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July 2007
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Tim Carrithers



If This Suit Could Talk

It would probably scream or take me to court. Thankfully, most of the genuinely actionable escapades implicating my Aerostich Roadcrafter are either purely circumstantial or safely outside the statute of limitations. Considering that 97 percent of the 1800 or so miles I cover every month are inside motorcycle haberdashery's answer to Karl Elsener's original Swiss Army knife, the suits accumulate stories quicker than L.A. freeway grunge.

Mine started 24 years ago in the CSUC library with a tiny black-and-white ad in the back of *Cycle* magazine. "Beyond Leathers," it said, above a drawing that looked like something Boba Fett might slip on for a quick scrape around The Great Pit of Carkoon. I wasn't the only one having a hard time figuring out what to make of this getup.

In the beginning, Andy Goldfine just wanted an outfit he could commute in. "I wanted something I could wear over my regular work clothes, something like James

Bond peeling off his wet suit on the beach in *Dr. No* and walking away in a tuxedo, but for my banal life," he says. "It had to be waterproof, but I didn't want to show up all sweaty on hot summer days. It had to be lightweight enough to wear every day, with a zipper that made getting in and out easy. And it had to be tough enough to survive a slide down the road without getting torn up.

"I thought if we could sell 100 suits a year at \$300 apiece I'd make a living at this," Goldfine recalls. "The worst-case

"ONE SUPERMARKET BOX-BOY WAS POISED TO DIAL 911 BEFORE HE DEDUCED I WAS STUFFING GROCERIES INTO A SUIT SPREAD-EAGLED IN THE PARKING LOT."

scenario, I'd end up in a basement somewhere with three other people making suits for the 11 riders in America who wanted one. The best-case scenario was suddenly there would be a practical way to go back and forth to work on your motorcycle.

People would look at the Ford in their garage and say, "What do I need this for? I'm riding." I would be hailed as the next Henry Ford for putting everyone back on two wheels." Reality, as usual, was somewhere in between.

Cordura nylon, Gore Tex and Kevlar hadn't been around all that long. No one had combined them quite this way before, so even magazine editors were a bit perplexed in the beginning. Because the original Roadcrafter was such a radical departure from normal early-'80s gear, Goldfine dealt directly with potential customers: "I had to tell people what it was and how it worked." The next step was a ride from Duluth to L.A. to pitch the magazines.

"The suit turned out to be ideal for guys with your job," Goldfine told me, "or anybody who rides a motorcycle back

and forth to work." Especially in Southern California where you go from cold and damp on the way to work to hot and dry on the way home. It wasn't long before editors all over the world fell in love with the suit—so much so that art departments from L.A. to Tokyo got sick of seeing them in photos. The motorcycling public finally caught on. Sales went from about 300 suits in 1983 to 1000 every year for the next 10 years to about 2000 per year today. That adds up to maybe 30,000

suits that spend more time on a motorcycle than in a closet.

Spend a few thousand miles inside one and you know the Roadcrafter isn't perfect. You get a little cold with too few layers underneath or a little hot with too many. Heavy rain will infiltrate the crotch after 30 minutes or so, suggesting some sort of bladder-control problem to the suggestible half of a blind date who isn't actually blind. Innocents in grocery stores or hotel elevators may assume the bilious hi-viz yellow model means you work for the fire department. In this case, engaging coeds on spring break are preferable to the cantankerous pensioner whose tool shed went up in last week's controlled burn. One supermarket box-boy was poised to dial 911 before he deduced I was stuffing groceries into a suit spread-eagled in the parking lot, not mugging some unconscious form crumpled next to his motorcycle.

More than anything else, the Roadcrafter is a tool for collecting the sort of experiences only motorcycles create and filtering out most of the static: hypothermia, heat stroke, road rash and bug guts, to name a few. There are other defensive perimeters for flesh and bone in an increasingly unfriendly world, but none have been proven as many times in as many places over as many miles as the suit that lets me zip up and roll out of here 30 seconds after typing that last word. Like the guy who came up with the idea in the first place, it's become an old friend.

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