures is not so easy. Fortunately, I rode as passenger all the way down; Doug makes a good windshield. He rides pretty well too. I wasn't scared...much. We got all 7 bikes and 6 remaining riders back to the cabin by 12:30 or so and went right to sleep. The trouble now of course was that we had 7 bikes and only 6 riders.

Sunday we got all packed up and breakfasted. The plan was to leave the Kawasaki KZ750 behind for a later retrieval. I would ride the XS650 about 40 miles more to Justin's place where we would attempt to repair the rear brake pedal. When this turned out to be futile, I decided to ride it home with just a front brake. This seemed do-able but I resolved to be extra careful to maintain an adequate following distance.

The final **contrast** of the weekend: the fine cool weather turned nasty on us. Now it got warm but cloudy, followed quickly by warm but drizzling followed quickly by pouring rain. With the mercury hanging out at the 55 degree mark we trudged through the rain and slogged through the puddles as we slowly soaked through to the skin, making our way east across the northern part of Maryland. We scarfed up several hot pizzas for lunch and became horribly lost somewhere north of Hanover, PA. I actually waved down a car and asked for directions. How often does that happen? We weren't really too far off our route though and as we approached the Susquehanna River crossing for our final leg the rain finally let up. The last 50 miles in the dry were a breeze. We were tired and wet but as a group, we had been mightily challenged, and we had met the challenge. The reward?????

.....Back at home, Lynn had prepared a delicious hot meal. The fire was roaring; the table was set. Appetizers were laid out; wine corks were popped. We ate until we could eat no more. We shook hands. We said our goodbyes and we each went our own way. Back to the routine? What a **contrast!**

Monday Lynn and I grabbed a company truck and fetched up the KZ. Today Mike sent a picture from the hospital. The picture is encaptured:



“Ready to Ride”