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The Oklahoma Adventure Trail

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE







**"The Sooners'
Own
Discovery
Route!"**
- Bill Drago

"We're taking the bypass," a wise James Pratt belts out from aboard his faded yellow Suzuki DR-Z400. "I'm out of gas and there is no way these guys will get those pigs through the woods in this muck."

Text: Bill Drago

Photography: James Pratt

The "woods" we are about to enter are a segment of the Cross Timbers region of Oklahoma, a band of tangled, stunted deciduous trees and briars, many older than our United States. In the early 1830s, author Washington Irving called this nearly impenetrable region "forests of cast iron."

Play-Doh for Grown Ups

After a weak attempt to negotiate the soggy trail, my Beta 525 RS sits facing the group, mud oozing through every opening like a Play-Doh Fun Factory. I just poured the contents of one of my two spare fuel bottles into James' extended-range tank. He skipped the last gas stop holding out for ethanol-free fuel and has hopefully learned his lesson. Even ethanol burns better than air.

The sun is about to set, and we don't know how bad it will get if we continue into these woods. The "trail" is blocked with downed trees and underbrush, and the mud has no bottom. I give in and we turn towards Hugo, 12 miles north by road. Oklahoma is experiencing an unusually cool and wet July and, except for the mud, it is perfect weather for an adventure ride. Brad, Josh, and Paul are riding new generation

Kawasaki KLR 650s. Larry is on a Suzuki DR 650. I have to agree that pushing heavy dual sports into these woods under these conditions could spell a long night among the mosquitoes and poison ivy, and there is no dry place to pitch a tent.

A Study in History

Our trip over the eastern half of the Oklahoma Adventure Trail (OAT) began this morning taking us south from the Oklahoma City metro area. We decided to do the OAT counterclockwise, tackling the rugged eastern section early in our travels. After a 65-mile jaunt down I-35, we joined the trail near Davis, a bustling town in south-central Oklahoma, nestled against the Arbuckle Mountains. Day one brought a pleasant string of experiences ranging from a visit to Turner Falls to a side trip crossing the Red River on a 100-year-old multi-span bridge south of Durant. Many of those old bridges are being condemned. Near Durant we encountered bridge inspectors who almost gleefully reported that they were closing these bridges as fast as they could. I found this news disturbing, yet understandable, with the aging structures only able to support a fraction of their original weight limits.

The ancient Kiamichi (K) Trail is a thin, rocky scar through the wilderness in south-eastern Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's diverse landscape surprises the city dweller with wonder, once they get off the beaten path.



Dark, tree-canopied tunnels lure the adventure rider deeper into their depths.

Willie Earl Watkins is a prime example of the friendly folks living beyond where the pavement ends.

We also stop at Fort Washita outside of Durant. At different times, Fort Washita was occupied by both Confederate and Federal Troops and was given to the Chickasaw Nation by the federal government after the Civil War. Some original structures have been maintained, and cannons and other weapons are available for viewing.

With our first day behind us, we take a break in Hugo, OK, to regroup and clean up the bikes at the local car wash. Slicing hunks of mud from our fenders and radiator shrouds with the high pressure spray before it turns to brick is a fitting end to a day on the OAT.

Barnum & Bailey Stopped Here

For more than a half century, Hugo has been known as Circus Town USA. Several major circuses have wintered here, and the circus theme is evident all over town. Even the cemetery has a corner dedicated to circus performers. Angie's Circus City Diner provides good home cooking and a colorful atmosphere for the traveler.

The clouds are parting as we leave Hugo and take a quick side trip through Fort Towson, a few miles east. The OAT is a mix of historical sites, backroads, and trails with varying degrees of difficulty. North of

Garvin we find the bridge over Little River barricaded. Built in 1959, this is one of the newer steel-truss bridges we have seen condemned. Giant concrete and rock barriers limit access, but we manage to slip through on the bikes, lamenting the fact we may be the last travelers to motor across this architectural beauty from a time when U.S. steel was plentiful.

Stopping at an abandoned house for a snack, we see an old pickup with a bed full of ranch dogs, banging across the nearby field and heading directly toward us. A lean black man steps out with a big skinning knife on his hip and an even bigger smile on his face. Willie Earl Watkins is a cowboy who tells us he quit riding when he was stepped on by a bull and wound up with a hole in his gut. He greets us as friends, provides a bit of local lore, and sends us on our way with the Lord's blessing. Willie is typical of most people we meet on the OAT. Rural Oklahoma is full of friendly folks who will treat strangers well if given half a chance.

We camp at Clayton Lake State Park for the night and rest up in preparation for a rough day on the infamous K (or Kiamichi) Trail of eastern Oklahoma.



There seems to be wisdom and sadness in the eyes of this old mule. If he could only talk ...

Turner Falls at the headwaters of Honey Creek is a favorite cooling off place near Davis.







Larry and Brad head home after breakfast, wishing they had worn more serious riding gear for the OAT. Hiking boots and cotton pants have left them wet and vulnerable. It is a wise decision to turn back.

Technical Difficulties and Attrition

The unmaintained K Trail has long seen service by loggers, hunters, and probably a few bootleggers. There is a rumor that it was once a supply road between Fort Smith, AR, and Fort Towson. Over the last three decades it has become popular among jeepers, dual sport motorcyclists, and mountain bikers as a challenging backcountry route through the wilderness.

After several hours pounding on the K Trail, Paul notices a dark stain appearing on the ground under his engine. As a precaution, we decide to tow him the last five miles to pavement before removing the skid plate to trace the leak, likely a busted oil sump. Upon investigation we discover that he has blown a shock, fooling us into thinking he'd cracked a case. A clunk in Josh's KLR turns out to be missing subframe bolts. We perform makeshift repairs at Cedar Lake

before settling down for the evening in our tents. Josh and Paul stick around until breakfast and then turn towards home, leaving only James and me to finish the eastern portion of the OAT.

Old Roads and Slick Tires

Our cool reprieve turns into typical July Oklahoma weather as our two remaining bikes leave dust plumes on the eastern Oklahoma skyline. We follow an old Highway 59 alignment that takes us to the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System locks. These remnants of 60s-era highways remind us of a simpler time when cheap gasoline was dispensed with an audible ding as every gallon passed through the hose. I am thankful that my Beta is sometimes getting more than 60 mpg at these relatively low speeds. Switching to taller gears for an extended dual sport ride is turning out to be a good idea.

We shut down at sunset at a campground on the Illinois River. My tires are getting thin and probably won't make the whole trip. James' clutch cable is frayed and should be replaced if we are to continue.

There are actual reports of Bigfoot sightings in southeastern Oklahoma. Beware!

Oklahoma was laid out on a grid, making many roads straight. The OAT manages to find beauty, even where curves are scarce.

Paul Schoelin is impatient to take a bath. This looks like a good spot.



Cedar Lake in southeastern Oklahoma is dead calm in the early hours of morning.

The next day, a few miles from where we camped, we see a massive yard-art chopper with cylinders from a Pratt & Whitney airplane engine in front of a beautiful log home in the middle of nowhere. James backtracks to meet the owners, Jerry and Diane Hammond. “We wondered why all these bikes kept riding by our house,” says Jerry. “This summer one of them dropped his bike right there, and we went over to help. That’s when we learned about the OAT.”

Over a glass of cool well water, Jerry explains that he used to build rigs for Chesapeake Energy. In his retirement he has applied his creative talents to improving his home. Tools, art, and equipment bear his mark everywhere we look. Inside the house is a Jules Verne-looking woodstove made from an old propane tank. His shop is full of projects in various states of completion but all are of the same quality workmanship as the chopper and stove.

Saying goodbye to our hosts, we pick up the pace on the graded county roads. We are happy to be making miles, but we miss the more technical, unmaintained

roads of the rugged Kiamichi. On a dark, tree-canopied stretch, an owl swoops low overhead, its wings seemingly as wide as the road itself. I instinctively duck as it glides overhead before disappearing into the woods. James crosses a brook and pulls up to an old house to ask permission to shoot photos from the yard. A shirtless, white-bearded Pete Montgomery offers us ice tea and a rickety lawn chair in the shade beside the creek. We discuss the old days when he was a welder, mechanic, and construction worker while I sneak a few Nutter Butters to his dog Shadow. Our day ends at a motel in Pryor after a fruitless search for a new clutch cable.

Outlaw Ghosts and More Rusty Iron

We limp on the next day, hitting rain and another series of iron bridges. Suddenly an old hotel appears out of nowhere, standing like a painted mural on the skyline. It looks like something from a Western movie, and for good reason. Now just a ghost town, Ingalls was once a hideout for outlaws. In 1893, a famous shoot-out between U.S. Marshals and the Doolin-Dalton gang took the lives of several men

and a couple of horses. The hotel, stables, and a few out buildings still stand, graphic monuments to the Wild West. The place is well maintained with chairs and a water hydrant around back to welcome the weary adventure rider on a hot afternoon.

Changing Horses

James' wife, Kay, meets us in Stillwater with fresh tires and a new clutch cable, but our plans to continue are thwarted after a brutal maintenance session in a hot, metal shed with no shade or air movement. Something goes awry when James changes his clutch cable and the clutch refuses to engage. We succumb to attrition, and a call to his daughter sends a trailer our way. I climb aboard the Beta and head south via the shortest route home, planning to finish the tour on our BMWs.

The first half of the OAT has reminded us that the Sooner State really does have a lot to offer the adventure rider. We have met some of the friendliest people on the planet, learned more about our state's history, witnessed the dying glow of some beautiful icons of early 20th century engineering, and we have met a black cowboy with a truckload of man's best friends. The OAT has evolved into more than Peter Coats and Jacob Roby could have imagined. It is a silk thread, tying the modern generation to our roots. Roads unchanged since the Dust Bowl lead past windows of a simpler life. Those peering out of the windows smile and wave as we ride by. We wave back, thankful for the connection. **RR**

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Dude, quit snoring!

As an expat from the working world, Pete Montgomery shares a slice of his life with us over a glass of ice tea.

The ghost town of Ingalls is a great stop, offering shade and cold well water to the adventure traveler.



Facts & Information

Total Mileage
Approximately 900 miles

In General

Riding buddies Jacob Roby and Peter Coats set out to put Oklahoma on the map by joining their state's rich historical sites, ghost towns, and dwindling steel-truss bridges with country byways and tree-canopied backroads. They call their 1,800-mile creation the Oklahoma Adventure Trail (OAT). Terrain ranges from rocky two-track and graded gravel in the east to deep sand in the west. Fall and spring offer moderate temperatures and the most scenic times to travel.

How to Get There

The OAT crosses Interstate 35 twice, near Stillwater to the north and near Davis to the south. Either city provides easy access, but the OAT can begin at any point on the loop.

Food & Lodging

Bypasses are noted where food and fuel are scarce. Remote camping, public campsites, and motels are dispersed throughout the route.

Roads & Biking

This is a dual sport excursion, so plan accordingly. Roads vary considerably from smooth and graded, rocky and rutted, to nearly impassable mud or deep sand, depending on weather. Except for the somewhat technical K Trail and a few sandy stretches in western Oklahoma, a moderately-skilled rider should be capable of completing the trip without incident.

Books & Maps

- *Ghost Towns of Oklahoma* by John W. Morris, University of Oklahoma Press, ISBN 978-0806114200, \$21.95
- *Roadside History of Oklahoma* by Francis L. Fugate, Mountain Press Publishing Co., ISBN 978-0878422722, \$20
- *Oklahoma Atlas & Gazetteer* by DeLorme, ISBN 978-0899332833, \$19.95
- Butler Maps' Ozarks Map (covers much of eastern Oklahoma), www.butlermaps.com, \$14.95

Resources

- OAT contacts, Peter Coats: okadvtrail@gmail.com, Jacob Roby: oklahomaklr@gmail.com
- ADV Rider thread on the OAT, www.advrider.com/forums/showthread.php?t=836706
- Free GPS downloads for the full trail, www.about.me/oklahomaadventuretrail

Motorcycles & Gear

2008 Beta 525 RS, 2012 Kawasaki KLR 650, 2002 Suzuki DR-Z400, and 2014 DR 650
 Helmet: Arai XD3
 Jacket: KLIM Induction
 Pants: KLIM Mojave
 Boots: Sidi Adventure
 Gloves: KLIM Mojave Pro
 Luggage: Wolfman Enduro Soft

Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

