

# Riding Adventure in the Alps of Italy, Austria, Switzerland and France

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When I first started the series of moto adventure vacations in 2005 riding in the Pyrenees of Northern Spain & Southern France I never thought of the Alps. Later as I experienced the High Atlas of North Africa, the twisties in Tuscany, the magnificent coastal ranges of South Africa and the challenging mountain roads of Greece, I finally thought I was ready for the highest mountain range in Europe. The best part of the last three years of these riding vacations was sharing the experience with Linda, my fiancée.

Although there are a number of organizations that offer tours of the Alps, we chose Adriatic Mototours since we had a fantastic time with them last year on the Greek Isles but were challenged by the crumbling infrastructure caused by economic depression, herds of goats, sheep and occasional sightings of wild boar crossing our path.

However, the history, cultures, and languages of the four countries visited, along with the spectacular scenery, will be to be remembered for the rest of our lives. Not only is Linda a seasoned pillion but also a great photographer capturing the fantastic scenery while I concentrated on the twisties!

Due to the 23 kilo (50 pounds) checked bag limit, we have learned to wear our riding jackets and boots on the plane but have comfortable shoes and a sweater in a carry-on. Our destination was Milan Italy with the Crown Plaza shuttle bus was just a step from the taxi stand. These tours are all inclusive except for fuel (~\$8 to \$9 /gal), lunches and evening libations. We arrived in Milano a full day ahead of the first dinner meeting to do some local touring and get accustomed to the time difference of 5 hours.

The Express train depot is at the airport and is very easy to use with ticket machines in many languages. We found that no one asked for our tickets but I suspect that there would be a price to pay if challenged by a rail employee. The fare was just a few Euros and the ride took about 40 minutes to the sights in the city. The main plaza was the location of numerous shopping malls, street performers and the Domo or main cathedral. We opted for a self-guided tour from the roof which had a magnificent view of the architecture of this building. In 1386 construction began on this largest cathedral in Italy and the 5th largest in the world.



We spent the day enjoying the sights, watching street performers and chatting with other tourists and taking their pictures as they took ours. We found a sidewalk café and dined "*Al Fresco*" on Italian pasta, strong coffee and delicious pastries. We navigated the subway back to the main train station and returned to the hotel for cocktails and our first dinner with our new traveling companions. Unlike other tours we had only three other adventurers. From Brazil we met Merna & Marcio and Jim from the Seattle area. All were seasoned global travelers and moto riders. Our tour guides were Matej (owner of the tour company) and his assistant Niko both from Ljubljana Slovenia. They had trailered all of the bikes with the chase van from their main office which was only about 5 hours away.

That evening we enjoyed local Chianti, beers and more pasta in a restaurant that was walking distance from our hotel. We discussed the routes and sights we would see over the next two weeks visiting four countries.

The next morning we left the autostradas for the bucolic back roads of the Lombardy countryside with Lake Como our first destination. A short ferry ride across the lake brought us to Lugano Switzerland.



We could see horizon to the north rise and ahead are the San Bernadino (6,939') & Splügen Passes (6,778'). Thus it begins . . . two weeks of riding magnificent twisties in an Alpine environment!

A general comment about this genre of twisties; many of the passes were above the timberline with relatively good visibility of what's ahead. However, some of the ascending switchbacks required intense concentration to avoid vehicles that had drifted from their lane. Fortunately these are not tour bus routes! Another comment from history: many of these passes were military routes and the Roman engineers and their descendants considered the maximum incline possible without killing teams of horses that would be transporting cannon and other heavy military supplies up and over these mountains. That probably didn't matter to Hannibal in 218 B.C. with his army of 100,000 men and scores of elephants!

After passing the designer village of St Moritz and good night's sleep in Pontresina, we rose early to tackle the famous



Stelvio Pass at 9,045'. Stelvio is the highest paved pass in the eastern Alps and 2nd highest in Europe with 87 switchbacks.



The ride was exhilarating but being above the tree line the major challenge was watching for bicyclists and joggers going up the mountain and traffic coming down!



The next day we experienced some weather that worsened as we climbed to Timmelzjoch Pass which was a military road that Mussolini and Hitler built jointly. There is a significant steel structure (also known as the "Ice Cave") at the peak where we could see some of the construction photographs as well as being sheltered from the wind and snow that was starting to fall. The temperature was now 30 deg. F.

We ended the day at our boutique hotel in Lech with a traditional Austrian greeting of

warm apricot schnapps to take the chill from our bones. Honestly, the hot shower did a better job! It was interesting to see that our host was watching the "Big Bang Theory" with the dialogue translated to German as we left for our dinner in a local restaurant a few blocks away.



Dinner- Weiner schnitzel, apple strudel & beer, of course!

Another day of rain though numerous mountain passes until we find the "Iron Pony" store of Austria to purchase some waterproof lobster glove covers and weather proof riding pants for Merna. The ladies of the store were very helpful and gladly posed for photos for the visitors from Slovenia, Brazil, and the USA.



Interlaken Switzerland was our destination for the day and next as well. This bustling city is on a river between two large alpine lakes between snow topped mountains in the distance. This was a tourist mecca with Swiss chocolate stores, every brand of Swiss watch and all of the well-known fashion boutiques represented.

We were going to visit the Interlaken Casino and try to win some Swiss Francs, but there was an admission charge so we passed and looked at cow bells! The restaurants represented all nationalities and there was an abundance of Chinese tour busses packed with those tourists who are spending the dollars made from the assembly of all of the electronics goodies that we can't live without.



From Interlaken we rode over a number of passes through quaint villages to the ski resort of Chamonix France with a view of Mt Blanc, the highest in central Europe at 15,781'. We had a rest day at this alpine resort and witnessed the International Vertical Wall Climbing Competition.



The next day after seeing the clouds disappear from a hotel webcam, we took the two cable cars to the summit of the *Aiguille du Midi* at 12,605 ft! to experience a "Walk Into The Void". After trying to catch our breath with 40% less oxygen at that altitude, Linda and I stepped into *The Void* which is an enclosed structural glass cage with a vertical drop of 4,075' to the rubble below!



That evening we had a unique dinner with pieces of beef that were served on a very hot stone.

Off to another ski resort near the UNESCO medieval walled city of *Briançon*. Our hosts were a former Olympic French Gold Medal Ski Champion and his Aussie wife. We walked over a draw-



bridge to gain entrance to the walled city and dined in a small bistro enjoying a multi course banquet and libations to match the occasion.



The next morning after a hearty breakfast at the hotel we headed south to the "Gold Coast" of the French Riviera. On to Nice!

There were more mountain passes and great twisties with arrival in Nice at commute time and a parade to celebrate Bastille Day-the French Independence Day observed on the 14th of July! The WWII Liberation Parade was just finishing with Sherman Tanks, Willys Jeeps with Duece and a halves leading the way including foot soldiers and nurses in period uniforms. Who said the French

didn't appreciate Americans?

We settled into our seaside hotel and had a couple of hours to view all of the participants and then the arrival of a half dozen self-contained stages with PA systems and overhead theatrical lighting. Spaced about 100 yards apart, these would feature a variety of music venues as the evening festivities started and culminated with fireworks launched from two ships in the harbor.

The evening's entertainment was a bit bittersweet demonstrating the globalization of music with most performers singing in English including New Orleans jazz and Country Western themes.



The next day Linda and I browsed the Old City's open-market place and found a few souvenirs to bring home. We found a well-stocked grocery store and purchased a bottle of red, a French baguette, a local cheese and enjoyed our picnic lunch picnic in the hotel courtyard.



Our guides went swimming in the Med and the others took public transportation to Monte Carlo just 30 kilometers down the coast. Two years earlier we paid \$12 for a cup of coffee there and decided to pass ... BTDT!

Our next destination was the French Riviera rich & famous resort of St. Tropez. However our route took us through the rolling hills of the Grasse region



where the French Perfume industry was born in the 16th century. We saw acres and acres of lavender in full bloom in addition to roses and other fragrant flowers. Our lunch stop included a visit to the local perfumery museum where we saw copper distillation vessels and other



components of the chemistry that support a modern multi-billion dollar business in France.

Our lodgings for the evening had an ocean view from our terrace as well as the pool below. St. Tropez was within walking distance and we saw luxury yachts berth upon berth preparing for evening entertainment with catered food and cases of liquor being loaded from dockside as well as yacht tenders. This scene reminded me of a James Bond movie where the stern of a yacht would open to receive a high speed jet boat or even larger shuttle vessel!



Our dinner was served in an open courtyard with a view of the sunset and couples strolling along the beach. Approved street performers were invite to entertain the guests as we dined. Returning to our hotel we stopped at a small carnival in a public park and had a delicious gelato.

Our final day of mountain riding took us thorough the Grand Canyon of France with red rock geology, tunnels and steep drops offs to the river below. There were a few tours busses but we easily passed them on some straight sections of the road. Our final lodging was a surprise ... A French Castle! We were given a tour by the owner and enjoyed beer, wine, French bread and cheese in the castle gardens. The castle was saved by a couple who have invested over a million dollars in its restoration including the grounds, gardens and wells. We were told that there were ghosts in the castle but since the restoration was completed they had not been seen in many years. Again we were able to walk into the village of Embrum and enjoyed French country cooking (I had rabbit) and wine from the region.





Our last at was primarily slab riding thorough an agri-region. It was a significant contrast from the freezing temps in the mountains since these valleys had 90 degree temperatures!

Back in Milan we enjoyed our final dinner with new friends and old, exchanged addresses and looked forward to someday visiting Rio during Carnival with our Brazilian adventurers.

The Alps and Rivera tour was two weeks plus travel days and covered 1,668 miles on a 2013 R1200RT. How could we not be impressed with riding the Alps! Riding twisties all day was exhausting and exhilarating at the same time but yes, we would do it again & again!

