

Outdoor

X4

THE *gear issue*



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HISEGA

in the hills

WORDS & PHOTOS | BILL & SUSAN DRAGOO





Unpaved byways abound in
the Black Hills National Forest.

HISEGA.

From the sound of the word and the location of the tiny community that is its namesake, one could be forgiven for thinking the “Hisega” label has Native American origins, but its surprising origins go back only about a hundred years. In a deep canyon west of Rapid City in the Black Hills of South Dakota, a rustic lodge bears the same name and welcomes guests seeking outdoor adventures.

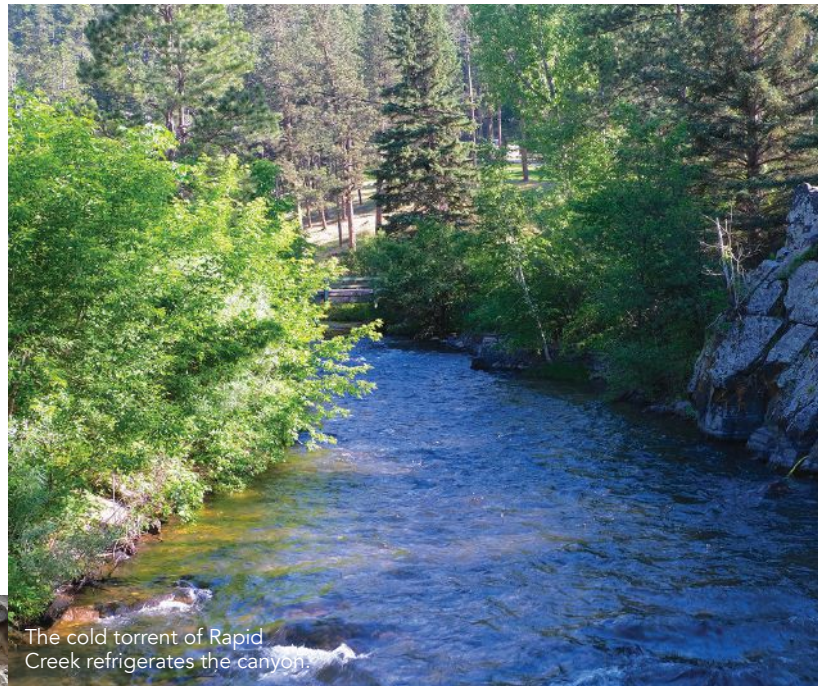
It was August of 1908 when a group of 17 young people rode the train from the capital city of Pierre for a vacation along the rushing waters of Rapid Creek. They called themselves the Pierre Party, and made camp in a canyon of tall pines and sheer cliffs. Taking day trips by railroad to see other sights in the Black Hills, they enjoyed the respite of the cool nights, and decided to make it a permanent camp, creating its title by taking the first letter of the given name of six of the women, which came out to be, "H-I-S-E-G-A." Helen, Ida, Sadie, Ethel, Grace and Ada. It was the historical equivalent of carving their initials in the bark of a tree, but perhaps with more enduring results.

Soon a two-story hotel was built on the banks of Rapid Creek alongside the railroad. Vacation cabins sprang up, and the village of Hisega even boasted a post office. The hotel still stands today, welcoming guests who enjoy the pleasures of good food and the soothing sounds of Rapid Creek lulling them to sleep in night air refrigerated by the cold torrent. It was a naturally air conditioned hotel in a time when such luxuries were rare, and remains so today.

Mike and Tara Flanery, the adventurous owners of Hisega Lodge, are Black Hills natives with expert knowledge of the best trails for motorcycling, hiking, and mountain biking. Our Hisega Lodge experience began in 2019, when we (Bill and Susan Dragoo/Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) took part in the Flanerys' inaugural adventure motorcycle immersive training tour. Building on the success of that first event, we returned in 2020 for another training tour, in which formal adventure motorcycle training preceded two days of enjoying the dual-sport trails of the Black Hills, with coaching along the way.

Stretching from western South Dakota to northeastern Wyoming, the dense pine forests of those "Black Hills" do indeed look black from a distance. They are also described as a 1.2-million acre "Island in the Plains" because of the manner in which they rise from the surrounding grasslands. Amid these "hills" are rugged canyons and gulches, open grasslands, and tumbling streams. Black Elk Peak, otherwise known as Harney Peak, is the highest point in the Black Hills and in South Dakota, at 7,242 feet of elevation, and is the highest point in North America east of the Rockies.

The region is home to Wind Cave National Park, Custer State Park, Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Monument, Spearfish Canyon, and, just west of the Wyoming border, Devil's Tower. East of Rapid City lies Badlands National Park, a type of terrain distinctly different from the Black Hills, with its quasi-lunar landscape. It's no wonder this place was selected for the well-known gathering of Harley-Davidson riders at nearby Sturgis. Twisty roads and a place called



The cold torrent of Rapid Creek refrigerates the canyon.





The 2020 adventure riding group prepares to leave Hisega Lodge.

I could have continued riding the way I'd always been doing it for the rest of my life and never learned what I learned yesterday morning. I didn't know what I didn't know."



Riders arrive at Slate Creek Dam for a lunch break.

"Badlands" seem tailor-made for the alter ego of those who aspire to their darker sides, even if only for a few days away from the daily grind.

On the first evening of Hisega's 2020 tour, however, the parking lot began to look like a BMW convention as the guests rolled in. The two-wheeled machine of choice was the BMW GS (standing for Gelände Strasse, meaning "land and street" in German), ranging in displacement from 800 to 1,250 cubic centimeters. Two Kawasakis, a Suzuki and a KTM rounded out the eleven-rider contingent, including tour leader Mike Flanery and Dragoo Adventure Rider Training's (DART) Bill Dragoo. And instead of dragging Main Street and roaming the blacktop in large groups, this small contingency of adventure seekers would be taking on dirt, gravel and unmaintained trails, far from all the fanfare. Textile gear with names like KLIM replaced bare skin for protection against the elements and an unintended meeting with terra firma.

Some of the guests were alumni from the 2019 Hisega event, others veterans of previous DART courses, and a few were brand new. In deference to COVID, meals were served out of doors, but spirits were undampened as everyone prepared for what was to come.

The first day of training was spent in the Shanks Quarry Trail area with braking drills, counterweight turns, loose hill starts, ruts, rocks, and steep up-and-down hills, getting the group warmed up for riding trails the following two days.

The next day, the riders were ready to roll, departing Hisega Lodge and starting with a few miles of asphalt to a short, "get your feet wet" trail, which provided a feel for the area's terrain. Then it was off to Silver City to escape from the pavement, with some water crossings and a scenic overlook near Hill City.

Slate Creek Dam provided a picturesque setting for lunch, then a stretch of gravel took the riders to Castle Peak campground, the road flowing along Castle Creek to a remote spot in a scenic canyon. There, the entourage paused as forest service personnel stocked the creek. It was an interesting process to watch, as hundreds of wiggling, silver trout were scooped from tanks with nets and released into their new home in the wilds.

The next destination was White Tail Peak, at 6,962 feet elevation. Following a rough climb, the route continued to Black Fox Campground, then Custer Peak, the last challenge of the day. The trail up Custer was rocky and steep in places, posing a fair test of skill for a moderately experienced adventure rider on a big bike. The riders displayed a wide range of abilities, as some struggled and others demonstrated their newfound knowledge with dexterity and determination.



Selecting a good line on a rocky path can be challenging.



Riders pause at a scenic overlook near Hill City.

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It was a tired but satisfied group which made the relaxed ride on pavement back to the lodge that night for an appetizing meal al fresco and a good night's rest.

The second day of touring first took the group on asphalt to Pactola Dam, which impounds Rapid Creek in the Pactola Reservoir, the largest and deepest reservoir in the Black Hills. Then they were off on southbound trails toward Sheridan Lake, working on hill climbing skills along the way with a short but steep hill climb and descent.

More trails filled the morning, with a brief but especially challenging rocky section, before heading to Hill City for lunch. A few riders were ready to call it a day after the morning on dirt, and chose to spend the rest of the afternoon on pavement while the remainder continued on the trail.

The off-pavement group traveled to the Jasper Burn area in the southern Black Hills, mostly on gravel, the bane of many an adventure rider. Traction is sketchy to non-existent. Riders must remain relaxed and be willing to let the bike move around while being mindful of the forces of kinetic energy, in tension against the laws of traction. "It's like riding on marbles," one rider lamented.

The road snaked its way across the Jasper Burn like an angry serpent draped over a bed of hot rock. Dragoo described the joy of embracing this sketchy terrain with a measure of skill: "It's the perfect place to air out my KTM 790 Adventure. I lean forward, chin over the steering head, roll on the power in third gear and press on the inside foot peg. The back wheel steps out smoothly, and the bike arcs a sweeping turn to the right, spraying gravel behind like the tail of a comet. The road reverses direction as I roll off the power. I downshift while braking, and switch pressure to the opposite peg. Back on the throttle, the bike sweeps left into another drifting turn. This is as close to flying as it gets while still on the ground."

After the sweeping, hilly traverse of the burn area, it was a short trip on connecting roads to Highway 16. Fueling up in Custer, riders enjoyed another mellow, scenic ride on pavement back to the lodge.

That evening before dinner, the group gathered for their DART "graduation." Friendships had been forged or strengthened, riding skills had been learned and honed, and the consensus was that it had been a splendid adventure, with many voicing a desire to return for a repeat in 2021.

Host and tour guide Mike Flanery sat in the riders' midst listening to comments, compliments and critique. And the common theme was, they had learned a lot. Justin chimed in with, "My favorite part was learning to ride much faster on my 1200 GS Rallye without fear of losing control. Just the information that was shared each time we stopped in the shade followed by immediate application

Jan Kessel and his "Green Hornet" Kawasaki Versys accelerate during braking exercises.



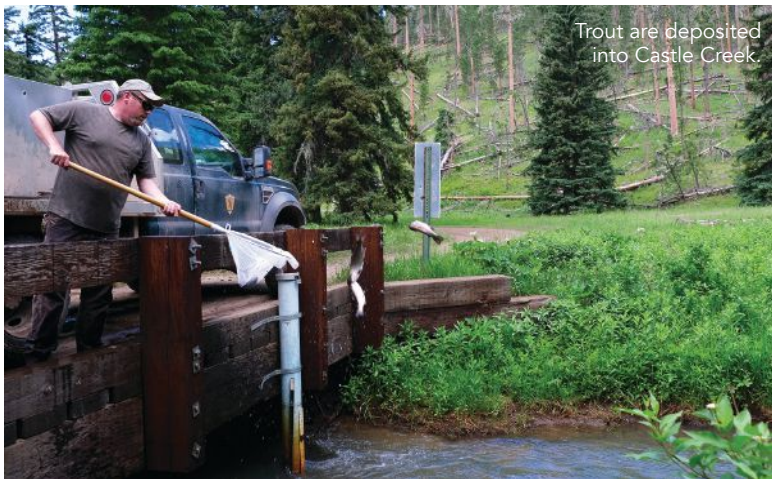
Bill Dragoo negotiates a rock ledge during training.



A deep mud pit offers Mike Flanery a challenge.



Riders plunge ahead into one of the trail's larger water crossings.



Trout are deposited into Castle Creek.



Motorcycles and wild flowers, an unusual but pleasing combination.

MOTORCYCLE TRAVEL BOOKS

by Sam Manicom



'8-YEARS AROUND THE GLOBE'

▶ PAPERBACK

▶ AUDIO

▶ KINDLE



'A UNIQUE & WONDERFUL ADVENTURE.' Ted Simon

Sam-Manicom.com

following Bill at a spunky pace over rocks, ridges, through ruts, and around sandy turns, was priceless. I could have continued riding the way I'd always been doing it for the rest of my life and never learned what I learned yesterday morning. I didn't know what I didn't know."

Another rider's observation spoke to the camaraderie among the group. Jerry Weinstock is new to riding motorcycles and has made it his mission of late to not only ride a motorcycle but also to become an adventure rider. "There are no jerks among us," he said.

The rest of the group echoed this sentiment about the support the riders displayed for each other as, one by one, they described what they had learned. The tour had begun with a skills refresher but ended as a moment of recognition of what the adventure lifestyle does for the spirit...especially kindred spirits. Hisega Adventure Lodge aspires to provide these experiences for all outdoor enthusiasts. Motorcyclists are only one genre catered to there. We are fortunate to have played a small part in their mission. ❖

Resources:

Hisega Adventure Lodge:

hisegaadventurelodge.com

Dragoo Adventure Rider Training:

billdragoo.com



Some of the rocky ascents are quite steep.

BILL & SUSAN DRAGOO

AUTHOR BIO

Bill and Susan embrace adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors they are hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill's not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle and Susan's on a break from leading women backpackers through the Ouachita Mountains, the two are exploring together in their Toyota 4Runner.

A desire to connect contemporary explorers with the places and people of the frontier led the Oklahoma-based couple to study and travel the region of Comancheria. Among his many pursuits, Bill is an MSF-certified riding instructor and recently kicked off an Adventure Riding Skills class near the Dragoos' hometown of Norman. Bill was a member of the 2010 BMW GS Trophy team, representing the United States in competition in Africa. Susan devotes much of her time to historical travel writing and outdoor photography.

