



2011 KAWASAKI CONOURS 14 ABS



RIDING AMONG GIANTS

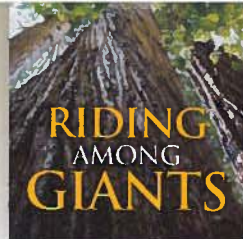
2011 KAWASAKI CONOURS 14 ABS TOUR TEST

BY GREG DREVENSTEDT • PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR,
CARRIE STAFSTROM AND MARK TUTTLE

Our motivations differed, but our destination was the same. Having fallen under the spell of majestic redwoods several years ago at Muir Woods National Monument, north of San Francisco, Carrie wanted to see big trees. Having fallen under the spell of the Kawasaki Concours 14, winner of our last sport-touring shootout (*Rider*, November 2010, and on www.ridermagazine.com), I wanted a two-wheeled odyssey. Together we embarked on a six-day tour through the central and northern coast of California to ride among the giants.

The Concours 14, *Rider's* 2008 Motorcycle of the Year, is a powerful, comfortable, well-appointed and affordably priced open-class sport-tourer. It was updated in 2010 with a redesigned fairing and exhaust guard for better heat management, larger adjustable windscreen with programmable presets, fuel economy assistance mode, KTRC traction control (on ABS models) and many smaller tweaks aimed at enhancing the riding experience. Little has changed for 2011, except that the ABS/KTRC model is now standard and it comes in Atomic Silver instead of Candy Neptune Blue. At full boil, the Concours 14 puts 138 horsepower and 93 lb-ft of torque to the rear wheel (*Rider*, February 2010), generated smoothly by a 1,352cc in-line four with Variable Valve Timing and shaft final drive. Lockable hard saddlebags, heated grips, tire-pressure monitors and KIPASS security are all standard.

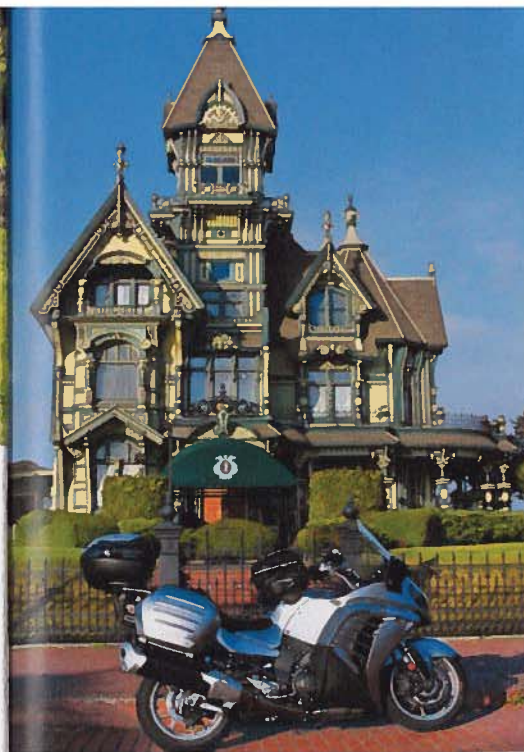
As good as the Concours is, there's always room for improvement. Givi provided its 55-liter L55 Tech top trunk (\$340), gloss silver trunk cover



Right: Roosevelt elk grazing in meadows in Redwood National Park. **Below:** It's easy to get a crick in your neck looking up at redwoods. **Below middle:** Carrie is dwarfed by 371-foot-tall Giant Tree. **Below right:** Riding through Rockefeller Forest in Humboldt Redwoods State Park.

(\$70), mounting kit (\$132) and backrest (\$75), which expanded our lockable storage space from 70 liters to 125 and provided a reassuring, comfortable backrest for Carrie. Dowco's Fastrax Elite expandable magnetic tankbag (\$145.99) provided additional, easy-access storage. For more wind protection, I bolted on National Cycle's VStream windscreen (\$179.95), which is 2 inches taller and 4 inches wider than stock, and it's patented V-shape pushes wind away from the cockpit for a quieter, less turbulent ride. And Helibars sent us a set of its just-released Horizon ST handlebars (\$695; see review on page 79), which are adjustable for height, pullback and grip angle. Including a couple hours of labor for the HeliBars installation, the touring accessory upgrades cost \$2,018. Add that to the Concours 14's \$15,599 base price and you've got a decked-out, two-up sport tourer for less than \$18,000.

Deadlines met and dragons slain, Carrie and I departed Ventura on the Friday afternoon before Independence Day, sharing U.S. Highway 101—the backbone of our route—with holiday ramblers.



raised the windscreen to full height and dialed up the grip heaters. We motored through Castroville, the Artichoke Center of the World, on our way to Highway 1, and at Santa Cruz we turned onto Highway 9. Soon we were enveloped by redwoods, riding through Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park, and on tight, scenic Highway 236, through Big Basin Redwoods State Park. Entering a redwood grove is like entering another world, one that is darker, cooler and more mysterious. As John Steinbeck wrote, "The redwoods once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always...from them comes silence and awe. The most irreverent of men, in the presence of redwoods, goes under a spell of wonder and respect." Unless he's carrying a chainsaw.

Commonly known as coast, California or giant redwoods, *Sequoia sempervirens* is one of three redwoods species, the others being the giant sequoia (*Sequoia-dendron giganteum*) found in California's Sierra Nevada range and the much smaller dawn redwood (*Metasequoia*) found in China. Before being heavily logged, coast redwoods filled more than 2 million acres on the West Coast. Now they're limited mostly to a

handful of protected groves within a narrow, 470-mile-long band along the coast of California, from Big Sur to just beyond the Oregon border. Giant sequoias are larger in terms of total mass, but coast redwoods are the tallest living things, some reaching more than 350 feet in height and living more than 2,000 years.

Following a ridge that separates Half Moon Bay from Silicon Valley, we shared Skyline Boulevard (Highway 35) with scads of motorcycles, cars and bicycles, passing by Alice's Restaurant and Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve. As the day's temperature climbed, we removed our jacket liners, opened vents and lowered the VStream windscreen. Temperatures rose into the 90s in Silicon Valley, plummeted to the low 50s crossing the fog-shrouded Golden Gate Bridge, and spiked again to nearly 100 as we rode through the Sonoma Valley toward Ukiah. After creeping along several miles of dirt road to their hideaway home, we were greeted warmly by my uncle Lanny and his wife Debra and enjoyed cold showers, colder beers and grilled steaks.

From just north of San Francisco to the Oregon border, U.S. 101 is known as the Redwood Highway. From Ukiah, we continued north through the Russian River Valley and rode through redwood groves at Smithe Redwoods State Reserve, north of Leggett, and again at Richardson Grove State Park, north of Piercy, sections of the 101 that quickly narrow from a divided four-lane highway to a meandering two-lane road along the Eel River. North of Garberville we turned onto Avenue of the Giants, a 32-mile scenic road through Humboldt Redwoods State Park, home to 17,000 acres of old growth redwood forests, including 10,000-acre Rockefeller Forest—the world's largest contiguous old growth redwood forest. To stretch our legs, we hiked along Bull Creek and visited the Giant Tree, which at 371 feet was the tallest known coast redwood until several taller examples were discovered in 2006.

Late in the afternoon, we rolled into Eureka and checked into the Best Western Plus Humboldt Bay Inn, near Historic Old Town, our base camp for two nights. When I told Carrie that Lost Coast Brewery was less than a mile's walk from our hotel, she quickly saw through my ruse and realized that our two-up redwoods tour was, in fact, a microbrewery tour. (What can I say? I'm a hopelessly addicted hophead.) While relaxing after dinner, we were struck by an odd coincidence. We turned on the TV and discovered the *Family Guy* spoof of *Return of the Jedi*, the third movie in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, followed by the movie itself. The forest moon Endor scene where rebels and Ewoks battle the Empire aboard speeder bikes was

Left: Built by a lumber baron, redwoods and white mahogany were used to construct the Carson Mansion in Eureka.

Below: Paul Bunyan and Babe great visitors to Trees of Mystery in Klamath.

Below middle two: Lost Coast Brewery in Eureka soothed our tired bodies with tasty grub.



Left: Greg doing his best Bigfoot impersonation. There is plenty of old-time kitsch to lure tourists along the Redwood Highway.

ENTERING A REDWOOD GROVE IS LIKE ENTERING ANOTHER WORLD, ONE THAT IS DARKER, COOLER AND MORE MYSTERIOUS.

From coastal cool to inland inferno, we racked up 260 miles through small towns, vineyards, farms, crosswinds, RVs and SUVs on our way to the Best Western Plus in Salinas, conveniently located within walking distance of the Monterey Coast Brewing Company. With over 2,200 locations in North America, Best Western hotels are not only ubiquitous, more than 1,400 are "rider-friendly," offering goodies like bottles of water, wipe-down rags and motorcycle-only parking. The company's motorcycle-rider loyalty program is pretty generous, too.

Friday's freeway slog allowed us to begin our first full day at a relaxed pace. Plying our way through cold, damp fog, I



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Top right: The Chandelier Tree, a ride/drive-through tree in Leggett.

Below right: Givi's E55 Tech top trunk provided extra storage and a backrest for Carrie.

Below: HeliBars' Horizon ST handlebars offer unmatched adjustability for improved comfort.

filmed in Humboldt Redwoods State Park, where we'd been earlier in the day.

From Eureka, we rode north to Redwood National and State Parks, a contiguous area that includes Redwood National Park and three redwoods state parks: Jedediah Smith, Del Norte Coast and Prairie Creek. We rode through all of the parks, including the stunning 10-mile Newton B. Drury Scenic Parkway, hiked through Ladybird Johnson Grove and Cathedral Trees Trail, and admired herds of Roosevelt elk grazing in open meadows. Enormous moss-covered redwood stumps and dense vivid-green ferns captivated us. Redwoods are not only massive, they are able to grow almost on top of each other, creating a dense maze of towering trees that all but block out the sun. To cap off a wonderful day, we dined again at Lost Coast Brewery and watched the July 4th fireworks over Humboldt Bay.

All too soon we had to start heading south again, leaving many trails to be hiked and roads to be explored for another time. We backtracked to Leggett and slithered down 22 twisty, scenic, sparsely traveled miles of Highway 1 to the coast. South of Mendocino, we turned inland again onto Highway 128, through Navarro River Redwoods State Park and eventually back to U.S. 101. We checked into the Best Western Plus Dry Creek Inn in Healdsburg, and wouldn't you know it, Bear Republic Brewery was a short walk from the hotel. There's nothing like a Racer 5 IPA after a long, hot day of riding!

The Kawasaki Concours 14's combination of comfort, wind protection, power and smoothness made it the perfect choice for our journey. Handling, braking, shifting and throttle response were above reproach. Its 482 pounds of load capacity was more than enough to accommodate Carrie and me, the accessories and a full load of gear. Our accessorized Concours was a more functional, comfortable sport tourer, helping us log more than 1,600 miles in six days, averaging 39.2 mpg from the 5.8-gallon tank.

Our last day was brutally long,



Above: A breathtaking view from the Crescent Beach overlook near Crescent City.

Above middle: Best Western hotels were our home away from home.

Right: This is what comfortable two-up sport touring looks like, thanks to our accessorized Concours 14, HJC helmets with Chatterbox communicators and Olympia Moto Sports gear.

and at times, brutally hot. From Healdsburg to Ventura, with a detour onto Highway 1 through Big Sur to escape the inland heat, and to bag one more redwoods park (Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park), we racked up 460 miles and 10 hours in the saddle. In all, we rode and hiked through a dozen redwoods parks, as well as many other preserves and recreation areas. Humbled by the tallest living things on earth, we returned home with energized souls and quieted minds. 