

One  
to one

# Route master

Travelling thousands of miles on a bike the other side of the world could be a little daunting. Unless of course you're accompanied by Gary Fleshman of California Sunriders.

WORDS: Bruce Wilson  
PHOTOGRAPHY: Joe Dick

"I've travelled Route 66 one-hundred-and-three-times. I'm one of very few people in the world who've covered the route so many times, but every time I do it I still come away with a big smile on my face. If I wasn't happy, I wouldn't still be doing it". Finding a tour guide half as qualified as California Sunriders' Fleshman is a challenge in its own right. And even if you did, you'd struggle to find one with half his enthusiasm and love for the job.

## Have you always been a tour guide?

This is my sixth year of leading motorcycle tours, but I've got about 20 years combined experience of being a tour guide. I've done everything from hot air ballooning to white water rafting, camping tours to horse packing tours. And that previous experience has been invaluable. I've seen just about all that can go wrong and I've learnt from it and used that knowledge to eradicate risk and optimise enjoyment on our motorcycle tours.

## What's the big appeal behind one of your tours?

I'd say the two main appeals are the opportunities we give our customers to ride bikes across big distances and to take in America from a totally different perspective. We pride ourselves on taking our tours off the typical routes, so we can ride through small town America. That

rural lifestyle is so different to what you see, hear and read in the media. Most people that travel from overseas only go to the big cities or tourist resorts like the Grand Canyon or Las Vegas. It gives a different insight into the people and culture of America. And people love it. There's nothing more iconic than riding a big Harley through the rural routes. It's a very fitting combination of man and machine.

## What distance do you cover on a typical tour?

The Route 66 tour covers around 2500 – 2600 miles of riding. The distance varies a bit per tour, but it's generally within those parameters. It means you cover around 250-miles per day, which is manageable. And it allows you plenty of time for stops and to explore when you reach your destination for the night.

## Do you only ride on the tours?

I ride quite literally everywhere. I typically clock up around 50,000 miles a year on a bike. The tours account for a lot of that mileage, but not all of it. I have my own bikes too and I'm seldom off them. I've even built my own Harley. Truth is, I'm happiest when I'm in the saddle.

## Do you manage your own fleet of bikes?

No. We use a bike hire company called Street Eagle. We switched to them because they have the best maintained fleet of hire bikes in the US. The last thing you want on a big tour is an unreliable

bike. If it breaks it doesn't just ruin the day for the guy who's riding it, it potentially ruins the day for the rest of the guys on the trip too. And that could ruin everyone's holiday. And I don't want anything to go wrong on my customer's two week holiday. I want them to have the best time possible. Out of the 110 tour bikes we've had this year only one machine's had a problem. But that was still one too many for me.

## Is every tour group different?

Yes, very. Sometimes it's fantastic because everyone gets on really well with each other and they develop friendships which continue even when they get back to their own countries. Other times it's not so easy. Not everyone can get along and it's my job to try and keep the peace and make everyone happy. And that's often more of a challenge than it is to organise the whole trip.

## What's been your most memorable tour?

Having done 42 motorcycle tours, that's a very difficult question to answer. One trip which was really memorable happened two years ago when we rode through the remnant of a hurricane. It was very different, very bizarre, but extremely memorable. I had a group of musicians from UK with me and they just took it all in their stride. It was a moment in time to experience.



## Have you always used Harleys?

We've always used Harleys, but some customers have opted to bring different manufacturers' machines. To be honest, the reason we're so passionate about Harley's is that they're the perfect machine for crossing big distances. Feet up, radio on, you can't beat them. Those bikes were designed for the States. Over in the UK, they're probably not so good. In the UK I'd opt for a Triumph.

## Outside of the tours what do you get up to?

I'm big on paintball. I'm away with the tours for seven months of the year, but when I go home I head out to the woods with my friends and we go shooting. It's great fun and gets the adrenaline flowing. I also do extreme distance

competition shooting. I use the same scoped rifles as the US Marine Corps. In fact, on my Route 66 tour, I give my customers the chance to come with me to a shooting range and I teach them how to shoot a pistol. I'm a trained firearms instructor, so they're in safe hands. And people seem to really enjoy it. Chances are they'd never get a chance to hold a pistol let alone shoot one in their native country.

## Would you ever be a tour customer?

Hell yeah. I'd love to go on the Best of the West tour, if I could. To go on a trip like that and not have to worry or babysit for the duration would be amazing. I love riding, but especially when there's no pressure on me. It would be amazing.