

A Creek Runs Through It

A rally in the Land of Enchantment

Article by Jodi 'Jo' Smee as published in the January issue of the BMW ON magazine. Pictures by Jo Smee and Hal Korff. Jo is President of the AZ Beemers BMW Motorcycle Touring Club.

Every year after I attend this rally, the countdown begins. "365 ... 364 ... 363 ..." and on and on until I reach two days left. That's when I leave to go back to Taos, NM for the LOEBMWR (Land of Enchantment BMW Riders) rally held near there, at the Sipapu Ski Area, the weekend after Labor Day in September. It is, in my opinion, the best rally ever because of the sheer beauty of the ski resort at which it's held (in the heart of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains), the city of Taos and its beauty close by, and the wonderful twisting roads throughout the area. As many years as I've been attending this rally, I never grow tired of it. The site itself is incredible. A creek separates the lodge from the camping area, and rally-goers can sit and listen to it during the days of the rally, or if they are camping, they can fall asleep at night to its musical sound.

This rally is special, I suppose, because it was one of the first rallies I ever went to, back in 2007 when I started long-distance riding "for real." My riding partner, Hal, and I had started going on long trips the previous June, and we thought we'd try the



The Pueblo River runs through the Sipapu Ski area as it serenades Rally participants

Sipapu rally. Neither of us had been to a rally before, and we had heard that this particular one was nice. That year we tried to ride there from Phoenix, AZ in one day. We made it, but we took a circuitous route, not knowing any better. We got to the rally site as the sun was going down, only to find that we had missed the chili dinner. We didn't really mind, but I wasn't sure how far it was to Taos. I was tired as we rode the final 20 miles to Taos - in the dark. Our hotel was near NM 518, which is the road past the rally, and soon after we arrived, we went in search of dinner, two-up on Hal's

bike. We had no idea where we were going, but managed to find a place at the other end of Taos that served the best burgers we've ever eaten!

This year, we started out on Wednesday after work, and rode the first 110 miles. As we entered elk and deer country on the Mogollon Rim of Arizona, we pulled off the road, and in the morning we resumed our ride. Since the goal was to get there as quickly as possible, we were on I-40 most of the day, from Holbrook, AZ to Albuquerque, NM. After a brief stint on I-25, then the 599 around Santa Fe, we finally rode onto secondary roads, passing through the Rio Grande gorge, and coming into Taos from the south. We found the temperatures in the mid to upper

80s, which was lovely for most people, but for us was disappointing. There have been a few years that it was rainy and cold during the rally, and being from Phoenix, we really look forward to that weather. During the last two years the weather has been perfect for most people, sunny and warm.

On our first full day in Taos, the sun rose high and warm. I knew it was going to be a wonderful riding day, and as I rode the 518 toward the rally site, I said to myself, *Look! Look where I am!* I know that sounds so silly, but these are the two days I look forward to all year. It was a shining day, and the road was beautiful, clean and clear of gravel. A few trees along the edges of the turns, the usual ones, were beginning to be tipped with gold, a breathtaking reminder that we are at the edge of autumn, my favorite time of year.

We got to the rally site quickly, and checked in. I had to buy my usual souvenirs, t-shirts and other things that I like, and then we wandered around briefly. The vendors weren't set up yet, so we decided to go and do the ride we had planned for the day.

The plan was to take a series of roads known as the Enchanted Circle. The name itself makes the imagination run wild, and I wondered what sights and conditions I would encounter. We'd ridden part of this route three, maybe four years ago, and I think we were on dual sport bikes at the time, but I always wanted to go back.



Scenery along NM Highway 518

NM 518 past the rally site was the beginning of the loop, and then we continued to Mora Valley. We picked up 434 in Mora, a narrow little turn that threads through the canyon formed by two old buildings in the town. A short way up the road, we passed an Alpaca farm, and saw a large herd of the darling Alpacas in the meadow next to the road. They were recently shorn, and probably happy for the warm sunny weather.

We wound through Guadalupita and other tiny communities, and the road became narrower and narrower until we were on a road with no center stripe, about the width of a car and a half. It dipped and turned through thick vegetation, and marshy water that came literally to the road's edge. It is an amazing little road.

After the road climbed then widened again to two lanes, it came out in a vast windswept alpine meadow. We were at about 8,000 feet in elevation, and it was nice and cool. Soon we passed Angel Fire Resort, and then picked up NM 64,

which was another wonderful road. We took that past Eagle Nest State Park where we picked up NM 38 and headed toward Questa, where we picked up NM 522. Soon we were riding high mountain passes with joy, until we got stuck behind a “spoiler,” a big truck that was going too slowly and spewing out diesel fumes. We lugged along until we found ourselves in a touristy winter sports town called Red River, which was good because I’d had enough of creeping along in first or second gear on the steep grades because there was no safe place to pass. We parked the bikes, got some coffee, and walked around.

First, we walked down to the river for which the town is named. It was smaller than I expected, but still pretty. Then we walked around the town for a while looking at souvenirs. Being the big spender that I am, I bought a knotted paracord bracelet for a whopping \$4, just so I could say I got something there. It lasted about two days then fell apart. What did I expect, right?



Freshly shorn alpacas enjoying another beautiful sunny New Mexico day

We got back on the bikes, and back on the 522, rode a lovely stretch of flowing perfect turns, then the road flattened out as we dropped in elevation. We passed a place that was actually called the

Enchanted Forest, but the road that led there was dirt and we were on the road bikes for this trip.

The temperature was up, too, into the high 80s F. I was a little bit disappointed since we were trying to get away from the heat, that and the incessant glare of the sun. It was absolutely hot by the time we rejoined a short piece of NM 64 that we took for a couple hundred feet just outside the north end of Taos.

We turned onto Blueberry Hill Rd., then a short while later, we closed the circle and crossed the intersection with 518 where we’d started our day. It was truly an enchanting ride with all the beautiful scenery and fun roads!

After breakfast the second morning, Hal and I rode east on NM 518 again to the rally site. Our plan was to go there, walk around a bit, maybe have some coffee, look at the vendors’ wares, and then talk to whoever we ran into. When we got to the rally site, I said to Hal, “hey, I have an idea. Would you like to take my bike and run back to Taos, then come back?” I knew he wanted to ride my bike, I could see the longing in his eyes.

“Okay,” he said enthusiastically. (*wow*, he didn’t need much persuading!) So, I handed him the keys to my F800ST, and off he went. I de-gearred in the parking lot of the lodge and put my stuff on his R1100RS. Then, I encountered a few people that I knew and ended up standing there talking the whole time he was gone. He rolled back into the parking lot in what seemed a short time later.

“I didn’t get very far, did I?” I said, laughing. “Did you like riding my bike?” Dumb question; his joyful grin said it all.

Then we went into the lodge, I grabbed a cup of coffee from the bottomless urn, and we walked around the beautiful rally site. I stood on the bridge and listened to the silvery magical sound of the creek. I closed my eyes, wanting to remember it so I could think of it when things get stressful at work, as they always do.



The rest of the day was more riding the curvaceous roads in the area, capped off by a nice dinner with all of our friends at the rally site, then relaxing and listening to the music of the band.

Lots of turns on this amazing little road, a little wider than a car and no center stripe

Later, while sitting in the best spot to use the hotel Wi-Fi, a dark corner of the bar, we watched incredulously as a black cat passed through, nearly unnoticed and unremarked upon. *A black cat walks into a bar*, I thought. Apparently, he was a regular. That skulking black cat walk made my mind churn and made for restless dreams on the night that led up to the last day of the trip ...

My last morning in Taos started early, about 5 o’clock. That was 6 o’clock local time, so I thought of it as 6. Not being a morning person, this is the kind of self-trickery I must engage in to make myself get up early. We wanted to be on the road by 8 o’clock local time, 7 o’clock Arizona time. Hal and I had an early breakfast followed by the frenetic and somewhat sloppy packing of the bikes. *Why does it all take up so much more space on the way home??* I wondered. After a few tears as I thought my good-byes to all the places in Taos that I love, Hal and I met two other riders from the Phoenix area at the gas station down the road. We were all soon riding into the cool morning, however, the temperature was one of the warmest I’ve ever experienced leaving Taos. The sky was clear except for a few puffy clouds, and the mountains were anonymous and nearly invisible in the



One of many vast alpine meadows at 8,000 feet in elevation

stay in this part of New Mexico longer. Unfortunately, I may have to wait for retirement to spend as much time there as I want. Why? Because it is so stunningly beautiful with amazing riding, awe-inspiring scenery, and, most of all, worthy of the description *The Land of Enchantment*.

The LOEBMWR rally is held every year on the weekend after Labor Day, at the Sipapu Ski Area near Taos, NM.

distance. They are usually prominent and incredibly beautiful, sometimes covered with snow, making them almost impossible to leave.

Before I knew it, we were past Española, then entering NM 599. When I saw the Sandia Crest in distant Albuquerque come into view, I knew I had officially left Taos behind for another year.

So, the countdown to next year's rally began again. In the meantime, I am trying to figure out ways to make my