Foresthill to French Meadows Reservoir - Northern California
Mosquito Ridge Road – National Forest 96
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California Motorcycle Roads

RIDE IT on a PASHNIT TOUR: http://www.PashniTours.com
LENGTH: 36 Miles
PAVEMENT: Very good to reservoir, well-maintained, remote
CURVES: Smooth, tight, endless, long drop-offs
CONNECTS: Foresthill to French Meadows Reservoir
GAS: Auburn, Foresthill, Cool, Georgetown

Quick Ride: 600 Curves in 36 Miles on remote mountain road deep in the Sierra Nevada Mountains

Mosquito Ridge Road – Placer County, California

600 Curves in 36 Miles

Mosquito Ridge has long gained an air of infamy in local riding circles. This is a road quite unlike those that surround. And one could probably go even further and say its uniqueness is unparalleled for the Sierra Nevada Mountains. So, what's the big deal? For starters, Mosquito Ridge has length, at nearly 40 miles of salacious curves. Add in the scenery, drop-offs and a fantastic dosage of Sierra Nevada terrain- all the ingredients are there.

No peaky peaks here, just mountainous fingers and the pursuit of water. Like many of the Sierra Nevada's greatest roads, this one was laid down during those glorious reservoir building days in the 1950s and 1960s. French Meadows Reservoir being the prize on this ride, thirty-six short miles away- but getting there is what this ride is all about.

Brace yourself for some outstanding pavement quality, intense views, and a chance to see what all motorcyclists dream of. Few roads anywhere in the Sierra Nevada Range will compare. You have to see it to believe it. Long sweeping corners, left, right, left, hard hairpin right, then back left again, this one's got it all including straights and corners capable of sustaining a spirited pace.

Mosquito Ridge Road is found in the small mountain town of Foresthill. You'll need to ride Forest Hill Rd to get here. Exit Interstate 80 at the Auburn Ravine Bridge, the way is well-marked, and head for Foresthill. The bridge is worth a quick stop. At 730 feet, it's one of the tallest in the United States (and used as a backdrop for the opening stunt in the Vin Diesel movie 'Triple X'). To add some more twists and turns into your diet, from Highway 49. Ride south out of Auburn or north out of Cool, on Hwy 49 to the river bottom, and turn east, on via Old Foresthill Rd. Two miles east of the Auburn Ravine Bridge is Lake Clementine Rd, practically across the highway from Old Auburn Foresthill Rd. Lake Clementine Rd drops down into the canyon, although becoming so narrow at the bottom, it could be mistaken for a bike path, before opening up at the canyon bottom to a parking area. A variable radius arch dam built in 1939 holds back Lake Clementine. The dam is designed so that the river flows over its top, a waterfall is created that grows impressively large in winter and spring, when rain and snowmelt cause high river flows. Well worth the detour.

Keep in mind that Foresthill Rd a few years back was widened and straightened- creating a smooth and consistent cadre of curves. However, every time I ride it, I see a heavily patrolled speed trap of a road. One time, I came up this road at 6 AM, thinking I'd be safe before everyone else awoke. Lo and behold, there he sat, radar on.

Note that Foresthill Rd does continue eastward beyond Foresthill to Robinson Flat Campground, but the pavement ends here. Foresthill Rd continues as the unpaved Soda Springs road, but it's a poorly marked gravel/sand (up to 8 inches deep depending on time of year) all the way to Soda Springs Ski Hill and Old Highway 40. It's a common ride for dual-sport riders and jeepers.

If you ride it, but bring some detailed maps. Or, follow the most trodden path. Recently read a writeup by a fella who rode the distance on a stock Yamaha R1. He made it, but had no idea what he was headed into.

Despite my 6 am encounter with the local gendarme, this is a still great morning ride before everyone else wakes up. Close to Sacramento, say an hour's ride east to get there. You could run up for a quick ride and be back in time for lunch, or spend all day running around this region of the Sierra Nevada.

Bear in mind, you'll have the option to connect all the way south to Wentworth Springs Rd via the paved Eleven Pines Rd, or detour all the way up to Hell Hole Reservoir. Also, off this road is French Meadows Road down to the American River and one of PG&E's many hydroelectric plants. Otherwise, one could just ride the 36 miles out to French Meadows Reservoir, and ride it back.

Also note this region has some fantastic dirt bike trails, and it's not uncommon to see a train of pickups headed up to Foresthill OHV to do some dirt riding. One other point of interest on the ride up is when you reach Foresthill, you can also ride north on Yankee Hill Road (gravel) and connect back to Interstate 80.

Note that while Ponderosa Rd connecting back to I-80 near Weimar is not paved, a few miles eastward, Spring Garden Rd to Yankee Jim Rd is paved, however, Yankee Jim Rd into the canyon below is one of three roads that drops down into the canyon and back up to I-80, but also not paved. The only paved options that crosses over the river is Iowa Hill Rd at Colfax which connects through the gold rush town of Iowa Hill to Sugar Hill Reservoir and joins up with Foresthill Rd via NF 10 - Sugar Pine Rd 9 miles east of Foresthill.

What makes this Mosquito Ridge unique is the pavement quality, a key ingredient to carry speed and lean angle from corner to corner. Traffic is rare, as for most, this is a dead-end road headed into the Sierra Nevada. An occasional boat trailer, and every now and then a ranger. There are no towns, shops, mini-marts, nothing. As usual, beware of rocks on the road. The other thing you will need to be mindful of is cows, in spring, it’ll be snow.

A few years back, 15 or so, I was hanging out in Cool taking a breather and another bike pulled in. A bug-eyed Triumph Speed Triple, he was from Portland and looking for a thrill on a Saturday morning. Pleasantries exchanged, the real question was where are you headed next? Mosquito Ridge. Never heard of it. But has a nice ring to it. Let's ride. After we reached French Meadows Reservoir some 36 miles later- he was blown away, the pleasure he felt burst forth and he couldn’t stop smiling.

Saying most roads he was used to lasted 10 to 20 miles then you come to a town, straights, people, whatever. He had been riding for quite a few years, and had never ridden anything like this! Mosquito Ridge is like that.

Locals might think of this sort of thing as normal, but for riders that aren't familiar with our Sierra Nevada Wonderland, it's quickly apparent from their amazed grins rides like this are more unusual to them than common.

What was the ride like with the Speed Triple in tow? Well, since you asked. Seventeen miles east of Auburn, reach Foresthill, top off at the Valero, then hang a right on the well-marked National Forest 96 across the street from the Post Office. Sign says Oxbow Reservoir 12 miles, Big Trees Grove 25 miles, French Meadows Reservoir 36 miles. There is gas in Foresthill to top off before you head into the mountains.

Much of the town is just up ahead after the Mosquito Ridge turn off, and Main Street suddenly opens up to an 80-foot-wide road much like nearby Georgetown, a practice to prevent forest fires from sweeping through the town. Gold made Foresthill famous and by the 1860s, 125,000 feet of hard-rock tunnels spidered through the ground beneath and around the town. By the 1880s, $1 million in gold had been pulled from the Jenny Lind mine.

The Foresthill Divide Museum is one block north via Soap Street in the middle of town. The Forest Hill Divide Museum focuses on the history of the Foresthill area, including topics such as mining, geology, Native Americans, timber, and home life. The complex includes a working blacksmith shop, the original Foresthill Jail, and a 1931 USA Fire Truck. Look up hours before you visit as they are only open Saturday & Sunday afternoons May through October, but admission is free and you cannot visit these old mining towns without swinging by the local museum. Each one of these small gold-rush towns has one and they are always well-worth the visit.

 Mosquito Ridge begins its sinuous descent to the river valley below. Views you may have already figured out from the photos are an exercise in comprehending space as you gaze across the Sierra Nevada Foothills. I typically can't go far without wanting to stop and take a few snaps. The second date I ever had with my wife, I took her to Mosquito Ridge Rd, pulled over a few miles outside of town at a broad pull-out, spread out a blanket and we watched the sun go down over the Sierra Foothills.

Nine miles from Foresthill, you reach the bottom of Skunk Canyon and Circle Bridge, aptly named for its half-moon shape curling over the North Fork of the Middle Fork of the American River, the ride is just getting warmed up. Back up the hill weaving back and forth, at the first hairpin is Blacksmith Flat Rd – NF 23.

This is a paved road (mostly) down to the Middle Fork of the American River to Oxbow Reservoir and the power generating plant at the bottom. The river bottom is only a short distance so it's worth riding down and back up to check out the small reservoir. NF 23 reaches Indian Bar Rafting Access 1.5 miles from Mosquito Ridge Rd. However, a left turn (east) on Rubicon Rd takes you the other direction past Oxbow Reservoir to Ralston Campground and the Ralston Powerhouse. Ralston Powerhouse is located at the lower level of a multiple series of lakes and underground tunnels built for power generation decades ago, the massive penstocks visible in the hillside originating somewhere above.

Rubicon Rd at Ralston Powerhouse continues out of the canyon climbing steeply via an 18% grade through a series of eight switchbacks and is signed as NF 23 or FR 14N25. This southern leg is paved all the way to Eleven Pines Rd to create a circuitous route when combined with Mosquito Ridge Rd. 23 Miles beyond the Ralston Powerhouse, the road Y’s here and has a name change to Ramsey Crossing Rd for the paved southern leg of the Y. The northern leg of the Y is French Meadows Rd - Ralston Ridge - FR 14N22 and provides the most direct route to French Meadows Reservoir but is not paved. French Meadows Rd has some terrific views atop Ralston Ridge of the rugged Middle Fork of the American Canyon, but it sticks to the motif of being a one-land dirt fire road that only lasts 8.5 miles till it reaches pavement of Eleven Pines Rd just north of the Hell Hole Reservoir junction.

Once you’ve ridden out of the canyon and continue on Ramsey Crossing Rd, the pavement is poor, but it’s better than dirt. 37 Miles from Ralston Powerhouse, Ramsey Crossing Rd Y’s again, stay to the left to continue on Blacksmith Flat Rd – FR 14N25 to make it to Eleven Pines Rd – FR 14N08 - NF 2 just 3 miles away. Exploring the Y to the south, the road is signed as Ramsey Crossing Rd – FR 13N65 and takes you to the actual Ramsey Crossing which is a small bridge across Long Canyon east of Jerry Canyon that continues south curling around 5302 ft Devil Peak and hooking up with Eleven Pines Rd 2 miles later, as far as I know, this is paved.

The Mosquito Ridge Rd to Rubicon Rd to Ramsey Crossing Rd to Eleven Pines Rd combination is shortcut over to Eleven Pines Rd from Mosquito Ridge Rd bypassing French Meadows Reservoir and Hell Hole Reservoir. Reaching this same junction via French Meadows Reservoir amounts to more miles but these roads are so unused and remote, the going may be so slow, it’s unclear how much time that would save you. Prudence dictates do your homework on these roads before riding them, they are remote, unknown to most and there is likely no cell signal to call for help. Happy exploring. Easy to get lost, or at least have no idea what road you're on.

My first time back in the Ramsey Crossing region was much like that, I was plain lost and had to ride till I came up on something I recognized. Not a good idea if your gas is running low though. Also note that while riders often think in terms of road names, these forest roads will have as many as three name designations.

A common name, such as Mosquito Ridge Rd, and a National Forest number, such as NF 96. Other rides they'll have 5-character Forest Rd designation such as Forest Road 23S16. It's worth mentioning as the road signs you'll encounter may use any one of them. The signs also come and go through the years and at times are so full of bullet holes, they may be difficult to read. Every couple years, the Forest Service will replace the signs.

Let’s backtrack to the Blacksmith Flat Rd - Forest Road 23 hairpin just beyond Circle Bridge. Mosquito Ridge Rd is now atop the actual Mosquito Ridge and cuts through solid rock walls that occasionally drop truck-sized rocks onto the road. The views of El Dorado Canyon below are stunning, expansive and worth a quick stop to take in the sense of space. You’ll be able to look directly down on Circle Bridge before continuing up the ridgeline.

The next six miles is the sequence that'll jump start your heart. This is also the section probably most photographed and recorded on video. With steep mountainside drop-offs, Mosquito Ridge is cut right through the rock, and the sheer walls often produce a fresh crop of rocks on the road so be watchful.

Sixteen miles outside of Foresthill, the canyon wall portion finally ends as Mosquito Ridge Rd runs through a sweeping 180-degree hairpin past Big Oak Flat Rd (gravel, gated) and begins to lazily curve along the top of the ridgeline passing by Peavine Rd, another dirt fire rd. Peavine connects to a labyrinth of fire roads to the north in the Tahoe National Forest.

Finally, at Interbay Rd, the ride settles down to a relaxed pace atop the ridgeline curving through some very fun twists and turns. At several places, the ride pokes out of the forest exposing broad expansive views to the south across the ridgelines, just beautiful.

 Note that Interbay Rd heads south off the ridgeline to the canyon below to the Middle Fork Powerhouse power generating plant. (The adjacent hilltop is appropriately named the End of the World). The road is paved to the powerhouse but it’s a dead end, there is no other road continuing up the other side of the canyon, you’ll need to back track if you wanted to take a look at the powerhouse but this stretch is paved.

Riding eastward beyond Interbay Rd on Mosquito Ridge, there is Spruce Creek Rd – NF 16, an unpaved fire road that loops around to Big Tree Grove Forest.

Beyond Interbay Rd, a few miles of straights finally appear. However, before and after are larger than life sweepers nearly 200 degrees around. Now picture that back to back.

At the 25-mile mark from Foresthill and half-way to French Meadows Reservoir is a sweeping hairpin where Spruce Creek Rd (NF 16) meets back up with Mosquito Ridge, a turn here onto Jarvis Rd will take you .4 miles to the Placer County Big Trees Grove and a short distance beyond is the Big Tree Grove Campground. The entire grove, six living trees and two fallen giants, exists on about two acres in the middle of a 160-acre recreation area of the Tahoe National Forest, a demonstration forest that is the northernmost grove of giant sequoias in the Sierra Nevada. With the idea being to grow new sequoias, two backup plantations have recently been established near the grove. Propagated from cuttings at the USDA Forest Service's Chico Tree Improvement Center, 10 tiny sequoias are just now pushing their roots into Sierra Nevada soil.

There's a small parking lot here .4 miles off Mosquito Ridge, and sometimes used as a rest point for motorcyclists and car clubs. The six sequoias are not exceptionally large, the biggest is 12 feet in diameter and 250 feet tall, for larger sequoias, best to skip south to Arnold to Calaveras Big Trees State Park along Highway 4 or Sequoia National Park south of Yosemite NP.

A few miles beyond the Big Trees Grove is Robinson Flat Rd - NF 43 which is an unpaved fire road over 7182 ft Robinson Mountain and connecting back to Robinson Flat Campground at the terminus of pavement on Foresthill Rd. Robinson Flat Campground is 7 family sites and 7 equestrian sites located 27 miles northeast of Foresthill at an elevation of 6,800 feet.

Mosquito Ridge after Robinson Flat Rd begins a slow descent to French Meadows Reservoir, el 5263 ft through several sweeping hairpins. The 1408-acre reservoir was completed in 1964 and is only nine miles from the crest of the Sierra Nevada range. Most of the water is released to the French Meadows Powerhouse on the north shore of Hell Hole Reservoir to the south via an underground tunnel.

The McGuire Trail, French Meadows area, is a part of the infamous Western States Trail winding through timber and following the north shore of French Meadows Reservoir. This short trail is a moderate climb to the top of Red Star Ridge offering scenic views of the area and is easily enjoyed by the entire family. Horseback riding is outstanding on this trail as well. There is also camping along the lake.

If this is your first time on Mosquito Ridge, consider that few roads compare to this stretch of pavement. The one road that's similar is likely Cottonwood Road by Sonora, Mammoth Pool Road near Nork Fork or Angeles Crest above Los Angeles. You also must ride north 100 some miles and ride the Oroville-Quincy Highway, more traffic, but just as good.

Can you see what's around the corner in the photo above? I couldn't either. But just in case you really wanted to know, he's pictured at right. Forget all those stories of deer you've heard. This region is open range, and Cows wander freely in these parts. I've had them in blind corners like this one, walking down the middle of the road, or just plain hanging out nearby. And while I've yet to hear a story of a motorcyclist hitting a cow (bear or deer is more likely), they are not the brightest of animals.

Also note that law enforcement is spotty and seems to come and go through the years. Catch phrases like 'directed enforcement' were created because of riders coming up to roads like this and crashing. No one crashes, the cops stay home. Squid behavior requires the use of the local paramedics, and gendarmes come to see what the problem is. Over a decade ago, my email box was full of riders lamenting the draconian policing of this road. New season starts up, and nothing. Take that with a grain of salt. The years go by, riders come and go, but the road remains the same, always here, always waiting for you to enjoy it.

The road reaches French Meadows Reservoir some 600 curves and 36 miles later after a 4000-foot elevation change. You can continue to head south across the earthen dam onto French Meadows Rd. Most of the campgrounds are located one the east end of the lake and the road to reach them is on the southern end of the earthen dam. Continuing south, the road name changes to Hell Hole Reservoir Rd, then Eleven Pines Rd to reach Wentworth Springs back to Georgetown. If you like backroads, goat trails, forest road sort of rides, you'll like French Meadows Rd, it has some great views just south of French Meadows Reservoir, oddly enough because the Penny Pines Fire in 2001 wiped out the forest in the region.

Note any road over 4000 feet in the Sierra is over the snow line in winter so snow may block the road and your ride may be limited in winter months extending all the way to Memorial Day depending on the winter.

Continuing south from French Meadow Reservoir is the paved Eleven Pines Road which is little more than a forgotten forest road. The road has closed several times in recent years due to heavy rains that washed away the road, however, Eleven Pines is essential to keep open for fire-fighting and taking it south will link over the Rubicon River and connect back to Wentworth Springs Rd. This region was extensively burned by the King Fire in 2014. In two weeks, the fire razed nearly 100,000 acres of forest originating from the edge of Pollock Pines. Prevailing winds blew it away from the town, saving the town of Pollock Pines from the fate of Paradise where in late 2018, the entire town of Paradise with 25,000 residents burned to the ground in the Camp Fire.

The King Fire burned mostly national forest land and winds pushed the flames across the Rubicon Canyon all the way to Hell Hole Reservoir with Eleven Pines Rd being in the center of the burned area. Vast tracts of forest on both sides of Wentworth Springs Rd were burned east of Stumpy Meadows Reservoir. In the aftermath of the 2014 King Fire (which was started by arson, the suspect caught, convicted and sentenced to 20 years in jail and ordered to pay $60,000,000 in restitution), squabbles began regarding salvage logging, replanting and how to manage the forest. You may see salvage logging in this region despite most commercial logging ending in the early 1990s when the majority of the local mills either went bankrupt or closed down. Critics are quick to point out larger more devastating fires started when the commercial logging ended.

Eleven Pines Road ranges from poor in condition to smooth at times through non-descript forestland traversing two canyons. It finally descends to the Rubicon River then reaches Wentworth Springs Rd. Turning east will take you to Ice House Rd. West, back to Georgetown which is a quaint gold rush town (gas and food) on Hwy 193. This loop will take several hours, it's all paved but after Mosquito Ridge, it's rather slow going. Also note there are numerous unpaved forest roads besides the one listed here for all the dual-sports. Enjoy.

And come ride this road on the all new Mosquito Ridge Pashnit Motorcycle Tour.

Other Rider Thoughts:

Webmaster Note: Scott sent me this email: "Just finished reading your notes on Mosquito Ridge Road, and I do have to add something. The section of road from I-80 to Forest Hill has been heavily patrolled in the past by everything from local sheriff's to CHP. They can be real sticklers about the speed to, my wife (on a Triumph Legend) and a friend of ours (on a GSX1000R) tickets for doing 65 in a 55.

The locals are pretty good sports about it though, they'll stop and warn you if you're pulled over taking in the vista's, tell you about where the radar traps are set up that day, and flash their head lights in warning if they don't see you stopped. As funny as it sounds, the last time I did that road and gassed up at that station in Forest Hill, the kind lady behind the counter took no less than three calls from people wanting to know if the law enforcement officers were out in force or not that day."

-Scott Caspe

Glen sent me this comment: Wow, I just got back from Mosquito Ridge. Are you kidding me? That was the most fantastic 36 miles of riding I think I have ever had. Not a car on the road. In fact, on the way out to French Meadows there were zero cars. On the way back, we had to pass two but that was it. There were some motorcycles on the road but a lot fewer than I thought. Those on the road were pretty advanced riders. One guy had titanium knee sliders and was sparking his way up the hill. Way cool! Anyway, thanks for the work you have put in to your site and thanks for showing me the key to happiness in my backyard. I love Northern California!

-Glen
Roseville, CA

To the Dual Sport Riders:

I have discovered a new world...dual-sports. I picked up an old '89 Honda NX650 trailie on the cheap, threw on some DOT-rated knobbies, bought some motocross safety gear, and hit the woods. WOW! This is fun, oh so fun. I leave Travis AFB, roll up I-80 to Foresthill. But do I turn right onto Mosquito Ridge Rd this time? Oh nooo, I ride 10 more minutes and turn left into the Foresthill OHV area. About 100 minutes on pavement so far.

French Meadows Reservoir- Thanks to Curtis for the Pic!!

A few hours later I arrive back on pavement, with arms shaking from exertion, a mud-caked motorcycle, and a smile so wide I think I pulled a jaw muscle. I have just ridden a 340-pound trail bike into the deep dark mysterious world of dirtbikes. Snow, ice, thick mud, jumps, boulder, jagged rocks, giant roots, trees....all were encountered with glee.

There are 80 miles of trails in the Foresthill OHV...I don't think I've ever encountered a better case of "your tax dollars at work." Bless the folks who manage the Foresthill OHV! And there are LOTS more OHV areas scattered all over California? Damn I love this state.

Rick Williams

Travis AFB, Calif.

View at French Meadows Reservoir

While back in 2004...

The Auburn Sentinel ran a front-page article on motorcyclists on Mosquito Ridge. They focused on speeding and frequent crashes and injuries. The reporter talked to one emergency responder who that day rescued a high school friend who was hurt in a crash. Your site was briefly mentioned (but not by name, if I recall) as contributing to higher numbers of cyclists.

Easter Sunday, I decided to take advantage of the perfect weather and headed from Grass Valley to Foresthill. It's just over an hour on the back roads I like: Dog Bar to Placer Hills road, out of Auburn on the 49, drop down to the river, don't turn across the bridge, but continue past the confluence where the road becomes Old Foresthill, up the hill, past the entrance to the OHV area until you meet Foresthill Road proper.

Nice and easy out to Foresthill (three CHP in 15 miles), where I stopped at the gas station next to Robber's Roost. Three riders there said they hadn't been out yet, and only a couple bikes had gone by. Off to Mosquito Ridge road.

Five minutes later I got nicked going 46 in a 40 at the 4.5 mile mark by a ranger with a serious attitude problem. He was stopped in the middle of the road ahead of me waiting.

And man, you'd think I killed his dog by the glares he gave me. Respectful "yes sir", "no sir" answers got condescension and antagonism. He was in my face like he was trying to pick a fight. What a prick. Although he was a bad example of what happens when you give an asshole a gun, he let me go with a warning. I'd rather the little peckerwood gave me a ticket. Anyway, I continued to the 26-mile mark (at the posted limit of course) without further incident. A few points found some rocks on the road, and snow blocked one lane for a hundred yards or so at two or three spots beyond mile 24.

I turned around after stopping briefly at Big Trees picnic grounds, where the latrines are closed for winter, and the water is still shut off. On the return, I saw two forest service trucks shooting radar and a CHP passed me headed outbound. All of them were from about mile 15 and in. Foresthill road back to Auburn saw another three CHP cars. None of them were keen (thankfully) on making U-turns.

I concentrated the afternoon on my own Nevada County roads: Wolf, Lime Kiln, McCourtney, Indian Springs, Bitney Springs, Rough and Ready Highway, Pleasant Valley, etc. Beautiful rides those, and law enforcement is both less concentrated and more reasonable.