



THE BIKER'S WEEK

A FLORIDIAN ROAD TRIP FROM THE LEGENDARY DAYTONA BIKE WEEK TO THE CONCH REPUBLIC OF KEY WEST – ALL FROM THE SADDLE OF A HARLEY-DAVIDSON ELECTRA GLIDE
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If there are a hundred things petrolheads should do before they die, Daytona Bike Week is one of them. To tick the box, I arrived at EagleRider Motorcycle Rental in Daytona Beach to collect a 96cu-in (1584cc), 910lb, 2009 Harley-Davidson Electra Glide with six miles on the clock.

I dropped the clutch and set off, heading back towards the Hilton hotel. The big V-twin was ever forgiving as I edged down Main Street, part of the constant show cruise, not wanting to drop the beast in front of a good many of the 500,000 bikers who'd invaded the sleepy Floridian beach town. Pressed up against the barriers the on-lookers were a cultural mix of hardcore bikers and weekend motorcyclists. However, one thing was clear: they were all here for fun on two wheels!

The 10-day Bike Week, usually held at the start of March, is a pick-and-mix affair; a guide and map collected from the welcome centre was my key to hundreds of happenings and road trips throughout Volusia County and beyond. I soon learned that today's razzmatazz has its roots in a 1937 3.2-mile road-beach motorcycle race won by Ed Kretz on his Indian at an average of 73.34mph.

After World War Two NASCAR founder Bill France took over promoting the Daytona 200, and the event was eventually moved to the Daytona International Speedway. Motels in the area were overwhelmed and locals were asked to take in the





Clockwise from left
Stock, chopper or old-school custom: two-wheelers by their thousands rumble through Daytona as bikers and babes make their annual pilgrimage to motorcycle mecca.



'MAIN STREET IS WHERE ALL THINGS BIKE WEEK ARE CENTRED: REALLY SPECIAL MACHINES EARN HOOTS AND HOLLERS FROM THE BARS AS THEY RUMBLE PAST'



race fans – and it's probably that which has made this town so motorcycle-friendly. The 200 race continues at the banked speedway as a finale to Bike Week.

As the sun rose I fired up the Harley to ride the 22-mile scenic 'loop'. I headed north and soon hooked up with a like-minded posse. Whereas the only way to describe their bikes was 'custom', my machine's stock nature made it an endangered species. Our route followed the dunes north, the cobalt blue Atlantic to our right. With the breeze registering 77 degrees, wearing my helmet and leather jacket was just about bearable. However, my chums rode *sans* lids and with only Bike Week T-shirts as body armour.

The road was terrific, leading us through tropical wetlands on to the oak and Spanish moss-lined Old Dixie Highway. I hooked a right at International Speedway Boulevard to join the thousands of bikes heading in both directions. It felt strange, as if cars didn't exist. The locals seemed to react to bikes much as I've noticed the Italians do to classic marathons: with great enthusiasm.

I parked up and walked past the 18-wheeler trucks displaying demo bikes, surrounded by every vendor known to the biking universe. I reached the huge

speedway, and from the infield watched a Clubman's Super Sport ten-lap race – the twist being the long sections of banking where you look up, not down, at the action!

Main Street is where all things Bike Week are centred. Lined by colourful emporiums and saloons, it is closed to all but two-wheelers on Saturday evening. It was packed when I arrived, and as the sun set behind the palms the serious cruising began, with really special machines earning hoots and hollers from the bars as they rumbled past.

I was overwhelmed by choppers in every form, old-school customs and even bikers carrying their pet dogs. From my room I saw bikes lined up on Atlantic Boulevard and turning down Main Street until 3am.

I awoke on Sunday morning to find the wind and rain battering my window, so I walked to the Starlite Diner. There I squeezed in at the counter between Jesus and his friends from Milwaukee. Japa our server asked Jesus if he'd had a rough night. 'No, but my bike's dirty!' came the reply.

The weather had improved by lunchtime, so I headed south on HWY 1 to Ponce Inlet Lighthouse, stopping en route at a chopper concours. It wasn't your usual gathering: I saw some guys chopping up a Chevrolet,

while further on there was a great show of old-school hot rods and bikes echoing the early post-war home-made machinery.

On Monday morning I loaded my gear into the Harley's cavernous back boxes and headed west on HWY 40 towards Ocala, home of Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing. At 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the weather was chilly for Florida: the hotel receptionist was concerned that I'd freeze! Leaving town, I noticed Krispy Kreme was offering a special Bike Week doughnut. The road was smooth, straight and traffic-free, and that's what makes riding so much fun; you feel part of the journey. Only the sign reading 'Bears for 23 miles' concerned me.

Following my sat-nav – well, trip notes gaffer-taped to the tank – I located the museum. My guidebook said to allow an hour for the visit, but I ignored that advice. 'Big Daddy' Garlits founded the collection after visiting the UK's Beaulieu Motor Museum in 1967, having been competing at Blackbushe Airport. For nitro-burning-rubber fans it's a must, with well displayed hardware and mountains of memorabilia. Don can often be seen wandering around, as he still has a workshop in the back.

I was behind schedule when I accelerated >>>



USEFUL CONTACTS

EagleRider Motorcycle Rental
www.eaglerider.com
Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort
www.daytonahilton.com
Bike Week information and events
www.officialbikeweek.com
Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing
www.garlits.com
Ivey House Bed and Breakfast
www.iveyhouse.com
Speedy Johnson's Airboat rides
www.speedyjohnsons.com
Pier House Hotel and Caribbean Spa
www.pierhouse.com
El Meson de Pepe cuban restaurant
www.elmesondepepe.com

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along the Interstate 75 south. It was 3pm and I had a 300-mile ride to Everglades City, just about the last town in south-west Florida. The Electro Glide was made for freeways, with its air-suspension, large tank and great sound system. Its big screen protected me from the wind, and despite traversing Tampa and Naples in the rush hour, I arrived in good time at the Ivey House B&B.

The Everglades is now a world heritage biosphere, and Everglades City was built by the constructors of the wetlands' first road, the Tamiami Trail HWY 41. The Ivey House was originally a workers' recreational hall. Next morning, I set off early to Speedy Johnson's airboats to take a peek at these machines that look like a baking tray with an aeroplane propeller at the rear.

Powered by a 350cu-in Chevrolet V8, this 16-foot vessel can travel at 40mph across the shallow waters. Pilot Lyle Demere cast off and we idled out through a tunnel of mangroves that looked like a prehistoric bone yard. On approaching the exit we donned ear defenders as the V8 was cranked up. Speeding along the channel, the boat power-drifted through the meanders until hitting full speed over the wetlands. You'd think that such a din would cause the wildlife to scatter, but when we

stopped things appeared to the contrary.

I was now heading east on 41, and in the early morning light the views were superb. I stopped to post a card at Ochopee Post Office, thought to be the smallest such facility in the USA. Next I took a left on Turner River Road in search of alligators, and I was not disappointed...

Back on route to Key West, I crossed the bridge on HWY 1 to Key Largo, and my morale was lifted after the Miami commuter traffic. I could smell the ocean, and from the causeways I could see turquoise sea and dark blue sky. Progress was slow as I hopped from key to key, as there is only one road. This is based on the original railway, as is evidenced by the view from Seven Mile Bridge, which runs alongside the railway structure itself.

Approaching Key West, the self-proclaimed Conch Republic, I was surprised by the number of motorcycles on the road. Riding up Duval Street to the Pier House Resort, I saw them parked on every corner.

Key West is the icing on the keys cake. It's cool, funky, hippie and Caribbean all at once, with a wonderfully relaxed ambience. On my first morning, I rose with the lark and rode down Whitehead Street to photograph my bike next to the 'most southerly point

of the USA' marker. My early visit was necessary to avoid the all-day queues of tourists waiting to have their picture taken.

Further along is Ernest Hemingway's home. Mr Hemingway was a car guy, and I think he'd have appreciated Bike Week. In fact, he became a resident of Key West after being delayed there for seven weeks while awaiting the delivery of a newly ordered motor. He rented a room and wrote the draft to 'A Farewell to Arms'. The Hemingway house is now a museum and, as with everything in Key West, it is laid-back and friendly.

The best way to gain an idea of the old town is to walk the streets of tin-roofed wooden homes, many built by ships' carpenters. It's not uncommon to see old British sports cars or VW campers ageing gracefully on the palm-shaded streets. It was also here that I found speciality cafes full of locals away from the tourists on Duval.

Sunset marks the start of Key West's nightlife. In Mallory Square, street artists perform as a hors d'oeuvres to the coming night of dining; in my case, Cuban cuisine at El Meson de Pepe and drinking in Sloppy Joe's on Duval. As I left at 4am on the Friday of my departure north, the shutters were rolled down on partyville and the end of my 1227-mile trip. 