

IBA Great Lakes Challenge

Introduction:

After getting my Iron Butt Association Border to Border and BB1500 certifications earlier this year, I really wanted to get one more IBA certified ride in before the end of the riding season. My initial plan was to do the Lake Superior 1000 (around the lake in 24 hours) around late July or Early August. Then, when Team Strange scheduled the Return to Niobrara, my plans were pushed back.

By the time I could get a free weekend, it was already mid-September. Daylight was down to about 13 hours by now, which made me nervous about riding alone around Superior, especially on the North Shore where vehicle-moose collisions are a real problem. Were I doing it with someone else, I'd probably be fine, but not alone. I started to rethink my options.

Other than my strange Border to Border (to Border) trip, I'd never really been on a multiple day long distance motorcycle trip. In addition, we (Me, Ron and Carrie and Paul and P) are planning on going to Hyderseek next year in Alaska, so a multiple day trip might be a good idea anyway to see if there's more I need to learn about traveling by motorcycle. I thought about it, and decided to try the IBA's Great Lakes 100. This was a ride around the great lakes (around 2600 miles) in 100 hours. They also have a certification in 50 hours, but that would pose the same night riding problems as doing the LS1000 this late in the year. Plus, never having been in that part of Canada, I wanted to enjoy it more than just burning miles. As such, I chose not to run my auxiliary fuel cell, keeping the Givi box on instead for more waterproof storage.

I switched the dates a few times before finally settling on September 11-14, leaving on Saturday, and hoping to be home by Monday. I took Tuesday off just in case, and because I'd probably want a day to recover. My estimate was that I could do the ride in 65-70 hours.

Day one:

I was all packed and ready to go Friday night, when we found out we were supposed to go to a birthday party. I knew this was a bad idea, but I went anyway and got very little sleep. I never sleep well before big rides anyway, but this was worse. I got up around 6 am on Saturday, had Ron and Carrie sign my witness forms, and I was off to the gas station to get my starting receipt - 7:22 am.

The weather was beautiful, but a bit hot out, especially with a black helmet, black jacket, black pants while sitting on a black seat. I went through a lot of water that day. Things were pretty uneventful with gas stops in Mauston, WI and Ottawa, IL. The IBA requires receipts from anywhere in Illinois, Cleveland, OH, Watertown, NY, Sudbury or North Bay, Ontario, Thunder Bay, Ontario, and either Duluth, MN or Superior, WI to prove a GL ride. Talking to Ron the night before, I'd been debating whether to bypass Chicago. He ran it on Streets and Trips, and found that going all the way down to I-80 in LaSalle, IL would add about 70 miles, but would likely save time over going through the city, not to mention avoiding the tollways in Illinois, which are the old style "throw your coins in the basket" tollbooths, which are hard on a bike. I nearly wiped out twice on the short stretch of tollway from Beloit, WI to Rockford, IL, from greasy oil slicks coming out of

the tollbooths. In New York, I often saw that kitty litter absorbing stuff coming out of booths. A nice touch for motorcycle safety.

It turned out to be a smart move to bypass Chicago, because the XM traffic channel said speeds were averaging 4 to 9 mph and it would have taken 2-3 hours to get through. In the meantime, I could cruise along at 70 out in the country. I hit some construction traffic near Gary, IN, but nothing too bad, and the tollway through Indiana and Ohio was uneventful, with a stop at a plaza near Howe, IN for food and gas. I switched the clock over to Eastern Time here.

Cleveland (actually North Ridgeville, OH) was the next stop, and a mandatory receipt. Here I had my first problem. I stopped at a big 24 hour gas station called Sheetz. As will happen sometimes, the receipt didn't pop out of the pump. I went inside and asked for one, and when she gave it to me, it had no location.

Me - "Do you have anything with the location printed on it, like a stamp or something?"

Clerk - "No, why?"

Me - "How about a business card - anything with an address?"

Clerk - "This coupon has the store name on it - that's all we got."

That wasn't going to do, and I couldn't seem to get through to her, so I went across the street and pumped a tiny amount of gas at the BP station to get a location receipt. I also spent some time tightening my speedometer cable, which had a tendency to come loose ever since the Minnesota 1000. This took a lot of time, and it was around 10 pm at this point. Soon after that, my XM radio bracket broke, and when I stopped again I bought some superglue to fix it. XM is a godsend on the bike, but their build quality is really shoddy.

My goal was to make it to Buffalo that night, but after the screwing around there, I had to rethink my plans. I made it through Cleveland, and thought about going to Erie, about another hour away, but I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to get a room off the freeway on a Saturday night. I pulled off about 20 miles out of Cleveland and stayed at a Red Roof Inn. Good thing too, because I had the last room, and all the other hotels at the exit were apparently booked. Unfortunately, when unpacking the bike, I realized that my magnetic tank bag had picked up a bolt in the garage, causing my tank to get scratched up. That sucks.

Day one miles - 845 (gps)

Moving time - 12:29

Moving Avg. Speed - 67.6 mph

Lessons Learned:

Don't go to a party the night before a ride.

Sometimes the longer route takes less time.

Be VERY careful at tollbooths.

Carry superglue in your parts and tools kit. Like duct tape, it comes in handy.

Look for metal things when you set your magnetic tank bag down.

Day two:

I got up around 6:30 (I usually get about six hours sleep), and hit the road. It was cool out, but not too cold, and I made it through the short stretch of Pennsylvania and into New York. It was on the NY State Thruway I had my second receipt problem near Buffalo. The receipt at the pump had no time on it. I needed cash, so I was planning on just going into the restaurant building and using my cash machine receipt. No problem there, except this service plaza was set up so all the buildings were on the other side of the freeway, and I had to walk through the skyway to get to the ATM. This wasted more time.

The speedometer started acting up near Syracuse again, so I stopped to tighten it. I was really nervous about this (since odometer readings are required for certification - if the cable goes out, so goes my hopes for a GL certificate) but it never loosened again after that. I was going to stop and buy some Loctite near Watertown, but it turned out it wasn't needed. For some reason, it never got loose after that, which is a good thing.

I stopped for gas to get the mandatory receipt in Watertown and crossed the 1000 Islands Bridge into Canada. I'd heard it was beautiful, and it is. One of the coolest views I've seen, with lots of trees, islands and boats out on a beautiful day. Canadian customs was no problem (maybe my customs jinx is over) and I headed toward Ottawa. This part of Canada isn't too interesting. Just some trees and a freeway. I had a hard time reading my kph numbers on my speedometer (why are they blue on a black background?) and I didn't want to get pulled over and get a speeding ticket like a certain Team Strange founder did, and have problems getting back across in the spring for the Alaska trip. I could have switched the GPS over to metric, but I don't think well metrically (is that a word?), so I just kept going, hoping I wasn't going too fast. An ST1300 passed me then, and I just followed him for about 100 miles, figuring they'd get him first!

I turned off in Ottawa to go west again, passing the Corel Centre, where the Senators play. (It's kind of in the middle of nowhere - just this huge arena and little else around) and kept on through the farm land of central Ontario. At Pembroke, my next scheduled gas stop, I took a short detour across the river into Quebec, just to say I'd ridden in Quebec (cheap, I know, but I did it anyway).

After Pembroke, I had to think about how far I wanted to go that night. I'd hoped to make it to Sault Ste. Marie when I started, but I didn't think that would happen. Either Sudbury or North Bay were required receipts, and I'd planned to stop in Sudbury, the farther of the two, for gas anyway, so I decided to go there. It got really cold when the sun went down, and since my heated jacket didn't arrive in time for the ride, I bundled up and kept going. I considered staying in North Bay, but kept going on to Sudbury.

It was on this stretch I first saw the signs with moose on them, saying "night danger." Uh oh - this was what I wanted to avoid. I became more nervous when I happened upon a car in the ditch and a lot of police and ambulance workers - did that guy try to avoid a moose?

I pulled into Sudbury and realized I'd missed the turn for the highway I was on. It didn't show up on the

map, but I decided to keep going into town. It turned out to be a smart move, because I found gas and a hotel almost right away. I was done for the day around 10 pm. The desk clerk seemed very surprised when I said I'd been riding from Cleveland. She didn't know I'd come all the way AROUND the lakes to do so.

Day two miles - 791 (gps)

Moving time - 12:50

Moving Avg. Speed - 61.6 mph

Lessons Learned:

Carry loc-tite (I usually do, but I forgot this time when I needed it)

Heated clothing is a good idea - I'll have it for the next ride.

Day Three:

It was really cold on Monday - about 44 degrees according to the bike thermometer, so I put on all my clothes and headed out. I found that it was a really good thing I missed that turn, because they'd built a bypass around the city, and there really wasn't anything out there - hotels, gas stations, nothing. I might have had a hard time in the dark.

I headed for Sault Ste. Marie (the Soo) and it started to cloud up. The UP of Michigan gets a ton of precipitation (which is why the skiing is so good) so it didn't surprise me that it might rain, I just hoped it wouldn't continue. About halfway to the Soo, I hit some nasty construction. For about ten miles, there was no road. Just dirt, with rocks the size of golf balls, and to make it better, they OILED it to keep the dust down! Imagine riding on a greased cookie sheet full of golf balls. Add to that, some assclown tailgated me all the way through it. I've rarely been happier than I was when that mess ended.

I pulled into the Soo, and I just had to get a donut at Tim Hortons. They're seemingly on every corner in Canada, and their donuts are as good as or better than Krispy Kreme. There were something like 50 people in there at 10 am on a Monday - don't they have to work?

I needed gas too and I headed out of town, thinking I'd see a gas station. I pulled into one place, but they were diesel only - I've never seen that before. After a mile or two, it looked like I was not going to find gas. I turned around and went back into town, got gas, and headed back out. Of course just over the next hill from where I turned around, there were about six gas stations. Oh well...

After that, I headed north. You'd think that riding around the great lakes, you'd actually SEE the lakes, but I really didn't until I got to Lake Superior. That said, it was worth it. The ride over the north shore of the lake is one of the prettiest rides you could ever imagine. Good roads, beautiful views of the lake, the trees, the rock formations. Traffic was fairly light and the weather cleared up and got sunny too. I saw a number of bald eagles flying overhead too. One unfortunate thing was that unlike the Minnesota side of the north shore, there are very few places to pull over and take photos, and those that do exist are often gravel and rocks,

which doesn't help on a motorcycle.

Somehow, I seemed to miscalculate some of my distances that I had on a spreadsheet, and I was somewhat concerned about making it to my next scheduled gas stop in Marathon, so I fueled up in Wawa, and then again in Marathon. Normally, I have a fair amount of food on the bike to eat while I ride - jerky, granola bars and the like. I had eaten all of that about a day before, but you can usually find things along the way to supplement that. I was pretty hungry by the time I hit Marathon and I saw a big sign: PETRO-CANADA GAS, FOOD, CONVENIENCE STORE, HOTEL Perfect - I'll stop there for gas, I thought.

I pulled into the station, and a kid that looked remarkably like Macaulay Culkin came out - maybe it was him - he hasn't done much lately (note - guess not, he just got busted on drug charges in Oklahoma). I realized it was a full-service station, something you NEVER see in the US anymore.

Me: "Are you full service only?"

Mac: "Yup."

Me: "So do you have to pump the gas?"

Mac: "Nope - we don't pump bikes eh." (yes, he did say the stereotypical "eh")

Me: "So can I pump the gas?"

Mac: "Yup"

I couldn't figure out why he had to stand there and watch me, but he did, making small talk about my trip. I don't think he sees many people there. I went inside to pay. Remember now, I was hungry, and the sign said there would be food. When I got inside, I realized that they must consider motor oil to be edible, because that was the only thing for sale there, except a few bottles of water and a broken Pepsi machine. I didn't bother to consult Mac on their false advertising - just filled my Camelback and went on my way.

At this point, I was checking the GPS for sunset times. I figured I'd hit Thunder Bay around 8 pm eastern time, which was right around sunset, as Thunder Bay is nearly the farthest west point of the Eastern time zone. I pulled into town, and looked for a gas station. I discovered a similar situation as in Sudbury, where the main highway bypassed the town, and so I turned off and into an industrial area. No gas there. I kept going deeper into town, until finally I found a commercial strip. I filled up and asked the attendant how to get to highway 61 back to the US. Turns out I was only two blocks from the main road I'd turned off of, so I'd have ended up there anyway instead of wasting a half hour wandering around lost (in case you wondered, my GPS is very inaccurate in Canada for gas and food locations etc.)

I headed toward the border, and there were big, lighted scrolling signs warning for moose on the road. It was getting dark, and I was nervous again. I'd heard too many stories about riders who hit moose. I pulled into the border and went through US Customs easily and gained my hour back. 9 pm became 8 pm again. I stopped at Grand Portage to put my earplugs back in, and a friendly old guy decided to stop and visit. He rides a BMW and winters in Florida and lives in Grand Portage during the summer. Normally, the Iron Butt Association license plate is a conversation piece, but he was the only one to ask about it - he even knew of the IBA and told some stories about rides and riders he knew. The problem was it was pitch dark out, and I

had to get going so I had to cut the conversation short - too bad because he was a nice enough guy.

I headed south and started thinking about whether I wanted to ride all the way home. I would have been home around 1 or 2 am. No big deal, as I've done 24 hour rides before and I wasn't that tired. My feelings changed once I got farther along. It was completely black out. No stars, no moon, nothing except my driving lights out there. The thought of hitting a moose or a deer popped back into my head. I don't mind riding at night, but this is a pretty desolate area and I was alone - if I hit something and went in the ditch, I might not be found for a long time. In addition, my cell phone didn't have service so I had no way to call for help. I decided to stay in Grand Marais. It turned out to be a good decision because the weather radar showed thunderstorms, hail and 40 mph winds at home. Not fun after riding all day.

Day three miles - 719 (gps)

Moving time - 12:38

Moving Avg. Speed - 56.9 mph

Lessons Learned:

Go with your gut instinct - there's always gas when you come into a major city.

Don't panic and backtrack to waste time.

Pack more food than you think you need. In sparsely populated areas, gas stations may only sell gas.

Day four:

Not much to say here. I got up really early and rode home. I also saw my only deer of the trip. The north shore of Minnesota is one of my favorite places, but I don't like how it's been built up so Stuffy and Muffy can pack up their Volvo and play voyageur while drinking their lattes.

When I was a kid and my dad and I went up to the BWCA, it was all grizzled canoeists, roadhouses and cheap motels - I guess I'm just a curmudgeon (at 31, I'm too young for that!) Still, it's a nice place to visit and a nice ride.

I ran into another receipt problem for my final mandatory stop in Duluth. I should have known this from a previous ride but I forgot - DON'T GET GAS AT HOLIDAY STATIONS if you need to audit a ride with receipts. They only have the store number - no city. I ended up having to go across the street to another station to buy something to get another receipt. After that it was a quick two hours home (and the only rain of the trip) with my ending receipt at 11:10 am, 75:48 after my start. Ron and Carrie signed my forms again when they got home from work, and I mailed everything to the IBA the next day.

My time wasn't as fast as I'd hoped, but well under the 100 hour mark. It was a fun trip with some nice sights, but most of all I learned a number of things that should help on future multi-day trips, and that was probably the most valuable part of the ride.

Day four miles - 261 (gps)

Moving time - 4:09

Moving Avg. Speed - 62.9 mph

Lessons Learned:

Don't get gas at Holiday on IBA/fuel log rides and rallies.

Total miles - 2616 (gps)

Total moving time - 42:06

Total time - 75:48

Total moving average - 62.14 mph

Total overall average - 34.5 mph