

Off Road Adventures with Wolverhampton Advanced Motorcyclists Oct 2010

As we made our way to Wales on the Tuesday before our 2 day off road adventure, it occurred to me that I would be required to concentrate a great deal, to exert myself physically likewise and to challenge myself, seriously taking myself out of my comfort zone; something I had not done for ages.

With the previous week of frosty early mornings I was not anticipating that we would have the best of weather for the next two days. I was pleasantly surprised though, because it turned out not to be too cold, dry in the day and not too windy; great weather for off roading.

The group this time consisted of 7 brave riders; Peter Carder, Pam Fergusson, Rhianydd and Stuart Hyde, Dave Fullwood, Paul and Jacquiey Atkinson. This time we had booked to stay in a B&B in Machynlleth - the Maenllwyd. This had been chosen on the basis of close proximity to the meeting place for the first day's ride on the Wednesday: being only 3 miles from there and also close to the pubs and eateries for the evening after hard days riding.

When we arrived and settled at the B&B we were flabbergasted to encounter Nich Brindley and his lovely wife, who were on their anniversary break. That man gets everywhere, and for one brief second I thought he had surreptitiously booked himself on the off roading without letting us know. We were able to enjoy a lovely evening with Nich and his wife, Mandy at the pub, The Skinners Arms (turn right at the T junction, it is on the right). I can thoroughly recommend this pub as a stop, as it not only has excellent ales, but superb, simple home cooked meals, which are served hot and with the most courteous service in a warm, cosy and welcoming atmosphere. Not being one for going to pubs very often, I wished it was my local.

Onto the important stuff then: meeting at 9.30 am riders who needed equipment were given chance to get suited and booted and become acquainted with their bikes: a Rieju 200, CRF 230, Suzuki DRZ 400. Marianne's weapon of choice was a Husky 250, which was hugely tall. The skill, balance and dexterity shown by Marianne on this machine was a sight to behold.



Selecting our machines

The first part of the morning was given over to getting used to the bikes and giving people a chance to develop their machine handling. There is a definite difference between riding road and

off road bikes. It is important to have machine control before you go anywhere near a grassy, muddy, rocky lanes. As ever though, the machine is always better than the man (or woman) and the best advice is to let the bike do what it is set up for – trust in your machine.

The routes were well chosen by Marianne who was able to accommodate both the skill of the more able riders like Pete, Dave and Paul, and the inexperience of the rest of the group. Her knowledge of the area was exemplary as she took along forest tracks, single track roads, rocky inclines and muddy trails. In these initial stages the whole group worked hard to focus on the direction in which they were going, rather than the reaction of the machine.



Good team advice on the way.

Along one of the muddy tracks, I took an impromptu rest in a tree and a ditch at the side of the road. I had arrived there principally because the tyres on the bike were not in their best condition and the rear end slewed back and forth as I tried to make progress along the muddy trail. My desperate attempts to find rock to hold onto underneath the mud were rewarded only by an undignified dismount in the aforesaid ditch and tree. The soft landing allowed me to have a good giggle at myself and since there were no riders immediately behind me, I had to wait for the next one along to aid me in my plight. Rhianydd flew by at a rate of knots, acknowledging my weak cry of 'Help,' by returning in the next minute. The concern on her face was picture, by which time she had been joined by Dave, who just laughed and could not decide whether to get me out of my predicament or take a photo. Thankfully he did the former and not the latter. It took Paul and Dave to get the bike off me because of the depth and angle at which the bike had gone in. But such men never give in and I was extricated from the tree in 3 short minutes. This did lead to a demonstration on how to pick your bike up, if it should fall by Marianne, which was very useful, if a little too late for me.



Riding in the twilight.....what an experience!

Moving on through lovely woods and forest trails we stopped for a bite to eat at the visitors centre in the Coed Y Brenin Forest (East off the A470, 8 miles North of Dolgellau www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-5QED5P)

The roads back took us through more lanes and byways showing the beauty of the Welsh landscape. The road to Cadir Idris and towards the coast was deserted and delightful. It went on for miles and was a real find. At the end of this track we turned into Happy Valley; a trail that was not difficult and all did well showing just what they had learned from their efforts during the day. Pam looked supremely confident, whilst Pete and Dave were certainly enjoying themselves as they tried to play catch up, all the time putting their skills to the test.



Rhianydd and Stuart looking ready for action

A quick stop at the petrol station followed. Time was ticking away and twilight descending. Marianne said there was just enough time to go over to Bearded Lake, for the more experienced in the group. I was invited to take part in this expedition.

Paul had done this before and was acquainted with the area. Pete and Dave thoroughly enjoyed crossing this area as they demonstrated total command of the rocky ascents, deep ruts and pools they encountered. The poor light did not faze them in the slightest.

I found the whole thing to be new and really challenging. Not only for the initial river crossing and first rocky ascent, but with the fading light it was difficult to see far ahead enough to plan a path through. The deep water ruts gave me the opportunity to grasp my do or die attitude with both hands. As I entered each pool of water, each seemed deeper than the last. To my credit, I did not fall under the water, which was a huge relief to Paul, as he wholly anticipated getting soaking wet in rescuing me. At one point, I clearly remember the wheel of the bike being near submerged, my tyres feeling for rock underneath the mud and slime beneath me, all the time remembering what Marianne had told me. 'Sit down; put it in first and keep a constant throttle.'

I was asked if I had lost my confidence, and I can honestly say that I had not. I was just not as confident as I might have been in better light. Crossing Bearded Lake, I learned so much and was thankful of the opportunity to learn. I would like to go back there at some point in the future.

I can say that I have probably never concentrated so much in my life as I did across that particular trail. I was mighty relieved to see Pete at the gate near the bottom, and the ride in near darkness and under the cover of trees, dimly lit by our headlights was wonderful. As challenging and at times dangerous as it all seemed at the time, I felt truly alive and totally in touch with what I was trying to achieve. I would not have changed that for the entire world.

Joining the rest of the group, one of the bikes that had been struggling with electrical problems throughout the day and ably commanded by Stuart, finally gave up the ghost, refusing even to take off from a hill start. The bike was left on the side of the road to be picked up later and we rode

back to the meeting point where we had started in the morning. It was late, the day had been long, but it had also been very rewarding.

The riding on Thursday found us minus Dave, Stuart and Rhianydd. I would like to thank them for taking part, because being part of the group with them made a huge difference to the whole experience.

Gareth at the Maenllwyd Guest House very generously said that Marianne could meet us there on the Thursday. So after a good night's sleep there and a hot breakfast all we had to do was get kitted up and get the bikes sorted.

Pam was offered the CRF230 again. She said that the height, power and dimensions of the bike were perfect for the job and that she had felt very comfortable on the bike the previous day. Today Marianne rode the Rieju, even though the Husky was lurking in the back of the van.

Leaving Machynlleth this time we headed coastward this time on the A487. Just after the roundabout we turned left on a small tarmac road that followed the Llyfnant Valley. The green lanes that lead off this road gave us the opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with and develop the skills we had learned yesterday. There were several challenging rocky and muddy ascents.

Turning briefly onto the A487 again we then went along Artist's Valley. The route took us through some stunning country side and very twisty roads, onto some challenging green ascents and descents and through to the forests that we had previously seen in the spring outing. Marianne offered us the opportunity of going a little faster at this point, adding that this would probably not be relevant to me. (She has a wicked sense of humour that lady). The challenge was eagerly taken up by Pete and Pam, with Paul and me following sluggishly behind. The forest trails are particularly interesting not only for their lightness and air, but for the confidence that they give the rider because of the wide paths and good view of what is ahead of you.

We were given the option of going to the Bwlch Nant Yr Arian Visitor Centre for lunch but we were told of another place not far from us. A couple of picturesque lanes found us very briefly back on the A487 by Bow Street where lunch break was taken at the Pennau craft and coffee shop (4 miles north of Aberystwyth, A487, opposite the petrol station by 'Borth' junction). The food here was excellent, fresh and tasty. Marianne had phoned to check that it was okay for a group of dirty off road motorcyclists to go there in advance. The cake here is seriously good and tasty. I will be going back there!

At the risk of being accused of being a bad work person, blaming their tools, it was over lunch I began to realise that my tyres were seriously not up to the job of coping with mud. The tread had worn in sections where I needed most grip. It could also be put down to my own ineptitude though. But it did go some way to explaining why I had launched myself into a tree the previous day.

After lunch we were guided back to Machynlleth . Turning right off the A487 and over the railway bridge past, up through Bryncastel and onto a trail that took us above and parallel to the A487 and back to Llyfnant Valley, where we had begun our days ride.

Riding back through the valley it occurred to me just how hard we had worked over the past two day. The physical effort and concentration required is immense, but so worth it. The reward of having completed challenges that you would not have believed yourself capable of is inspiring. It is because of that, I take my hat off to all who took part over these two days.

My final thoughts go to Marianne, who led such a varied group on Wednesday, managing at all times to give something to all along the way. On Thursday for taking us along some breathtaking roads and challenging trails that enabled us to get so much from each day. Her consummate knowledge of the area and ability as a rider was an inspiration to all.

PS: Sorry for the quality of the photos. For further photos see the website forum, where Pam has posted some excellent pictures.

Important stuff:

Where to stay:

Maenllwyd Guest House, Newtown Road, Machynlleth SY20 8EY
016540702928

www.maenllwyd.co.uk

This is a good place to stay as a base because of its very close proximity to the pubs and other places to eat. There is ample parking and Gareth very kindly let us leave the trailer and bikes at the side of the building. The rooms are spacious and clean, shower facilities are good. There is a good choice for breakfast which included full Welsh breakfast, cereals, toast and fruit juice. At £35 pppn it is good value overall.

Our Guide:

Marianne and Colin have a website with all the details of prices and packages.

Marianne can offer accommodation for up to 5 men and she will do an evening meal, where you have the option of eating what the family eat or something from the menu. The first option comes with a discount. Details of this are available on request.

For all information please go to

www.trailrides-wales.com.