

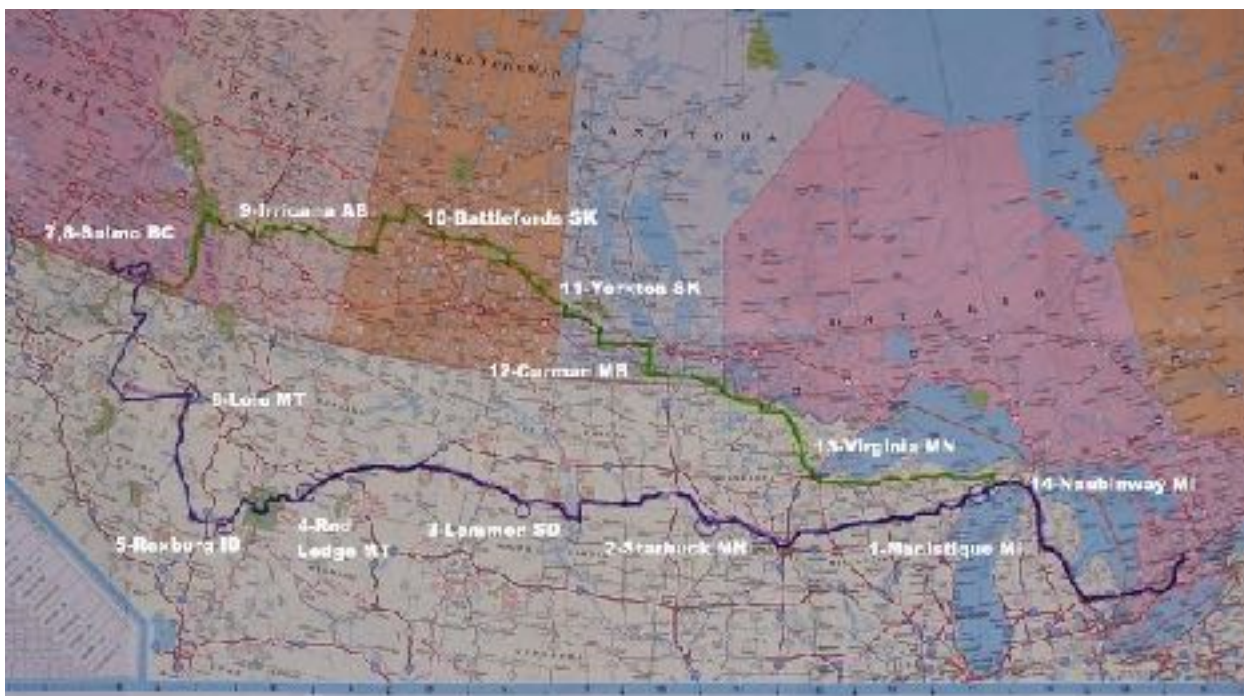


<http://www.learningelectronics.net/VA3AVR/tot.html>

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Summer 2008: WINDING ROAD 40 YEARS AFTER Pirsig's Cathartic Journey;

A Photo narrative by Marc G. Boileau 2008: WINDING ROAD 40 YEARS AFTER Pirsig's Cathartic Journey;



A Photo narrative by Marc G. Boileau share Pirsig's preference for the back roads. I knew for sure that I wanted to ride the Beartooth and Lolo highways. I also knew that my trip would have to return via Canada to allow me to do some fieldwork for another project. I would need to leave my Pirsig-Zen week behind and start my eastward journey from British Columbia. This arrangement also meant that I couldn't squeeze in a ride on the Highway to the Sun in US Glacier National Park. While this was a planning disappointment, it turned out to be a lucky decision and now I also have an excuse to make another trip.

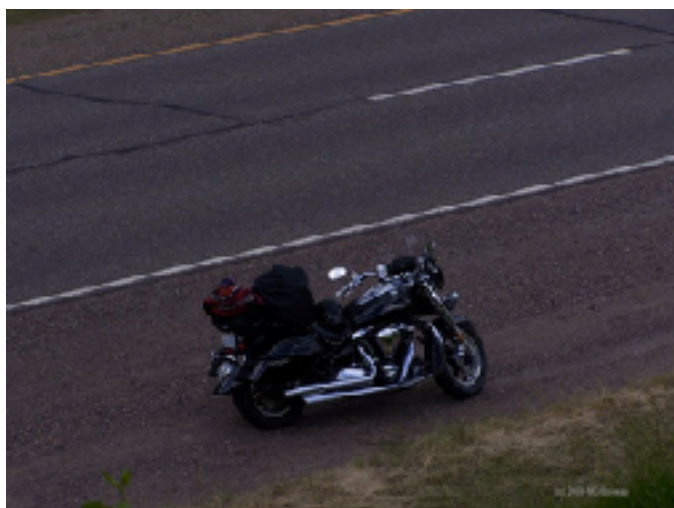
The journey began one month before the 40th anniversary of Pirsig's trek. Our weather in Ontario had been more spring-like despite the approach of July and the blackbird calls suited this season. They are spring harbingers to me. From my start in Guelph, it was two long rides to my Zen rendezvous



### 1 --- A red-wing blackbird

The punctuated alarm calls of a red-wing blackbird pierced into my consciousness from an unseen cattail perch. "Tchee-err, tchee-err, tchee-err." A chorus of several more rang in my ears like cheerleaders on the sidelines. Following a short coffee rendezvous with two of my best friends, I embarked on a long- anticipated motorcycle odyssey chasing the western sun. My excitement rivaled those of my blackbird accompanists because, for the first time in a very long time, my motorcycle flight was to be solo. For the trip I adopted as my flying mascot, the

arctic tern, *Sterna paradisaea*, the ultimate long-distance traveler. Pirsig fans who are familiar with Lila will recognize my winged guardian as it graces the cover of his second, and favourite work.



### 2 — Portrait: Eleetia 2 fully loaded, awaiting the rider's return

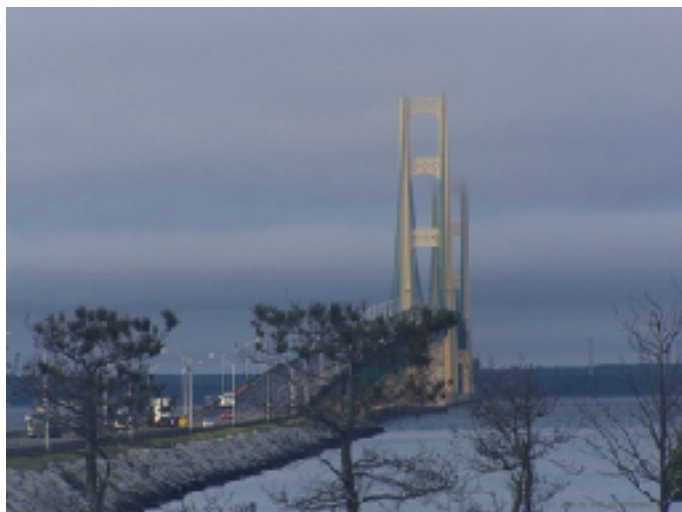
For this pilgrimage I had hastily divorced my Virago 1100 (Eleetia 1) of 7 years and 90,000km only 27 days before this picture. My Road Star had inherited the license plate and number from the Virago. Her name (a variation of the Greek word for shiny) is drawn from the text that the numbers imply, ELEET



### 3 — Natura Contessa

**Day 1)** The first day, I considered an inconvenience of freeways through Ontario and Lower Michigan. Using web access to the Weather Network, a modernity Pirsig would not have been blessed, or perhaps, cursed with, I could anticipate meeting some rain. Storm cells dotted the map westward along my planned route. Sometimes it's just better to damn the torpedoes. I flirted all day with the weather goddess, thwarting her moving labyrinth of black clouds.





### Magnificent Mackinac Bridge

Mackinac Bridge seen from Upper Michigan side looking south toward Mackinac City. Crossing the Mackinac Bridge, which I have done several times before, was the first important milestone on the journey. Like rewinding the clock by two months, a chill air swept my face before I saw the bridge, an impressive structure that connects a freshwater strait nearly four times wider than the Golden Gate. Riding across it on a motorcycle for the first time was an emotional landmark.

My journey seemed trivial in contrast to the downbound freighter 550 feet

below. On the threshold of Lake Huron it appeared to be anchored as it campaigned against nor'easter swells. The approach to the northern shore from the bridge looks a great deal like landing on an island and island inhabitants in nature are of special interest to me.



### Serpent mound camping in Minnesota

**Day 2)** On my second day I planted my tent at the end of a wooded serpent mound in Minnesota after crossing Michigan's western land bridge to Wisconsin. The prehistoric ice also stopped near here and left the sinuous esker as its calling card. The land also bears the scours, traded in a seesaw of the land removal and deposit during glaciation. West of the Missouri, the landforms become more weathered and old than these Pleistocene mounds but it will be another day of riding before I can study them.

The wind had steadily increased through the day and it is practically a gale by the time I got my tent up. I wasted little time relieving my fatigue with sleep. For the second consecutive day, I logged over 900km (almost 600 mi.). The wind continued its tantrum throughout the night. The loud "creak" of the state bird, sounding like someone standing on a wire fence, filled the early morning silence as I awoke with the rising sun. Filtered through the dense brush it cast a TV blue glow on campground. I soon discovered the campsite was nearly empty. Most of the canopies and sprawling bungalow-sized tents had been blown down or packed up with their owners and disappeared. My trusty tent survived the night as it had its inauguration on an arctic island and many wilderness trips since.



A spectre of riders past?

Honda Rebel 250 rider outside of **Morris MN; County Road 9** as I am about to **link up with the Pirsig route in Breckenridge.**

By 8:00 am the heat is already intense. The pavement shimmers and disappears into a mirage lake, which has a distant towering grain elevator floating like an ark on its surface. A fellow motorcycle rider slowly materializes slowly in front of me like a specter out of this sea as I overtake his Honda Rebel 250, a modern equivalent of Pirsig's Super Hawk. This spirit sprang from a different holy motorcycle

scripture though, clad in his leather jacket, complete with stars and stripes. As I pass, I give him the customary motorcycle wave and recall that Wyatt, the Easy Rider character he mimics, was looking for America. I am too. It had been nearly twenty years since I lived here.



Pirsig's Zen landscape

Riding westerly the highway suddenly topples down off a ridge and onto the open prairie as a kettle of buzzards soared symbolically on the rising draught. The buzzard, is the peculiarly American name (true buteo buzzards are hawks) for our North American turkey vulture, genus Cathartes. I felt now that I had entered **Pirsig's Zen landscape. It was a prairie purgatory.** The sun was as hot as hell.



Eleetia 2 on 13 west of  
**Breckenridge/Wahpeton**

### **Day 3)**

At Breckenridge, Pirsig's route begins its westward beeline toward the setting sun, a pursuit that only deviates slightly for the next eight or nine hundred kilometers. It has to be the undisputed loneliest road in America.



Eleetia and I take a break from the hot sun at a convenient sheltered picnic table at **Milnor**

It must have been later in the day when Pirsig and his crew stopped here, while my image was taken at about 9:00 am on a **Sunday morning**. There was no one around to take a photo of me at the site. I was inspired by the comment that I read somewhere that if you look real close at the Pirsig photo from this location you can see the photographer (John Sutherland) reflected in the chrome gas tank.





Riderless "ELEETia" with Pirsig and Chris overseeing the proceeding from astride the Honda 305 Super Hawk

The wind whistled through the shelter because there was nothing for 50 miles to slow it down; the vibrating metal canopy supports made an eerie hum.

As I passed **Guelph, North Dakota**, I must have entered a parallel universe. I feel myself seamlessly sliding on to the uncomfortable, cramped saddle of Pirsig's Honda Super Hawk, much like I had on my own forty years

ago. I am into my **3rd day** alone on my Star but he is my metaphysical passenger. **I can see the straight road stretching off in the distance as far as next Saturday.** The heat glazes me. Slowly, through a crystal pane I begin to see why this flight became Pirsig's Zen.

The core of Zen practice is seated meditation. Putt-putting along on a 28 hp motorcycle, loaded to the gunwales with gear and bodies, **Pirsig took four and a half days to ride from Minneapolis to Cooke City MT.** When I look at this famous photo of him and Chris at Milnor, I see how confined they must have felt. On a lightweight motorcycle, thoughts don't stray far from the sounds it makes. They tell of its condition and it won't go far without regular maintenance. Riding with few other distractions for hours and days is also perfect for cleansing out the demons and Pirsig's tale drifts between these two themes throughout.



Self portrait at Milnor

The chrome breather cover of my motorcycle shows that it was already quite dirty from the road and Eleetia would wait patiently until I got home for a good bath.



Westward looking panorama near **Ellendale**

Looking westward even from the streets of **Ellendale** a prominent ridge dominates the distant western horizon. The first of two windmill farms I saw on the trip is visible on the left horizon. The coteau also hides a valley stippled with ponds that remind me of the arctic tundra, which was my summer residence for many years.



A duck and pelican nursery

These ponds or sloughs are really a duck and pelican nursery but my mascot would be forgiven for thinking it was his tundra home. A gravel quarry makes a good place for a short rest stop. I inhaled the water from my bottle. From the ridge crest, looking down on the paved ribbon before me it looks every bit like making an approach, full flaps, into a lonely airstrip but my flight plan beckons me onward.



Grasslands

My nervous attention for potential trouble from the Road Star faded two days ago. Eleetia thumps along at 110 km/h like she is just getting into a stride. "When are we really going to get going?" she seems to ask. I don't pine for that familiar old "nickels-and-dimes" sound of the Honda overhead cam. For the **next 50 km until Hague**, I see only non-human signs of life. A pronghorn antelope, browsing near the road is spooked by the bark of my Cobras as I

crest a knoll and I am surprised at his size. On these quiet grasslands I pass houses, lightning rods still pointing redundantly skyward. Their only occupants are the livestock. Entering Hague it appears as deserted as **Ashley** and everything in between. Even the railway line has fled. However, I briefly glimpse 20-25 chrome hogs at a small watering hole. I resist the temptation to stop and join them.



### Looking south towards **Herreid**

My westward trek is redirected temporarily about 5 km past Hague. As when Pirsig passed through, the only bridge crossings are north to Bismark or south to Mobridge. The distant Missouri River exerts its influence and west of the junction with highway 83 no road descends the gradually sloping valley to the river. I travel south on #83 past the modest Dakota state marker to Herreid. The town is tidier than I expected. Pirsig's passages had impressed on me his negative feeling throughout this stretch, especially about Herreid.



### **Mobridge** crossing

At Mobridge I gassed up beside the Yellow Submarine but don't stop for any malteds or burgers.

I waste no time motoring through town to view the bridge.

From the crest of the river bank the ford is impressive. Like a funnel it draws in road, rail and electricity to cross here. I am drawn to the river valley and another time zone beyond. I have two more hours of riding to go.



### Mobridge railway crossing





### Crossing the Missouri at Mobridge

Through my bug spattered windshield, the girders drum in rhythm to my V-twin. My camera captures live the rhythm of the bridge girders under my seat.



### Mobridge

Mobridge crossing, the return view for those that come this same way on their eastern trek. The high voltage electric line would keep me company along the route for many more miles together with an occasional join in from the rail line.



**Llewellyn Johns Reservoir**, dry as a bone June 29, 2008 with inset (left) of John and Sylvia Sutherland taken by Robert Pirsig at the same location in 1968.

Like the Pirsig crew I am also exhausted at **Lemmon**. Riding south on County Road 73 I couldn't even anticipate the reservoir coming up

around every corner, because there are none. By the time I reached Llewellyn Johns Reservoir after my first day on the route, I was as desiccated as the pathetic reservoir. I had covered a mere 835km (522 mi.) and I collapsed on the corner campsite, the only empty one left. It was, sadly, not where I would stay and my experiences with the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks were not happily memorable.



### A cultural artefact

These landscapes are famous for yielding ancient dinosaurs, evidence of our natural past. Our cultural fossils also litter the scape, their histories as yet unwritten.

Came across an old farmhouse  
Standing broken and bare  
It used to be someone's home  
Now no one lives there  
-David Francey, Torn Screen Door



### Bucyrus elevators

This lichen encrusted elevator near Bucyrus is like a fossil not yet buried, not petrified.



### Bucyrus elevator

The rusted grain downspout hung down like a mastodons trunk.



Near Marmarth

As a final thought before leaving the D's a final thought before leaving the Dakotas I take a side trip near Marmarth. No hard top here but the lookout vistas are worth the detour.



Near Marmarth,

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop before a farmhouse near.  
-Robert Frost



Near Marmarth,

An oasis of green on a parched  
moonscape land.





Near Marmarth,

A prairie sentry, neglected and lonesome as no vintage restorers have put value on this historical artifact yet. I offered the noble machine my encouragement to be patient. I felt it wave at me as I disappeared into the gully and returned to the highway.



Near Marmarth,

My prickly pear cactus at home had not bloomed yet when I left. Despite all my careful tending, it is dwarfish compared to this happy cousin.



My yucca have never bloomed like this



The land is also large in Montana, the big sky country.

Gas is a must in Baker as the sign warns. I heed the warning but top up at every opportunity usually anyway. Like 40 years ago, the thermometer feels to me like it's nearing "108 degrees in the shade." Pirsig was also concerned about his badly worn rear tire. I had anticipated a problem with my rear skin before I left Canada and had a new one installed. At Baker I noticed that I probably could have changed the front also,

but for now as long as it doesn't rain it'll be OK (did I have to say that out loud)



Montana, west of Baker

Sometime after leaving Baker, Pirsig notes, "We enter a low-rimmed canyon." At a brief rest break in a highway works area I stop on the cusp of a similar canyon.



Montana, west of Baker





Montana, west of Baker

The rocky outcrops are sculpted into faces that supervise the highway transients.



Route 212 south of **Laurel**

On Route 212 just south of Laurel I briefly glimpse the snow-mantled peaks of Absarokas for the first time. I only stopped briefly for gas in **Miles City** and **Billings** because the heat was just simply more than I could bear. At my Billings stop, I overheard the radio in the station saying it was 97 degrees. A fellow motorcyclist, noting my distant home on the license plate, stopped to chat me up about my trip. Normally, I am eager to engage at length with anyone who is interested but we both were sweating so intensely that we mutually, agreed it was time to get

moving'. I could feel the pull of Red Lodge and my impending assault of the Bear Tooth.



Wet in Red Lodge

The wet pavement in **Red Lodge** only hints to the wicked weather that had just swept through, just long enough to soak a weary rider. A dragon of storm front (see next image) blasted down from the mountains, dropping hard rain and even harder hail. The raging river also tells of winter's extremely tenacious late grip on the region. I took a small cabin at Perry's RV south of town and my host confirmed what I had heard on the Weather Channel before I left home. Major snow events had occurred in the weeks before I arrived (end of June!) including one only days before that left skiers lost and stranded on the

slopes. Snow had only been cleared from the summit of the Bear Tooth Pass 2 days before. I would see this all tomorrow.





The head of a dragon near Red Lodge

The storm I hit only minutes away from Red Lodge shows its dragon face on leaving the region. Outside the Red Lodge Cafe where I was about to have dinner, I met a squid foursome still a bit shellshocked from their ride from Cody WY. My Saskatchewan compatriots had traversed a hail-afflicted descent from the Bear Tooth summit.

One of the first switchbacks on the Bear Tooth Highway

I got off to an early start and the road was quiet at first. At one of my photo stops, a guy on a well-worn BMW with panniers passed me as I was re-entering the road. I made a silly attempt to keep pace with him but he quickly lost me. The polite rumble of his Beemer was soon swallowed up in the alpine emptiness. He looked like a courier who clearly knew this road. My guess was partly confirmed later in the day. As I was slowly navigating the Deadman Curves downbound from the summit into Cooke City he passed me again this time apparently returning to Red Lodge.



Rock Creek Vista Point, 9,190 feet asl

**Pirsig mentions stopping twice in the Bear Tooth Pass section, but the well known photographs were clearly taken at the Rock Creek Vista Point, 9,190 feet, and before the summit.** His Honda was clearly struggling to breathe.



Rock Creek Vista Point

"At a turnout on the road we stop, take some record photographs to show we have been here and then walk to a little path that takes us out to the edge of a cliff. A motorcycle on the road almost straight down beneath us could hardly be seen from up here. We bundle up more tightly against the cold and continue upward." Pirsig

Rock Creek Vista Point; A plague of hogs

Comparing these images with Pirsig's you can see the heavier snow cover on the mountains in 2008. No buses had arrived yet to block the vista from view. The Harley folks that came into the parking area a few minutes after I arrived barely responded to my good morning salutation. A plague of hogs. I made a clandestine self portrait and continued my ascent.



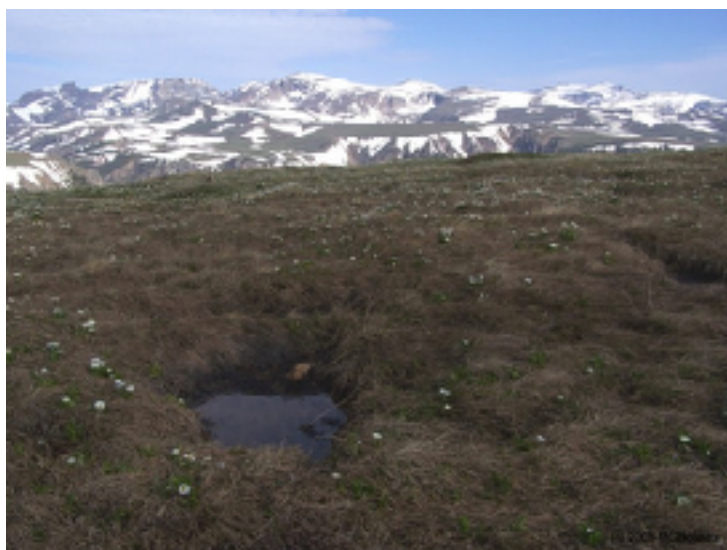




Snowfields near the summit

Pirsig: "The snowfields become heavy and show steep banks where snowplows have been. The banks become four feet high, then six feet, then twelve feet high. We move through twin walls, almost a tunnel of snow. Then the tunnel opens onto dark sky again and when we emerge we see we're at the summit."

This photograph was taken along the broad flat tundra plain that you go through before actually cresting the summit. The snow tunnel on the summit was so deep that no parking was possible for a similar photograph. The walls of the snow tunnel were easily 15 or 20 feet tall.



Alpine tundra habitat

I was flooded with unexpected emotions as I approached the summit. The images at this location remind me of an intense period of my life rambling alone on the arctic tundra collecting invertebrate samples from ponds much like this one. This photograph would not be out of place in my earlier albums from my arctic adventures.



Panorama of the Bear Tooth Pass summit

Keen observers will see the ski lift towers on the edge of the snow pack on the left. With youth on my side, in an earlier time (and with no ice on the tarn) I might scramble down to the edge of the cirque pond below. This photograph could be used as a

textbook illustration of these unique glacial features, made by the rotating motion of a long vacated glacier in the bowl below. The gravel moraine that dams the little lake marks the terminal deposition of debris from the bottom of that ghost glacier. It is a classic example of the type.





Self Portrait on the summit: In praise of hogs

Pirsig: "We stop and park at a turnoff where a number of tourists take pictures and look around at the view and at one other. At the back of his cycle John removes his camera from the saddlebag. From my own machine I remove the tool kit..."

Thanks to the Harley couple from Pennsylvania, I am finally able to get into a photograph to prove I actually made this journey. In praise of hogs.

And what a masterpiece of a view it is, the rumpled and sunburned motorcycle rider notwithstanding. I felt no compulsion to unpack my tool kit.



Ski lift at Bear Tooth summit

Ski lift buried in 20 feet of snow. The 30 foot poles mark the edge of the roadway for the snow blowers and the road tunnel is clearly visible carving through the snow drift.



Eleetia 2 at 10,947 feet asl

Eleetia at the summit, warm and breathing.



Flowering Lupine

Alpine meadows full of wild Lupine in flower welcomed me in Yellowstone soon after sailing down from the pass and Dead Mans Curve. Even though I was losing altitude rapidly, my spirits soared.



Five cent pose

This buffalo was sauntering along the paved road causing a traffic jam. I stopped for the jam and watched this fellow chug past me so close I could hear his huffing and chuffing breaths. He suddenly stopped and gave this nickel pose. I have read that the wildlife in Yellowstone was accessible, but I never dreamt they'd be as cooperative.



Yellowstone basalt postpile

A basaltic postpile intrusion in Yellowstone. Similar to the Devils Tower and other locations these columns of stone signal the volcanic nature of the Park.





Yellowstone scarred

The lasting mark of the 1988 Yellowstone fires that burned so much of the Park.



A Yellowstone sulphur pot

I had forgotten it was Canada Day (July 1st) as I wandered through one of America's natural icons. I was reminded of the significance of the day moments after I took this photo. A compatriot motorcycle rider on a sport bike rode by me wearing a Canadian Flag like a super hero. He received lots of acknowledged honking but sadly, I had put my camera away.



Crop circle maker

On Idaho highway 28 to Salmon I have left the Pirsig pathway for a bit. This dry almost desert area is dotted with artificial oases. I call them crop circles because that's what they are in the Google satellite images.





### Idaho highway #28

OK, so I said that North Dakota highway 13 was the loneliest road in America. Maybe not. From the bottom of ID #28 you begin a journey of several hours mostly alone to Salmon.



### Sandhill cranes and snake fencing

The sandhill cranes were hiding among the corral fencing but their distinctive croaks gave them away. The fences are reminiscent of the barbed wire barriers that Steve McQueen attempted to jump over on a motorcycle in the Great Escape movie. This rare enclosure felt incongruous in an otherwise expansive, nearly unlimited open space.



### Sacajawea Historic Byway

Even on a V-twin heavyweight, I am no fan of big slabs. I rode to **Lolo from Yellowstone on this, the Sacajawea Historic Byway** and Route 93. My detour off the Pirsig route is also very Zen-like and provides ample opportunity for reflection and contemplation.



### Lolo Pass Highway

The Lolo Pass Highway. Warnings and signs say, "Watch for... moose, pedestrians, game, stock, deer, ice, rocks." Whew, anything else? I did hit a bird that ended up in my lap, literally.



### WINDING ROAD - NEXT 50 YEARS

From Canada I had driven 2800 miles (4420 km) across the prairies to ride this ribbon and it didn't disappoint me. Somewhere on the cobweb of logging roads that tangle through the Bitterroots, Pirsig and his son camped for the night. Like Pirsig, **I had a Honda Super Hawk in 1968, and now I have nearly a dozen of them** but I was not inclined to take one for this trip.



### Lolo Highway is Riding Paradise

If ride heaven is carving countless curves with zero traffic on superb tarmac, then Lolo Pass Trail is paradise, with few rivals. Starting at Lolo, MT the Trail begins by following the historic Lewis and Clark westward path of 1805 southwesterly. It crests the Great Divide at 5200 feet, enters Idaho and glides effortlessly down the Lochsa and Clearwater River valleys.





### Druids of eld

This is the forest primeaval.  
The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,  
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,  
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,  
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.

from: Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie Part the First by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



The river is a road; the road is a river

Nearing the end of my Pirsig pilgrimage I have been on the road alone for over five days with a lot of riding yet before my day is done. There is a secret pocket in my saddle bags where I can always stuff these and more memories.



Near Kooskia, ID

Near the Lolo end you can join countless others that have captured a photo that says it is 77 miles of "Winding Road." (see my photo-) But in life it's always a good idea to look back over your shoulder once in a while. At the Kooskia end the sign says 99 miles and everyone seems to miss this one. My trip odometer logged the actual distance of 215 km (134 miles) from Lolo to Kooskia. I passed only about 10 other motorists, one another biker. You essentially have this road to yourself.





Rocking River Campground, Salmo BC Canada

One stage of my odyssey ends but another is about to begin.