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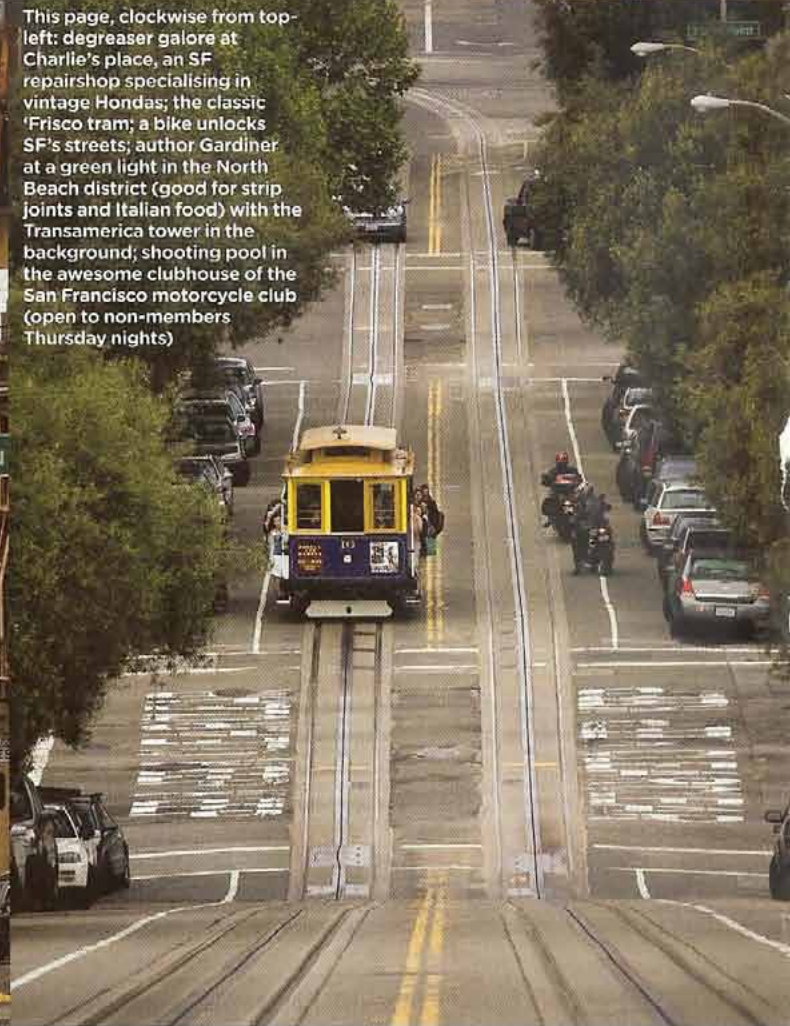
With incredible coast roads, glamorous beaches and two of the world's most exciting cities, California should be on everybody's must-ride list. Here's your insider's guide

By Mark Gardiner

Photography by Andrew Wheeler

RIDE THE WORLD!

Each month *Bike* will cover another motorcycling destination, building into your definitive global riding guide. Next month: the beaches, bars and myriad back roads of northern France



This page, clockwise from top-left: degreaser galore at Charlie's place, an SF repairshop specialising in vintage Hondas; the classic 'Frisco tram; a bike unlocks SF's streets; author Gardiner at a green light in the North Beach district (good for strip joints and Italian food) with the Transamerica tower in the background; shooting pool in the awesome clubhouse of the San Francisco motorcycle club (open to non-members Thursday nights)

RIDING SAN FRANCISCO-CITY BY THE SEA

European in feel and beautiful like few US cities, San Francisco should be the base for your week in the sun

Every time I ride in San Francisco, I'm reminded that it's only motorcycles that can actually move through the city's congested inner streets. The parking is worse still. But there's an upside to the dense urban core – just a few miles away in any direction, there's open countryside, not the cancerous suburbs that sprawl across so much of southern California. The city's surrounded by rolling vineyards and forested hills that plunge into the sea, criss-crossed by some of the best riding roads I've seen.

The first time I came here, I stayed in the infamous Tenderloin district, long before it was trendy. Back then, sailors' fists and girls – if that's what they were – went bump in the night. I loved it. Since then, I've returned to race at Laguna Seca and Infineon raceway so now I have friends who know all the right places, as opposed to the wrong ones I managed to find on my own.

Laguna's an easy ride south so locals can see MotoGP without paying outrageous Monterey hotel bills. Half an hour north of the Golden Gate Bridge, Infineon Raceway hosts a round of the AMA superbike championship. My friends refuse to acknowledge its naming rights sponsorship deal (Infineon are an electronics firm) and still call it by its original name, the more evocative Sears Point. Whatever, the country's oldest racing club, the American Federation of Motorcyclists, calls the circuit home.

There are over twice as many bikes registered per capita in SF than LA – enough to force car drivers to pay attention. The city's loaded with cool shops and gritty biker bars. Even the Hells Angels are headquartered right across the Oakland Bay Bridge (and no, I didn't drop in for the purposes of this story).

*The Bay Area is the
epicentre of US
motorcycling*



Clockwise from top-left: the eclectic car park line-up at Alice's; classic Californian back road in Big Sur – note complete absence of speed cameras or traffic; says it all. Go early or late to avoid day trippers around Big Sur

The 'Bay Area' is home to some of America's best restaurants. If you want to blow your entire meal budget in one go, book months ahead for a table at French Laundry, up in Yountville. Or try to get a seat at one of the big, family-style tables at Chez Panisse in Berkeley. Go on a Monday night for chef Alice Waters' relatively affordable fixed-price dinner. But if you work up a hunger riding, you needn't have reservations; you're in the best place in the US for good food, good wine and good coffee (okay, so maybe Seattle's the best place for coffee, but that's another story, and SF runs it a close second).

By American standards, San Francisco is a relatively expensive place to find a hotel room. But right now a pound buys almost \$2 so accommodation is as affordable as it's ever going to be for foreign tourists.

All this makes the Bay Area the epicentre of US motorcycling and the best place in the States for a riding holiday. Fly in, rent a motorcycle and have a great week now, before the next earthquake or before Barack Obama gets the US economy – and the greenback – back on its feet. >

ON YER BIKE

Getting on a bike in San Francisco is easy if you've got a full UK licence. Wolfgang Taft's Dubbleju Motorcycle Rentals offers a diverse fleet of 40 bikes, skewed towards the BMW GS and retro Triumphs.

The R1200GS is the perfect all-rounder for the Bay Area, but if that's too yuppie for you, Wolfgang's got a tidy R100GS in classic bumblebee colours and a Hinckley Triumph Scrambler. You can almost always just walk into his Bryant Street garage and ride out, but if you've got your heart set on a particular bike, it's best to book ahead.

'All I need to see is a UK driver's licence,' he told me,

'but I always recommend getting an International Driving Licence before coming over, in case you're stopped by some small-town Sheriff.'

As his name suggests, Wolfgang's bikes are prepared with positively teutonic attention to detail, and he's universally respected in the SF bike community; an unhesitating recommendation. For prices and contact information visit www.dubbleju.com. Alternatively, Eagle Riders have a vast fleet of Harleys and a GS or two for hire in SF. Usefully they have branches all over the US so your itinerary needn't loop back to SF – visit www.eaglerider.com.

SEVEN DAYS

At speed and in blissful coastal happiness on the epic Pacific Coast Highway



Empty inland highways ask only for a bike and long empty days to get lost in. Rural idyll between Napa and the town of Marshall, on the coast



BIG SUR AND THE PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY

Famous to the point of cliché but breathtaking nonetheless

There's nothing more infuriating than chasing a well-ridden GS down an unfamiliar mountain, particularly when the GS is being ridden by a racer who knows the road like the back of his hand. My guides are an ex-pat Irishman named Jack and my friend Karolyn, an instructor with Zoom Zoom trackdays. We're plunging down Highway 9, off Skyline Drive, towards the sea. Karolyn's riding the motorcycle equivalent of a pair of sensible shoes and has wisely let us go, but I want to keep Jack in sight. I need him to convince me that those dark spots under towering trees are just new asphalt, not damp patches.

Thankfully, the Ducati Multistrada I'm riding is one of the most forgiving motorcycles ever made. We're having an amazing ride

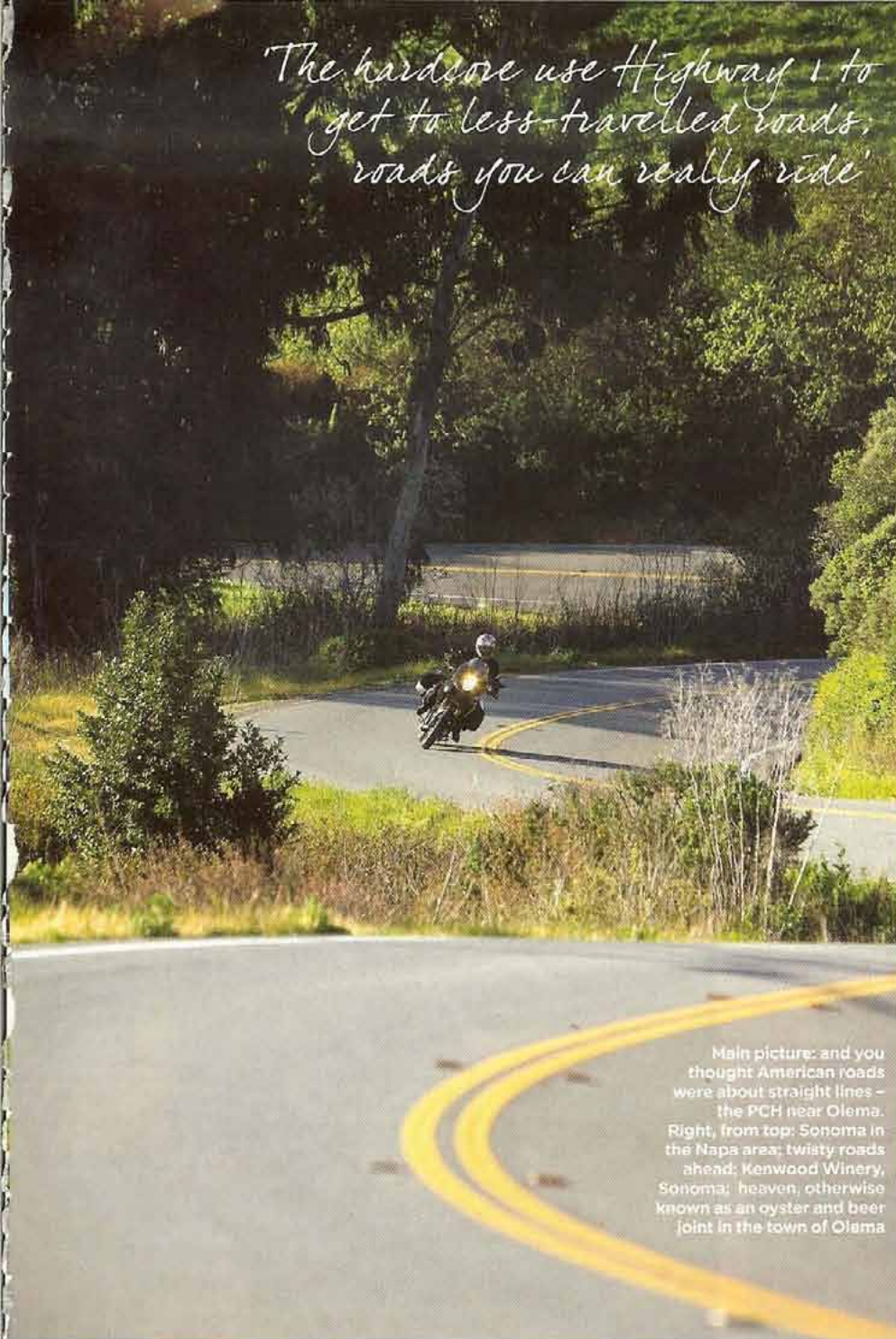
through incredible scenery on Highway 9, heading for Capitola. Yesterday I droned up the ass and mind-numbing Interstate 5 from my home in SoCal (Southern California) but this morning we're heading back down south on California Highway 1 – the justly famous Pacific Coast Highway.

Spanish priests built the first mission on the Monterey Peninsula in 1770. They called the Santa Lucia Mountains 'the big, impassable country to the south'. That was shortened to 'Big Sur'. It wasn't until 1935 that someone managed to hack out a road that skirted its western edge.

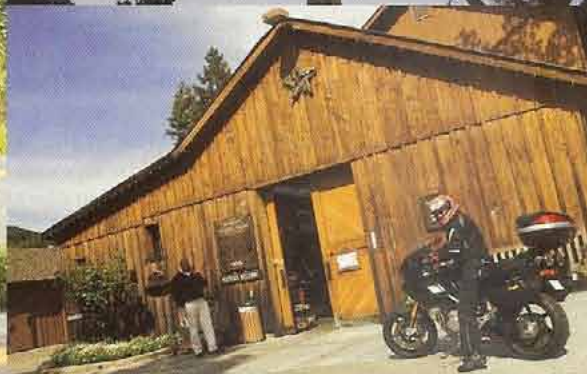
The stretch of Highway 1 that clings to the cliffs of Big Sur begins in Carmel, a town that used to call Clint Eastwood mayor. It's a must-ride road, but there's almost constant traffic. Safe passing opportunities are rare and the tourists you're following will slam on their brakes to ogle the scenery with no notice. If you want a clear-ish run at the PCH, go for an early start or a dusk run.

The hardcore use Highway 1 to get to less-traveled roads; roads you can really ride. One of the best is the Nacimiento to Ferguson road, still the only paved road that actually crosses the Santa Lucia

The hardcore use Highway 1 to get to less-travelled roads, roads you can really ride!



Main picture: and you thought American roads were about straight lines – the PCH near Olema. Right, from top: Sonoma in the Napa area; twisty roads ahead; Kenwood Winery, Sonoma; heaven, otherwise known as an oyster and beer joint in the town of Olema



Mountains. There's a checkpoint at the summit, where the road passes through an army base, so make sure you have all your paperwork or they'll turn you back.

The best advice about this stretch of the PCH is to enjoy the scenery. A Harley bagger (tourer) would be the perfect bike. But no matter what you're on, chill, dude. Stop and watch for whales from every viewpoint. And don't miss the amazing, \$12-and-worth-it half-pound burger at Fernwood – a hideaway bar in the forest where loggers, outlaw pot farmers and Buddhist hippies in saffron robes comprise an only-in-California customer mix.

There's 150 miles of great riding, past the basking sea lions, all the way to San Luis Obispo. Stop and check out Hearst Castle. It wasn't built by Patty Hearst, the millionaire heiress who was kidnapped by a radical group, the Symbionese Liberation Army, in 1974 (she adopted the nom-de-guerre of Tania, then joined them for a spectacular bank robbery). No, Hearst Castle was built by her grandfather, William Randolph Hearst. He was a newspaper magnate and the model for *Citizen Kane*. Judging from the house he built, he was even crazier than Patty. Only in California. >

THE ORIGINAL WILD ONE

The town of Hollister is about 20 miles northeast of Monterey. It's always been a popular place for off-road riding and racing, but it's best known as the scene of the Hollister 'motorcycle riot' of July 4, 1947.

Even the local police admitted that the bikers 'did more harm to themselves than they did to the town' but the *San Francisco Chronicle*, ran headlines like 'Havoc in Hollister' and 'Riots... Cyclists Take Over Town'. Then *Life* ran a photo of a beefy drunkard swaying atop a Harley, with a beer in each hand.

Hollister was the calm at the

eye of a national storm. The Salinas Scramblers were allowed to hold more races there a few months later but other towns across the US cancelled race meetings. Police departments fostered the notion that bands of motorcycle hoodlums might descend at any moment.

When Hollywood dramatised the Hollister weekend in the 1954 film *The Wild One*, any hope of salvaging motorcycling's image was lost. The movie's only redeeming scene comes when a ride on Marlon Brando's Triumph weakens the resolve of a beautiful-but-chaste young woman. If only that were true.

SAN FRANCISCO BIKE SHOPS

Hanging out south of Market Street

The best-known biker bar in San Francisco is Zeitgeist, on the corner of Valencia and Duboce. But the bartender seems to think he's cooler than his customers, so instead I wander into Ace Café SF. As soon as my eyes adjust to the gloom I know this isn't a biker-themed bar, it's the real deal.

When the owner, Rob Hough, learns where this story will appear, he calls all his staff in for the photo, 'You're going to be in the same magazine as Ogri!' He knows *Bike* because he's English. He fled Chester when Thatcher came into power and, after 15 years as a vagabond, hit SF in the early Nineties.

I get the feeling he learned the bar business after spending quite a bit of time on my side of the counter. 'I've ridden bikes all my life and there was no place in town to hang out at anymore to be with other people like me and my missus,' he tells me. He didn't spend much money on the place; the bar top's recycled from an old bowling lane. Still, there's motorcycle racing on the television, Rob holds constant fundraisers for AFM racers and he organises special deals on race tickets and trips. 'And,' he says with pride, 'we make the best fish, chips and mushy peas west of Cleckhuddersfax!' I didn't test the veracity of that claim, but the Ace is, well, ace.

The south-of-Market St area is known as SOMA to the locals. When I started coming to SF it was a wasteland of warehouses and junky shooting galleries. The bike shops were all here because rent was cheap. In the Nineties, during the dot-com boom, SOMA got hip and rents went up, but the cool kids needed garages like Werkstatt and Charlie's Place to keep their old motorcycles running, and the internet millionaires needed places like Munroe Motors and Scuderia West to buy their Ducatis and Bimotas. It's still the bike district; home to good bars, cafés, and garages as well as the way-cool clubhouse of the San Francisco Motorcycle Club. >

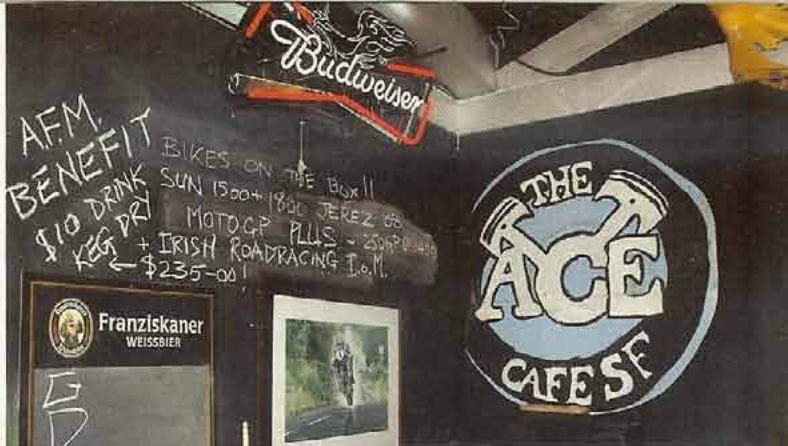


WAY SOUTH OF MARKET

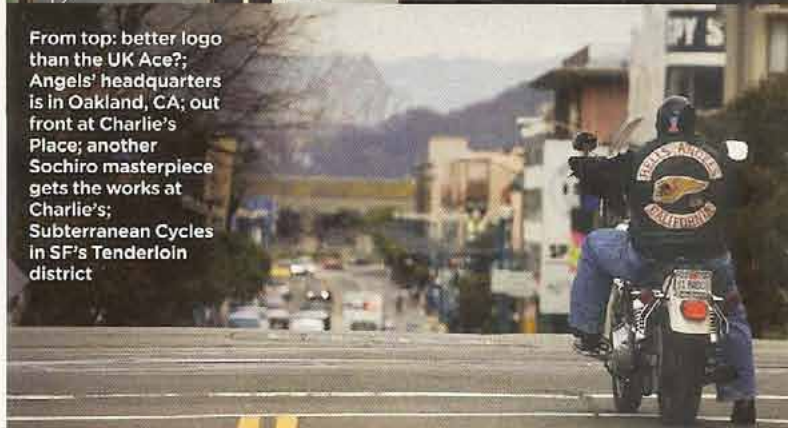
No visit to the Bay Area is complete without a breakfast or lunch stop at Alice's Restaurant, on Skyline Boulevard (Highway 35) in Redwood City, about 20 miles south of San Francisco. On weekdays, Alice's is a great jumping off point for sportsbike riders since any of the great roads heading west off Skyline (such as Tunitas Creek Road, Hwy. 84, or Hwy. 9) are pretty much devoid of

traffic after the rush hour.

There's more traffic (and cops) on weekends, when Alice's is the destination for hundreds of cruisers. The legendary American folkie Arlo Guthrie sang, 'You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant'. He was not, however, singing about this particular restaurant, so you'd best arrive wanting eggs or a burger. You wouldn't go out of your way for the food, but the bike- and people-watching are worth the ride.

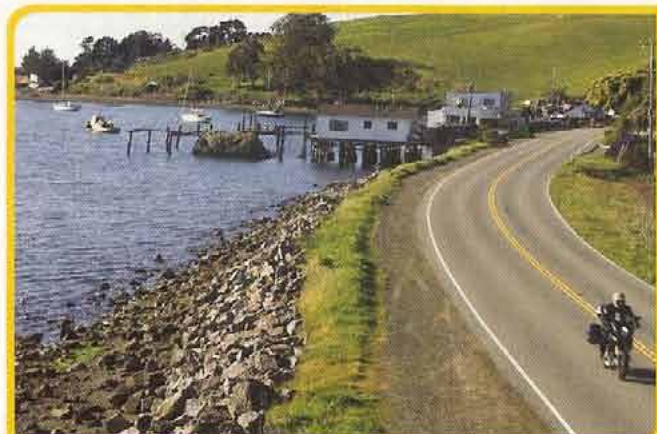


From top: better logo than the UK Ace?; Angels' headquarters is in Oakland, CA; out front at Charlie's Place; another Sochiro masterpiece gets the works at Charlie's; Subterranean Cycles in SF's Tenderloin district



KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT RIDING IN CALIFORNIA

Your guide to the best of California, by a Californian



THINGS TO DO

Ride

Around here, great roads are as common as transvestites. Before your trip, visit www.pashnit.com where thousands of sportbike riders trade advice on routes, hazards, even speed traps and the best lunch stops along the way. Another great resource is Mad Maps. These printed maps highlight great one-day loops. In SF, pick up Mad Maps at Subterranean Cycles.

Drink wine

The Napa Valley wine region lies about an hour north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Anywhere that produces good wine is a good place for a motorcycle tour: vines require the well-drained soils that usually occur on hillsides, so the roads are winding, long dry summers make for good vintages and good riding; the orderly rhythm of the vine-rows provides pleasant scenery and, where there's good wine, there's usually good food to go with it.

The heart of the wine region stretches for about 20 miles northwest of Sonoma and Napa, towards the quaint town of Calistoga. There are literally hundreds of wineries here and most of them have free tasting

rooms (if you've finished riding for the day). Leave Calistoga and ride west to Highway 1, where it traces the shoreline of Tamales Bay. This stretch of Highway 1 is less busy than Big Sur and the riding's even better. The little towns of Marshall and Ofema are really just clusters of seafood joints.

The last ten miles, along the Marin Headlands and then over the top is, suitably, over the top.

Hit the track

Bay Area racers and track day riders have two great home tracks. Although Laguna Seca gets all the attention, Infineon Raceway is also laid out on beautiful, natural hills in the heart of a spectacular tourist area. Both feature lots of elevation changes and some tricky blind, cresting corners. I've raced at both of them and Infineon's every bit as rewarding to ride – and even harder to learn.

Track contacts

www.laguna-seca.com
www.infineonraceway.com

Race dates

Laguna Seca MotoGP/AMA Superbike, July 18-20
Laguna Seca AMA Superbike, September 27-28

TRAFFIC LAWS

California is the only American state where filtering (we call it 'lane splitting') is legal.

Motorcycles are also allowed in car-pool lanes. Speed limit signs are rectangular with a white background. The yellow, diamond-shaped 'speed' signs posted on corners are just advice. No cops means no problems – there are no speed cameras here. Riders pulling wheelies are routinely charged with 'reckless driving.'



BIKE SHOPS

Dudley Perkins Co.
333 Corey Way, So. San Francisco,
www.dpchd.com

This is America's oldest continuously operated H-D dealership. Old bikes and memorabilia on display make it worth a visit.

Munroe Motors

412 Valencia Street, SF
www.munroemotors.com

One of the biggest Ducati dealers in the US also imports MV, Triumph, Husqvarna and Guzzi.

Scuderia West

69 Duboce Avenue, SF, www.scuderia.com

'Scooteria' has a great accessories shop and a funky mix of bikes from scooters to Bimota Tesis. Years ago, Scuderia's owner Don Lemelin hired a young German girl to be a mechanic. After a while, she opened her own shop called...

Werkstatt

3248 17th Street, SF, www.werkstattsf.com

Run entirely by women. Jennifer Bromme told me, 'I started with \$800'. She let one of her friends, a guy named Patrick Eichhorn, sell motorcycles out of her basement. He called it...

Subterranean Cycles

886 Geary Street, SF, www.subcycles.com

He's since moved to an above-ground location in the Tenderloin district.

Charlie's Place

3084 17th Street, SF, www.charlies-place.com

A haven for old Hondas.

RENTAL

Dubbelju Motorcycle Rentals,

www.dubbelju.com

689A Bryant St, SF

Thunder Road Motorsports

123 South Van Ness Avenue, SF,

www.thunderroad.com

Lots of Harleys and some dirt bikes, too.

Eagle Rider

1060 Bryant Street, SF, www.eaglerider.com

A nationwide chain that, as the name implies, rents mostly Harley-Davidsons. Gives you the option of a one-way rental.

Ducati North America is setting up a rental program. You should be able to get more information from any Bay Area dealer.



WHERE TO EAT

Moto Java

498 9th Street, SF,

www.motojavacafe.com

Owner Anna-Marja Helt makes great espresso, sandwiches and soups. Free WiFi.

Alice's Restaurant

Intersection of Hwy. 84 &

Hwy. 35 (Skyline Blvd.),

Redwood City,

www.alicesrestaurant.com

Ace Café SF

1799 Mission Street, SF,

www.acecafesf.com

12 beers on tap, including Delirium Tremens. Best time to come? Any MotoGP day.

Kilowatt

3160 16th Street, SF,

www.barbell.com

Order Anchor Steam, San Francisco's favourite local beer.