

Tortilla Flat, Arizona

– Bill Gade

Just the mention of the word “Arizona” gets this Chicago Boy thinking about some of the greatest motorcycle riding in the United States. Living in the Chicago area limits my riding season because of the cold winter weather. My wife and I have taken

advantage of the great spring riding in Arizona, over the past several years, doing a HOG “Fly and Ride” and twice we shipped our motorcycle to Phoenix for Arizona Bike Week. I particularly like going to Arizona in March because the weather is not too warm, the roads are not too crowded with 4 wheel tourists and are always in great shape for 2 wheel riding. One of my favorite rides in Arizona is the ride to Tortilla Flat and is must ride on each of our trips to Arizona. While this ride is not one of the longest rides we take each time we go to Arizona, it is one of the best.



The ride to Tortilla Flat starts when you exit Route 60 (Superstition Freeway) on Arizona Route 88, Idaho Road exit north. If you are coming from the North and want to avoid some of the city traffic you can take AZ 87 north out of Scottsdale to N Bush Highway and go south to Usery Pass Road south. Turn East on Brown Road to AZ 88 North. Continue north/east on AZ 88 until you get to Tortilla Flat 19 miles later. Now that sounds rather simple but once you leave the city limits of Apache Junction the following 15 miles is riding nirvana. This past spring my wife and I had the pleasure to lead a group of 10 motorcycles from our HOG Chapter back home on this ride. While I told our group we were riding to Tortilla Flat, I tried not to “hype” this ride or tell them what to expect, since I wanted them to experience the ride without any preconceived expectations. I could tell from their smiles they were not disappointed. The road twists turns and changes elevation its entire length. I always have two reactions to this ride; 1) “WOW” was that was too much fun” and 2) I have to do it again.

Shortly after you leave Apache Junction, on Route 88, you will see the entrance to the Lost Dutchman State Park, which is located in the Superstition Mountain Wilderness. The legend of the Lost Dutchman mine and the Superstition Mountains creates images in my mind of the legend of the hidden gold mine in the area. Even before this legend was created Spanish explorers combed this area in the 1500s looking for gold and silver. Along the entire ride you will notice that there are no commercial billboards or signs. Commercial signs and billboards are not allowed on AZ 88 since it was the first Arizona highway to be designated a historic and scenic highway. There are speed limit signs however and you better watch your speed because this road is well patrolled. Watch your speed and enjoy the beautiful scenery along the way. While this ride may not be as challenging as the Dragon’s Tail it does not lack for turns and demands your full attention and respect. The road runs along Canyon Lake, a lake created by the Mormon Flat Dam that was built in 1925. There are two single lane bridges that you cross along the way. Two miles past the second bridge is Tortilla Flat.

Tortilla Flat could easily be called a “tourist trap” and that is what I thought the first time I went there but I was very wrong. The owners of Tortilla Flat have preserved the past with that “Old West image” with the Superstition Saloon. After the ride you will be ready for something to drink but try to get there around lunchtime since it is a great place to eat lunch and spend time with your friend discussing the ride. The walls in the Saloon are covered with \$1 bills signed by guests from the past and then stapled

to the walls and the bar stool seats are made from genuine saddles. It is a great place to walk around and see some of the historical relics that still remain on the site.

If the restaurant in the saloon is full, sit outside on the patio and listen to the Tortilla Flat Band. Burgers and cold beverages are available outside and you can listen to the band while you eat. We were there midweek for lunch and the place was “really rockin”. There were many people from all over the country enjoying their day when 14 bikers joined the party. It wasn’t long before we were all friends and sitting at their tables discussing where we were all from. A retired farmer and his wife from northern Wisconsin sat on my bike for some great photos and great stories I am sure they are telling at home. A resident of Tortilla Flat is the “outlaw and Terror of the Rockies” Big Dave Murra. He can be found there mingling and being photographed with the visitors. Now I am not a small man at 6’ 3” but Big Dave is 7’ 2” and he towered over me. If you go to Sturgis for the Bike Rally keep an eye out for Big Dave since he is a Black Hills Resident. Being 7’ 2” tall he will be easy to find. He will be the tall guy with the bullwhip and the six-shooter. We were having a great time and it was really hard to pull ourselves away from the party but the ride back was waiting.

I wanted a group photo of our HOG Chapter members but there was really no place in Tortilla Flat to take a group photo so we stopped along Canyon Lake for some great photos. I am really glad we did that because we were able to take some great group photos for our Chapter newsletter. Shortly after our stop I saw two motorcycles parked along the road where motorcycles normally should not have parked. As I passed the bikes I look over the drop-off only to see a third bike down at the bottom of the hill and a rider down. I quickly stopped our group and went to help with a first aid kit. The men in our group helped and to get the bike back up to the road. The women in our group helped to direct traffic so there would not be any additional accidents. Several of us helped to administer first aid and stayed with the rider until the police and paramedics arrived. The good news was the rider’s injuries were minor; bruises several cuts and a broken wrist. The rider was part of a group from Minnesota that had trailered their bikes to Arizona for Bike Week. Aggressive riding resulted in the rider going down and over the side. It could have been very bad but of all the places to have a wreck, this was probably one of the best places. The bike could have been ridden but an ambulance and a flatbed was the mode of transportation for that rider and bike. It was a stern reminder that motorcycle riding can be very dangerous. We continued on to Apache Junction but I can assure you that we resisted the urge to push the limits. I like to describe riding to Tortilla Flats is like dancing. If you have ridden on similar winding roads you will know what I mean. There are so many curves, turns and changes in elevation that you need to get into a real riding rhythm. Everything you learn about riding curves and turns is used during this 15-mile ride to Tortilla Flat and on the return ride back to Apache Junction.

AZ 88 runs all the way to Roosevelt Lake and is part of the famous Apache Trail Circle Route. The road was built in 1904 and Tortilla Flat was a staging area for building materials used to construct the Roosevelt Dam.

The Apache Circle Trail Route begins and ends in Apache Junction but unfortunately the entire route is not completely paved. Five miles past Tortilla Flat the pavement ends and the gravel starts. Unless you like to ride on gravel roads with a single lane and steep cliffs you probably should turn back when the pavement ends. I have ridden all the paved sections of The Apache Trail Route and they are great rides by themselves. I think I now have a good excuse to buy that Buell Ulysses, R1200 GS BMW, or KTM 990 Adventure so I can ride the entire route. Do you think my wife will understand?