## Favorite Rides: Day Trips Out of Denver \& Fort Collins, CO

 curvature, there are almost no route choices in the Rockies that end in disappointment. However, for those venturing westward with limited time to explore, there may be a balanced combination of must-see tourist passes and lesser-known pavement that work together to create the ideal visit. That equilibrium is what my dad (Van) and I sought on our weeklong trip last summer.

Before diving deeply into the maps and destinations, l'll introduce the machines (and their riders) to give the narrative some context:

My dad was piloting a 1979 Honda CBX, a bike affectionately known as "Sammy the Rat." Before entering my dad's stable in 1993, this CBX had led a harsh life. Beyond having been repainted and missing a few cosmetic details, the previous owner shared that somewhere in its past, it had toppled after a long downhill ghost ride (explaining a few missing cylinder-head cooling fins). After some careful TLC over the years (and with a little help from the experts at Retrospeed in Belgium, Wisconsin), the CBX underneath the rugged exterior has become an exciting and capable machine. Boasting the higher-performance ' 79 carburetors, a sport kit, progressive rear shocks, and a full Kerker competition exhaust system (which I had coincidentally acquired in Colorado on a previous visit), "The Rat" belies its name by providing a unique and competent riding experience.

My tool of choice to navigate the Rockies was a 1984 Honda VF50OF Interceptor - my first bike, a survivor, and one of which l've only grown fonder. With small modifications (custom flat seat to accommodate my 6'5" 220-lb frame, Vance \& Hines performance exhaust system, GSM luggage rack, etc.), Honda's mini-ceptor has become an ideal bike for me. In the 20k miles I've travelled on it (mostly around the Midwest), I had never found it incapable or grossly underpowered, and wouldn't hesitate to hop on for any length ride. As more Interceptors are (and will keep) finding their way into my garage, I'm confident that this one will always have a prominent place.

Van Komurka's 1979 Honda CBX - "Sammy the Rat."


## The Motorcycles



Joel Komurka's 1984 Honda VF50OF.

Deviating slightly from the structure of our previous trips, we decided to trailer out across the plains, and begin our riding from the base of the eastern foothills. While it could be said that hauling instead of riding compromises the purity and iron-butt integrity of the trip, it yielded some logistical and convenience benefits that we prioritized: no packing constraints, better time + fewer gas stops across the plains with two to share the driving, and option to bring along spare wear components (in my case, a new rear tire). Also, given the age of all the equipment (and one of its operators), having backup vehicles that far from home is a lesson taught us more-harshly in the past.

Two sets of generous family friends allowed us to lodge with them during our trip, even with the space for the bikes to be parked inside each night. We stayed the first half of the week in Aurora (an eastern suburb of Denver), and the second half in Fort Collins (70 miles north of Denver on I-25). Both locations allowed us access to several canyons leading to the spine of the Rockies, with several options for crossing the Continental Divide.

## The Set-Up



The truck-and-trailer configuration in El Paso, Illinois before heading west. Note: the '97 F250 rolled 625,000 miles on the odometer during the trip.

## The Rides



Dad with the machines at Loveland pass, the last big stop on a wholly ideal riding day.


The first portion of the week targeted roads south of I-70, given our starting location:
Our week began with a less-technical but more-tourist route, following Highway 285 out of Denver all the way to Johnson Village. Hwy 285 climbs sharply over an initial, relatively steep spine out of Denver (which tested the guts and cooling power of my little VF50OF), then settles into a leisurely-paced sightseeing tour as it follows the meeting of basin and mountain range. From Johnson Village, we turned north on Hwy 24 toward Leadville, making a brief westward detour to the Continental Divide at the summit of Independence Pass. Our time here was made memorable by another visitor not only recognizing the VF500F, but going so far as to ask my dad to roll his CBX out of the way for an uncluttered photo of the Interceptor. We climbed out of Leadville on Hwy 91 to join I-70 east. Soon after meeting the interstate, we detoured onto Hwy 6 to visit the Divide again at Loveland Pass. From the summit, we descended down I-70 back into the city. Given missed turns and slight exploration, our odometers registered about 350 miles overall.

The second day's route was defined by a dinner stop in Evergreen (graduate school and longtime family friends of Dad's), and began similarly with the rapid ascent out of town on Hwy 285. This time though, when we came to Grant, we turned north on Hwy 62 toward Guanella Pass. That stretch all the way to Georgetown was truly one of the hidden gems of the trip, and one both Dad and I are very glad we rode. The ascent to the summit is gradual, with low-speed corners on good road surface through dense and impressive forests. Once over the crest, the road became more-windy, and followed a series of reservoirs along South Clear Creek. The entire descent was especially impressive, with the final few miles into town being particularly memorable. We then utilized I-70 east again for a few miles to catch Hwy 103 towards Mt. Evans. Before reaching the top, we jogged east on Hwy 103/Squaw Pass Rd all the way to Hwy 74. This section was also highly enjoyable, with moderate undulation, constant-radius corners, and a nice mixture of forestation and valley views. After a long-overdue dinner catching up, we retired for the night having logged just over 200 miles.


One of many picture-worthy views from an outlook on the Guanella Pass.


For our third and final day in the southern region, we decided to get a little more adventurous, and explore the area straight south with which neither of us were very familiar. Hwy 85 took us down out of the city until Sedalia, where we turned onto Hwy 67, intending to follow it all the way to Woodland Park. However, I made a wrong turn just east of Twin Cedars that led us to a dirt/gravel road (W. Pine Creek Rd), well out of cellular data range. Despite a $15 \%$ downhill grade (and better judgement) we continued across to Platte River Rd, where we found some of the best riding and scenery of the week. The river was scattered with fly fishermen, and the road surface was consistent. As it followed the banks, sight distance was plentiful, so there was an opportunity to ride the road's optimal pace without much concern for blind surprises. We were able to join back up with Hwy 67, make it to Woodland Park, jog west to Divide on Hwy 24, and continue south on Hwy 67 again all the way to Cripple Creek. After a hot dog from a stand (the only food available in town), we retraced our steps minus the off-road portion, arriving back with 250 more miles showing than when we left.


An advantage of trailering is the capacity for spare parts. Thanks to generous hosts, and Interstate Honda in Fort Collins, I was able to replace my rear tire with a new one we'd brought along.


The second half of our week began with an off-day for logistics. We trailered from Denver up to Fort Collins, met friends and toured their home, and used their graciously-offered garage space. Interstate Honda in town provided a fantastic experience, and were able to mount and balance the tire I had brought along while we perused their showroom.

Our fourth riding day was based on knowledgeable suggestions from our hosts, and began on the southeast end of Horsetooth Reservoir, nestled against the eastern slope of the foothills. We took off south until we hit County Rd 38, followed it into Masonville, and picked up Buckhorn Rd headed north. We continued until we reached Rist Canyon Rd, where we turned east towards Laporte. This stretch was very scenic and playful, with a nice combination of technical and sweeping sections. After a lunch and gas stop, we jogged up to Hwy 287, then split west on Hwy 14/Poudre Canyon Rd. The run up Poudre was one of the most-enjoyable sections of the entire trip for both of us. The average incline was perfect, uphill enough to allow for more spirited riding given the shorter braking distances, but not so severe as to require excessive downshifts. Poudre's real charm is in its rhythm (see "The Pace" by Nick lenatsch, 1991); it flows in an exciting and trustworthy way, and was almost entirely free of traffic in either direction. At the top of Poudre Canyon is Cameron Pass, which served as our turnaround point. To conclude, we were treated with the canyon in reverse, and arrived back with just under 200 miles behind us.

I would be remiss not to mention the meal prepared for us that evening. Our host is an avid cook, and built a professionally-capable outdoor kitchen (complete with stone pizza oven) in the backyard of his property. Not only was the bison burger and salad (fresh with garden-picked vegetables) the best we'd ever tasted, but even more impressive was observing him in that space. It's always a treat to see someone as skilled as he in their element, and the culinary quality severely outshone any company we could have hoped to offer in return.


Our final day was our largest (ignore the mileage shown on the map, however; this article was written at a time of year when not all passes are open, so the computer gets creative with routes), and included an unexpected but very welcome addition. Dad and I headed straight down to Loveland, where we joined Hwy 34 and pulled up Big Thompson Canyon, going all the way to Estes Park. From there, we took Hwy 7 south past Allenspark, and used Hwy 72 to descend into Nederland, where we met and added a passenger. My then-girlfriend (now fiancée), Riley, is in Air Force pilot training, so rarely gets leave
 from base, but she was able to arrive to see her family (in Denver), and also to join us for a day. Whose bike she joined was easily determined by which direction the elevation was changing; my VF500F doesn't have the displacement to haul two adults up the mountains, so the CBX handled the climbs. The Interceptor happily accepted a passenger on the downhills, and had enough juice to manage when I was the only option. Once she was aboard the CBX, we continued south on 119 through Black Hawk to I-70, using the interstate to move west until breaking off onto Hwy 40. Hwy 40 runs up to Granby, where we met Hwy 34/Trail Ridge Road that goes through Rocky Mountain National Park. I don't need to sell the beauty of Trail Ridge Road as it's documented by many authors more-skilled, but I can add that it only gets better when traversed on two wheels. Recent wildfires gave the park a unique look, showed the lifecycle of the ecosystem, and cleared eyelines for even better views. At the Alpine Visitor Center, we stretched our legs, Riley traded bikes, and we moved down to Estes Park again for a late lunch. After our meal, Dad headed directly back to Fort Collins, and I returned Riley to Nederland, which allowed me to visit Boulder Canyon and St. Vrain Canyon as well. All in all, I traveled nearly 425 miles (with just fewer than half of those being 2-up), and had successfully completed our trip.

## The Lessons

Most CBXpress readers are experienced riders, and have likely logged more miles than I have on a variety of bikes. Nonetheless, l'd like to summarize a few points that I took away, in hopes of rephrasing ideas already known, or provoking more-profound thoughts than I could assemble.

1. The right gear/equipment - In the mountains, elevation drives temperature and humidity to a higher degree than the Midwest rider may expect. We experienced up to 65-degree temperature swings throughout the course of the day, but were unbothered because of our apparel versatility. What I also tend to include in gear is tools, luggage options, and replacement wear components. If you know that you'll ride enough miles to eventually consume something (e.g. a tire, brake pads, fuses, etc.), there is no disadvantage to having them purchased and along with you.
2. Timing - Often, when planning a route, it can be easy to look at an estimated mileage, divide that by an average speed of 50 or so mph, and calculate an arrival time guess. On such slowly-trafficked, twisty, undulating, and unknown roads, this inference should almost be doubled. Time in the saddle is what generates fatigue, and that can sneak up over a fewer-than-expected number of miles.
3. Ride your ride - I mean this in two ways, both to ride the style that your bike accommodates, and that your skill level encourages. For this trip, my dad was a much-more-experienced rider on an objectively more-capable motorcycle, and although I led most of the way, we were both able to enjoy the routes. He stretched and closed his following distance to allow for our style differences, and neither of us felt pushed or hindered. These concepts were particularly true with a passenger; while the engineers at Honda never dreamed of anyone two-up sport touring on a VF50OF, we were able to do so with real success, not only because of the bike's capabilities, but from a riding style change to anticipate movements well before they were needed, and a conscious effort to focus on gear selection/speed to pull grade without overheating.
4. Socialization - Riding is often seen as solitary, and correctly so. The insulation from all else when swinging a leg over is a factor that captivates riders of all styles. However, when I reflect on this trip, "isolated" isn't an adjective that comes to mind. I was very fortunate to have spent an entire week with my dad, doing something we both loved, in an area we both enjoy. Every gas or food stop was greeted with "did you see that..." or "what did you think of...," and the evenings were full of excited planning. I may have virtually unlimited opportunities to see the Rockies as time goes on, but it's never certain how many times l'll be blessed by those experiences together with my dad.



The bikes weren't the only vehicles that needed care and attention this trip. Early in our return drive, the left-front truck tire decided that western Nebraska would be the perfect place to end its useful life. Thanks to habitual preparedness, we were back on the road in 45 minutes.


Many famous photographers have a unique trademark that has given them transcendent recognition (e.g., Ansel Adams nature in black and white). Dad's trademark is subtle, but consistent; his shots all contain two of three things, but never all. Those three he never fails to capture two of are the ground at his feet, his finger, and part of the intended target. Hence, article photos provided by Joel.

## The Appendix

The views descending from Guanella Pass were some of the most-memorable of the week. Thankfully, given my deep background in videography and motovlogging, my chest-mounted GoPro effectively captured this clear and unobstructed view of my tank bag map, thoroughly excluding the scenery and road we had brought it to document.


Our typical standard roadtrip diet is completely unsustainable, with amounts of fast food burgers only recognizable by those who've seen "Supersize Me." Thankfully, the rare occasions come up to try something different, like these giant gyros from King Kong restaurant, to give our arteries variety if not breathing room.


