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PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA
SHAMROCK TOUR®

A Palms to Pines QUARTET

Text and Photography: Christopher Baker







The spectacular Cholla Cactus Garden is one of the highlights of Joshua Tree National Park, and well worth a stop to roam the trails.

Ya gotta love Palm Springs, CA, where the summer never dies, the architecture is retro-cool, and the town spirit is as invigorating as an iced martini. Where else can you golf in the morning, go snowshoeing in the afternoon, and enjoy a cocktail by the pool in the evening? As to riding, Palm Springs' fabulous winter weather spells nirvana.

I felt almost guilty slipping on my BMW AirShell jacket and pants with the temperature at a balmy 73 degrees, while half of the lower 48 states were blanketed in snow and 3.5 million Texans were shivering without power.

And did I mention Palm Springs' physical setting? The place is out of this world! Majestic mountains soar on three sides, glistening with snow in the winter sunshine. In fact, the surrounding scenery is far more diverse than you might imagine, ranging from below sea level to more than 11,500 feet atop Mount San Gorgonio. Although you could be forgiven for thinking that in summer it's just too darn hot to ride in the desert, after 15 years of living here, I've learned that's the best time to head into the mountains.

The terrain is so diverse that a lucky Shamrock Tour® delivers a kaleidoscopic experience to all four points of the compass. To the east sit the surreal rock formations and eponymous yucca species of Joshua Tree National Park and the High Desert. To the south lie the Salton Sea and Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Northward, you'll find the circuit of Big Bear Lake that takes you to 8,443 feet in elevation. And westward await the wineries of Temecula and the stupendous switchbacks over pine-clad Mount San Jacinto.

After months spent cooped up in my man cave, I was beaming like the Cheshire Cat as I fired up my BMW R 1200 GSA on day one.



More than 4,000 windmills line the route north of Palm Springs. Each blade is the size of half a football field!

Pioneertown—a former Hollywood Western stage-set—transports visitors back 150 years, but it's also a populated living “museum” with one of the liveliest bars for miles around.

It's not hard to reckon how Skull Rock, in Joshua Tree National Park, got its name.

Salvation Hill, a surreal piece of desert artwork intended to spread a messianic message, draws a steady stream of curious visitors.

DESERT DESIDERATA IN JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK

Palm Springs' windmill farm is as iconic as its Instagram-worthy #thatpinkdoor. Rotor blades half the length of a football field spun overhead as I powered north out of town up North Indian Canyon Dr, then roared through Morongo Valley on SR 62, with its delicious sweepers. Within 30 minutes, I'd gone from sea level up to 4,000 feet.

At Yucca Valley, I turned left for the snaking road up to Pioneertown. Set amid the fantastical boulder formations of the Mojave Desert, this former Western movie set is a lived-in museum renowned for Pappy & Harriet's—a real-life functioning Western saloon—and as a trendy place to reboot for Los Angeles castaways and outlaw artists. Visit on Saturdays to view mock gunfights on Mane St.

Pleasingly grotesque Joshua trees added to the surreal Wild West landscape as I looped back down to Yucca Valley through Pipes Canyon and SR 247, then turned east on the Twentynine Palms Hwy for Joshua Tree National Park. The

park's majestic grandeur—its lunar-like boulders, gnarled eponymous trees, and wide-open feeling—once drew Jim Morrison, Donovan, and Keith Richards for their own desert trips. I was happy for the slow speed limits—all the better to admire one of the most spectacular desert landscapes in North America.

Most traffic and sites of interest concentrate in the 1,240-square-mile park's northwest quarter. I took the side road to Keys View, a *de rigueur* viewpoint at 5,185 feet, offering a panoramic vista over the Coachella Valley, San Andreas Fault, and Salton Sea. East of the aptly-named Skull Rock, I turned south and cranked open the throttle to trace fast, graceful arcs as the road augered down into the park's lower Colorado Desert, studded with spike-like ocotillo and decidedly non-cuddly teddy bear cholla cacti.

I emerged at the junction with I-10 and diverted four miles east to Chiriaco Summit to visit the General Patton Memorial Museum. Back at the junction, I turned south for Box Canyon, scything down through the Mecca Hills. Here, sedimentary

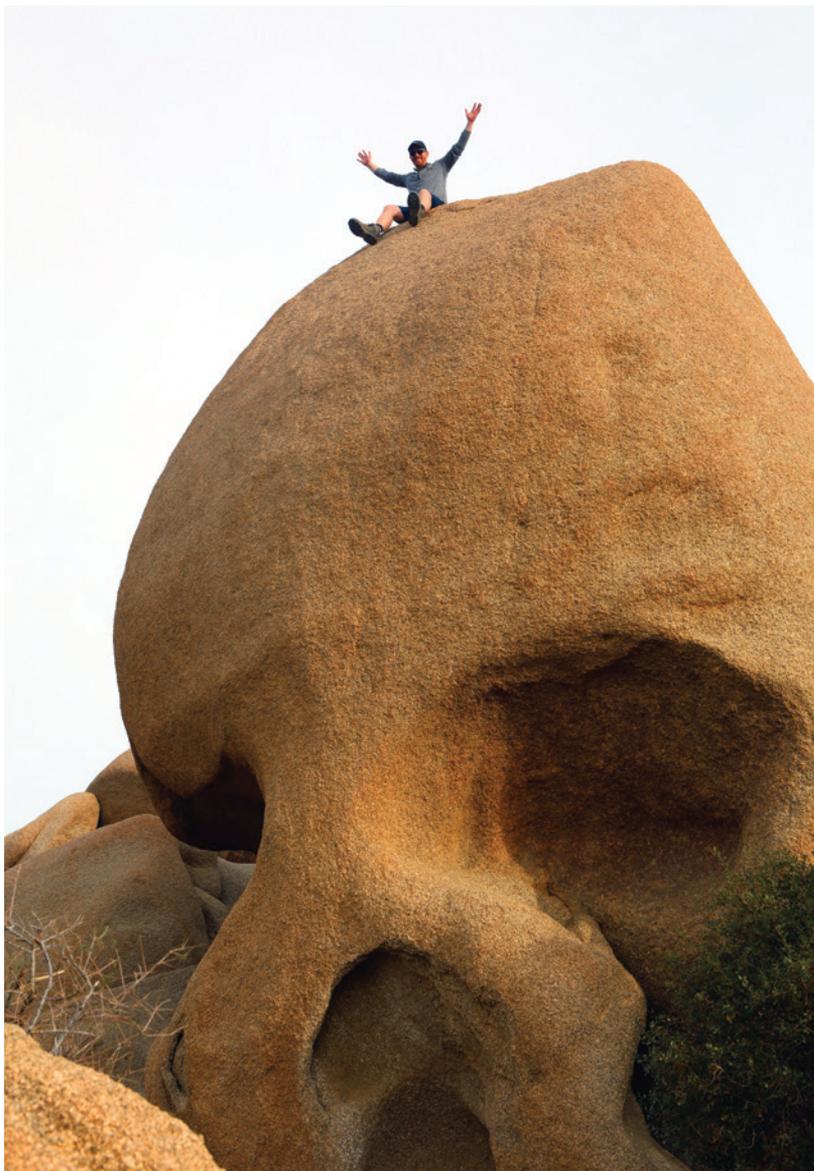
layers have been upended and doubled over by tectonic forces associated with the San Andreas Fault (which you cross at the base of the canyon), then eroded into fantastical badlands formations tinted with mineral deposits.

The fast, fun downhill ride spilled me into the Coachella Valley and the heart of date palm country near appropriately-named Mecca. I turned north onto ruler-straight SR 111 for a well-deserved iced date shake at the Oasis Date Gardens. The road then unspooled into Indio, where it turned west as one of California's great urban drives. This being February, the sun had already dipped behind Mount San Jacinto as I closed in on Palm Springs.

SALTON SEA & ANZA-BORREGO STATE PARK

My second clover leaf pointed southeast, straight at the Salton Sea. I'd explored enough to know that despite its bad rap, the Salton Sea is a fascinating destination, especially when combined with nearby Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. It also offers a fabulous non-technical ride—easiest of the four loops.

The 38-miles-long, 15-miles-wide “sea” is California's largest—and most surreal—lake. Occupying a tectonic depression well below sea level, it's been a natural sink for the Colorado River's overflow for thousands of years. The current lake came into being in 1905, when the swollen river blew out irrigation canals and poured unchecked into the bone-dry sink for two years! The resulting 500-square-mile lake should





A Joshua tree—a species of yucca—makes a handy backrest for my lunch break in Joshua Tree National Park.

Once fashionable but now derelict, Bombay Beach is evolving as an offbeat artistic haven beside the Salton Sea.

have evaporated in the 110-plus-degree summer heat, but irrigation run-off from the intensively farmed land to the north and south continues to feed the sea, whose astronomical salinity increases yearly.

It took just 45 minutes from Palm Springs to catch my first glimpse of the waters, shimmering between date-palm groves like a distant mirage. I rode along the eastern shore bordered by badlands—an extension of those at Box Canyon. Arriving in Bombay Beach, it was hard to imagine that in the 1950s and '60s, the now semi-derelict town hopped as a watersports resort destination, popular with the Hollywood A-list. Riding around the dusty streets, I almost fell out of my seat at the eye-popping art installations reflecting the funky community's recent quasi-renaissance.

Southward, the gentle two-laner eased away from the shore. At Niland, I turned east on a potholed road that coiled to Salvation Mountain—a mound of sand, hay bales, and junk, covered with adobe and colored as if by Crayola with various messages on a “God is Love” theme. A steady stream of visitors arrived to gawk at this desert oddity while I ate my homemade tuna sandwich. Then I fired up and headed south through the Imperial Valley. Flat as a billiards table and just as green, this intensively-farmed checkerboard extending all the way to the Mexican border grows heat-loving veggies and fruits.

I ran fast along SR 111, then cut west for the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, which protects a wetland habitat and is a bird-watcher's paradise. Egrets and grebes took off, spooked, as I roared south on SR 30, then right onto W Bannister Rd, which unspooled to the SR 86 dual carriageway leading north, inland of the Salton Sea's western shore. The kaleidoscope turned again as I cut west through the dune-riddled





The Mojave Desert, and especially Joshua Tree National Park, are renowned for Disneyesque rock formations.

Two lifesize, metal T. rexes by artist Ricardo Breceda battle it out in Galleta Meadows outside Borrego Springs.



Boulder Bay is the perfect picnic spot beside Big Bear Lake where you can simply relax and soak in the fresh air and scenic beauty.

Apparently, death is a laughing matter for this skeleton surrounded by discarded TVs in Bombay Beach.

Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area. To each side, OHVs were kicking up clouds of dust, like a scene from *Mad Max*.

Borrego Springs Rd sliced through Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, delivering me at Galleta Meadows, the first of two areas where Ricardo Breceda's iconic metal sculptures of giant beasts—mammoths, T. rexes, and even a 350-foot-long sea serpent—rise from the sands.

Finally, I got to some serious riding, as SR 22 curlicued through hypnagogic badlands, before putting me back on SR 86. I zigzagged to Palm Springs past date groves and country clubs, along backroads that are more relaxing than the I-10.

BIG BEAR MOUNTAIN & OAK GLEN

It was time for some mountain fun! I packed my fleece vest and Port Authority high-viz fleece jacket with my sights set on snowbound Big Bear Lake. Repeating my route to Yucca Valley, I turned north onto SR 247, a lonesome, gently winding two-laner through the broad, cactus-studded Johnson Valley.

I stopped for coffee and photos at Cafe 247 in Lucerne Valley, before donning my cold-weather gear and turning south onto SR 18 for the climb into the mountains. I'd been longing for twisties and soon found them as the narrow road arced ever more steeply, delivering delicious hairpins and staggering views back over the desert. Soon I was among the pines, the ground still quilted in patches of snow.

I sped through broad sweepers as I skirted the dry pan of Baldwin Lake, then slowed for the views as the road snaked along the northern shore of Big Bear Lake. The most scenic viewpoint—Boulder Bay—proved a picture-perfect place to picnic beside the indigo waters at 6,752 feet. Sublime in the sunshine and sparkling air!

After a crawl through the urbanized southern shore along Big Bear Blvd, the road suddenly jiggled south and began to climb steadily around Sugarloaf Mountain. It topped out at Onyx Summit and began a divine descent of endless sweepers and twisties, with stellar views for good measure.

Around the Mile 25 marker, the route really began to rock 'n' roll as SR 38 flowed like a wildly

sinuous ribbon around Mount San Bernardino and down into fire-ravaged Mill Creek Canyon. Disgorged, I turned west onto Bryant St, then left on Oak Glen Rd. The narrow road waltzed sharply up into its eponymous vale with a unique microclimate at the base of Mount San Gorgonio. Oak groves, apple farms, and yesteryear country charm combined for an unexpected treat.

From here, I took the only possible route back to Palm Springs—high-speed I-10, winding downhill through the San Gorgonio Pass with a strong tailwind and one eye on the speedo. I exited on SR 111 and made my last stop for photos by the Palm Springs Visitor Center—an iconic modernist former gas station with a Space Age flying-wedge roof marking the entrance to the city.

TEMECULA-HEMET-IDYLLWILD

Downtown Palm Springs pushes up against the base of Mount San Jacinto. It's an exhilarating 2.5-mile ride on the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway to the Mountain Station, where the air is 30 or 40 degrees cooler than in the desert below. You'll achieve the equivalent of traveling from Mexico to Alaska in 10 minutes. But a cactus-to-clouds motorcycle ride is just as much fun and lasts far longer. I'd saved the best for last.



This roadside bear carving at 416 W Big Bear Blvd provides an irresistible photo opportunity in Big Bear.

The Palm Springs Visitor Center provides an iconic welcome to the beautiful desert spa resort.

TOURS

A BMW R nineT racer and about 100 antique, mostly Italian, motorcycles are an irresistible lure to Doffo Winery.



SR 111 delivered me east to Palm Desert, where begins the famous Palms to Pines Scenic Byway—the valley’s equivalent to LA’s Mulholland Dr. Leaning through the switchbacks, I spiraled up five miles of sweeping curves and tight coils for a grandstand view from the Cahuilla Valley Vista Point. Beyond, the writhing, racetrack-smooth road was a big-bike nirvana through the Santa Rosa Mountains, which I traversed into Anza Valley.

Turning north, I was delighted to find myself dipping and twining through a boulder-strewn valley of chaparral semi-desert—lots of fun, but requiring caution with the asphalt’s awkward contours and camber. Beyond Sage, East Benton Rd snaked down past horse ranches to Temecula wine country and the Doffo Winery for a wine-free lunch.

Doffo is legendary among motorcyclists. Father-and-son vintners Marcelo and Damian Doffo have such a passion for wine and motorcycles that their wine labels include the MotoDoffo series, while the winery’s MotoDoffo Vintage Motorcycle Collection displays more than 100 mostly Italian vintage motorcycles and scooters spanning eight decades.

I skirted sprawling Hemet to pick up SR 74 as it became the Idyllwild National Forest Hwy. The BMW sang with delight as I throttled into the



mountains again and gleefully leaned through the curves. I took a left at Mountain Center onto the seriously steep SR 243, with tight hairpins that delivered me to the alpine resort town of Idyllwild, set amid sweet-smelling cedars and pines at 5,413 feet. The road clawed to 6,165 feet, before becoming a fantastic coiling roller coaster with more twists and loops than a Disneyland ride.

Finally, I corkscrewed down, dizzily, in fast sweeping bends and tight curves to hit the I-10 at Banning like a log shooting out of a flume. The “lucky shamrock” cycle was almost complete as I roared back to Palm Springs at the end of a dopamine-laced day. **RR**

Whether riding in sunshine or snow, deer are always a potential hazard on the mountain roads around Big Bear.

PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA SHAMROCK TOUR®

APPROXIMATELY 810 MILES

OVERVIEW

Riding in the Palm Springs hinterlands offers something for everyone, from flat and non-technical roads to tight mountain hairpins. The lowlands are mostly breathtaking cactus-studded desert, but it takes mere minutes to reach cool, pine-clad heights.

Winter, early spring, and late fall offer sublime riding weather in the desert. Summer is brutally hot (lightweight gear is recommended), yet delightfully warm in the mountains. The High Desert of Mojave can be wickedly cold in winter, too, so dress accordingly. Above all, stay hydrated in the summer, and pack enough water to sip in case of a flat tire or other breakdown.

Palm Springs has heaps to see and do off the bike, from hiking the Indian Canyons and a ride on the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway to the superb Palm Springs Air Museum and Palm Springs Art Museum.

ROADS & BIKING

The routes described here span fast, well-paved four-laners to remote, narrow, winding sections with occasional potholes. Patches of wind-blown sand sometimes occur, especially on N Indian Canyon and SR 111 north of Palm Springs and SR 78 through Anza-Borrego; high winds are a frequent occurrence in the San Gorgonio Pass. Winter storms can dump enough snow to briefly close the highways to/from Big Bear and Idyllwild.

Fill up with gas at the start of each day—long stretches of desert are without service stations. The roads are perfect for all types of bikes, but



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

a dual-sport will let you divert for some enduro riding. Watch out for deer, especially in the mountains, and notably around dawn and dusk.

RESOURCES

- Visit Palm Springs www.visitpalmsprings.com
- Greater Palm Springs Tourism www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com
- Visit Pioneertown www.visitpioneertown.com
- Joshua Tree National Park www.nps.gov/jotr
- Salton Sea State Recreation Area www.tinyurl.com/saltonsea-sra
- Anza-Borrego Desert State Park www.tinyurl.com/anza-borrego-sp
- Big Bear Lake Tourism www.bigbear.com

- Borrego Springs Tourism www.borregospringschamber.com
- EagleRider Motorcycle Rentals www.eaglerider.com
- Desert Moto Rentals in Palm Springs www.desertmotorentals.com

MOTORCYCLE & GEAR

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Hi-Vis Fluo-Yellow
- Jacket & Pants: BMW AirShell
- Boots: Forma Adventure
- Gloves: REV'IT! Dirt 2

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