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Reach for the Sky

Riding Colorado's highest mountain
passes with Pikes Peak H.O.G.

Words and photos by **Glen Abbott**

“Nine down, one to go!” came the voice of Pikes Peak H.O.G.® Chapter Road Captain Mark Watkins over my helmet headset. We’d just crossed Victor Pass, one of 29 paved mountain passes in the state of Colorado with an elevation of 10,000 feet or higher. In the heart of the historic Cripple Creek mining district, the area was once known as “The world’s greatest gold camp,” and more than 500 mines there produced over 22 million ounces of the precious metal between 1890 and 1910. Today, mining relics and detritus dot the area, and a large surface mine still extracts ore from the mountain.

Our journey into the Colorado clouds started a day earlier from Colorado Springs. Every year on the third Saturday in July groups of riders gather at Pikes Peak Harley-Davidson® for the H.O.G. chapter’s signature 5 in 1 High Altitude Poker Run. The goal is to complete five 10,000-foot mountain passes in one day, traveling a route mapped by the chapter’s road captains. Thanks to the plethora of 10,000-footers in the state, each year features a different route.

“We try to limit the day to 400 miles, but sometimes it gets a little longer,” said Road Captain Charlie Ford.

For 2019, organizers offered riders a chance to double their pleasure, and their mileage, with the option to ride five additional 10,000-foot passes the second day. “This year is the ride’s 20th anniversary, and we’re adding a second 5 in 1,” Chapter Director Jeff Munsch explained. “We’re ending in Durango, Colorado, and a lot of people are coming back to Colorado Springs [the next day] anyway, so why not pick up another five passes on the way back?”

INTO THE CLOUDS

Shortly after dawn’s first light on Saturday morning, I lined up with my assigned riding group, behind Road Captain Keith “Buster” Brown, an exuberant Brit originally from Manchester, England.

“Colorado is awesome. Compared to what I’m used to in the U.K., this is just a dream come true for me,” he told me later. Buster was riding in his second 5 in 1, and it was his first time leading a group through the mountains. “Following is a damn sight easier,” he laughed. “But it’s a pleasure to lead people who come from all over and don’t know the area.”



We rolled out of the parking lot at 6:20 a.m., heading for Cottonwood Pass, its 12,126-foot elevation the highest on this year’s ride. After winding through intense switchbacks and jagged, snow-frosted terrain, we stopped for photos at the peak. More than two miles in the sky the thin air made me feel weak and a little woozy, but I knew from experience the feeling would pass at lower elevations.

As the group bonded over photos and selfies, two members stood out for their laughter and infectious enthusiasm. Pikes Peak H.O.G. members Charlene Wilson and Helene Wilson-Brown are



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It's tiring.
It's draining.
It's electric!**

sisters, and both serve in the military in Colorado Springs.

"We both like being outdoors," Helene explained. "You get to meet people from everywhere, especially on this type of ride." Added Charlene, "Every time you get up on the mountain passes and the curves, and you get to the top and have such amazing scenery; it's great!"

From Cottonwood, we turned around and returned the way we'd come, since the road down the other side of the pass was still dirt. Since then, the road has been fully paved and is reportedly a spectacular ride, so that's something to look forward to another time.

The 5 in 1 is one of the Pikes Peak H.O.G. Chapter's most popular events.

"It's a big deal," Charlie told me. "We've had people come from all over the world just to ride in it."

This time, more than 300 riders from 10 different U.S. states were registered. Among them, Guy and Melissa Fish, of Henry, South Dakota, who have ridden in every 5 in 1 since 2013.

"We read about it in *HOG*® magazine in 2012 [issue 017], and we just decided that we needed to do this," said Guy. "It's a great group of people, and you can't beat mountain riding."

Bruce and Melody Garrison rode 600 miles from Shawnee, Kansas, for their third 5 in 1.

"I just like riding in the mountains," Bruce explained. "Everything is so vast and



enormous and pretty.” Added Melody, “It’s beautiful out here, different weather and scenery than what we’re used to in Kansas.”

From Cottonwood, we made our way to Monarch Pass, followed by Red Mountain, Molas, and Coal Bank passes, before wrapping the day in Durango. A light drizzle began near Ouray, a charming 19th century Victorian town in the heart of the San Juan Mountains. Located on U.S. 550 along the San Juan Skyway, Ouray marks the beginning of the Million Dollar Highway, a roller coaster-like ride that runs to Silverton. With its elevation changes, switchbacks, steep drop-offs, and scarcity of guardrails, the road arguably features some of the most thrilling riding and stunning scenery in a state with no shortage of either.

Nearing Durango, a thick plume of smoke rose from an 1882 coal-fired steam locomotive chugging along beside the highway. The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad transported millions of dollars’ worth of gold and silver ore in its heyday, but today it hauls tourists, taking in million-dollar mountain views.

At Durango Harley-Davidson®, riders filled the parking lot for the traditional end-of-ride group photo.

“It’s unbelievable,” Mark exclaimed. Although this was his fourth 5 in 1, it’s always exhilarating. “After my first 5 in 1, we went through Rocky Mountain National Park, and when I got off the bike in Fort Collins I don’t think my feet were touching the ground. I couldn’t get the smile off my face,” he said. “I told my

wife, this changed my life! It set the hook for motorcycles, it set the hook for the 5 in 1; it’s just an incredible event.”

5 IN 1, REDUX

Sunday morning, our group gathered in the Durango H-D parking lot for a 6 a.m. departure, this time with Mark taking the lead. The second day’s route would be no less challenging and somewhat longer: nearly 500 miles compared to about 350 miles the day before. Passes included Wolf Creek, Cumbres, La Manga, Victor, and Tenderfoot, and the route included a short jog through northern New Mexico.

At our final gas stop near Colorado Springs at the end of the day, it was no small wonder that strong feelings of exhilaration and accomplishment reigned in our exhausted group, having completed 10 10,000-foot mountain passes over two days and ridden nearly 1,000 miles.

“It’s amazing. It’s tiring. It’s draining. It’s electric!” exclaimed chapter member Mike Walsh, describing his jumble of feelings.

Enthused Melody, “Fun, exciting, exhilarating; one for the books!”

And this final bit of advice from sisters Charlene and Helene: “If you haven’t done this ride,” said Helene, “YOU NEED TO!” both shouted in unison. “And if you haven’t ridden in the mountains of Colorado, YOU NEED TO!” ●

Check out Glen’s 5 in 1 video in the *HOG*® tablet edition: HOG.com/tablet. Download the *HOG* magazine app from the Apple App Store or Google Play.



The 5 in 1 High Altitude Poker Run for 2020 will take place Saturday, July 18. For more information and to register, go to pikespeakharleyownersgroup.com/5in1.