

Amazon Heart Thunder – A 2008 Journey - Wendy Peak

I missed the Chester HOG meeting in the summer of 2007 where someone from Amazon Heart came to speak, as I was still recovering from my cancer treatment. Fortunately Lil told me about the website, and once I read it I was hooked – women, breast cancer survivors, motorcycling to raise awareness and funds for breast cancer charities. It was too late to register for the 2007 UK ride, but I immediately went on the mailing list and waited for the 2008 registration to open. Early in the year it was decided that the UK run in 2008 would be a long week-end based in one place, and I had set my heart on a long run – so I became the first ever UK participant to register for the annual USA ride.

Preparation

I'm not sure how I would ever have been ready for this ride if I hadn't retired in April!! First I had to sort out flights. Then I had to get my fund-raising under way – we pay all our own expenses, but are expected to raise at least £750 for charity for every ride that we register for. We are also expected to try and get local media coverage. I then discovered that my annual travel insurance, which covers me for any recurrence of the cancer, didn't cover me for medical treatment if I got injured motorcycling on anything over a 125cc machine – how crazy is that! I took out a one-off policy with the AA for only £28 – highly recommended. Organising packing took me a while – what should I wear to be cool but safe riding in summer California temperatures? The Amazon Heart Google group proved invaluable, with previous riders and California residents on hand to answer questions. Of course I took way too much luggage – but it did fit in the designated sized soft bag!

Arrival

I flew over to Los Angeles a few days early, to acclimatise to the time

difference, do a bit of sightseeing, and meet up with relatives. I was on 4 wheels for this time, visiting the California beaches, Universal Studios, and Balboa Island, and joined for part of the time by the other UK rider. We were staying in Marina del Rey, the ride start point, and more of the girls arrived from all over the USA the day before the ride. A group of us went to nearby Venice Beach and Santa Monica to see the body builders at Muscle Beach, and the famous old pier.

Briefing (4th September)

The first official meeting was in the hotel on the Thursday evening before the ride. The organisation of Amazon Heart is very impressive. A presentation about the reasons for the organisation, previous adventures, and some ride rules, was followed by lots of signing of waiver forms! There was then great excitement as each of us on an Amazon Heart ride for the first time was given our free H-D leather jacket – I had chosen a 105th edition jacket, which you have probably seen me wearing around – it's gorgeous!! Many of the girls had brought gifts for everyone – some personal, and some from their local bike club or dealership – so we all ended up with a selection of T-shirts, scarves, pins, buffs, a ride bell and a biker bible. The final part of the meeting was an opportunity for each of us to say a little about why we had come on the ride, and our hopes and expectations for the week. I was struck by the diversity of the women – a wide range of ages, from cities and small country towns, creative people, business women, mums – a fascinating mix. How will we all get on? It was quite emotional as we started to find out more about each others cancer history, but also inspiring and encouraging – the start point for life long and life changing friendships. We then adjourned to the bar!

Ride Formation

Amazon Heart do not use the 'second man drop off' system for riding. The ride is divided into sub-groups of 5 or 6 riders with a lead and a sweep, followed by a super-sweep and two support vans at the back. One of the important elements of an Amazon Heart ride is that women can learn to ride to take part, though they are expected to complete 1,000 miles before the start. This ride formation allows the less experienced riders, and those of us 'on the wrong side of the road', to be in the middle of a small group. They also try to put the more powerful bikes towards the front of a sub-group. It meant that we quickly got used to the riding styles of those around us, and at junctions and traffic lights each small group was able to stick together in close formation. Experience of these rides has proven this to be the safest and most effective way to keep the whole ride together and moving at optimum speed. Anyone who has to pull over is joined by super-sweep and one of the vans – this was only necessary on one day, when two of the riders were joined by bees in their helmet and jacket! The joys of an open face helmet!! We occasionally lost a sub-group, but were able to re-form into one big group without too much delay.

The Bikes (5th September)

More excitement as our bikes arrived on the Friday morning. Harley-Davidson loan bikes free of charge for Amazon Heart rides. Ours had started life at the 105th in Milwaukee, and were then trucked down to us in Los Angeles. Most were new models, with virtually nothing on the clock. There was a wide selection, including Rockers, a V-Rod, a Heritage, various Dynas, a Street Glide and some Sportsters. I was allocated a blue and

Amazon Heart Thunder - continued

pewter pearl Softail Custom which had just 178 miles on it. At the end of the ride the bikes are either loaned to journalists or put into the rental fleet. We all spent some time riding round a large car park opposite the hotel. Most people were on bikes very different from their normally ride, but we were soon looking pretty good, and practised some large group formation parking. Then we headed off on a test ride down the coast to Hermosa Beach. There were two memorable highlights. The first was coming over the brow of a hill to see a long stretch of beach with breakers rolling in and palm trees along the sand - I'm really doing this - California - on a Harley - laughing out loud in my helmet! The second was when some guys riding in the other direction gave us 'the wave'. No subtle head nods in the USA - it's like an upside down peace sign with the left hand - and the first time you see it it's like, "Hey Dude, how cool is this!!!". Sadly it couldn't work here, because we'd have to use the right hand. 24 miles down, lots to go!

The Route - and selected diary entries (6th to 13th September)

Day 1 - Marina del Rey south to California H-D in Harbor City, then north to Ventura - 98 miles. Lots of slow riding and stop-start to the dealership, but great barbecue lunch. Then all the iconic place names start - Malibu, Ventura - I have driven here before, and watched enviously as groups of bikers went by - now I am one of them. I still can't believe it. On a very windy freeway I am glad that I'm on a more powerful bike, and that I haven't got an open face helmet.

Day 2 - Ventura to Buellton via Santa Barbara - 113 miles. An early start, but it's quite cool and

misty - reminds me of an early summer morning in Cornwall. The days are planned this way so that we don't ride when it's too hot. Several people at the motel are interested in our ride and give us donations, and Ventura H-D provide a good breakfast. The roads are slightly twistier today. Riding over the brow of a hill I get a blast of hot air and think something is wrong with the bike - then realise we have moved inland and lost the ocean breeze! By lunchtime we are back by the ocean at Santa Barbara, where there are arts and crafts stalls all along the beachside area.

Day 3 - Buellton to Cambria via St Louis Obispo and Morro Bay - 118 miles. First stop the Madonna Inn - crazy place - ridiculously over decorated, and we all have to visit the gents, where the urinal is a huge waterfall that flows when triggered!! We are joined at our lunch stop by a TV crew for a feature on that evening's local news. When they have gone, we all dance in the car park to "I Will Survive". Our lovely motel in Moonstone Beach has a cheese and wine tasting for our arrival. The beach is just across the road, and we have a group evening with takeaway at the picnic area, followed by a few beers in the hot tub.

Day 4 - Cambria to Monterey via Big Sur - 100 miles. Our most challenging day. Short stops at Hearst Castle and Seal Beach, then we set off on the twisties. The Big Sur road climbs higher and higher and then follows the sheer cliff edge with lots of twists and turns. It is very beautiful. We stop at a viewpoint and meet some guys from Utah who are riding in the opposite direction - one has dropped his bike on the way in - he said it was that or go over the edge - not too encouraging!! But he did admit he was going too fast for the conditions. We finally arrive in Monterey after

a sensational day's riding and head to the wharf for some excellent seafood.

Day 5 - Monterey to Palo Alto - 126 miles. A pleasant morning's ride up a rural freeway - horses, people picking in the fields, hills rolling away on either side, small towns. Excellent welcome for lunch at Santa Cruz H-D from the dealership and local HOG chapter - great food and gifts of bandana and key ring. Very sadly, this dealership has since closed down. Crazy afternoon via a road called 'Alpine Road' - a bit of a mistake - very steep and narrow, camber all over the place, tarmac rucked up into the middle of the road and with foot deep tyre tracks at the edges, no white lines and lots of blind bends, bees on the attack. We eventually all made it down at about 10mph, and our group leader said "Oops, sorry about that", only not quite so politely! Rode on through Half Moon Bay to our most luxurious hotel and a few mojito's (rum, lime and mint) to recover.

Day 6 - Palo Alto to Benecia - 86 miles. A shorter day today to beat the traffic. We have a lunch stop at McGuire H-D, whose entrance is an up ramp with a U-turn - lovely! Riding through lots of beautiful trees it's difficult to realise that we are in the commuter area for San Francisco. You can really smell the trees from the bike. Another steep, curvy and narrow ride and we are overtaking cyclists - they must be seriously nuts to ride up here. One of our ladies did her one woman show for us in the evening - lots of laughter and tears, and some great stories.

Day 7 - Benecia to Rohnert Park via Vallejo - 110 miles. We are now in the Napa Valley wine area, and there are vines everywhere. It is very pretty country, and relaxing riding. We stop at a winery for lunch, but sadly can't drink and

Amazon Heart Thunder - continued

ride - good job some people have saddle bags for later! Our final night is another group evening, and there are mixed feelings - a huge sense of achievement, looking forward to the final ride into the city, but sadness that it is almost over. Everyone has a chance to say something about their ride experience, and how it compared to their hopes and expectations.

Day 8 - Rohnert Park to San Francisco - 69 miles. Final day already. We hit our first major commuter traffic on the way into San Francisco and go to the viewpoint at Marin Headlands - lots of photos with the Golden Gate bridge in the distance. This is our last stop together as a group, so there is yet another rendition of "I Will Survive", confusing the surrounding tourists! We then ride into San Francisco over the Golden Gate Bridge, and into Crissy Field, to be met by lots of family and friends who have organised a barbecue party to welcome us. We leave the bikes sadly by the truck that has come to take them - 844 miles done.

There are lots of photos of the ride, and you can find these, together with information, radio interviews and links to the Amazon Heart website and ride blogs on my personal website www.cornwall.myzen.co.uk

It's Not The Destination - It's The Journey

I stayed on in San Francisco for a couple of days, and couldn't resist going into yet another H-D shop! There I found this sticker, and it summed up everything I felt about the ride. The hardened bikers amongst you will be looking at the

daily mileage and wonder what on earth we were doing the rest of the day. I originally signed up for the fantastic chance to ride a Harley Davidson in the USA, but as the ride progresses it is much more



about the unique bond that forms between cancer survivors during an adventure experience. We are able



to talk together in a way that nobody else can understand, but it is not all sadness and talk of illness - it's about celebrating life and making the most of our future. We all feel that we have made friends for life. The ride allows time for this, as well as the riding. Through all the generous sponsorship I received I raised over £2500 for charity. It will all be spent in the UK, with various charities who provide support for women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

UK Ride

Having had this wonderful experience, I really needed to do it again in the UK! The UK 2008 ride in October was based around the Cotswolds, staying in a group of lovely old cottages between Gloucester and Bristol - no unpacking and repacking every night - bliss!

Australia 2009

"Two out of Three Ain't Bad" sings Meatloaf, but now I want to try for all three, so I have signed up to do the Australia ride in May 2009. This will be from Brisbane to Sydney, and

having announced that it will be the last one there the ride filled up in 2 days - there will be 46 of us! Look out Oz!!! I will meet up with a few of the friends I made on the USA ride, and make a lot more new ones. We start on an island where we can swim off the beach with dolphins, so it is already sounding very exciting. Since my first ever experience of riding on a Harley was in Australia, this really is like coming full circle. I have to raise at least another £750 in donations to go on this ride, so if anyone else would like to contribute please visit my fund raising page at www.smartgive.com/funds/aht09wendy

If you know any woman that has had a diagnosis of breast cancer, then point her in the direction of the Amazon Heart website. It is an excellent organisation, well run, and well respected. And it is life changing - a wonderful way to celebrate being alive.

Wendy

More 'Amazon Heart' Pics

