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Words : ***Andrew Cherney*** *Photos :* ***Courtesy Perfect Shotz Photography and Puget Sound Safety Off Road (PSSOR)***

Camping for Grownups

PSSOR's Adventure Camp

"TAKE A LEFT down the muddy hill and pull into the orchard. Don't worry about dropping your bike— because you WILL drop it."

Huh? Normally, a cavalier comment about the likelihood of me planting a V-Strom into the clay does little for my self-confidence... before any ride. But this one had me questioning my decision to even attend this sleep away camp for adults, in the hinterlands of Pierce County, Washington. So began the first day of Adventure Camp.

RawHyde's BMW-based training sessions may get all the press, but Bret Tkacs' PSSOR Adventure Camp offers a similar learning environment via a lower-key, more affordable and all-brands-welcome weekend session. The concept is familiar—gather a group of riders with new adventure rigs—be it a BMW GS, a KTM 950 or a KLR 650—and teach them how to ride it in the places it was meant to be ridden. As in, the dirt—not just to Starbucks. And considering that more than 95 percent of the planet's roads are dirt, it's a goal more people should probably pursue.

I had rolled in on a 2010 Suzuki V Strom 650, outfitted with Continental TKC80s (knobbies aren't required for the class, but they'll probably get you better results) and crash protection accessories—engine guards, a skid plate and a sidestand footpad, courtesy of AltRider. Scanning the assembled attendees, I counted 12 students, all of whom had set up camp in this large pasture outside Olympia, WA. The diversity of the group was as wide as the selection of bikes; men and women, ranging from 26 years old to a couple of guys in their 70s, and riding everything from Yamaha TW200s to the big 1200 BMW GSs, with several V-Stroms in between.

I came to find out that most of the campers had quite a bit of riding experience under their belts, which made sense—this class isn't structured around complete newbies. You were expected to know the basics before you enlisted in Adventure Camp, and there seemed to be quite a few street riders here looking to expand their off-road repertoire as well. The company had demo bikes from BMW as well as smaller dirt-based models on hand for participants to either rent or try if they wanted to practice on smaller bikes before saddling up on the bigger adventure machines.

Tkacs is a firm believer in learning by doing—over and over and over again—rather than having people sit in a classroom, especially when it comes to teaching the techniques needed for adventure riding. The 3-day session included 2 instructors (including Tkacs), who were constantly pulling students over to offer extra tips, and observations. Early on, the drills focused on the fundamentals of riding a dualsport or adventure bike, and built on the acquired skill sets from there.

For instance, on the morning of Day One, we learned body positioning and balance, and then moved on to low-speed control skills. Having nailed those, we moved on to drills that required traction control, riding over loose obstacles and so on, building upon the earlier skills.

Unlike most "training classes" there's no classroom component at Adventure Camp, save for when Tkacs uses the break time to expound on various topics integral to adventure riding, such as gear selection, bike selection (what kind of rider are you, where will you ride, and what are your abilities?) and accessories and functional upgrades for the bike (crash protection, tires, gearing).

Throughout the weekend, we were treated to lessons, clinics and meals, with a bit of camping thrown in for good measure. We even got to listen to a guest speaker: Dave Swezey, General Manager of the Ride West BMW dealership, give a brief seminar on packing for an adventure trip. Swezey's dealership lends support to the camp, and had actually trucked out couple of 650s and 800s for us to try. One woman I spoke with had been eyeing a 650 GS but had been too intimidated to try one. By the end of the weekend, she had gained enough confidence to purchase the bike, which she'd never have considered before.

The last day consisted of the hardcore stuff— drills that entailed us riding through a sand trap, a gravel pit, over a rickety old plank bridge—utilizing all the skills we'd acquired in the last 2 days.

As the camp wrapped up Sunday afternoon, we realized just how much information we'd been given, and just how damn tired we were. There was no denying that the countless drills had been permanently burned into my gray matter; on the entire ride home, all I could do was gaze longingly at the dirt trails I'd never noticed before, winding up the nearby hills as I sped by.

Turns out camping is good for adults, too.

THE NUMBERS:

PSSOR Basic Adventure Camp: $405 for the weekend.

PSSOR requires you to be an experienced rider; provide your own bike; your own riding gear and your own camping gear. Bikes are also available for rent.

PSSOR:
www.pssor.org

South Sound BMW
www.southsoundBMW.com

Ride West BMW
www.ridewest.com