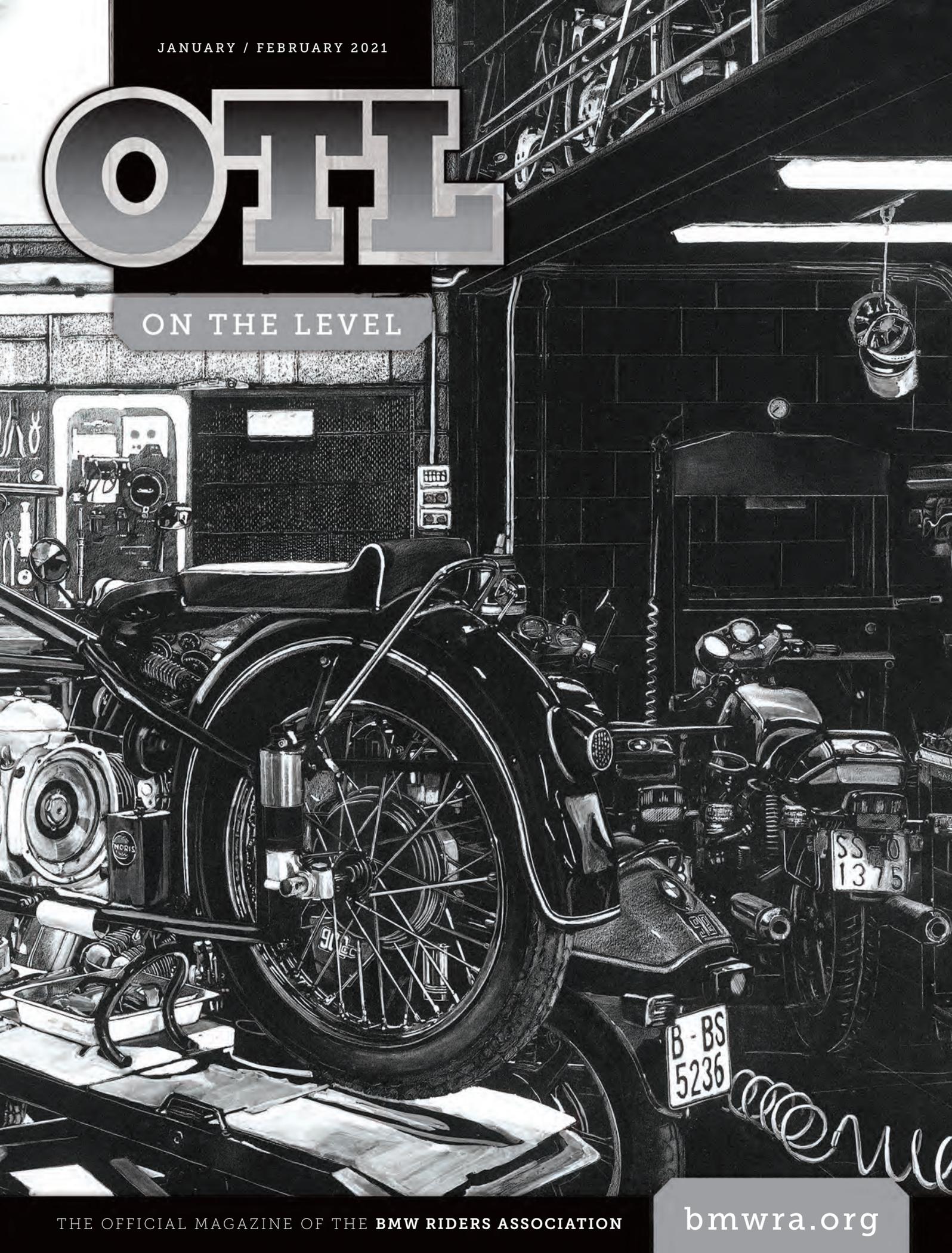


JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2021

# OTL

ON THE LEVEL





# A DECENT PROPOSAL

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So there I was, on the back of a massive stinking mule named Tank, creaking down the rugged Bright Angel Trail of the Grand Canyon's South Rim. We were descending almost 4,400 feet in just over 8 miles, and as I cautiously peered over the edge of the precipice directly to my right, I noticed that birds were flying underneath my foot. I utterly detest heights, and the overwhelming stench of Tank's ceaseless flatulence wasn't helping matters any. I groggily glanced ahead and saw my new fiancé leading the way on her own mule named Holiday. Unlike me, she was poised and happy in the moment, apparently unaffected by our rather dire circumstances.

My mind wandered back to when we first met. Our third date was a backroads romp in the pouring rain through upstate New York, on my agonizingly uncomfortable Harley Sportster. The seat on that thing was apparently designed by sadists intent on testing the limits of human pain endurance. To my surprise, Terri didn't complain once. Instead, she said, "I don't want to ride on the back of your bike. I want my own!" She promptly passed the MSF course, obtained

her license, and purchased an adorable 1971 feder weiss BMW R60/5 as her first steed. A year flew by, and thousands of miles were logged traversing up and down the east coast together. As Terri became more confident, she reminded me that her BMW's original owner was a female college professor who had criss-crossed the entire country twice on that faithful airhead, and so the idea of our own cross country trip was born. A serious traveler with over 45 countries under her belt, it wasn't long before Terri devised a detailed itinerary, starting from our home in New Jersey and riding as far west as the Grand Canyon before looping back through the southern states. We both purchased dual-spark Oilhead BMWs for the trip—an R 1150 RT for me, and an R 1150 R for her. With the bikes prepped and packed, we shrewdly haggled with our employers for a month of freedom, quickly said our goodbyes, and set off to discover America.

By the end of our first four days on the road together, Terri and I had already experienced a diverse array of what this nation has to offer the motorcycle adventurer. En route from home to our campsite near

Mount Rushmore, we swam the serendipitous beaches of Indiana Dunes State Park, toured the historic Frank Lloyd Wright district in Chicago, visited the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, and blazed through the stunning Badlands National Park in South Dakota. These first few days on the road blessed us with cool breezes and bright sunshine, and alternatively cursed us with torrential rain and consistent 50+ mph headwinds. They also taught us that the usual bounties of motorcycle travel such as captivating scenery, serpentine roads, and historic landmarks are every bit as abundant as we expected them to be. But more importantly, we were growing closer with each passing mile, as the bond of our shared experiences on the road was cemented.

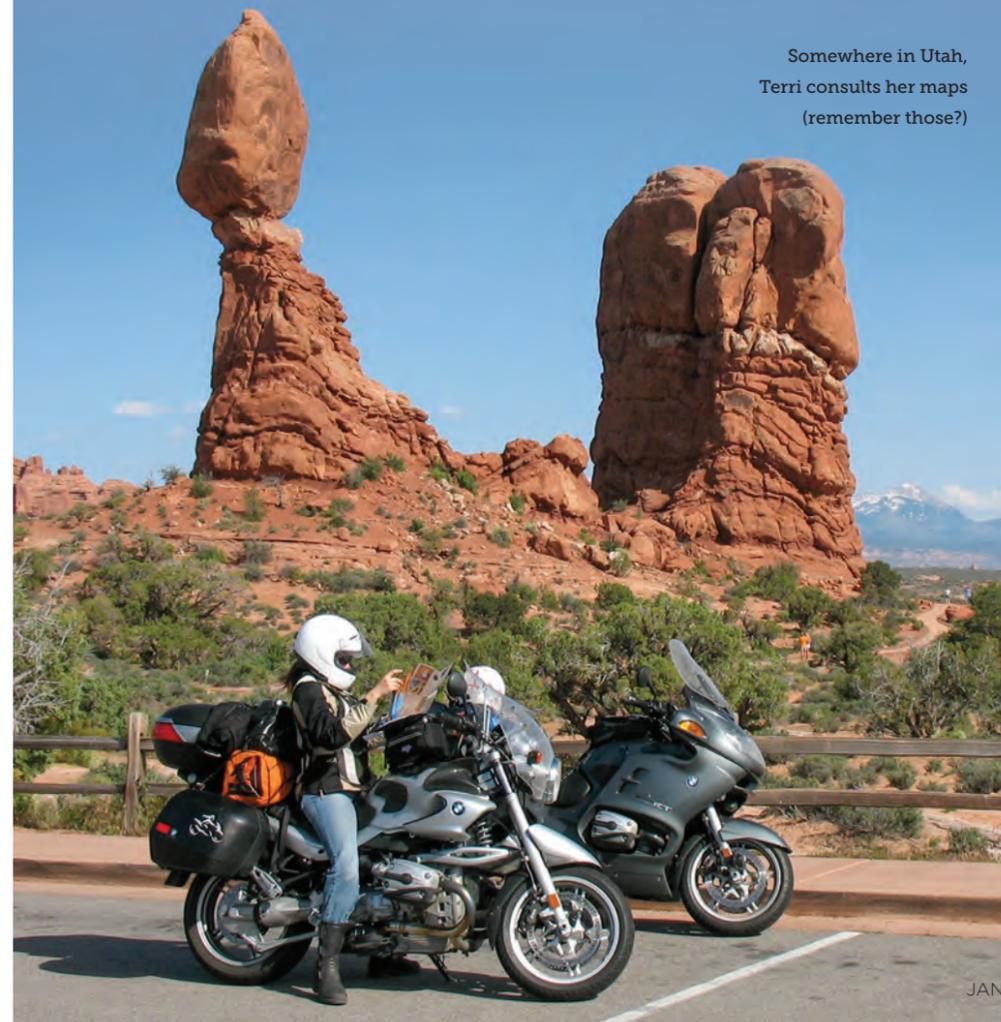
After a particularly challenging day spent taming the twisties near Keystone, South Dakota, I felt a certainty that this night would be a special one. After a simple country-style dinner at our rustic campsite, I motioned to Terri to come towards the bikes, where I had a surprise waiting. Under a majestic star-filled sky which one can only

witness in the vast mid-west, I played Ella Fitzgerald through my GPS into some portable speakers, we danced to our favorite song, and I asked for her hand in marriage. For reasons which still mystify me today, she accepted!

The next morning, we casually meandered over Wyoming's backroads towards Devils Tower, a dramatic natural monolith which is also sacred land to many Native Americans. We met some rock climbers who thought we were crazy for riding "dangerous" motorcycles, and watched as they proceeded to scale over 1,250 feet straight up towards the Tower's top. From there, it was on to Yellowstone National Park, easily the most breathtakingly scenic portion of our entire trip. As we entered the park, I felt sorry for our fellow travelers who

were locked inside their metal cages while we experienced the lakes, waterfalls, and steam vents in all their natural splendor. "They're taking a shower with raincoats on," I squawked to Terri through our communicators. Some people will never know what they're missing!

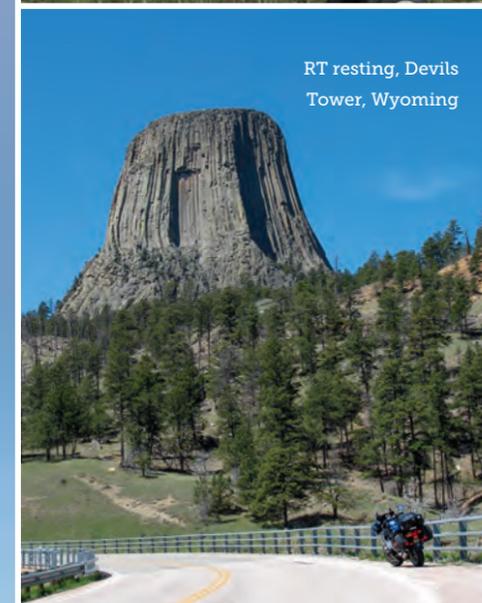
After a few days hiking around Yellowstone, we saddled up and pointed our Oilheads north towards Montana, where Big Sky and Glacier National Park awaited. Unfortunately, steady rain, leftover snow, and the resulting landslides meant that the famed "Going To The Sun Road" was mostly closed to our motorcycles. However, even the small unpaved sections we surveyed were spectacular in scope and well worth the soggy effort it took to get there. To dry off, we headed south again to Utah to visit



Somewhere in Utah, Terri consults her maps (remember those?)



Crazy Horse Memorial, South Dakota



RT resting, Devils Tower, Wyoming



Our tipi for the night in Arizona

Moab, Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, Monument Valley, and the Navajo Nation. After hundreds of miles of saturation, the arid heat of the Utah desert was just what the doctor ordered. We hiked for miles amongst the towering rock formations, in absolute awe of the natural buttes and arches which must be seen to be believed. The only way to describe the scenery is to visualize yourself in one of those old “Marlboro Cowboy” ads of years past. The Navajo Tribal Tour in Monument Valley took us deep into Native American territory, inside their hogans (homes,) up close with ancient petroglyphs and natural wonders such as the “Sun’s Eye” rock structure.

Back on the blacktop, a quick detour through Colorado found us navigating cautiously through snow as we made our way towards the haunted Stanley Hotel in Estes Park. It was here at the Stanley, in Room 217, where Stephen King was inspired to write “The Shining.” After a few days of relaxation and taking the requisite Stanley tours for our fill of ghost stories, we set off to Rocky Mountain National Park to climb Trail Ridge Road. At 12,183 feet, Trail Ridge is the highest continually paved highway in the entire USA and, true to form, had 25 foot snow banks on either side of the road near its summit. A few days after we completed our sojourn up Trail Ridge, a violent snowstorm stranded a group of motorcyclists, who were forced to abandon their cruisers in the evacuation effort. By the time we read about that in the local newspapers, we were already in Durango, unwinding on the ancient coal-fired locomotive towards Silverton. Reenergized after a break from riding, we remounted the bikes to commence the last leg of the tour to the Grand Canyon before heading back home through Dixie.

That trip was 14 years ago. Since that time, Terri and I have been raising our two beautiful girls together and have had many more adventures—but piloting those Oilheads through this land of ours is still my favorite one of all. Now we just have to patiently wait until retirement to do it again!



Terri shows off her new bling in South Dakota



Resting after a hike in the desert



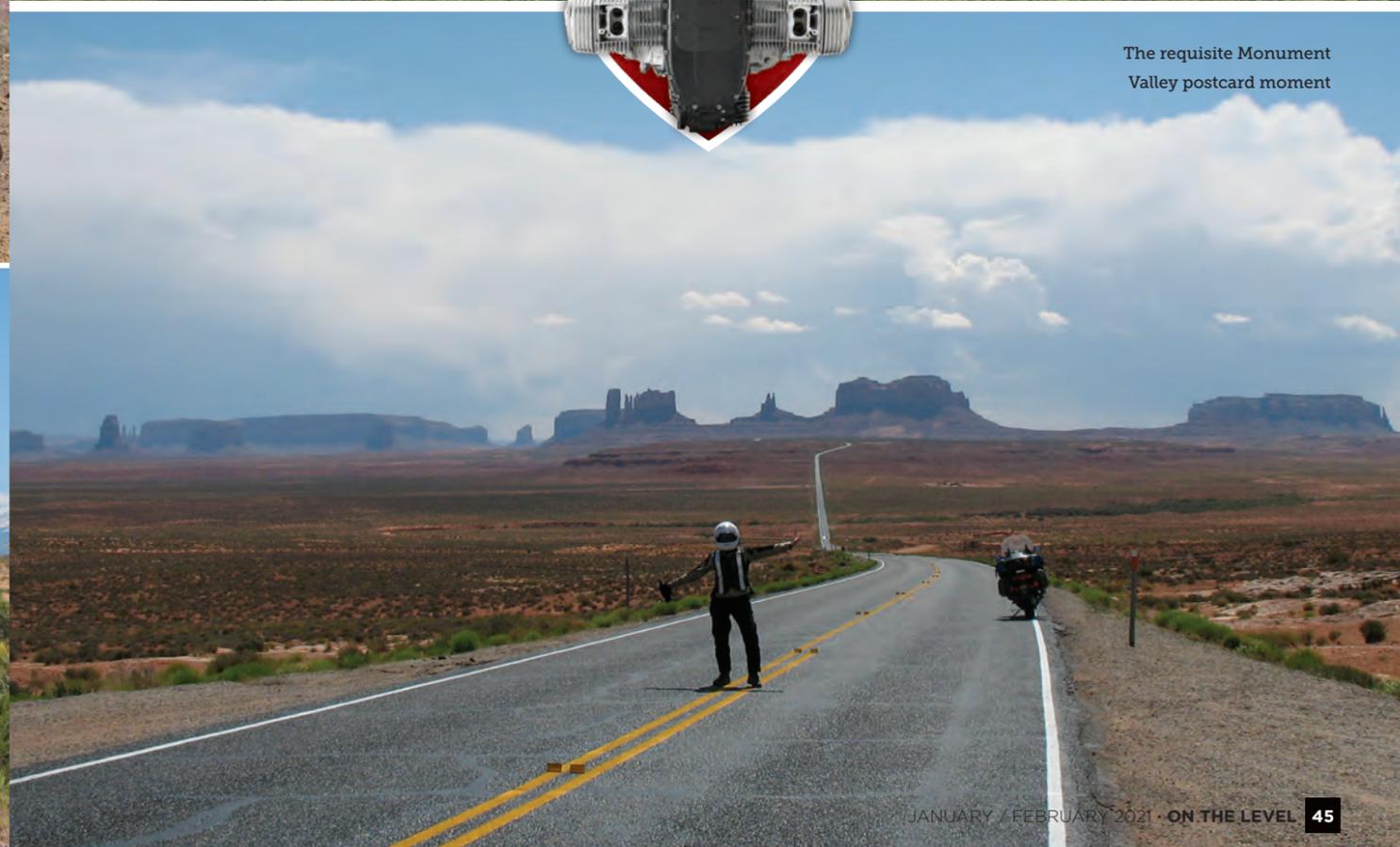
On our Grand Canyon mules



Terri admiring Utah buttes



Admiring the Badlands



The requisite Monument Valley postcard moment