

# THE FINE ART OF [toxic tourism]

DISCOVERING THE LOST HIGHWAY

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G U L F C O A S T

*The beach near the Lost Highway can be ridden by street-legal bikes only. This trick DRZ400S was loaned to me by good friends Manny and Robert Pandya.*

## FEATURE

**ON A LONELY** stretch of the Gulf Coast, where Cajun country meets the land of Longhorns, a hunk of beachside road was left for dead more than 20 years ago. Battered by hurricanes from the time it was constructed in 1920, the road was obliterated by Hurricane Jerry in 1989. From that point on, the state's Department of Transportation threw up its hands and let the sea have her way.

I first found a reference to this road while searching for remote routes along the coast. An off-road blogger wrote of attempting to cross it in his Jeep and being thwarted by deep sand and washouts. The idea of riding a possibly impassable lost highway stirred my soul, and I immediately began plotting my assault.

The first attempt came in April 2011. I was headed to New Orleans with a group of college professors on a weekend bender, and decided to make a detour with my Ducati-powered adventure bike. I left home a day early, checked into a cheap hotel about 40 miles from the start of the road, and then made my way out to the Lost Highway.

My route from hotel to coast passed through a large oil refinery belching noxious fumes as departing workers drove past in beat-up pickups. I bumped over a high bridge with a great view of the swampy coastline, and came to a small town that consisted of mostly boarded-up homes and a brand new school riding high on stilts.

The town was founded in the 1830s by Sam Houston, who expected the burg to become an important port city. Hurricanes, Civil War battles, yellow fever and political squabbles stunted the town's growth, however. The population reached 1500 in 1984, but by the early 1990s numbers got so low the Census Bureau stopped bothering to count inhabitants. Rita destroyed 90 percent of the town in 2005, and the rebuilt structures took a beating again in 2008, when Ike generated the highest tidal surge in the town's recorded history. Standing amongst the mix of boarded-up and newly built, I marveled at the tenacity of those who remained.

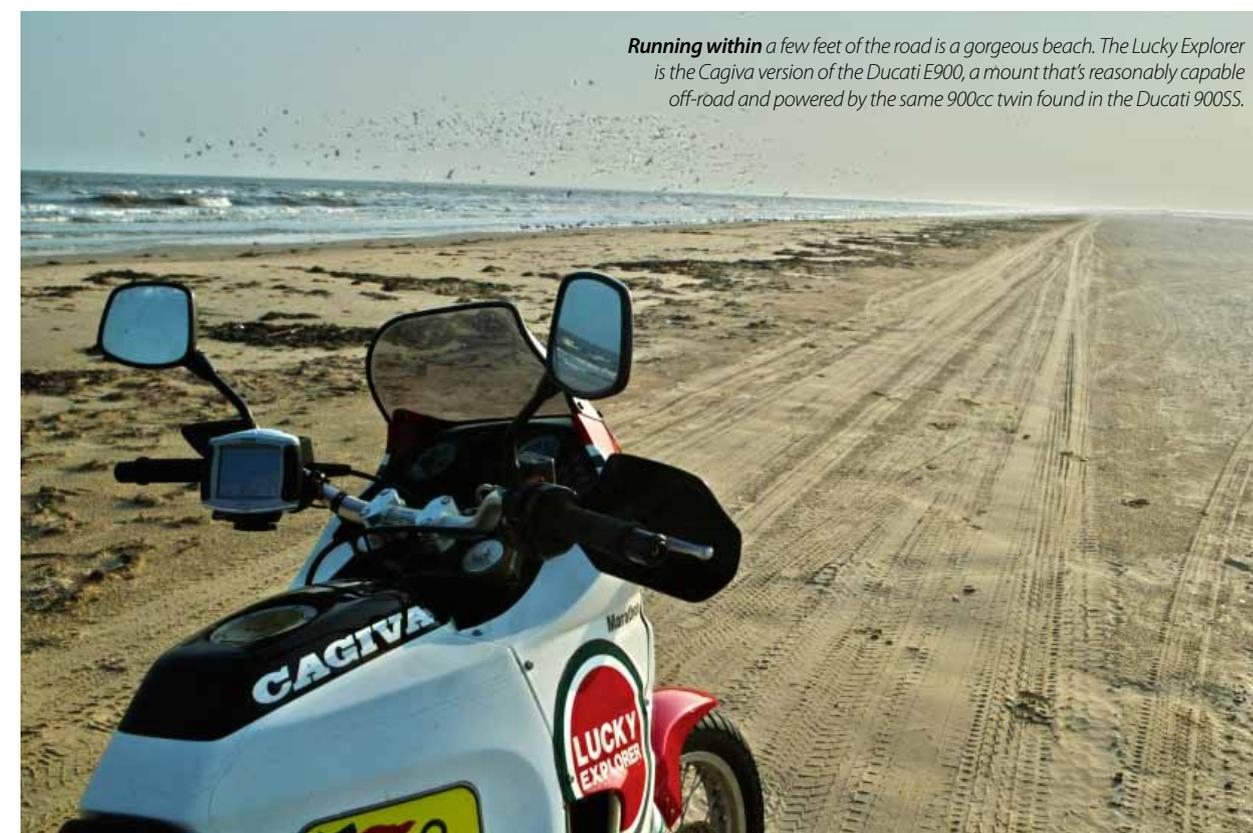


*This road was built in the late 1920s somewhere along the Gulf Coast. Repeatedly torn up by weather and then rebuilt, the State finally gave up after Hurricane Jerry wiped it out in 1989.*



### The Lost Highway Sweepstakes

Read the story carefully and do a bit of research, and you can probably deduce the location and two-digit name of the Lost Highway. The author will be posting more clues and offering a sweepstakes at [www.facebook.com/octanepress](http://www.facebook.com/octanepress). Like that page, and you'll find instructions on how to enter. We'll eventually show you where the road is located, and tell you how to ride it. Prizes include Utopia goggles, Tour Master DX gloves, a Dirt4Fun t-shirt, a free book or calendar, and an actual chunk of the Lost Highway.



*Running within a few feet of the road is a gorgeous beach. The Lucky Explorer is the Cagiva version of the Ducati E900, a mount that's reasonably capable off-road and powered by the same 900cc twin found in the Ducati 900SS.*

## FEATURE

A few miles past the village, I came to the remains of a state park on the shore. The park consisted of a hastily reconstructed boardwalk, abandoned pilings, and a gorgeous, empty stretch of beach. Rita and Ike may have torn up the park's infrastructure, but the beaches left behind were wide and inviting.

Just past the park, the developed road ended at a bright orange "ROAD CLOSED" sign. I stopped to check my phone, but no service—I was in a dead zone. The beach to my left had a few tire tracks, but otherwise, no sign of life. Inland, all that could be seen was a battered highway department shed and a green swamp and field stretching into the horizon. The sun dipped low, leaving me with the sense of standing alone on the edge of the world.

The Ducati 900 engine turns over painfully slowly when it starts. Even when you know the bike, you wonder if the mill is going to fire up or just stop dead. The trait was a bit unnerving here, at the end of the earth, and I vowed that while on the Lost Highway, I'd stop and start as little as possible.

I wove the bike around the 'road closed' sign and over a dune, and we lumped along the battered piece of pavement. Less than a mile in, I came to a washout of jumbled rock and asphalt. The crossing was doable on the big bike, but I could easily catch a wheel in the rock pile and crash. A twisted ankle would mean a long night out in the weather—so the washout was the end of the road for me that day.

With the reconnaissance run officially over, I continued on to New Orleans and marinated myself in music and Abita, determined to ride the Lost Highway again on a smaller bike with a companion or two. The road waited until November 2011, when I returned with three friends and some dual-sport bikes. While I towed a DRZ400S across the state, my buddies from Minnesota and Germany made their way to the ramshackle park on the beach.

I arrived with the sun setting, and lucked upon a local park officer who rode a KLR. He told me street-licensed dual sports were allowed on the beach, and showed me the campsites—an empty

*Guido Lindenau rides off the last chunk of intact pavement on the Lost Highway. After this point, it's nothing more than two-track scattered with chunks of obliterated asphalt.*



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stretch of beach. He also warned me that the mosquitoes were awful and that tidal surges could swamp our cars.

My companions for the ride—Darrick Anderson, Al Silberstein, and Guido Lindenau—rolled in just after dark. With the truck and trailer safely parked, Darrick opened the trailer's side door (which had been outfitted as a bar) and started to mix up some Zombies. The evening proceeded accordingly.

The next morning, I woke at sunrise when Guido opened the tent to use the facilities and let in approximately 400 million of the most vicious mosquitoes on the planet. The entire crew was on the beach 20 minutes later, swatting away haplessly. I still have scars on my legs from the little beasts swarming me like a pack of Rossi fans clamoring for an autograph at Mugello.

At the crack of noon we were off, a motley crew on a KTM 640, Honda XR650R, KLR650, and the DRZ, all shod with plates and some with reasonable tires. We went past the "ROAD CLOSED" sign and up to the washout that had stopped the Duck and me in our tracks months earlier. The DRZ's razor-sharp Dunlops and tweaked suspenders soaked up the nasty part without a whimper, and we blasted along a road that turned from patchy to apocalyptic. After less than a mile, the last intact chunk of blacktop dissolved into tiny blocks of pavement strewn across the sand.

Beyond the end of the pavement, a two-track trail of sorts could be followed along the beach. The trail was a mix of packed and deeply-rutted soft sand, easy to cross on a dual sport, but a wallowing mess on a big adventure bike.

We saw not one living being along the beach road for more than 20 miles. The shore was strewn with trash of all kinds: bottles inked with English, Spanish, and Kanji words, the fiberglass hull of a 20-foot boat, smashed plastic floats, dank green seaweed, splintered planks, and a dead porpoise, the flesh of its snout rotted away to reveal jagged yellow teeth.

When we stopped to catch our breath, Al was aghast. "This is like riding through a garbage dump," he said. "I'd call it toxic tourism."

*During renovation of the highway in 1970, construction crews uncovered cannonballs and black powder from the Civil War.*



*Parts of the road can challenge a larger bike with muddy ledges and deep sand. If the tide surges, portions would be treacherous.*



## FEATURE

**OUR TOXIC TOUR HAD SHOWN US A PORTION OF THE COAST THAT FEW HAVE SEEN. FOR MOST OF THE PLANET'S INHABITANTS, MISSING OUT ON THE GARBAGE- AND TAR-STREWN PORTIONS IS A BLESSING.**

To make matters worse, the beach was often stained with sticky black tar; long streaks of dark goo covered large sections. We assumed these were the remains of the BP oil spill.

With the trail running along the beach, we were able to cross the 22 uncharted miles easily. Once we were out to the paved road on the other side, we headed to a ferry which delivered us to a great little beach town deep with Texas history. After a night in a motel, we took the ferry back to rejoin the road. With weather coming in and local newscasters warning of tornadoes, we needed to hurry. Which, of course, meant a bike would break. And so, about three miles into the Lost Highway, Al's KLR died, refusing to restart despite our best efforts.

We left the bike to be trailered home later, and Al and Darrick piled on the 640 KTM. The faster Darrick rode, the better the teetering pile of man and machine handled the deep sand. When the pair dismounted at the campground 15 miles later, Al's eyes were adrenaline-pooled saucers and Darrick's boot was cut from some wire on the beach that had nearly ripped him off the bike. But both were laughing and alive, bright from the biochemical blast of excitement induced by misadventure.

Our toxic tour had shown us a portion of the coast that few have seen. For most of the planet's inhabitants, missing out on the garbage- and tar-strewn portions is a blessing. For me and the rest of the world's wind-twisted motorcycle adventurers, a lost road abandoned to hurricanes and traveled by few is paradise found.

*The Lost Highway comes out on a paved road, which you can ride to a ferry that takes you to one of Texas' most historic towns.*



*Sunset at the end of the Lost Highway.*



*Beach portions on the Lost Highway can be partially coated with sticky tar.*

