

# A Tale of Two-Fifties

Skippii

For my first “Ride Report/Writeup” with pictures, I wanted to do something a little unusual. And while there's nothing especially strange about where I went, it was made even more fun by taking a horribly unsuited motorcycle: A 2006 Kawasaki Ninja 250. I hadn't been out riding for a long time, due to a broken engine that I'd only replaced the day before.



And what better when to test out the new engine than with a hard ride through the mountains?

Joining me was my friend Rachel, on an identical Ninja 250 (only black in color). Just in case I'd screwed something up with the engine, it was nice to know I'd still have a way to get home should it explode deep in the mountains, where there is no cell phone reception.

After putting the last of the plastic on my bike (except the lowest), and removing the lowest fairing from Rachel's in order to gain an extra tiny bit of ground clearance, we headed west.

We got about ¼ mile before I turned back home because my clutch was slipping. A short minute later I'd tightened the cable, and we headed back west. Overall, not a great omen.

I live only 100 yards from Route 33, which goes through the mountains to West Virginia and is a favourite road for motorcyclists from all over the area. This map should give some indication as to why it is so popular among bikers, though it fails to indicate all the excitement from the deer, black bear, and fallen boulders frequently found on the road surface (I've previously had to stop twice to allow a bear with cubs to cross in front of me). The sheer cliffs only feet from the road add an entire other dimension to the thrill.

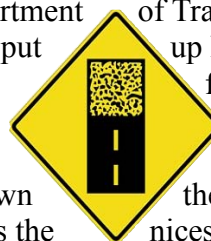


Having a new engine, and having not been riding for a while (save a short trip the day before), I'd planned to take it pretty easy on in these twisties. I thought I was doing so, so I was quite surprised when my left boot was scraping along the ground in a turn. Good that I haven't lost confidence in leaning the bike—and good that I am of course wearing my Teknic motorcycle racing boots, complete with toe sliders. Halfway through the twists, I stopped to wait for Rachel before turning onto a small



side road. Whatever pride I'd felt in those twists was quickly shot as I was passed by an old Goldwing rider grinding away his floorboards in every turn.

That side road was called Skidmore Fork. I suppose the department would be easier to name the road something like that than to put signs. In fact, there was only one road sign, and it came 50 feet later. After that, we were on our own. There weren't even signs naming the other roads and forks for the next 20 miles. The first time I saw that sign I couldn't figure out what it meant as I went by until I found myself riding on gravel a few yards down the road. But this time it wasn't gravel. It was dirt and sand. And it was the nicest road we were going to see for hours.



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It was also about this time that I realized that I'd left my maps at home. No worry, they weren't accurate, anyway, we discovered when we got home to check where we'd been.

Okay, so it was a bit muddy, and there were a few puddles and rocks, but it was fun!



As the road continued, the puddles got bigger.



And then the rocks got bigger, too.





And then we turned off the “main road”.



Actually, maybe that's not a road at all. Oops. Okay, back onto the dirt road, until we come to a fork. No signs, no map, no GPS, so we turn right. This turns out to be a beautiful road. It's extremely rocky, bumpy, muddy, and to make traction even worse, it's covered in leaves. But it is beautiful, and a heck of a lot of fun. All we know about this road is that it goes up. Slowly at first, but it seems to get steeper as we go along. It's not too long before we're regularly going next to the road instead of on it, either because it's significantly easier or to avoid obstacles or mounds of dirt we just couldn't make it over. After one particularly difficult section, we paused to rest and debated turning around. In the end we decided to keep going, and got back on our bikes. About ¼ mile later, the road got worse, even narrower, had cliffs on both sides, and several trees down across the road. No way to go through; we headed back.









Getting back proved to be even more an adventure. Rachel, having never been on dirt paths before, had particular difficulty in a couple of the technical parts, and I sometimes had to quickly jump off my bike to help her. Stupid me, being in a hurry, just hit the kill switch and jumped off---leaving the headlight on to drain the battery. Twice we had to take a 10 minute break while we waited (and prayed) that the bike would start again once the battery had rested. Luckily, it did.

The main trail then wound up the mountains, increasing in elevation until we were riding over patches of ice in the dirt, despite the mid-70 degree sunny weather. Still, the road was pleasant and the ride enjoyable. It eventually became obvious that this road would lead to the very top of the mountain—perhaps even to Reddish Knob, the suggestively named highest peak in the area. The earth at the flattened top of the mountain is a bright red color, and the lack of trees make satellite images show the area as a big red blob amongst the green trees. Oddly, the peak named Reddish Knob lies just to the southwest of this, in the middle of the green (Flagged in the corner of this satellite picture).



Sure enough, the path slowly got more and more red in color, and the trees thinned. And then as we took one final hill, the path started to head down. Had the batteries in my camera (Just put in 4 hours ago!) not died just before, I would have taken a picture. But alas, they were dead.

So we started our engines again, and headed downhill. Not long afterward, a thought came to mind: I had a camera on my cell phone. So we stopped again, and took some pictures while we were *almost* at the top of the mountain.





The ground at this point was some of the most spine-jarring of all we'd experienced so far. Large rocks were half-buried in hard-packed earth. Even with the very soft suspension on our bikes, standing up on the pegs is the only way to cope with the bumps. Unfortunately for me, I'd been standing up on the pegs earlier in the ride when I hit a particularly big bump, and actually cracked off my right side footpeg. Since standing on only the left peg tended to pull me off to the left, where a sheer cliff often awaited only inches

from the path, I had to just suck it up and sit down for most of this. My spine will never forgive me.

This may have been January, but the very exhausting technical riding and warm weather meant we were rather overdressed for the ride. My Air-flow armored jacket proved to be very valuable in keeping me cool. Luckily, I wasn't given the opportunity to test the armor on this ride! The light fleece I was wearing underneath proved to be too warm, and can be seen tied to the grab rail on the back of my bike.

After this stop, we went pretty much the whole way home without stopping. The ride down was quicker—for the first time, I was able to shift out of first gear and into second, and even third for some portions. Not too much further on, our trail brought us to a small but paved road, and after a brief discussion on which way was home, we continued downhill on another fun twisty road.



Before too long, the road led to civilization, and we were soon on familiar roads, coming back to my home in Harrisonburg. Just a mile from my house, we pulled up to a stoplight next to another Ninja 250 rider, and shared a wave before she turned off and we pulled into my street. Almost four hours after leaving, muscles and bones aching and vibrating, bodies hungry and wet, we pulled into my driveway to discuss options for lunch. We decided to go for pizza, but couldn't bring us to saddle our bikes again. I'm not sure I've ever enjoyed a motorcycle ride so much before, but I don't think I've ever enjoyed driving my car to lunch so much, either.