

You Can Never Ride the Same Road Twice



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I think we've all experienced this conversation at some time in our motorcycling careers:

Friend: Where should we ride this Saturday?

Me: How about Highway X?

Friend: Ugh! Again? We ride that every weekend—aren't you bored of that road yet?

While I am a fairly open minded individual, I must admit that I am particularly prone to riding some core roads repeatedly. Some, like my friend may see this mindset as being small, limiting and unadventurous, I disagree. Let me explain...

Admittedly, I am prone to aphorisms. These pithy gems of wisdom often carry a nucleus of knowledge worth gleaning and ingraining into our riding psyches. The old expression “You can never cross the same river twice” while seeming a natural for fly fishing, can easily be applied to our motorcycling mindset.

I propose a new aphorism: You Can Never Ride the Same Road Twice. At first reading, this appears preposterous--what do you mean? Your logical mind retorts that this is indeed contrary to fact.

You: I've ridden Highway X over a hundred times in my life!

Me: Not exactly.

There are several reasons why this is not a valid assertion. Roads are, counter intuitively, dynamic, not static environments. Wait? Asphalt doesn't shift. Perhaps no, but everything above and around can and will.

Take for example the road itself. Many factors regularly define and redefine it—sometimes between rides—sometimes during rides. Consider weather. Temperature can play a pivotal role in interpreting a road. I'll refer back to my Highway X. Highway X is a local mountain road in Southern California. For much of the year it is a temperate to warm road climbing from an elevation of 2000' feet at its start to over 7000' at its summit. However, during Spring and Fall mornings, chilly temperatures can significantly cool the tarmac, making maximum grip for your tires elusive. Come Winter, snow and ice can be deal breakers. Potholes, tar snakes and gravel inevitably scar the tough skin of the road. Creating a mental flip-book of road conditions over the years, I can clearly see that what appears to be a monolithic ribbon of asphalt is actually a dynamically shifting stretch of road.

While temperature variations may seem obvious in hindsight, traffic patterns are more elusive to quantify. Many a rider knows to be wary—or simply avoid—certain roads during certain time periods. Indeed Highway X, being proximate to many hiking trails, is *das verboten* on weekends in Summer. The normally open nature of the highway becomes as congested as a 5 year old's nose during cold season. Nervous, non-mountain highway driving folk drive erratically in their single-minded pursuit of trail head and parking spot. This puts motorcyclists in a one-down defensive posture. The seemingly suicidal maneuvers of said drivers can raise the stress level to points where enjoyment ceases. When the road becomes a parking lot, it has indeed changed. In contrast, the cooler late Fall mornings can be amazingly open and free of traffic as the cooler temps scare away the seasonal folk.

While wildlife, to an extent, remains a constant on many roads year round, what can compound measures is hunting season. Deer remain an omnipresent danger on Highway X. Its relatively long length and remoteness create a natural living space for deer. However, a skilled rider soon learns high traffic areas for deer: paths leading to water, dark, shady nooks where deer can easily seek shade on a hot day. Each Spring, hunters arrive, their incongruous uniforms of camouflage covered in Cal Trans orange strangely mirrored by motorcyclists in black leather wearing day-glow green vests for conspicuity. The hunters serve to inadvertently move the patterns of deer—forcing them into paths and regions often not seen as deer danger zones. Many a rider has remarked, upon arriving at our breakfast stop, seeing deer running along the side of the highway, or congregating in areas they've never seen deer before. When patterns change, we, as riders, must recognize this change.

We've all enjoyed that dawn patrol strafe of our favorite road, the crispness of the air matched only by the serenity of solitude as trees and streams blast by. Then, the sun rises above the horizon. Suddenly, retinas recoil as laser focused rays of solar energy spill over the horizon obscuring our path ahead. Perhaps the dreaded strobe effect serves to hypnotize us as rays of light flash between rows of tightly packed trees. This may be a stark contrast to the usual afternoon ride you normally enjoy, the sun at its daily apex, shining blissfully down upon you. Light is a double-edged sword. It serves to both illuminate and blind, depending on time of day.

After a little coaxing (OK—promising to buy breakfast at our breakfast stop) my friend and I ascend Highway X. We both marvel (through our Bluetooth headsets) at the amazing changes since last week's ride on the highway. Last Saturday's foggy conditions had reduced visibility significantly, and slickened the road to the extent we kept the two wheeled equivalent of a crawl. This morning, however, greets us warm and dry. The blue sky and sharp sun allow us to keep a suitably enjoyable pace. Indeed, were we even on the same road? The answer of course is a counter intuitive no. I've never ridden the same road twice, and given the myriad of possible factors, I doubt I ever shall.