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Daytona Bike Week 2006:

JD Conner

Daytona Bike Week is a biker buffet. There are lots of tried and true events and always some exciting, new things to sample.

As I've done before, I rode my bike to and from Florida. And, as usual, Mother Nature couldn't stand the fact that I was getting out of the Midwest for a little sun and fun. It snowed five inches the day before I left and I came within a few hours of getting caught in a blizzard that swept the Midwest on my way home.

I've got a good, winter riding jacket and pants, and electric chaps and vest. By the time I got to Indianapolis, the temperature was up to the mid-thirties, so I turned off the heated stuff and settled in for a nice ride. I love the hills of Tennessee, Kentucky and northern Georgia. If I weren't in a hurry to get to Bike Week, I could spend a month in each state, just cruisin' the back roads. The temperature was up to about 60 degrees in Dalton, GA where I spent the night. A nice 650 mile day, a good hot shower and I went to sleep smiling.

The next day was a beauty. Sunshine, a few stops for some pecans and peanuts at roadside stands (I will never get to like boiled peanuts) and, of course, a quick stop at a place to see some big alligators.

That night I arrived at The Cabbage Patch Campground just outside of Daytona Beach at about dinner time. The Cabbage Patch is always a little on the crazy side and this year was no exception. Lots of loud rock and roll that goes on late into the night, wet everything contests, ramp to ramp motorcycle jumps, food/tattoo/merchandise vendors and of course, the always enjoyable cole slaw wrestling. Yep, they put a couple of people (usually women) into a swimming pool of cole slaw and may the best person win.

Because Daytona Bike Week has so many things going on at once, you've got to pick and choose what you think will be the most enjoyable. This year, there were several new events that were a real hoot.

The inaugural Speedway Poker Run was terrific. The scheduled stops were at five joints that were just right for bikers (Hijackers, Iron Horse Saloon, Porthole, Gilleys Pub 44 and Hooters). In between, the riders got to see some nice countryside and the intercoastal waterway. The really, really, cool part of the run was that at the end, the participants were allowed to take a couple of parade laps on the Daytona International Speedway. Not just in the infield...on the race track itself. Although we had to keep our speed under 40 mph, it was a real thrill looking up at the stands from the race track Oh yeah, there were smiles on a lot of faces.

Another great first time event was the inaugural Speedway Bike Show. This was sponsored by Bikers Atlas and The International Master Bike Builders Association. And oh boy, was it a show. There were original, old classics, a bunch of customs and a few totally radical bikes that made me scratch my head. One bike that made my jaw drop was built by Tom-Z Motorcycles. It had three wheels: a normal front wheel, a normal back wheel and then another back wheel behind the regular back wheel. I asked the guy why. His response was beautiful. First, he said that it just looks good. The second reason was that the bike turns 217 horsepower and the second rear wheel keeps the bike from flipping over backwards when the rider decides to get on the throttle really hard.

One evening, the Riders Association of Triumph invited riders of all makes of bikes to a gorgeous ride through the forests, swamps and beach country and up to a British pub (King's Head) north of St. Augustine. For those who like British food and being surrounded by lovers of British bikes, this was a night to remember.

Each day, the major bike manufacturers had demo rides. Personally, I love riding different kinds of bikes. I tested the new Night Rod by Harley-Davidson and I liked it more than I thought I would. It's lower, smaller, and has a lot more power than I expected. The bike that I wish I had ridden was the Boss Hoss. They had about a dozen, 2 and 3 wheeled Boss Hoss bikes for people to try. The Chevy engine, the huge tank and the over-sized everything else make this a major statement going down the road. Maybe the most fun for me is watching cruiser people ride the sport bikes and sport bike folks swinging their legs over the cruisers. Some of them like the new rides, some don't. But most everybody had a grin on their face after the demo ride and that's what it's all about.

Saturday at Bike Week was my day at the races. On Saturday, I donated the whole day to watching guys with way more nerve than I've got, road race at the Speedway. First was the AMA Superbike Championship and then in the afternoon, the Daytona 200 by Honda. The AMA Superbike Championship was won by Mathew Mladin who crossed the finish line three one hundredth of a second ahead of his teammate. This was the closest race I had ever seen. People were spilling popcorn and beer while they were jumping up and down cheering. The Daytona 200 by Honda was won by Jake Zemke but it ended in a screwy fashion after a race accident and a pace car mistake.

My last night was spent riding to some bars, listening to good music and saying good-bye to a few of the half million bikers who visited Daytona this year.

On the ride home, a lot of images streamed through my mind: the crowds of watchers and riders on Main Street, the riding on the beach next to the ocean, the 82 year old woman who had just switched from two wheels to a trike, the husband, wife and two kids who had come to Daytona aboard their side car rig and the looks of pride on the faces of riders who had been fixing and polishing their bikes for weeks in anticipation of the "big show": Daytona Bike Week. No breakdowns, no speeding tickets, a little sunburn, a lot of laughs and a sore butt. My definition of a wonderful week on my bike.

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