

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

RIDING THE FRENCH ALPS WITH EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL. SOMEBODY'S GOTTA DO IT, RIGHT?



BY JOHN BURNS
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR AND EDELWEISS

It's all about the *planning*, really, a thing I've never been so hot at. As the old saying goes, failing to plan is planning to fail. Luckily for people like me, there's always sheer dumb luck and the kindness of strangers. Even a blind squirrel finds an occasional nut, and when Editor

Boehm threw out his back halfway through tours No. 1 and 2 of this year's AMA Alps Challenge Tour series (he was gonna do



all three, but...), he tagged yours truly to step in and take his place on Challenge No. 3. Funny, because I was just whining the other day about being the world's only "motojournalist" never to have been on an Edelweiss Tour. They've been putting them on since Werner Wachter quit his day job to launch the first one in 1980. Today, Edelweiss operates tours all over the world, and not just on motorcycles.

Apparently, there are a lot of non-planners like me who can appreciate showing up at a foreign airport (Nice, France, in my case) and having a great motorcycle ride *taken care of from there*. Actually, I had to get myself to the *Hotel Les Messugues*, from which the group would blast off the next morning, and return to seven days later.

"Taxi!" There are no Lyfts in France.



NO OFFICIALS ARE MANNING THE BORDER, AND NO SIGN OF ANYBODY TRYING TO SNEAK ELEPHANTS ACROSS TO CONQUER ROME. WHY DID WE EVER FIGHT ANYWAY?

For those keeping score, there were three week-long legs of this year's AMA Alps Challenge. The first one started from Munich, Germany, in early August along with Mitch and my new best friend Charlie from Miami. I don't ride as much as I used to, and I was a little concerned that seven days in a row blasting around the Alps on a not-slow BMW S1000XR might overtax my systems. Not to worry, said Charlie, who's 10 years older than I and was about to embark on his 22nd day in a row with barely a break: "You'll be having so much fun you won't know you're tired."



Also along for the ride: an actual French chef, from France, now cooking at his own restaurant in Chevy Chase, Md.; Steele the pilot and his wife Terri from Dallas, and buddies Brian and Larry from Walnut Creek, Calif., and Bend, Ore. Tour regulars Phil and Rick from Tennessee — part of the "Tennessee Trio" from the original tour in 2021 — were scheduled to attend, but Phil passed away unexpectedly earlier in 2023 and Rick figured he'd pass this one up. That's sad and sobering, but also why you should do a thing like this now if you've been thinking about it. I don't know about all the Edelweiss tours, but my group's not getting any younger.

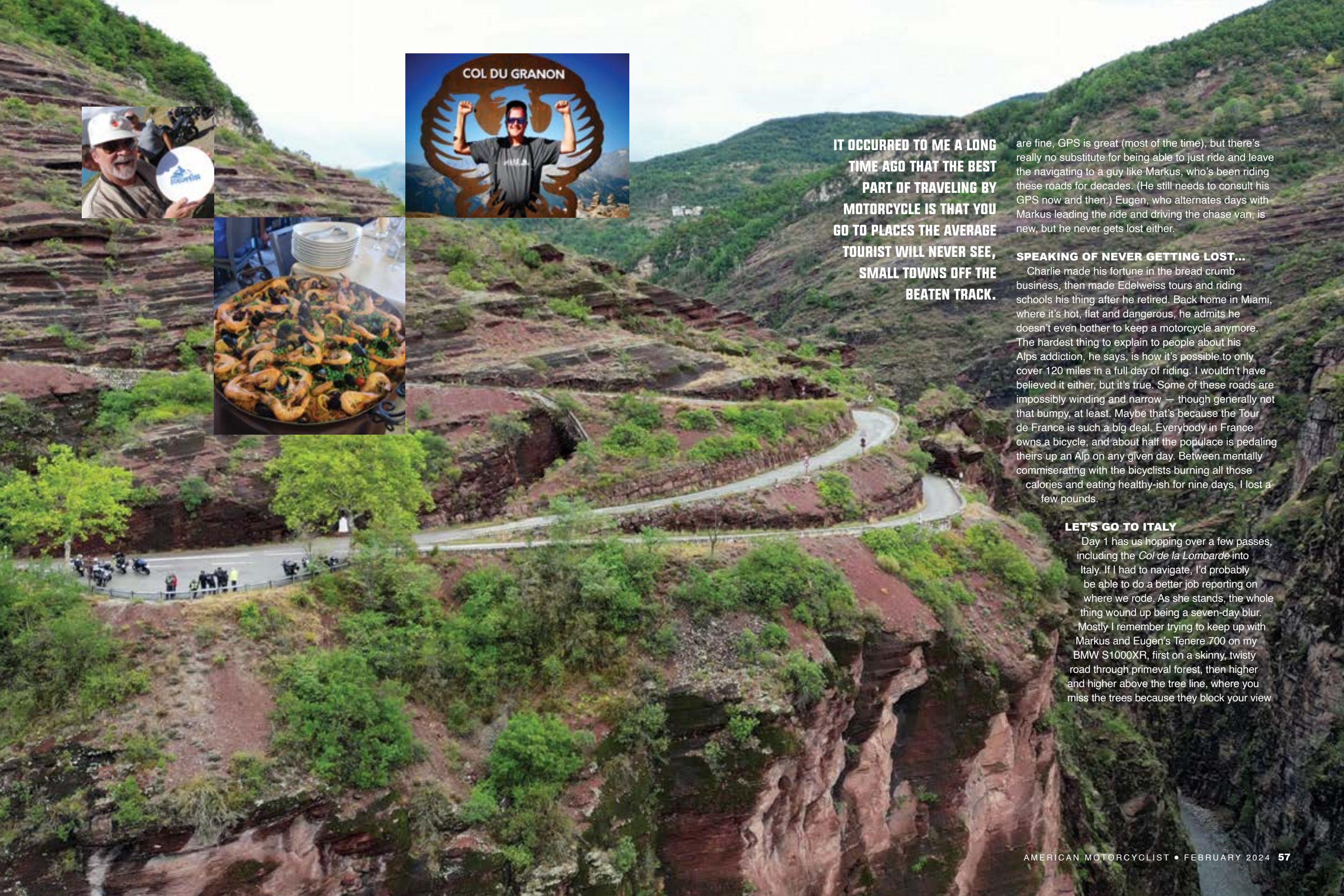
NO FURTHER ADO...

At 7:30 a.m. it's breakfast time; every hotel in France has the same croissants, chocolate croissants, prosciutto, salami, espresso maker — which is *not* a complaint. At 8:30 we drag our bags to the chase van, get a briefing on the day's ride, and by 9 we're rolling. Guess who's spoiled from being a motorcycle journalist

all these years? I am. I've been on a bunch of new-bike launches all over Europe (never for seven days, though), and it occurred to me a long time ago that the best part of traveling by motorcycle is that you go to places the average tourist will never see, small towns off the beaten track. Motorcyclists seek out the roads tour buses fear to tread. On your own, you might find a few of them, but you won't be able to seamlessly link them together in the most efficient manner over seven days the way Edelweiss's guides are able to do. Folding maps



Markus (in the van every other day, and at left), has been leading Edelweiss tours for decades and knows where all the bones are buried. Jamie E. Thomas Riit is Tour Supervisor and not a bad photographer at all who shot nearly all these pics. Your luggage, thanks to the van, magically appears in your room every night.



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are fine, GPS is great (most of the time), but there's really no substitute for being able to just ride and leave the navigating to a guy like Markus, who's been riding these roads for decades. (He still needs to consult his GPS now and then.) Eugen, who alternates days with Markus leading the ride and driving the chase van, is new, but he never gets lost either.

SPEAKING OF NEVER GETTING LOST...

Charlie made his fortune in the bread crumb business, then made Edelweiss tours and riding schools his thing after he retired. Back home in Miami, where it's hot, flat and dangerous, he admits he doesn't even bother to keep a motorcycle anymore. The hardest thing to explain to people about his Alps addiction, he says, is how it's possible to only cover 120 miles in a full day of riding. I wouldn't have believed it either, but it's true. Some of these roads are impossibly winding and narrow — though generally not that bumpy, at least. Maybe that's because the Tour de France is such a big deal. Everybody in France owns a bicycle, and about half the populace is pedaling theirs up an Alp on any given day. Between mentally commiserating with the bicyclists burning all those calories and eating healthy-ish for nine days, I lost a few pounds.

LET'S GO TO ITALY

Day 1 has us hopping over a few passes, including the *Col de la Lombarde* into Italy. If I had to navigate, I'd probably be able to do a better job reporting on where we rode. As she stands, the whole thing wound up being a seven-day blur. Mostly I remember trying to keep up with Markus and Eugen's Tenere 700 on my BMW S1000XR, first on a skinny, twisty road through primeval forest, then higher and higher above the tree line, where you miss the trees because they block your view



Everybody in California on a bicycle is wearing a tortured grimace; everybody in France, including the grandmothers, is mostly happily beaming. Charlie from Miami, right, will have been on 33 Edelweiss tours by the time you read this, and is the only human to do all three legs of the AMA Alps Challenge.

of how far you'd fall if you went over the side. At one tight hairpin, only one, there was Armco barrier; I didn't even want to look at what that drop must've been. It all had me feeling a little *vertiginous*. Marmots crossing the road snapped me out of it.

But we made it past the old military fortifications up there, and down the other side into Italy and the *Hotel Ristorante Pizzeria Le Lanterne* in Beguda. It was hot that day, and we finally

cheers-ed cold local beers, but only after the barman/owner explained the pros and cons of drinking five or six of them in various languages while we visibly dehydrated. Hey, said Alain the chef, Italy's the home of slow food.



The pizza was fantastic. Charlie was worried the rooms would be hot if there's no AC, and in my room (where my big Ogio bag had preceded me) there was none, but by dark it had cooled off nicely. Throwing open the doors to my balcony allowed me to snore freely and keep the bugs at bay. (In fact, I observed one dead mosquito on one fairing the whole trip; the Alps seem to be insect-free.) Of the seven hotels, the *Pizzeria Lanterne* was the only one with a bidet. After my last (and only) trip to Japan, I bit the bullet and outfitted both my home bathrooms with cheap bolt-on units. How ironic to be hygienically deprived in France, of all places...sometimes one must just soldier on.

NATURAL HIGH

Day 2 sees us climb a bunch more passes on our way to Briancon, the highest city in France at 4,350 feet. Not all that high, really, but on the way there we summit *Col Agnel*, third-highest pass in the Alps at 9,016 feet, and the highest border crossing in Europe. No officials are manning the border, and no sign of anybody trying to sneak elephants across to conquer Rome. Why did we ever fight anyway? Who can remember?

Luckily, Briancon is home of the *La Tourmente* brewery. Alain the chef translates what it means to have a big torment. It's universal. Tonight, we have none, but wash away the pain anyway with a lovely group dinner.



THE WISDOM OF CHARLIE

It's a crapshoot, says Charlie (who's done 31 Edelweiss tours over the last 10 years, and has two more lined up later this year, one of them to New Zealand) as far as what kind of group you wind up riding with. Some are more fun than others, he says, but none are ever not good. "I mean, we're all *motorcycle* people." Our group winds up being only seven (and three guides, four if you count Thomas' lovely and hard-riding wife Simone), but after the first couple of days we're all beginning to adjust to each others' peccadilloes. Except mine, as I don't have any.

By Day 3 I realize fatigue isn't going to be a problem, thanks to my BMW's 150-horsepower engine and the fact that we never ride more than 1.5 hours before stopping for a nice double espresso.

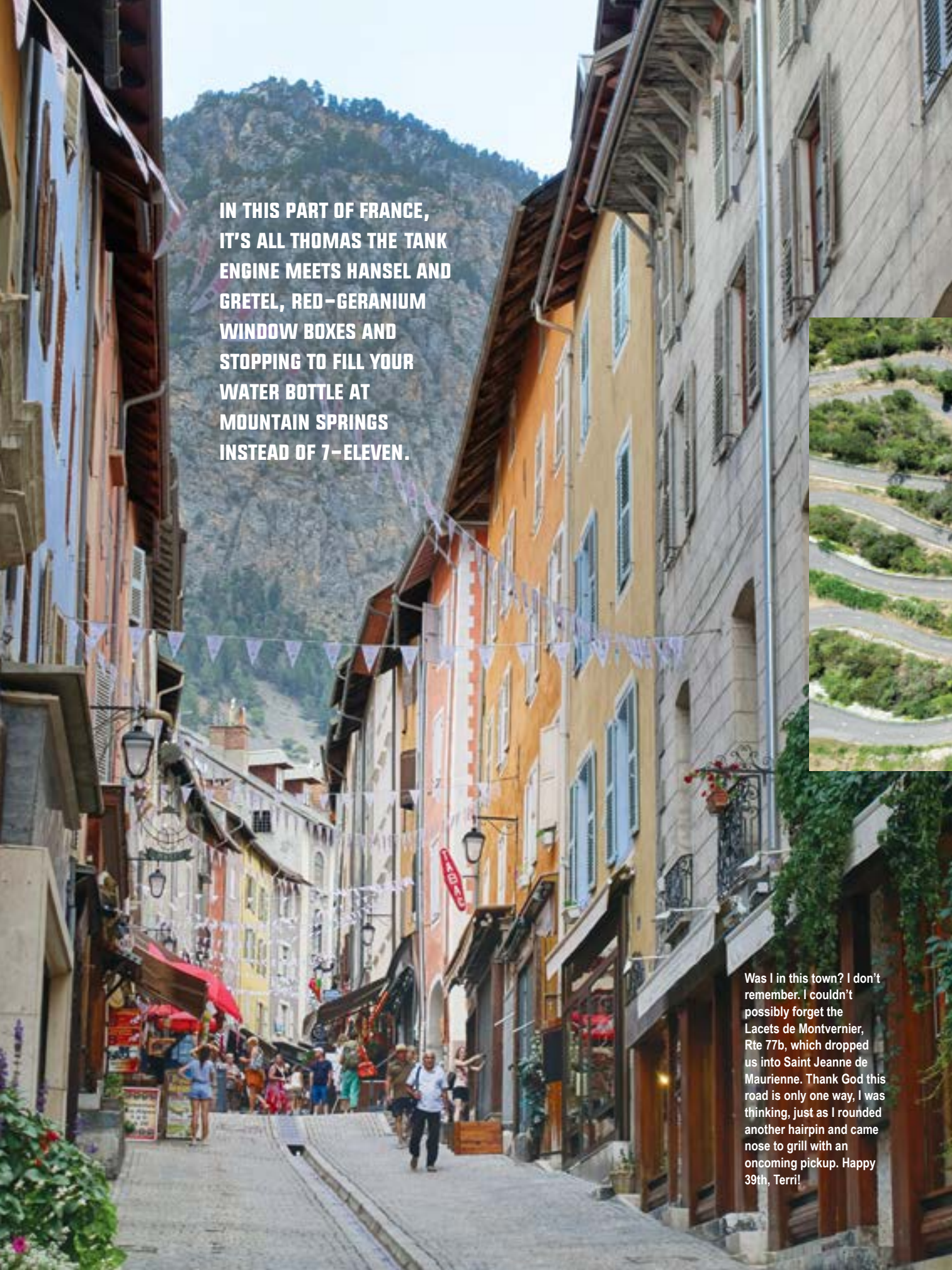


I'd missed the pre-ride orientation where the no passing rule was laid down (I thought everybody was just being super-polite), and after being upbraided for that, I'd now settled into my fourth place in the pecking order, having fun nipping



EVERYBODY IN FRANCE OWNS A BICYCLE, AND ABOUT HALF THE POPULACE IS PEDALING THEIRS UP AN ALP ON ANY GIVEN DAY.

IN THIS PART OF FRANCE, IT'S ALL THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE MEETS HANSEL AND GRETEL, RED-GERANIUM WINDOW BOXES AND STOPPING TO FILL YOUR WATER BOTTLE AT MOUNTAIN SPRINGS INSTEAD OF 7-ELEVEN.



Was I in this town? I don't remember. I couldn't possibly forget the Lacets de Montvernier, Rte 77b, which dropped us into Saint Jeanne de Maurienne. Thank God this road is only one way, I was thinking, just as I rounded another hairpin and came nose to grill with an oncoming pickup. Happy 39th, Terri!

at the heels of Charlie's R1250GS as he nipped at the heels of Steele and Terri's R1250RT, who nipped at the guide's Tenere 700. It was actually a pretty quick pace, but not so quick as to miss the essence of motorcycle touring through Europe. In this part of France, it's all Thomas the Tank Engine meets Hansel and Gretel, red-geranium window boxes and stopping to fill your water bottle at mountain springs instead of 7-Eleven. If you wanted to, you could at any time split off from the group and find your own way to the next hotel. Boehm says he does it occasionally, but on our tour, nobody did.



A LITTLE RAIN MUST FALL

It had been hot, in the low 90s degrees Fahrenheit, but on Day 4 there's a hint of rain in the air, which becomes a deluge for a short while. For fair-weather California bikers like me, that's always exciting. Will your gear be up to the task? Yes! My Spidi H20-Out jacket and Tourmaster pants keep me dry, and that's a good thing, because when I stand up on the pegs to stretch, the cold water caught

between the sleeves of my jacket's outer shell and waterproof liner runs down into my gloves. It's *icy cold*. No worries, though; my BMW has heated grips and handguards.

For a while we ride along the edge of a big lake on a smooth, fast road that passes through colonnaded tunnels I think I remember from a James Bond movie...or maybe a

Lexus commercial. There's a big waterfall that plunges over one section of it into the lake. We ride through the mist. After lunch, we ride up and over *Col de l'Iseran*, which is the highest paved pass in Europe.

We were going to do another pass, but the weather was turning blustery and we voted to get to Saint Jean-de-Maurienne a bit earlier instead — mostly because Alain

Once upon a time you might've wanted to stop and say hello to the woman tending her cliff-side garden, or the gentlemen killing the day beside the fountain. Now you just want to glimpse at their lives, wave, and keep sucking in more time and space. Let's keep the cradle rocking while we can. There's some kind of festival in one town we ride through, where the quad ski lift rises right up from the middle of things. Everybody's camped out; nobody minds the occasional shower.

Most days there's a leisurely lunch stop, but today the chase van brings us a picnic to eat alongside the beautiful blue *Lac du Mont Cenis*, 6,476 feet up. That night we sleep in the Black Diamond Ski Lodge in *La Battaillette*, which is as nice and modernly rustic as it sounds. *Entrecote* for everybody! And *vin rouge* for a few of us.



I HAVE 25 YEARS' WORTH OF ANTI-FOG PRODUCTS AND REPLACEMENT VISORS IN THE GARAGE; DID IT OCCUR TO ME TO OUTFIT MY SHOEI FOR A SEVEN-DAY ALPS ADVENTURE? IT DID NOT.

the Chef had told us about the *Museo Opinel* there, where they've been making great knives for a century or two. It was hot and parched again by the time we pulled into the Hotel St. George parking lot, and Eugen, whose day it was to drive the chase van, met us with a cooler of iced beer and drinks. I'm beginning to like Eugen very much.

I picked up a beautiful chef's knife and two camping

knives for the kids, and ducked into the local bar, *Le Soft*, on the way back to the hotel to observe the natives. I'm sure the French have their problems, too, but they don't wear them so close to the surface. An older gentleman is having a glass of wine at a table; his wife collects him on her way home with a baguette poking out of her grocery bag. Au revoir, monsieur, and *bon appetit*.



This is the part where I say "we all became the best of friends and are exchanging Christmas cards." Not really, but it is kind of amazing how different people from "all walks of life" (ok, that's not really true either) or at least a few geezers with a little disposable income and not much else in common, except motorcycles, really can become a tight-knit little band of brothers (and two sisters) in just a few days riding together. Cheers, mes amis!



Speaking of planning, I have 25 years' worth of anti-fog products and replacement visors in the garage; did it occur to me to outfit my Shoei for a seven-day Alps adventure? It did not. On Day 5, the rain is like being water-boarded for a while as we ride one of France's famous roads carved into the side of the mountain. Larry the civil engineer had observed the night before that at least all the cliffs are stable — which would explain today's many large rocks in the road with water pouring past them. Really, it was no problem to defog by just opening my shield and using the Shoei's drop-down visor and the bike's windscreen to block the drops, as we were crawling along pretty slowly. The clouds we were riding through parted once to reveal



a tiny village thousands of feet straight down in a lush valley, like looking out of an airplane. Yikes, better to concentrate on the taillight ahead of me...at least there's a low stone wall between me and oblivion on the left, even if it is only five feet away. Eventually we drained, along with millions of gallons of silty runoff, into yet another quaint cafe for another double espresso. Riding in conditions like that does reinforce group cohesion, and also makes you appreciate your ABS and traction control.

By now I'm even beginning to like the long lunches in the little French restaurants that you definitely wouldn't find on your own. Homemade pork ravioli, San Pellegrino and idle motorcycle chatter. By now, strangers have become new friends. If you wanted to travel on your own or with a pre-existing group of friends, Edelweiss also offers self-guided tours.

By the end of seven days riding, consuming long, delicious dinners with great people, and sleeping like a pampered baby in a different crib every night, I was with Charlie: I could've just kept going another couple of weeks if they'd let me. It is what it is.

Maybe Mitch will throw his back out again next year? **No!** Perish the thought! **AMA**