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Australian MOTORCYCLIST

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BACK ROADS

COME RIDE WITH **THE BEAR**



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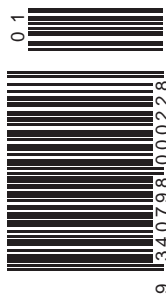
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PLUS: LESTER MORRIS, THE BEAR, BORIS AND OUR COMIC MOTOMANIA



Like Malvina and Pete, I had long wanted to see the tiny, more-or-less independent state of Andorra. Its independence these days is a bit of a myth, seeing that it is governed by two “princes” – the President of France and the Catholic Bishop of Urgell in Spain. Weird? No more weird than the government we currently have here in Australia... Andorra also has a few more souls – 85,000 at last count. But I doubt that it spends any more on its

defence: after all, the only people likely to invade are the hordes who come to shop tax-free or to enjoy the skiing.

Our little band was no exception. We stopped at what would have to be the biggest motorcycle clothing shop I have ever seen (and I’ve seen some big ones, especially in Japan), selling duty-free big-brand clothing. Peter from Canada bought a spare Dainese riding jacket and was thereafter known as Peter Two Jackets.

IN THE BEGINNING

I should have known it was going to be a good tour when I saw the wild pig. It was right at the beginning of the first day's ride, still in the hotel grounds. A dark animal of some kind crossed the drive in front of us, and when I got a closer look at it, it turned out to be a chunky wild pig. For Germans, pigs are symbols of good luck – and while Edelweiss is an Austrian company, they do speak German there.

Sadly, the first thing I discovered after my arrival was that I wouldn't be able to go and see the inside of Gaudi's amazing Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona – you have to book ahead, it seems. Bummer. Last time I was here, I couldn't get in because the Pope was visiting. It appears I am doomed to miss this. Bum-mer.

Our hotel was good, though, built around an ancient watchtower overlooking the coast and with a thoroughly pleasant pool bar. Drinks are affordable in Spain (I guessed correctly that a request for 'cerveza pression' would get me a draft beer), and pool bars are great places to catch up on your notes. Here's another tip o' the hat to the hotel, the Rey Don Jaime: they supply those excellent toothpicks which include a bit of dental floss and allow you to access the wonderful Iberian ham, which has a tendency to stick between your teeth. An inflatable saxophone floated in the pool, presumably forgotten by an inflatable jazz musician...

That evening I found myself sitting next to an American at the pool bar.

"Man," he said, "it's hot."

"Yeah," I said, "but as we say in Aussie, it's not the heat, it's the humidity."

He looked over at me. "You really say that?"

"Sure," I said. "And not only that. Last year we won the international Most Bleeding Obvious Comment About The Weather competition with it. We beat the Italians' "You should have been here yesterday", your American "Hot enough for ya?" and a joint Norwegian/Canadian entry, "Cold enough for ya?" out of hand."

"Yeah, right," he said and I got back to making notes.

ON THE ROAD

The breakfast selection included 'expresso with whisky' and 'expresso with rom'. You will be pleased to know that I resisted temptation.

On that first day's ride we were headed for the "sawn-off mountain" Montserrat, that wonderful bunch of near-vertical hills west of Barcelona which holds a spectacular road and the thoroughly exploited eponymous monastery. Here's a tip – the best way in is by way of the A2 and then the B112. That gets you through the Gordian knot of expressways around Barcelona, and onto the best road approaching the hills.

Montserrat monastery was built around a cave where two shepherd boys found a figure of the Madonna which neither they nor the local bishop could lift. I thought of volunteering to have a go, but remembered my bad back just in time.

Lunch was at Cardona, in a hotel that occupies a hilltop castle, and was simple – sandwiches – but excellent because they were filled with Iberian ham. Where did I leave that toothpick? The roads between Montserrat and Cardona had been good, but nothing like the after-lunch treat along the Ribera Salada, which I took to mean the Salad River.

I opted to take the shorter of the two routes available every day. We stopped in at a wondrous small motorcycle museum



1. The Casteldefels hotel had a nice tower next to the swimming pool.
2. The Mountain of Toast is only a hundred metres away.
3. The motorcycle museum at Oliana is a knockout, and it has a hamburger joint.
4. No, this does not mean "outdoor toilet in 250 metres".
5. Guess what? No, it's souvenir soap. Good gift idea, I suppose.
6. Road tunnels are just chopped out of the stone. It seems to work.
7. The Montserrat massif is crossed by an excellent road – but it requires care!
8. Here's where the fish can come and rest. Nice thought.
9. Many medieval bridges are still in use in Northern Spain.



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near Oliana (you will read more of this here in future) and then repaired to our hotel along a single-lane blacktop road. Entry was 6 Euros, a bargain for this two-level wonderland.

The hotel that night in Peramola was once again well chosen, with undercover parking and comfortable, modern rooms. Pity it was too cold for the pool... Edelweiss tours typically include breakfast and dinner on riding days (breakfast only on rest days) and here as everywhere the food was worth writing home about.

Next day was a so-called “rest day” but the riding options were far too attractive to ignore. Instead of joining the rest of the group, who took a similar route to mine, I decided to head off alone – it’s better that way if you want to spend a lot of time photographing. You don’t hold up everyone else. Isn’t it wonderful that digital photography these days allows us to take any amount of photos we want – and to check them on the spot to see if they’ve come out! Mind you, I have no idea what I’ll do with all of my mountain scenery shots from this trip.

I rode up to the Col de Bóixols on a series of terrific if rather narrow back roads. Finally figured out what the drivers of the cars parked in all sorts of remote places were doing – they were gathering mushrooms. Huge things, too, and very tasty – I had some that night at the hotel. My lunch that day was a tomato salad with olive oil and sheep cheese; the accompanying bread was a bit stale, but the heritage tomatoes were delicious.

Michelin road maps have green shading along some roads, allegedly marking ‘scenic roads’. In fact they often

10. My buddy Joe, a fireman from the US, enjoying himself.

11. Once upon a time, fortified churches acted as refuges from bandits.

12. Beer is good. Always. But it’s even better in a nice badged glass.

13. Not all medieval bridges have survived.



just show forest, which of course is not scenic because you can't see anything beyond the first row of trees. Sometimes, though, they are spot on. In this case I followed one which claimed to lead to the Montan de Tost, presumably the Mountain of Toast. Saw no toast whatsoever, but I may not have been looking hard enough because I was concentrating on the dozen kilometres or so of interconnected switchbacks which took me to the ridge line and its outstanding views. What a road! I apologise for all those 'forest' comments I've made about Michelin maps.

This is a wonderful area for motorcycling, with an almost endless supply of reasonably well maintained back roads and staggering scenery. One day I'd like to come back, base myself at Peramola or somewhere nearby and spend a couple of weeks sampling all the rides the area has to offer. One day...

POO TO US

The daily morning briefings were comprehensive. They started out in English and German but soon defaulted to just English, as the German

participants seemed to either speak or at least understand a little of that. Amusingly there was talk every day of sticking to the speed limit, followed by the departure of our guide at 120 to 130km/h. No, just in case you were wondering, that is not the speed limit...

This morning we tackled three countries – Spain Andorra and then France. Andorra la Vella, the capital of this small mountain nation, is in effect a giant duty free shop. And yes, motorcycle gear is available at tax-free prices.

The roads in and out were nevertheless terrific, and outstandingly well maintained. We weren't the only ones taking advantage of them; lots of riders with all sorts of license plates were all over the place. So was a McLaren which we admired while its driver had coffee at the Pass of Incontinent Horses. There was a wealth of horse dung on the road and everywhere else. When the driver came back he waved away our comments about his wallet and told us he was 'just' a test driver. The car, it seemed, might or might not see the showroom in about three years. It all depended on these and other tests.

My companions

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The most important one was, of course, the Triumph Tiger 800XC kindly lent to me by Triumph Spain. The bike did a terrific and consistent job without a single murmur and was remarkably comfortable even for long days. It kept up with the bigger bikes (even if I perhaps didn't!) and the suspension never caused any worries. It was also particularly attractive with its bright red frame.

In truth, of course, my human companions mattered even more. A great collection of riders from Canada to Japan and Germany, they made the ride what it was.

They are, in the back row: Klaus Roth, Peter "Two Jackets" Elliott, Marlene Roth, Ulrike Mueller, Mathias Breitner, Ruth Guillou, Joe Pezzuti, unknown and unknown (sorry – your names weren't on the list!), Jack Broomall and Lisa Barrow. As you can probably work out, I'm the one in the front row with the Free Catalan flag. The guides next to me are Mirko (middle) and Alejandro.





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While in the bar of the Pass of Incontinent Horses, one of the patrons was accompanied by a sleek, medium-sized and intelligent-looking dog. “C’est un bon chien,” I ventured in my broken French. “Il est local?” “Oui, c’est un chien berger,” was the reply. A mountain dog, right. “Err, c’est pour les brebis?” No, apparently it was not a sheep dog. “Non! Pour les avalanches!” Oops, a rescue dog.

Roads in France are not as good as in Spain, but in both countries there is a substantial drop from the tar seal to the surrounding dirt. You would not want to run off the tar if you were taking a corner a bit tightly.

Not far into France we rode into what we initially thought were clouds. I mean, they possibly were – except that when you’re riding in clouds, especially thick ones, they are exactly the same as fog. Heavy fog. Our speed decreased to a crawl as we followed each other’s taillight and did our best to avoid the copious cow pats covering the roadway. Cow pats, in case you didn’t know, have a coefficient of friction near enough to zero... The producers of this lubricant treated our bikes, looming suddenly out of the fog, as quite normal and continued to chew their cud and eliminate the remains as we passed.

Eventually we emerged from the fog and discovered yet more beautiful mountain roads and scenery, in France as it was in Spain and Andorra. No wonder the Catalans, who live here, think of themselves as one people and want their own country.

RESTING AND SPENDING

We reached the fortified town of Carcassonne in the afternoon. Most

- 14. Carcassonne’s fortifications were restored in the 19th Century
- 15. You can eat your way from one town to the next, sampling different cassoulets.
- 16. Heading into Andorra means tackling a few steep stretches.
- 17. Lunch – a tomato salad with sheep cheese and olive oil.

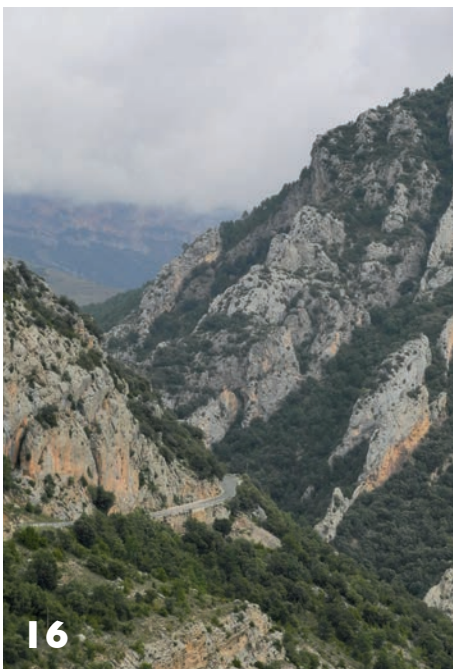
powered vehicles are not allowed into the town itself before 7pm, so we thought we might have to park outside – but someone took pity on us and guided us into the hotel carpark almost at the centre of the fortifications. Although it is a very old fortified site – it was a redoubt before the Romans came - Carcassonne these days looks like a bit of a Disneyland fortress. This is probably due to its recent restoration; the French government had it fixed up in the 1850s.

I liked what I had seen of Carcassonne, so I decided to skip the recommended rides and just wander around by myself for a day, looking through the tourist shops and walking the battlements like Hamlet. I didn’t encounter any ghosts but I did see a lot of tourist tatt. Fortunately there were some genuinely interesting goods available as well, and I bought some nice hand-made jewellery for the family.

In Carcassonne, however, as in most historic places in Europe, they do see the tourists coming. Literally in the case of Carcassonne, where they all get out of their buses and pour through the portcullis at the main gate. It’s like a modern Visigoth attack, except that the attackers leave, rather than arriving, with horned souvenir helmets. It’s better later in the evening; even the food is better – the pancakes I had for lunch had not even been properly re-heated after being made God knows when, while the cassoulet at dinner was edible. Mine’s better, though!

WHAT A DAY

My half-fractured clutch lever found a replacement, and the guides also managed to replace the perilously worn front tyre on my Triumph Tiger 800XC. That turned out to be just in time... I had enjoyed the riding so far, but I had no idea what was yet to come – today. It was remarkable; I don’t think I have ever ridden so many wonderful roads one after the other. We spent the entire day stringing together little back roads and passes, and if it hadn’t been for the loose gravel that French road builders had left scattered over 30km or so of one of the best stretches it would have been perfect. Peter Two Jackets had a relatively



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in the day we tackled the coast road to the north of Barcelona. This is clearly the locals' version of Sydney's Old Road, Melbourne's Great Ocean Road and so on. The local riders were everywhere, almost all on late model sports bikes which vie with each other to overtake in the most dangerous circumstances.

An hour on the tollway took us back to our original hotel in Casteldefels, a final convivial evening together and departure in the morning.

By the way, despite being little more than a vast shopping mall surrounded by obsessively groomed ski slopes, Andorra offers its residents the third-highest life expectancy in the world. Shopping and skiing, eh? Who'd have thought that they were the secrets of a long life?

The Bear took this tour as a guest of Edelweiss Bike Travel.

21. The moment you straighten up from one corner, there's another.

22. It's a shame they don't have time for the wonderful views...



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Star of the mountains

Edelweiss is a bright white flower of the Alps; the clothing brand Alpine Star is also named after it. The touring company has been in operation since 1980, and runs a staggering number of tours with various levels of difficulty all over the world; see www.edelweiss.com for a look at their lineup. They are especially proud of their safety record. They really are stars of the mountains, and my companions on this ride had all done other Edelweiss tours before and had come back for more.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to sample one of their tours, and happily recommend them.

While they are not quite as full-service as some other operators (for example, they do not pick you up at the airport – you need to make your own way to the hotel where the tour starts) they are happy to help you out in any way you might need. ●