

# A Dance with the Diva

## Only The Salt Has The Final Say



Sunrise on the salt emphasizes just how vast the salt flats are.

Story and Photos by Neil Ingroville



**I**t was the third week in August and I was sitting poolside at a cheap hotel in Utah, surrounded by Germans talking motorcycling while they forced me to drink copious quantities of Coors. Except for the beer, it was a little slice of heaven, and it caused me to reflect on just how I'd gotten there.

A year earlier, I was getting beat at darts by a newcomer to my favourite pub. My opponent casually mentioned that before coming to Calgary, he was part of a German drag-racing team that had captured a world record at the Bonneville Salt Flats. Being in a drinking establishment, my friends and I were both impressed and doubtful of the newcomer's tall tale. It wasn't until weeks later, when he showed up with a German magazine article with pictures of him as part of the team, that we actually believed his story.

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Team More Salt gather for a photo.

### FAST FACTS



#### BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS

The expanse of salt sits at 1286 metres above sea level and cover an area of 36,650 acres. Owing to ever-changing surface conditions, each year event organizers must choose an area of the salt flats most suitable for racing.

#### FIRSTS

The first official land speed record at Bonneville was set in 1914 by Teddy Tetzlaff, at 142.8 mph. In 1903, Glenn Curtiss set the first, generally accepted, motorcycle land speed record, at a speed of 64 mph in Yonkers, New York.

#### THE STUFF OF LEGENDS

The Bonneville Salt Flats and the Great Salt Lake are remnants of ancient Lake Bonneville, which ceased to exist 14,500 years ago. Each winter, the salt flats flood with a thin layer of water.

During the spring and summer, the water evaporates, leaving behind a smooth salt surface.

If the salt layer is too thin, it will crack under the weight of a vehicle, revealing the mud below.

The thinning salt layer at Bonneville is due in large part to salt mining in the area since the 1960s.

#### GET OFF MY LAWN

The Bureau of Land Management prohibits overnight stays on the salt.



Pit lane on the salt flat seems to go on forever.

Over the next year of socializing and dart throwing at our local watering hole, my new German friend discovered that I was a photographer, and invited me to photograph their next assault on the record. They had set the record for their class in 2012 at 169 mph. Now they wanted to go for 200 mph.

It was no small feat to get from a small town in the south of Germany to Bonneville, but the team had an army of believers working to make this happen, and a considerable list of sponsors, including Audi, which allowed them to use its wind tunnel to get the aerodynamics just right. Photographing the event meant I was but a small cog in the large machine. I accepted the invitation, not really knowing what I was getting into.

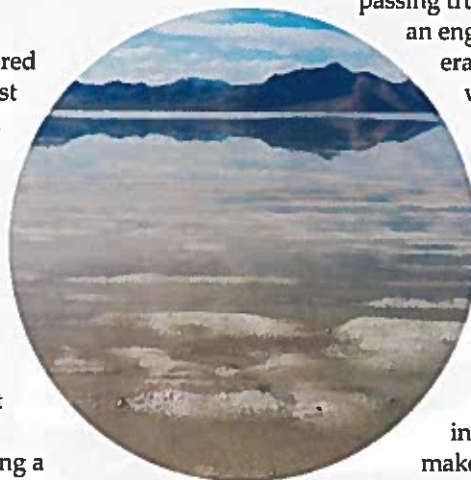
Riding to the salt flats from Calgary was easy enough when all the bits work out. We planned to spend two days ripping up mountain passes, and then a day across the flats of Nevada and Utah. However, trips rarely work as planned, and after day one, my friend and I had to return to Calgary with a

bike in the back of a truck. We were then left with only two days to make it down to the salt via automobile on the interstates. We set the cruise control to "don't-tell-anyone speed" and headed due south.

**Oasis in the Desert**

The salt flats appeared as expected, just east of Wendover, Utah. A huge expanse of white, flat nothing, with large portions covered by water. What? This is supposed to be desert!

To the detriment of all who showed up in hopes of setting a record this year, the salt flats had experienced unprecedented amounts of rainfall. Since the water table here is so close to the surface, much of the area used for setting speed



records was now covered in salt water.

Reaching the pits meant we had to traverse about a kilometre of ankle-deep water. To minimize the corrosion damage to our vehicle, we parked at the entrance gates and hopped a ride with a passing truck. The driver was an engineer for Confederate Motors, which was dominating the class it raced in, but was looking to do better by testing some exotic engine parts. Things weren't working as planned for Confederate, and our driver was feeling some pressure to make it happen. This was our introduction to the calibre of racer that can be found at the motorcycle speed trials in Bonneville. As the pits appeared through the heat waves, the variety of participants



Pilot Günter Retsch looks on as team engineers work under the lights of the hotel entrance trying to troubleshoot an electrical problem. (above) Tuning by laptop is commonplace with many of today's high tech races bikes. (right)

**WHEN THE TRACK CLOSED, THE REPAIR PROCESS SHIFTED TO THE PARKING LOT IN FRONT OF THE HOTEL.**

became apparent. Everyone from factory-sponsored riders to mom and pop in an RV were lined up side by side along pit row.

The salt provides a unique surface to run on. Traction is a large problem and winds have enough effect that a record run has to be made in opposing directions to get an average, non-wind-assisted time. The thickness of the salt, the grooming of the track, where you are in the line-up – it all works against you while attempting to set a speed record. The unifying factor is that everyone runs on the same track, and it's been going on for 100 years.

We met up with "More Salt," the name of the German team, which had already made a run on the salt by the time we arrived. Their bike, affectionately called "The Diva," is a custom-built 1000 cc turbocharged and partially streamlined Ducati running on high-octane racing fuel. The bike's suspension wasn't perfect during the first pass and tweaks were being made. One of the problems is that the process of making



**EXOTIC MOTORCYCLES WERE EVERYWHERE. THIS PLACE WAS A GEARHEAD'S DREAM**

adjustments, running through the inspection and then waiting for your turn on the course can take hours. Sometimes a team may only get two runs completed in a day of racing. When we arrived at the pit, the bike was in the tech process after doing a 160.137 mph run. Not as fast as the 2012 attempt, but optimism was still high. At 6 p.m., with our bike still in the tech inspection queue, the track shut down for the night.

**A Town Divided**

By early evening we were poolside, rehydrating with barley water. The core group of mechanics and the rider, Günter Retsch, showed great restraint by not imbibing like the rest of the peripheral crew. They had a couple of beers and sacked out early while the rest of us made up for their restraint.

Wendover is an odd little town; it straddles the border of Utah and Nevada. The Utah side - as designated by a line painted across the road - has a quaint small-town feel, while the Nevada side features multi-storey casinos with huge LED billboards advertising . . . well . . . everything. Temptations ignored, most of the crew stuck to the Utah side of the line, where the best pizza came from the Shell station and the restaurants had a local atmosphere.

The next day's first run on the salt saw a wobble appearing at 155.583 mph, so some chassis adjustments were made and it was back to waiting for our turn. This allowed for some wandering around the pits to see what else showed up.

The Bonneville races are unique in that pretty well anyone can participate. For \$50, you can show up, do some minor safety wiring and run your bike to see how fast it'll go. This is one of the few places left where it's legal to hold



the throttle wide open and see what'll come of it. Plus, you get documented proof. If you want to attempt a world record, there's a class for everything. It takes some more money and preparation to enter a world-record run, but from what I could see, it was no more prep than having to run at your local racetrack.



Exotic motorcycles were everywhere. This place was a gearhead's dream, and easy pickings for a photographer on assignment. High-powered American V-twins in custom

frames were so common, they started to look the same. There were electric bikes (one set a record for 240 mph), diesel bikes, old and new bikes, some with single motors and others with dual motors. There were singles, twins, triples, fours and sixes. There were old riders, female riders and even blind riders, and there was lots of grey hair. This track was not one that exploited the athleticism of youth, but instead embraced the ingenuity of experience. And - as with all racing - deep pockets.

**Someone Call Tech Support**

Just before the track closed on Monday, the bike was suddenly back in the pits. For some reason the engine-management software quit talking to the bike. The ability to make minor tweaks vanished, and this caused great concern, especially when the bike wouldn't fire up because of it. There was a frenzy of activity trackside. To showcase the camaraderie of fellow racers, diagnosticians from other crews kept popping by to see if they could help. Unfortunately, the electronic components were all European and the most experienced guys in North America were already on the team. When the track closed, the repair process shifted to the parking lot in front of the hotel. At 10 p.m., the

From diesel engine to twin engine and everything in between. If there is a chance it could break a record, someone will build it and race it.





Waiting for the sun and the wind to dry the salt could mean waiting for hours or days just to get a single run in.

problem was solved – a badly soldered connection – and by 11, everything was packed for the next day. The race effort continued!

The second-last day of racing was a wash because of weather conditions. Overnight rain had raised the water table, and the track needed a day to dry. There would be one last day of racing. This respite allowed teams to make their final preparations, and allowed us the time to take team photos out on the salt. Just after lunch we were back at the now familiar hotel pool. That night, after the mechanics and rider said their gute nacht, we went to the Black and White bar: the place where legends of the salt flats go to drink.

The directions to the bar were simple: Walk until you think you're lost, then continue for another block. Sure enough, looking like an abandoned warehouse at the end of an empty street, there stood the bar. We walked inside and instantly took a step back into history. The walls were lined with team photos from past exploits, and at the end of the bar hung a signed picture of Burt Munro. To stand where

decades of racers celebrated their wins was something special. Jokes were being told in half a dozen languages all around us, with bursts of raucous laughter drowning out the music.

When the alarm clock rang at 5 a.m., it was adrenaline alone that got us to the track. It was the last day to break a record. The team was ready, the bike prepped. Nothing more could be done except to make it happen.



**One Last Dance with the Diva**

The Ducati thundered down the course, and the team waited apprehensively for the time to be called out – 175 mph! They broke their record.

It's not 200 mph, but the speed wobble must have been fixed. Everyone knows they can now go faster.

Just as some team members rushed to get the bike and rider, there was another announcement, and everyone froze. There'd been a crash! It was our rider. Emotions dropped to the salt. The medical crew swept in, and the rider was whisked away. No one knew what happened or how Günter was.

Thirty minutes later, there was a phone call from Günter's wife; she was

in the rescue helicopter and he was okay. He was badly broken up, but he'd survive. Günter was pretty upset about letting the team down and knew exactly what had happened. While looking down at his pressure gauge, he missed the end-of-course marker and kept the throttle open for a few extra seconds. Once he realized the mistake, he tried to stop, but ran out of room, hit the rough salt and tumbled.

The mood in the pits was one of reluctant acceptance. Years of preparation and planning ended in knowing they had done all they could, and it was close . . . very close. Now they'd have to pick up the pieces and make their way home. It was tough to watch the bent and broken pieces of The Diva being loaded onto a trailer while still coated with salt. It wouldn't get washed until

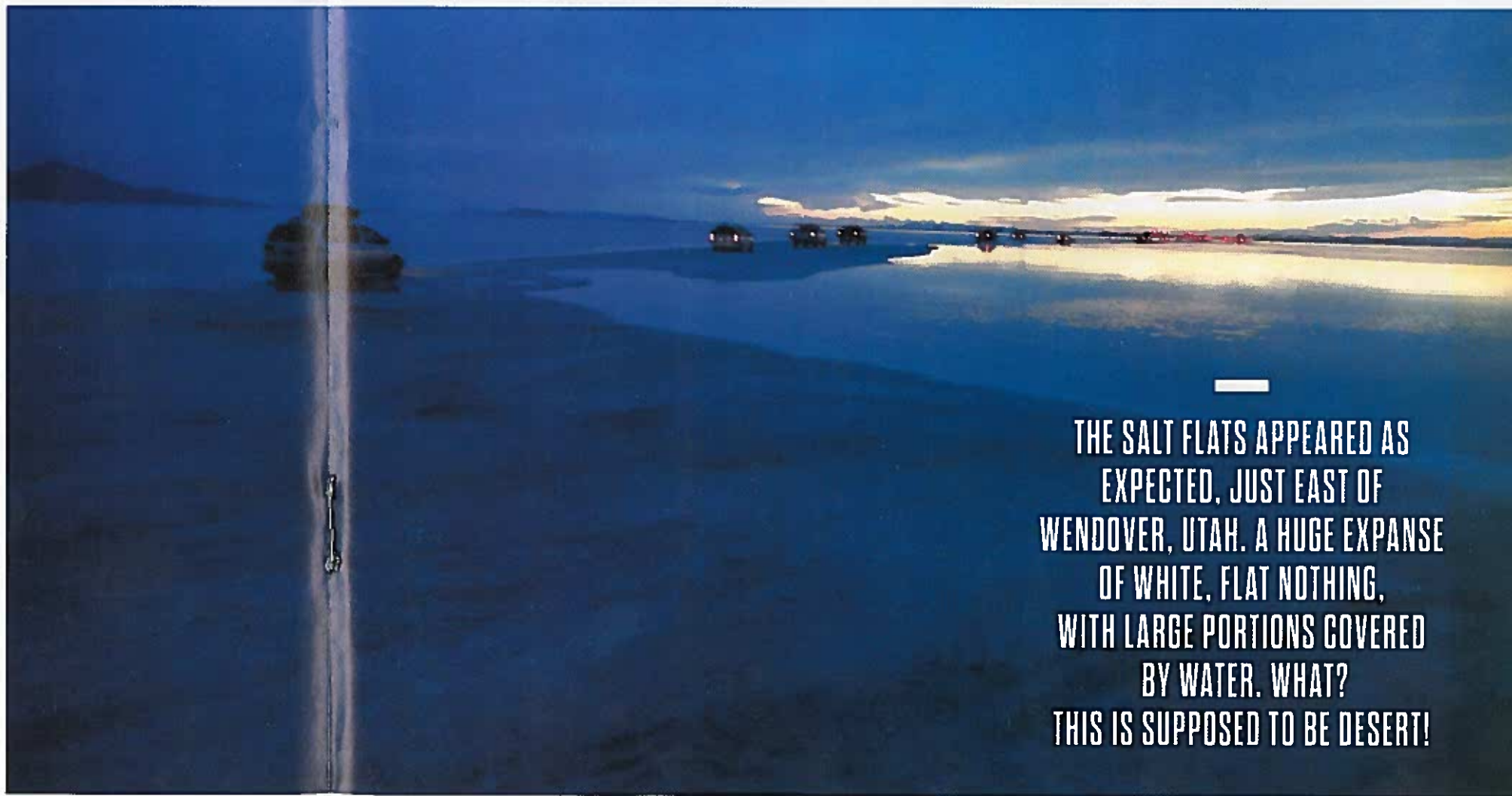
it got back to Germany.

That night, around the pool, the crew had been reduced to about a dozen. There was talk about abandoning the project. Many of the team had devoted considerable time and money – money better spent on mortgages and time better spent with family. The question "Is it worth it?" arose. No one wanted to answer.

Racing on the salt is something that seeps into your blood. It's like nothing else: the variable conditions; the unexpected getting in your way; the camaraderie of fellow racers facing similar adversity, chasing personal (or team) bests; breaking the records that stand before you. It's tough to articulate. But for those with salt in their veins, there'll be another chance next year. Or maybe the year after. **MM**



There isn't a protected place when running fast on the salt. Every nook and cranny could have salt in it but washing will have to wait until the team arrives back in Germany.



THE SALT FLATS APPEARED AS EXPECTED, JUST EAST OF WENDOVER, UTAH. A HUGE EXPANSE OF WHITE, FLAT NOTHING, WITH LARGE PORTIONS COVERED BY WATER. WHAT? THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE DESERT!