

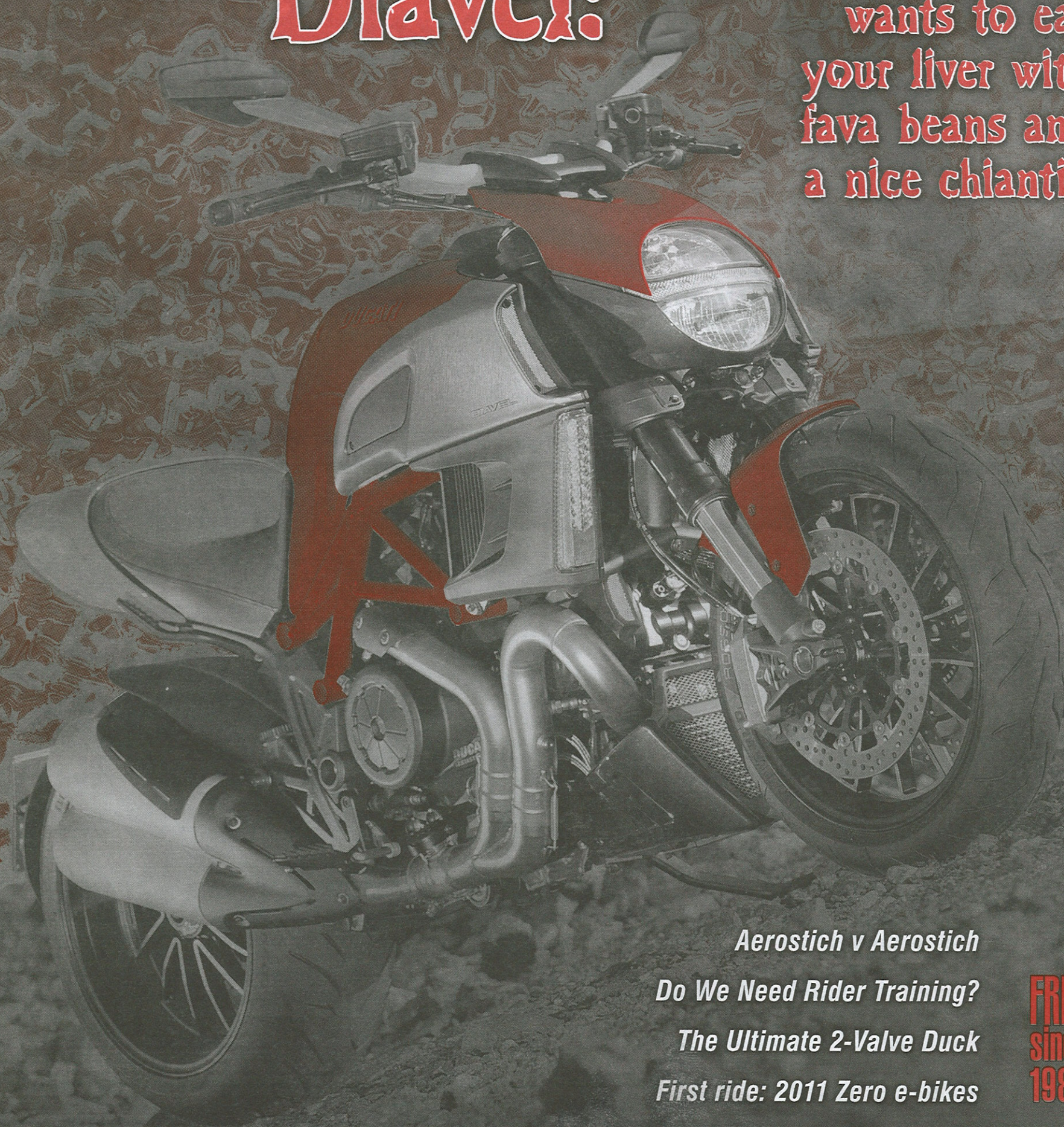
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Aerostich: Roadcrafter or Darien?

Life's full of hard choices, but this is one we all should have.

By Bob Stokstad, words and photos

Next to the motorcycle itself, nothing affects your enjoyment of riding, your comfort and your safety as much as the gear you wear. A poorly engineered, cheaply fabricated suit may be fine on a mild, dry summer day,

but it will make you miserable in wet or cold weather, and can greatly inflate your medical bills when you crash. But I suspect you know all this, wise reader, and that you've decided to spend what it takes to wear the right stuff. The only question is, what to buy.

No doubt before you make a commitment, you'll do far more research and study than I did some 25 years ago. Back then, I looked around at what the experienced, hard-core long-distance riders I'd met were wearing. They were role models for me, and if they'd been wearing buffalo robes, I would have as well. But they had "Roadcrafters," bought mail-order from someplace called Aerostich in the Midwest. I ordered one and haven't worn any other suit since, my present one being the third I've owned and, like the others, it'll

last at least 10 years. I love to tell people what a great invention is the Roadcrafter: it doubled my motorcycle-riding pleasure.

But the Roadcrafter, believe it or not, may not be the best suit for you. There's another one, similar in some respects (Goretex-backed nylon-woven fabric, protective armor and pads, many pockets, and Aerostich's signature reflecting stripes)

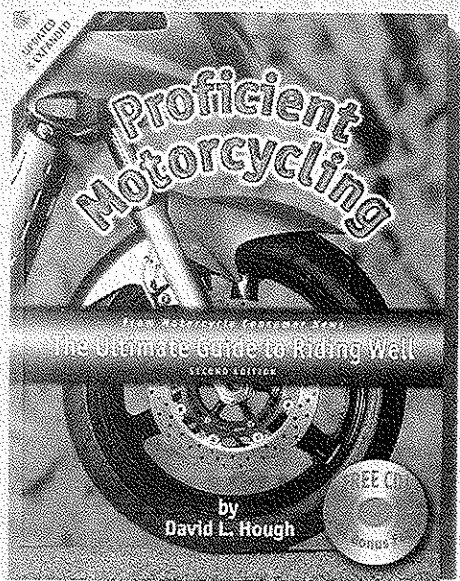
but of a different construction and degree of water resistance. It's called the Darien, after that swampland between Panama and Columbia that is the missing link in the Pan-American Highway. As you've guessed, the Darien was designed with the adventure-tourer in mind. The Roadcrafter, as everyone knows, was originally developed as a commute-suit, something wear over a button-down shirt and slacks



On the Nuerburgring's Nordschleife, Germany.



DarenLight on the left, worn by Erik Stokstad, next to his old man in the Roadcrafter.

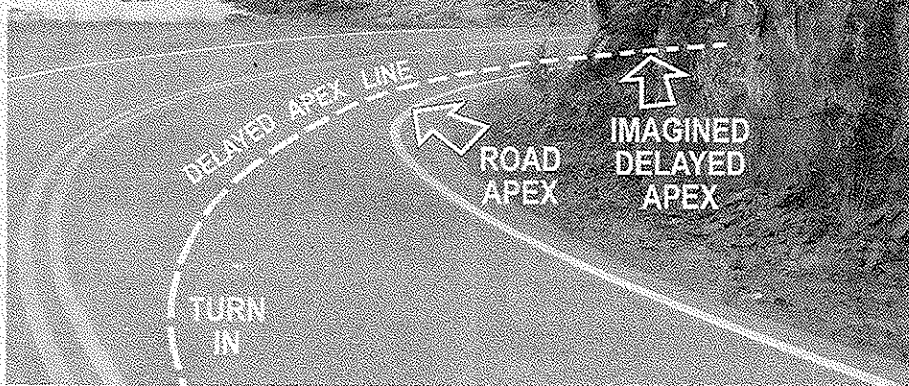


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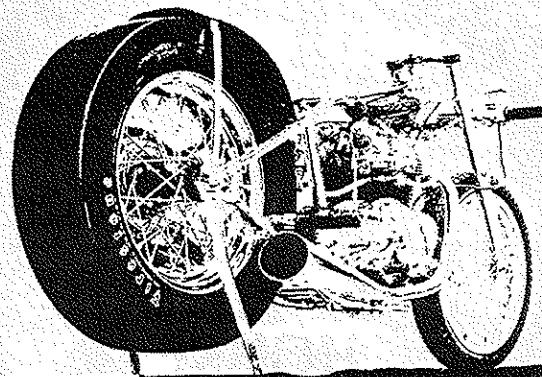
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The Aerostich Shopping Experience

After years of blasphemous waffling, I recently joined the church of the Aerostich Roadcrafter one-piece suit. While the quality of an Aerostich suit is undeniable and well documented, I'm here to testify on the remarkable experience of buying one.

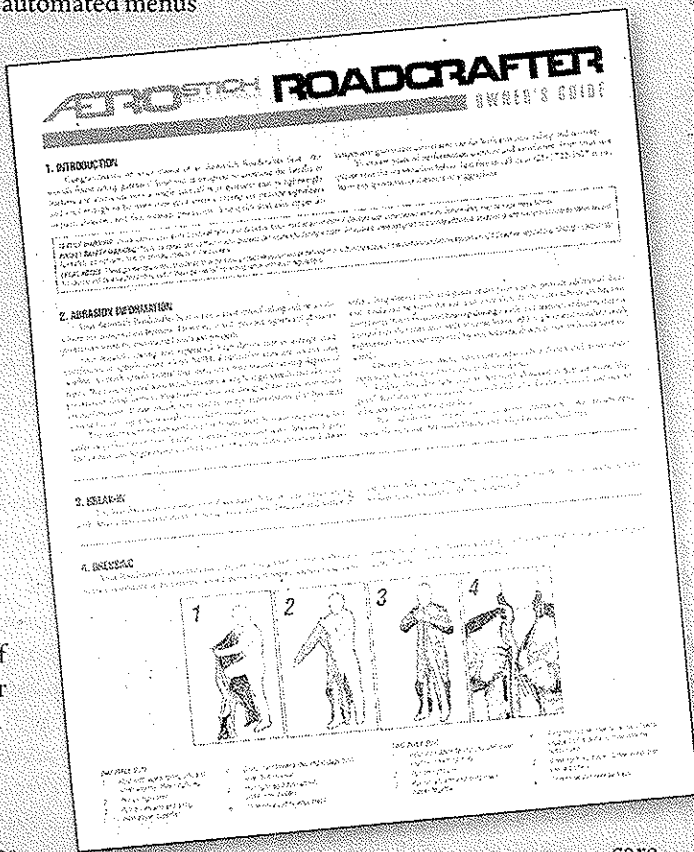
It starts when you call their toll-free number and you're directly connected to a real, live human. No automated menus (which invariably have the gall to suggest you hang up and instead "visit our website"), no overseas call center, and no holding whatsoever. Marvelous.

Aerostich's old-fashioned approach to customer service is especially valuable because, as I discovered, properly fitting a Roadcrafter is a fine art. After talking through my measurements, type of bike (because a cruiser rider's suit would need to fit differently than a sportbiker's), and whether I planned to do much winter-clothes layering under the suit, they recommended a size 42L. To be completely sure, they even offered to send me a try-on suit and stressed the importance of getting on the bike with it on. I gladly accepted and the brand new trial suit arrived a week later.

The try-on suit fit exceedingly well right out of the box. The only issue was something I invariably experience with motorcycle gear—as a result of my poor posture the shoulder armor wasn't positioned quite far enough forward to cover the front portion of my shoulders. Out of curiosity I called Aerostich to see if there was anything they could suggest to remedy this. Sure enough, they had a standard alteration that

covered it. I added this alteration to my order, returned the try-on suit with the pre-paid shipping label they'd kindly included, and awaited the arrival of my custom beauty.

When it showed up I relished in the unpacking process. The instructions alone were worth celebrating. My Dad always championed any product with thorough, understandable instructions. He would be an evangelist for the Roadcrafter's instructions, as they cover every aspect of functionality,



care, and the all important how-to-don the suit illustrations. While unpacking I noticed another customer-service magic touch: A thank you note, hand-signed by all five employees in Minnesota who'd made my suit. When you sign your name to something you're responsible for, chances are you're proud of your craftsmanship.

Indeed, the suit is truly a beacon of quality. The fit is precise, seams are sharp with no errant threads, and the functionality is an encyclopedia of innovations gathered from real riders. What was a delightful buying experience will undoubtedly carry over into many spiritual miles of riding in my new 'Stich.

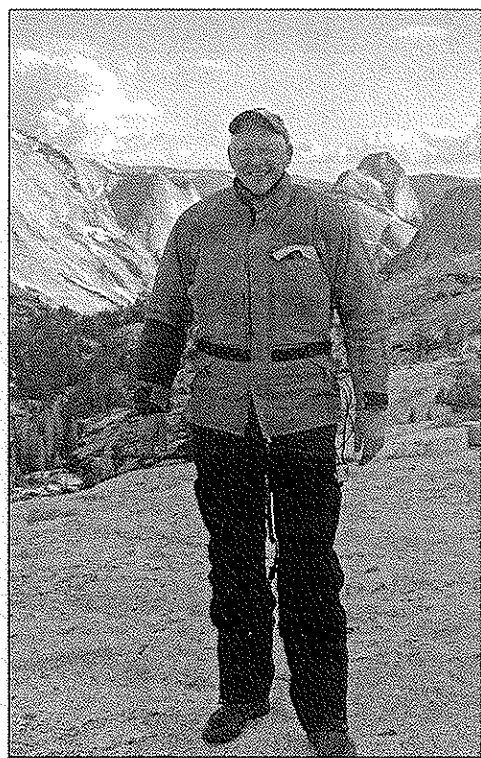
—Courtney Olive

while riding to work. But the decision of which to buy isn't so obvious, as you'll see Darien suits everywhere, too, not just on the road to South America.

For a year, now, two suits hang in my garage, next to the bike. Each morning I ride (300+ days a year) I have to make a decision—which to put on? The Roadcrafter or the Darien? How that decision is made (it's not a coin-flip) and my riding experience with the two suits may be of help when you come to that line on the order form where you'll write either Roadcrafter

or Darien. Of course, if you've got a big tax refund coming you could just order both and jump ahead to the next article in *CityBike*. It wouldn't be a bad decision.

The Darien is actually waterproof. Not long after I received it, a winter storm blew in from the Pacific and it was raining buckets that night. For no other good reason I suited up and went for a ride. For hours after the point where, in the



All wired up and ready to go. The cables connect a thermo-controller to a Kanetsu AirVantage electric liner under the Darien. Yosemite.

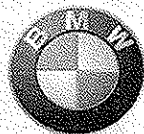
Roadcrafter, I would have felt that cold wet trickle-down in my crotch, I was still snug and dry. The suit is waterproof. I can't think of any other way to describe its performance that evening. My comfort level was also boosted because I was wearing the TL Tec Windblocker Fleece Liner, which zips into the Darien jacket, and a Kanetsu AirVantage electric liner under that. Test passed.

On a typical morning, it's cool and there's a light drizzle, and the weather report says

it's not going to get any worse. In half an hour I need to be in San Francisco and will have a couple of places to visit before heading back across the Bay Bridge to Berkeley. It's a no-brainer. Pull on the Roadcrafter—don't need the Darien for this trip. Putting on either of these suits is not rocket science (who has trouble pulling on a pair of pants?) but the Roadcrafter is miraculously quick and easy to put on. You literally step into it,

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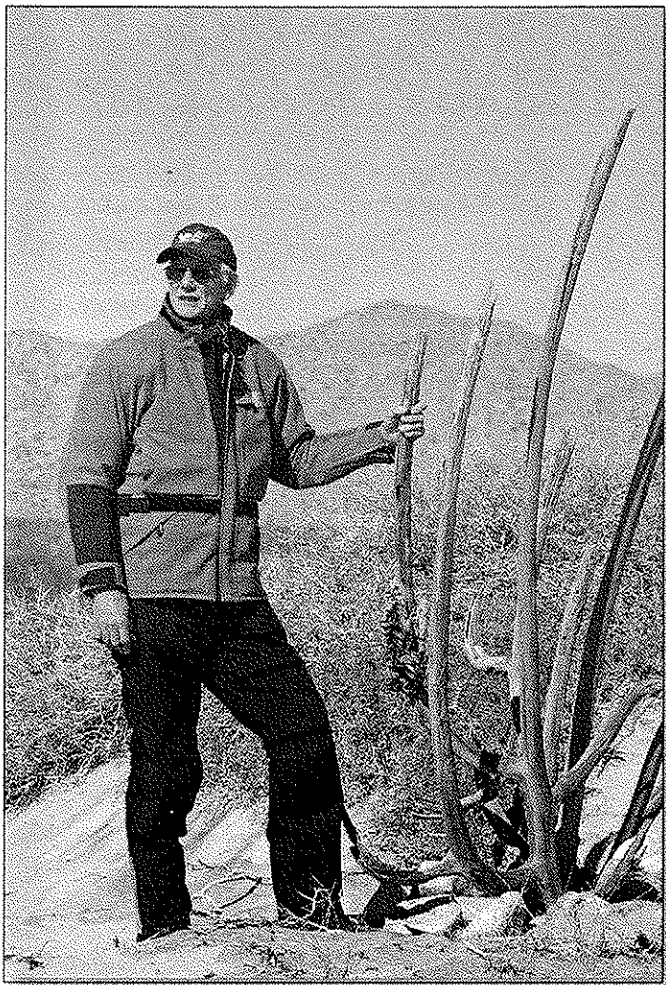
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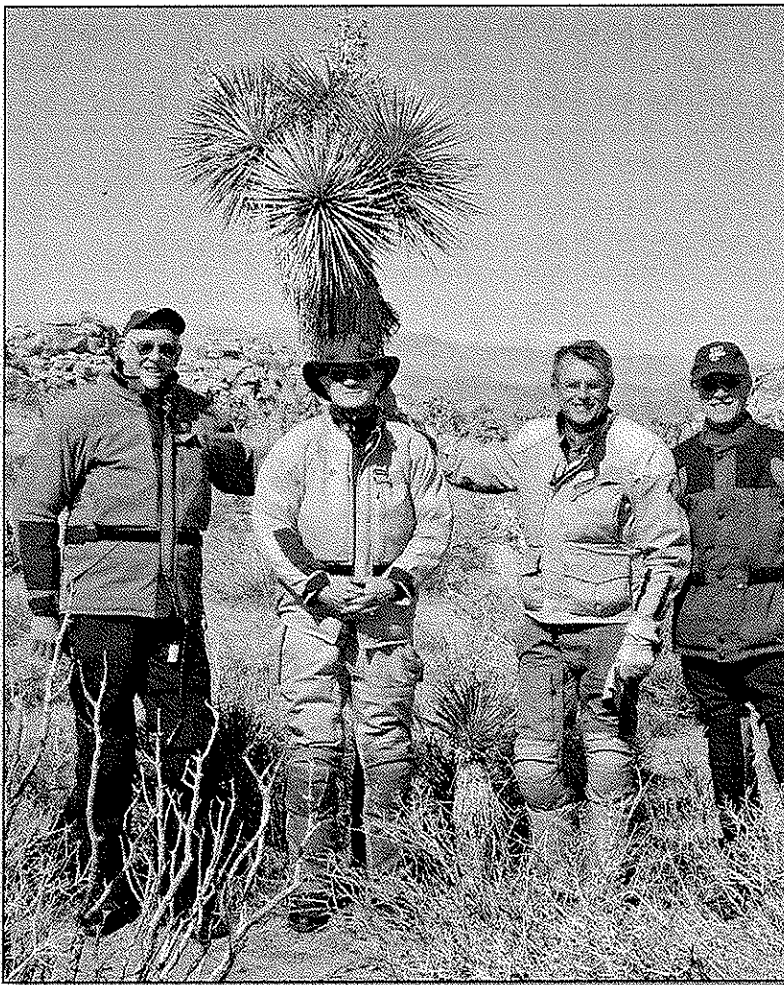
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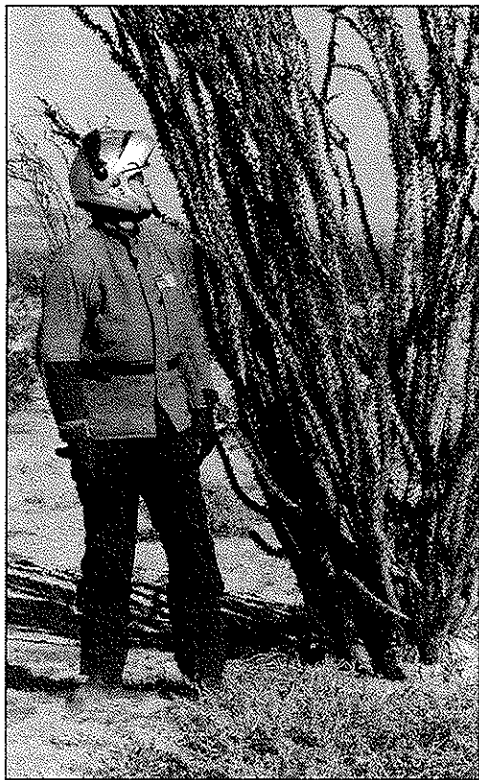
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Desert delight in the Darien. Baja.



The author's DarienLight, Bill Mittendorf with Darien jacket and Roadcrafter pants. Torsten Jacobsen is all Roadcrafter while Paul Goodacre wears brand X.



Crash into this bush and you'll be glad you're wearing an Aerostich. Anza-Borrego, California.

tug on a total of three long zippers (two with the one-piece) and you're ready to ride. Even if I've got only a five-minute ride ahead of me, I put on the suit without even thinking twice. Believe me, it was never that way with my old leathers. For any ride that's not in a storm and in which I'll put on and take off the suit frequently, it's the Roadcrafter—hands down.

Perhaps you're wondering what I did during all those years I owned only a Roadcrafter—did I forgo touring in bad weather? Not at all—I carried a rain suit, which I'd put on under my 'Stich, since I could never find one big enough to go over it. How long to wait after it starts raining before stopping and pulling on the rain suit is one of those agonizing and usually no-win decisions that you won't have to make if you're wearing a Darien.

Because of our climate in the Bay Area and my largely commute-like daily riding, the Roadcrafter is the default choice for me on any morning. But if I'm going on a trip, even just an overnight, I take the Darien. Simply put, it's the better suit for

touring. Once I deliberately switched these roles for a few weeks, just to see what it was like if I wore the Darien in situations where I would normally have preferred the Roadcrafter. My conclusion, once I was in the suit and riding the bike, was that the Darien and Roadcrafter were practically interchangeable: It's in the getting on and off that I would notice the difference.

The key word above is "practically." There are little differences. The horizontal-flap pockets in the Roadcrafter jacket are handier and easier to use than the angled side pockets in the Darien; it's a two-handed job to pull the zippers on the latter. The smooth nylon liner sewn into the Roadcrafter feels so luxurious compared to the bare Gore-tex liner on the backside of the Darien's nylon fabric. It also prevents snagging the protective pads in the knees, elbows, and shoulders when you shove your limbs down these fabric tunnels. That same nylon liner also holds moisture when, in hot, dry weather, you've wet down the inside of the suit to provide evaporative cooling.

The ballistics on the Roadcrafter will take punishment that will send the Darien back to Duluth, to be fixed by the American workers who made it for you in the first place. I had a minor get-off on a dirt road while wearing my Darien. The armor pad saved my knee from impact and abrasion, but the outer fabric tore. On the Roadcrafter's ballistics, that would have been a scuff. No big deal in this case, but the Darien will clearly suffer greater damage in a more serious crash than the Roadcrafter.

The Darien is lighter, which is a comfort factor if, indeed, one is bothered by weight. (I chose the DarienLight.) Also, its styling is less spacesuit-ish. The Roadcrafter's extensive ballistics—on shoulders, elbows and shins—evoke awe,

The Final Word

I don't want to pee on the fires of this Aerostich love-fest, but I do want to make sure you, the reader, know this is a magazine with some pretense of unbiased moto-journalism, if such an animal can really exist in this country. So I will tell you the Aerostich Roadcrafter is not a perfect product. It probably never will be. It leaks in the rain, a problem Aerostich has been doggedly pursuing like some kind of corporate Captain Ahab for most of the last three decades. You can live with it, and there is a new zipper design that I'm eager to try, but a true rain suit it's not. It also flaps and gets breezy at high speeds, the armor is heavy and can be uncomfortable, and though you can survive a ride through the desert in August in one of these, the venting could be better, to be polite about it.

So why am I on my third suit? Why does everybody I know—including 80 percent of my friends in the motorcycle media and PR industry—have one of these things, usually covered with grit, grime and bugs?

It's because every bit of riding gear you own is a compromise, and it's amazing what a good balance the Roadcrafter is. Nothing else I've owned (and my closet is so stuffed with riding gear I can't close the door) matches the versatility, especially in the mild Bay Area climate. Custom road-race leathers? I've got them. The latest hip-hop "urban" riding gear you see all over the magazines? Whatever I want, I just send an email and a UPS guy drops it off a few days later. That stuff looks good and probably protects me well, but for comfort, convenience, protection from the elements and the good feeling I get from wearing a well-made garment, what's better? Nothing so far.

Gabe Ets-Hokin

at least among other patrons waiting to check out at my local Safeway. The Darien draws less attention.

But now we're back to that question—if you'll only have one suit, which one to choose? If you're primarily a day-rider, commuter, or short-hauler, pick the Roadcrafter and take a rain suit along when you tour. If it's the other-way-round and you live for touring, the Darien is for you. In deciding on an Aerostich riding suit, you've made the best choice in what to buy. For which to buy you've got my advice, for what it's worth. Best of all, you can't go wrong with either the Roadcrafter or the Darien. ☺

Roadcrafter one-piece suit: \$847.

Darien jacket and pants: \$724.

DarienLight jacket and pants: \$684

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