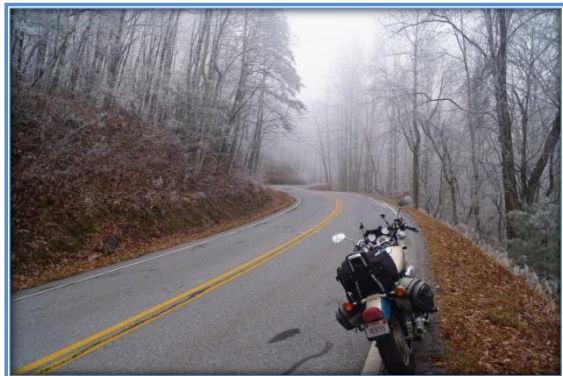


The Athabaskan Adventure 2017

Or

Once again to the Northlands

So far 2017 has been a good riding year. For the winter tour I rode through ice and snow into frozen Georgia on the Virago. Next I took the Goldwing for a ride through Big Bend. Then it was on the GSA to again ride the Burr Trail. All good rides.



Next up was supposed to be a ride up to Alaska. I was planning on riding to Vancouver Island and then a series of ferries through the inland passages. I wanted to take the ferry to Whittier but was willing to settle for Haines and then riding on to Alaska. However, the ferry to Whittier, in addition to being very expensive, is booked far in advance. In addition, the sailing dates of the various ferries is, to say the least, not convenient.

Eventually I had a more or less acceptable plan but due to developments with people coming and going I held off on making reservations, an unavoidable but large mistake.

I checked over the GSA, laid in a set of Heidneau tires which I would carry and have mounted in Anchorage. The GSA had just rolled over 100K miles but, after a driveshaftectomy earlier in the year, was in fine shape.

So everyone came and went, some stayed and my leave date got seriously pushed back. Eventually I rolled out on Sunday July 2nd. There was a window for me making the boat to Alaska and I thought that if I hurried I could still make it. With that thought, I got busy and laid down the miles. My first stop was fuel in Elk City where I put 9.5 gallons in an 8.7 gallon tank. Interesting, I think in the future I am going to bypass Hutch's on the west side of Elk City.

I hit a few sprinkles on I-40 but nothing serious and all in all the weather was good and the traffic light. As is shown by this photo, it has been a fairly good spring and summer so far with good rains and the usual crop of grass and bugs.



As I didn't want to fuss with Denver traffic I headed north from Dumas on Hwy 287 through eastern Colorado and hit I-70 at Limon. By taking 470 I missed most of Denver traffic, picked up I-25 and headed

north. Eventually I called in good in Wheatland Wyoming and walked across the parking lot for good meal.

Research online about catching a ferry to Alaska was not looking good with no room, even for a bike, on any route. I decided I would call and see what I could do over the phone and found out that the Alaskan Marine Highways phone reservation is a very poor joke. Eventually at a gas stop near Sheridan I found out that (A) on the toll free line they could not hear (three calls) and (B) on the other number the only boat I could get on left Bellingham Washington on Friday the 7th and would get into Haines on the 10th and the price was \$1800 for me and the bike. From Haines I would still have a very long day to Anchorage and then have 4 days to make it back to OKC. Bummer, not a good deal at all.

At this point there was a change in plans. I made it on down I-90 and called it good in Butte. Over a couple of beers I decided I would (1) get off the interstate and (2) ride through Banff/Jasper and (3) make it to the Ft. McMurray area and see what they were doing with the Athabasca Oil Sands. I was near Lolo pass and I really like that ride. The map indicated a couple of roads that looked

interesting and it turned out that they are very interesting. The

next morning was cool as I did the final leg on I-90 and

headed off on Hwy 1 and Hwy 38. I stopped for a rustic

breakfast at Georgetown Lake and shortly after that

turned on Hwy 38 and here is the view. All you folks

whose idea of travel is flying from place to place

never see this.

Views like this are all over the place. After a bit the

road turned to gravel as advertised, but never got

bad. I have done much worse on the Goldwing. Mick

and I did the Apache Trail on the K100s which was much

worse so on the GSA this was not a problem. As you can

imagine

there are all sort of wildlife in this area. I saw signs about watching out

for Bighorn Sheep, and Moose as well as the usual deer. So, when on the highway I always tried to find a

moose bumper I could follow, but sometimes you just have to go it alone. Towards the middle of the

gravel section I was rolling along, not in a hurry, checking the scenery and when I came around a corner

a doe and fawn jumped out of the bushes. Short of hitting the deer in Houston and the elk on I-25 this

was as close as I have come to another accident. I hit the brakes as the doe jumped across the front tire.

She was close enough that she kicked the plastic on the front of the bike and knocked off one of my deer

whistles, which is sort of ironic. Other than that, no damage was done to either of us.

Along towards the end of the gravel section I

ran across this waterfall and the bike

insisted on posing. I don't know if it flows

like this all of the time, but it is certainly

worth a photo.

Shortly before Missoula I turned off on Hwy 12, over Lolo Pass, one of my all time favorite roads. If you have not ridden it, you should put it on your list. Near the top of the pass is Lolo Lodge a really nice



place to stay. Unless things have changed there are no phones or TV but it has a hot spring and you can take as long a soak as you like.

While climbing up the pass from the east you are in the piney forests, tall mountains with glaciated topography. After the crest you start heading down and things change. The mountains go away and eventually you are running along a river with truly massive basalt flows on each side. Interestingly the basalt flows do not appear to be glaciated. Either the glaciers did not get that far or the basalt was emplaced after the glaciers receded. At any rate, this area of the country was, at one time, a very hot spot to be.

Just a bit before Lewiston I headed north on Hwy 3, still running down in the valley. There are quite a few little towns around here and I got to wondering what the folks did to keep body and soul together. Then, just after Kendrick the road climbs out of the valley and there is was. Large irrigated fields of wheat and other crops and a very nice ride into Coeur d'Alene and the end of a very pleasant days ride.

I had packed along a set of tires planning on putting them on in Anchorage. The tires that were on would not make it back to OKC so I figured on putting them on at my convenience and Coeur d'Alene would be the best place. The next morning after a couple of phone calls I rode over to the Honda shop. They would mount and balance the tires if I would pull the wheels. Not a problem with the BMW and after a couple of hours I was back on the road with fresh rubber and no tires stacked on the luggage rack.

From Coeur d'Alene I was heading north into Canada. Hwy 95 towards Eastport was a fairly nice road but it carried a lot of traffic with a lot of motorhomes with some drivers of very questionable ability.

Crossing into Canada was not a problem although the attendant did ask a bunch of questions about guns, asking several times when the last time was I had carried a gun on the bike. There was not a lot of change in the scenery but I did have to watch the speed as the maximum was 100 kph which is 60 mph.



Along about Fairmont Hot Springs I was getting hungry, thirsty and looking for a place to stop. This was one of some "quaint" cabins on the north side of Fairmont Hot Springs. It was also the only place with a vacant sign and was my first introduction to prices in Canada. With the, AARP, Military and friends and family discount I got this for only \$149.00, truly a bargain. However, it was clean, quiet and the Wi-Fi worked well so it did the job.

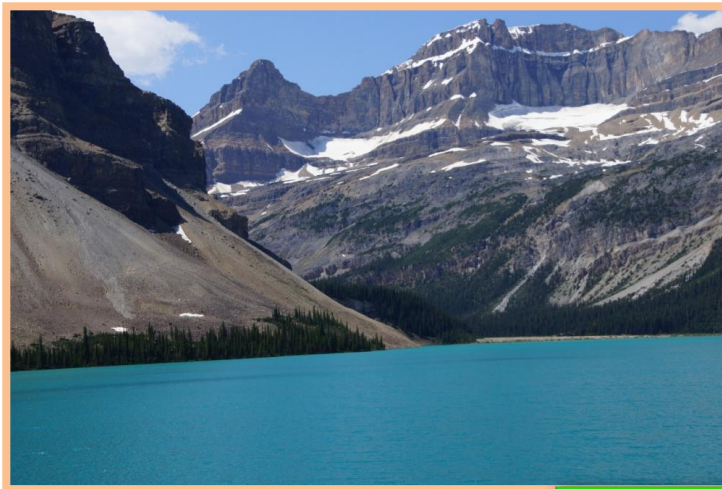
In the morning, as this fine cabin did not

offer a continental or any type breakfast, I made it on down the road and after a few miles found a nice place. When I hit Golden I turned right and except for the construction,



enjoyed the ride into Banff. I rode through Field and got this shot. This is similar to a photo in my historical geology textbook. This is the mountain that contains outcrops of the Burgess Shale. It is difficult for me to understand, but I do realize there are people out there who do not understand the significance of the Burgess Shale. The Burgess Shale is Cambrian in age (500 or so million years) it was discovered in 1909 and is well known for the preservation of soft parts of various types of fossils mainly unknown before this discovery. There are tours that can be taken but not lightly as the outcrops are up in the mountains and the guided tours are in excess of 7 hours so I will leave it for another trip.

As I headed east the scenery just got better and better. I turned north on Hwy 93 and as normal, I had difficulty making any time. I have been through Banff several times, once with Jessica, once with Bobbe and this would be the second with just me. Like Big Bend, it never gets old and the views are something to behold. If you have not been you need to go. The weather was perfect, warm, no wind, very few clouds and the traffic was not too bad considering the season. From the amounts of snow on the mountains winter the last few years have been good. The first time Jessica and I were here the snow had been slim. When Bobbe and I rode through it was somewhat better and when I rode through the first time it was better yet and this year even better. Towards the north part of Banff you can actually see outcrops of the Columbia Ice Field and ice is still there. Also, runoff down the creeks was still high and carrying lots of water.



This is Bow Lake, just below (surprise) Bow Glacier. The color of the water is caused by glacier flour (ground up rocks) in suspension. People were splashing around and some actually going in swimming although just for short periods as this water is not that much removed from being glacial ice. Jasper and Banff are two different parks that share a common border, Jasper being north of Banff and its scenery is different. Still glacial based but without the sharp stark views. There is a place

right by the border where you can actually walk out onto the glacier or if you don't want to walk you can take a bus tour. Just a bit north of that the road climbs a pass where the two valleys separate and the views are something else. This waterfall is right beside the road and it appears to flow like this pretty much all of the time.



As I said, it was difficult making any time as there was always a photo opportunity around every corner. This was at the top of one of the last passes.



Note the pointed tops of the mountains. Shapes like this indicated that they were not under the ice. This is pretty much how the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps got its shape. Further north, in Jasper, the mountains are rounded indicating they were under the ice. The mountains in Yosemite (Half Dome) are rounded as they were covered during the last glacial period.

Eventually after several very pleasant hours of riding, stopping and riding I arrived in the town of Jasper. It is a pleasant town, but for sure a town based

on tourists. I didn't stay long, just fueled up and headed east to Edmonton and then north to Ft. McMurray to see what they are doing with the oil sands.

Hwy 16 east of Jasper is mostly a 4 lane road in good repair and as it is heading to Edmonton, carries a fair amount of traffic. It also leads out of the mountains and onto the prairie and as the elevation dropped the temperature went up. I decided to call it good in Hinton and got another introduction to the prices of traveling in Canada. The room was nice, and within walking distance to a place to eat so I settled in.

The next day I was out on the prairie, making good time headed much further north. The area to the east of the mountains is a continuation of the plains in the states. In Canada the prairie covers the eastern parts of Alberta, the southern 1/3(?) of Saskatchewan and the southwestern part of Manitoba and it is fertile. Its biggest problem is the shortened growing season but the Canadians manage to do well. As I rode along there were all sorts of crops in the fields, some I recognized, some not. They do grow a lot of cows and as the winters are long, a lot of hay to feed those cows in the winter.

As I have a well known aversion to large cities I took the loop around Edmonton and picked up the road heading north. I was surprised how far north they did farm, but at around 200 or so miles south of Ft.

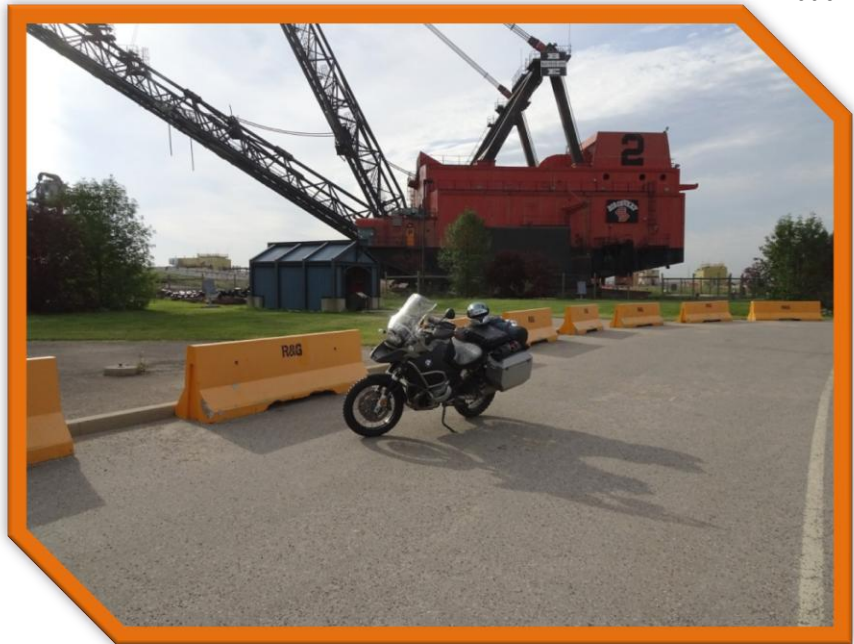


McMurray, the farming gave way to trees and oil and gas and pipelines. The road was mostly four lanes in good condition with little traffic but the speed limit was 60 mph. With about 180 miles to go I was passed by what had to be a hotshot truck with a piece of equipment in the back, doing about 75. This was more like it, I fell in behind him and in

short order we pulled in to Ft. McMurray.

It seems that the oil sands are having the same problem as the rest of the oil patch. It is not shut down but has seriously slowed down. I was not the only customer in the motel, but close. There was one car and my bike in the underground parking garage. I had dinner in the pub and got to talking with the locals. It turns out that if I wanted to see anything I needed to go to Ft. McKay, about 35 miles further north.

A word about the oil sands, first, the deposits have been known for a long time. The deposits are mostly shallow and there are numerous outcrops mainly along the Athabasca River. The 1st Nation people used the oil (actually bitumen, close not actually tar) for many things notably as a caulking on canoes. Actual mining started in the late 60s, early 70s and really got to going since the 80s. As the name says, it is sand, deposited by a meandering river. It is shallow with, according to the sign, an average of 25 meters of overburden. The overburden is removed in the winter and set aside for reuse. Then the sands are excavated, the oil removed then it is all put back.



However, strip mining is a messy business anywhere and it is no better here. I was there on a Saturday a cool morning with little wind and the smog was bad enough to make your eyes water. Not China bad but still bad. The saving grace of this is that this area is very sparsely populated. Of course they put a very positive spin on and focus on the restoration efforts and in truth, what they are doing is no worse than what is being done in many areas all over the world including the USA. Think Butte, Morenci, mountain top coal mining, and of course SE Kansas and Oklahoma's Tar Creek.



So, with my curiosity settled for the moment I headed the bike south, and I had a long way to go. This area has two roads to get to Ft. McMurray. I had come up one and was going down the 2nd. With the GSA I can go at least 300 miles on a tank so fuel is not usually a problem. Depending on the bike, it could be.

Again, it was about 200 miles of forest and then it was back into the farm lands.

This is an area that was surveyed in the proper way, laid out with sections, townships and ranges as God intended. Note this arrow straight road. None of this meandering around following cow as in some parts of the country such as parts of Texas and New England.

It was a pleasant ride, no big hurry, not much traffic, just cruising along enjoying the ride.

I didn't ride over to Hairy Hill, but you just have to love the names of some places. We ran across Witless Bay and Dark Tickle back east in Newfoundland. You just have to wonder about why and how these places get their names.

The further south I went the drier it got and the farming changed over to ranching and the traffic got less and less. I called it good in Duchess and there is not a lot of anything out in this area.



This is Main Street in Duchess Alberta. I was not in the least worried about getting run over. The bar/restaurant is on the left. If you order a burger or a steak, you have to cook it. I thought they were kidding but I was wrong. I told them I was not about to pay \$15 to cook my own steak and settled for



chicken fingers or at least that is what they said it was. However, they were friendly and the motel was clean so all in all, a good day's ending.

As a side note, it is easy to get to thinking that folks who live in places like Duchess are pretty much out

of the mainstream of things. Well, that is not necessarily so. The young woman tending bar has been to Peru and hiked the Inca trail and was getting finalized for a trip to Greece, not unlike someone else I could mention. She assured me she had someone large mean and ugly for an escort, sometimes a necessary thing. So all in all, it is a small world.

The next morning I was heading over to the Dinosaur Provincial Park. It is billed as the best in the World. It is the same time frame and depositional environment as the formations that produce all of the fossils in Montana and Wyoming so it had the possibility of being pretty good. I had breakfast in the Cretaceous Café and had a bit of a look around. It was not bad, but I doubt the best in the world claim. But, you never get anywhere advertising yourself as second or third best.

This sign was just outside the park. Canadians are kind to everything.

With the park looked at I was now heading back to the USA via Medicine Hat and crossing over at Wild Horse. There is not too much to say about this part of the ride. I picked up the TCH 1, that is, The TransCanada Highway, the one that runs east to west and it carries a lot of traffic. I turned off of the THC on Hwy 41 and headed south.

To say there was not a lot of traffic on this road would be a large understatement. This is ranch land and it appears that the ranches are large. There is nothing at the crossing except two building, one on each side of the border. I was the only one there and in short order I was back in the USA and heading for Havre Mt. and points SE.



This is the old Cottonwood School, Church, meeting place, now large Grey Owl residence. It was built in 1910, was, and still is, sitting by itself on the lone prairie. It served a lot of people in a lot of different ways. I saw it and decided to ride over. As I was walking up to it a large grey owl took off from the bell tower. Also, while I was walking around looking for a good shot I noticed a pretty good sized vacant snake skin in the tall grass. I was not too worried as I had on my tall dirt bike boots so a

snake would have to chew awhile to get through them.

After taking a break for a couple of large ice teas in Havre I headed east on Hwy 2. It is a nice road running through a bunch of small towns. It was beginning to get a little warm, but nothing serious. At

Glasgow I took what looked to be, and actually was, a very nice back road. It went by Fort Peck Lake and then took out to the SE across some very thinly populated area. For sure I was by myself out here with no moose bumper in sight. It was mostly grassland with few trees so if anything was going to jump in front of me I could probably see it. However, in the blind corners and hills I watched carefully. Along about Glendive I called it good and checked into a motel and a good meal.

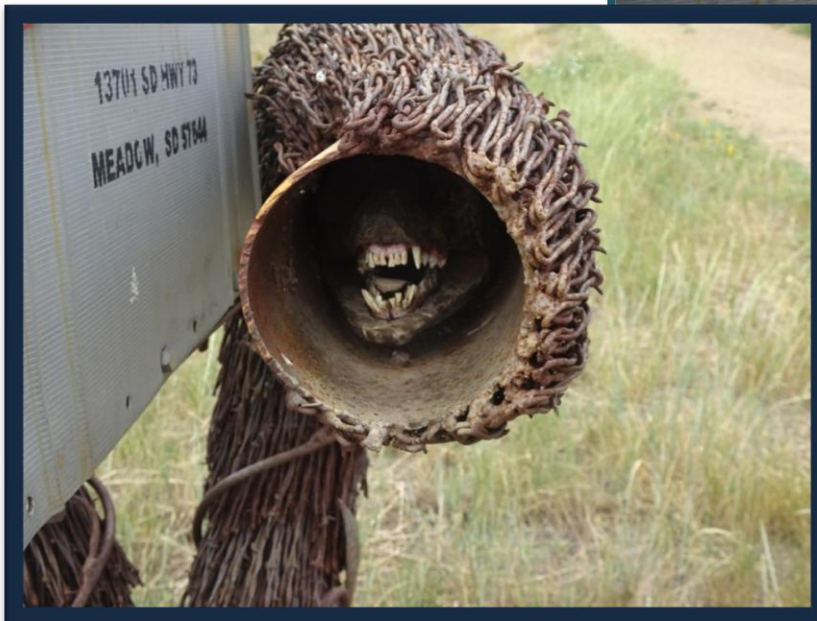
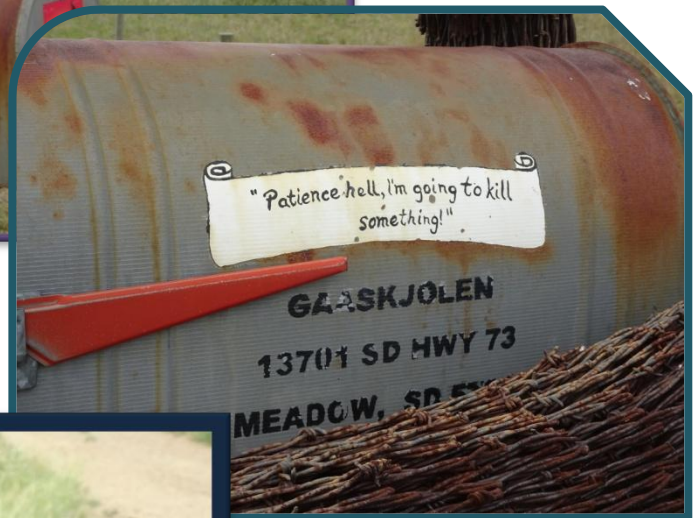
The basic plan for the rest of the ride was to head southeast and when I found a highway I recognized as going to Oklahoma turn right and follow it home. And, that is pretty much what I did. Also, I wanted to avoid as much interstate as possible. At Lemmon SD I turned south and ran across one of the most

interesting things I saw on the ride.



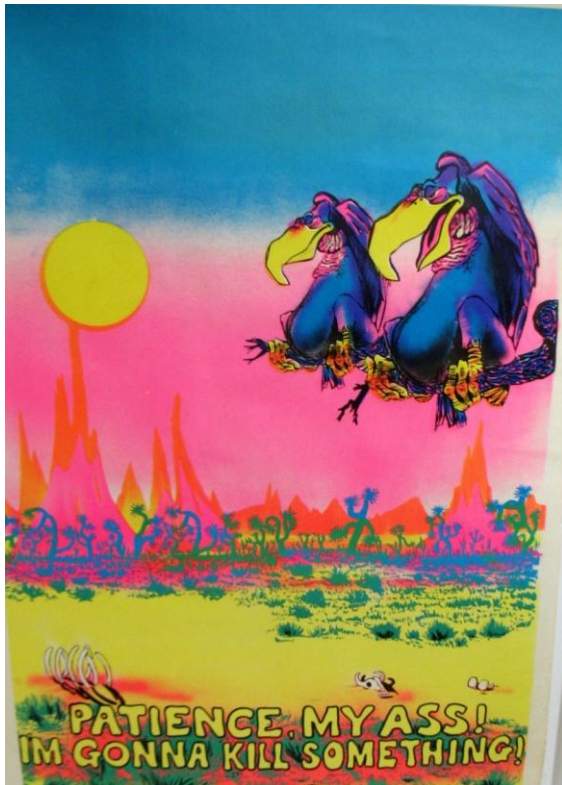
This is an actual mailbox just sitting beside the road. The tree is made out of barbed wire, presumably, welded on pipe and the buzzards are iron. From the second photo you have got to figure that this person

is a Gary Larson fan, Larson created the Far Side cartoon and I remember the cartoon with the caption on the mailbox. In the cartoon, as with the mailbox, two buzzards were sitting on



a tree and it had the caption.

As to what the thing with the teeth is supposed to be or what it has to do with the buzzards, I don't have a clue. But, on the other hand, it is well known that I don't know much about art.



I looked around online and here is the original.

As I have mentioned several different times, out in this part of the country pretty much no one is going to get upset with your speed. So, I headed south making good time. I stopped for lunch in a 1950's railroad dining car at a place called 1880 Town on I-90. There is a slight problem with the dates there, but the food was good. At Murdo I recognized Hwy 83 so I turned right and headed south. Highway 83 comes into Oklahoma out in the panhandle and I have done that road many times. Just south of Valentine Nebraska I turned east and picked up 183 and again headed south. This is farm land. They have plenty of water and grow lots of corn and other grain crops. A little further south, in the sand hills, if you believe the state signs they grow more cattle than they do in Texas.

After looking at the map I had to decide to either spend the night in Kearney or Grand Island. Kearney would mean I would have to backtrack about 30 miles

and I didn't want to do that, so Grand Island it was.

There is not much to say about the next day. It was only 400 and change miles to the house so a fairly easy day. While I was coming through Northern Oklahoma it got a bit warm. I saw 105 a couple of times with it holding around 102. The AC on the bike was malfunctioning so I resorted to stopping for water often. With no real problems I pulled into the house about 4:30 and rolled the bike into the stable.

So ended another good ride, I didn't get to Alaska but I did get to a lot of interesting places and see things I had not seen. Banff and Jasper are always a good place to go although Canada is an expensive place to travel. Cambodia and Vietnam are much more reasonable. I had no problems, didn't even have to get into the rain gear. I covered a bit over 5100 miles, had a very good time and am looking forward to the next ride.

