

Addicted to "36"

By the shortest possible route, it's 225 miles from my garage to Beegum Road near Red Bluff, California. Rarely do I arrive there via the 'shortest route.' In spite of the distance, the allure of this road, also known as SR-36 west, has brought me there repeatedly. From my perspective, no other road in California offers such a unique combination of exciting road geography, light traffic, fine surface, and extended distance.

On 22 occasions I have scuffed tires over some significant portion of Hwy 36. I have traversed it's full 136 mile length fourteen times. Eleven of those trips from east to west (Red Bluff to 101), and three times from the Pacific end, inland. I hold a strong preference for the westerly direction. On six weekend visits, I used the eastern end of 36 (from Hwy 3 to Red Bluff) as part of my return trip. In 1992, I rode both directions, back-to-back on the same day. I must admit, even for a 36 addict like me, 270 miles on this road in less than 8 hours, was a bit much!

I'm not surprised to learn how many other riders have tagged the Red Bluff end of this road a "Roller Coaster!" There is no better way to describe it. Laid out over the low rolling hills without grading, the road follows undulating curves that rise and fall like a ride at an amusement park. Eleven of my rides on 'The Coaster' were in my preferred direction (East to West). However, because I frequently use 36 as a return route, on ten other occasions, I enjoyed SR-36 from Hwy 3 back to Red Bluff. If I limit my critique to just the Roller Coaster segment, I'm less partial to riding direction than for the balance of 36. I love it both ways!



I have experienced the magic of this road on 3 different motorcycles. My first three visits were on an '83 Honda CB1100F, and the next three on an '87 Kawasaki Ninja ZX750-R. The past eight trips were made on a '94 Kawasaki ZX-9R. I now own a '02 ZX-9R, but haven't had an opportunity to visit 36 with my latest bike – Yet! All three motorcycles worked very well on this road. My bikes and I have accumulated 2,200 miles on SR-36, and I'm still learning this road. I have introduced 20 other motorcyclists to this phenomenal route, most of them have traveled it on repeated events with me. I haven't met a motorcyclist yet, who doesn't agree – it just doesn't get any better than SR-36.

Of course the road has changed some over the years. I first discovered Hwy 36 in 1983. In those days, just west of Mad River the road became extraordinarily tight & twisty. The rough surface, twisting in dark forest shadows was an arduous and tiring stint, particularly if you tried to keep a good pace. Around 1988, they straightened and widened the lower part of that section just above the Mad River General Store. The new road is now one of my favorite spots. Beyond the improved segment, the road deteriorates to what it once was, a lane-&-a-half of old twisting mountain trail. But this section which wore me out on my first trip here in '83, now is less than 15 miles. In the early days 36 went through Bridgeville. Even then, there wasn't much in Bridgeville. There was an old general store, run by a guy who looked to be at least 80. The store had closed down by the time I returned in '85. Sometime after '95, they cut the road around Bridgeville, so it now bypasses what's left of the town, and a few of the twisties. They have also replaced two of the old 1920 vintage concrete bridges which crossed the Van Duzen River. But, the character and attraction of this fantastic highway hasn't changed. In my early visits to Hwy 36, I would arrive in Red Bluff about mid day, and do 36 after lunch. Too HOT! I rearranged my route for the past four visits, and have made it a point to schedule my departure from Red Bluff in the morning. An early morning sprint to the west, with the rising sun at your back, puts you at the Wildwood Store, in less than an hour, just in time for a great breakfast.

There is more of Highway 36 east of Red Bluff, but from my perspective, it may as well not exist. I only used it once, on my way to Mt. Lassen. I wasn't inspired enough to visit that side again. The portion of Highway 36 "worth the money" starts at Red Bluff and ends at 101 South of Eureka. 136 Miles of the very best Motorcycling there is. No traffic. No law enforcement, great road surface, for 136 miles of the most fantastic road geography you're likely to encounter.

To describe the route, it's best to divide the road into it's nominal east and west "halves" using the intersection of Highway 3 as a marker. Give or take Odometer error, Red Bluff to Hwy 3 is 64 miles, Hwy 3 to the 101 Junction, another 72. From a motorcycling perspective, there are numerous unique riding experiences to be found in each half, and I will attempt to describe them from a sport biker's perspective.

I. Red Bluff through "The Concrete Roller Coaster"

A new housing development is beginning to expand the reach of Red Bluff a few miles west on 36. But here, on a bright Saturday morning in September, there is no significant traffic. You will encounter an occasional truck or car heading into town, and find a few to more to pass heading west. Out through the flat country just beyond the edge of development, the road begins to twist and undulate for a few miles, then straightens out for the next 10.

You'll be more than 15 miles west of town before you spot the first of the innocuous little yellow signs; "Road Narrows." Just past this yellow marker, the road suddenly climbs a grade, followed by an abrupt, blind left turn which drops into a hidden dip and spits you up the other side into a blind right!

Welcome to the Roller Coaster!!

The road flattens out as you top the first bluff, and you have a clear view of the next 3 bends. The first corner on top here is a flat right-hander, it's inside edge frequently cluttered with a bit of gravel. As you cross the top of the bluff the few scrubby Oaks allow a clear view of upcoming corners. Slash left then right, a little dip, a bit of rise, you'll quickly notice how nice the road surface is, not a lot of margin, but it's always smooth and clean. At the west end of the bluff the road drops down the other side through a big sweeping turn, and things quiet down for mile or two. Then, a small yellow flash passes on the right

"Road Narrows."

Your assault on the next twisty 'coaster' begins. So it goes, over 2 more of these

awesome undulating plateaus. Over each one the road is laid with virtually no grading, it just follows the rolling terrain of the foothills. Each section is filled with dips and twists that combine to keep your adrenaline pumping. Somewhere in the midst of these twisty bits are couple extraordinary rise-dip combos that, (if you have the nerve to keep the throttle twisted) will let you catch some 'big air.' After you drop off the last of these foothills the road straightens once again, and you experience a relaxing few miles before you begin the next chapter of Hwy 36.

Note: Even after 21 trips through the Coaster, I never let myself believe that I know this road. But, what I have learned – if you keep focused, and ride smart, this road will not sucker you. Even when a sharp rise makes the front light and you can't see if the road goes left or right, there is always adequate margin to get landed, and poised for the next corner. It'll probably take you a few visits to get comfortable with that fact.



II. Great Sweepers, Wildwood, and Dirty Mountain

Leaving the coaster you'll enjoy a couple of straight miles, until you descend into a big down-hill right. I think it's marked 25 MPH. It's not that slow, but it catches a few riders napping. From the bottom of this turn the road begins a rapid ascent up a mountain with blazingly fast, long, extended uphill sweepers. There are a couple of really awesome 180's on this mountain, it seems as though they will never end. Over this rise and down the other side, past the Forest Service Station, then a few more twists before Wildwood comes up quickly on the right.



The Wildwood Country Store, is a great breakfast stop, and I'm always amazed how quickly we get here!

West of Wildwood comes 'Dirty Mountain.' This is logging country, and the tight corners over this twisting mountain road causes trucks to drag trailer wheels through the inside shoulder of nearly every right turn. Each time scattering some loose gravel on the road surface. I've never liked this 12 mile 'pass,' although a number of riding buddies think it's great. But I didn't start calling "Dirty Mountain" until 1995.



That year the area had seen significant rain prior to our visit, and rain had washed significant amounts of the local yellow-brown dirt completely across both lanes. This stuff was like powder, and you could feel both ends of the bike slipping around on it. It spewed up off the rear tires creating huge rooster tails. (That's the only time it's been that bad) Fortunately it's a short stint, and by the time you get to the downhill side (going west) the road is usually clear and it's a fun ride down.

This segment ends at the intersection of Hwy 36 and Hwy 3 which will take you north to Weaverville. (the first few miles of Hwy-3 North is a continuation of "Dirty Mountain.")

III. From Jtn. 3, Mad River, Fast Stuff - Tight stuff

After you leave the 3/36 Junction, the road is a bit subdued for ~10 miles, but then it starts to rise and fall with some really great curves. It takes you up and over another low mountain, and the road surface here is different too, coarse gravel, well bedded in tar. The kind that gives tires great grip and inspires confidence for some serious lean angles. You'll enjoy the twists and turns for the next 13 miles or so, until you arrive at the Mad River Store. (Another good break stop) While it's only been 30 miles since breakfast, this is one of the few good rest stops along the route. Small General store and a trailer that sells burgers and snacks.



West of Mad River is the section of new road that was opened back in '88-89. Not quite as nice now as it was then, but the road surface is well maintained. This road has a really fast set of smooth sweepers climbing up the mountain. The lanes are wide and bordered with curbs so it stays clean. This fast section is pretty awesome, but the good stuff eventually gives way to the 'old road' which is still a bumpy lane-and-a-half of sharp blind turns and lots of trees obstructing views of the upcoming turns. Again, it doesn't last too long and eventually spits you out on to a wide 2 lane at the top of a Mountain (McClellan?) with a great view toward the coast. You can usually feel the weather change as you reach this crest.

IV. From Mountain top thru Redwood Groves

From the crest of McClellan, you'll drop down into a cooler, greener area, where the road is noticeably straighter although is never boring. It will rise & twist again briefly as you approach and pass Old Bridgeville. Beyond Bridgeville a flat valley, with a very small rural airstrip, & another country store (Gas & Restrooms). Through this area you'll leave the valley and use new Concrete bridges which cross the seasonally dry bed of the Van Duzen River.



Past the second bridge, you'll notice the forest density is increasing. Shortly you will enter a cool dark redwood grove which is part of Grizzly Creek Redwoods State Park. Often dark in the late afternoon, and damp in the morning, a bit of extra caution is wise here, especially in the Park area.



Beyond the park area you can turn up the wick a bit and enjoy a spirited ride thorough the trees, but the best part of your 36 event is behind you now. Soon you'll encounter some ranches and homes along the road and traffic will pick up. Air temperature will drop as it is almost always cool and overcast in Eureka.

But, you won't care and won't be disappointed, you've just had the best ride of your life!!

Hwy 36 West Recommendations:

Month: September or October

Direction: Leave from Red Bluff heading West

Time: Leave Red Bluff early AM.

Breakfast: Wildwood

Lunch: Eureka

Continuation: North on 101 to 299, East on 299 (watch for CHP around this area) to Willow Creek, then North again on SR-96. If your riding a big tank bike, no problem, but if it's a hot twin or a small 600 be certain to gas up at Willow Creek, once you get past the Hoopa Indian Reservation the only gas is a unmanned pump at Happy Camp 83 miles up the road. If you gassed up at Eureka, you'll have to cover 132 miles to get to Happy Camp. You won't see gas again until Yreka, another 75 miles.

Thanks to Pashnit.com for 3 of the Pictures included in this write-up.