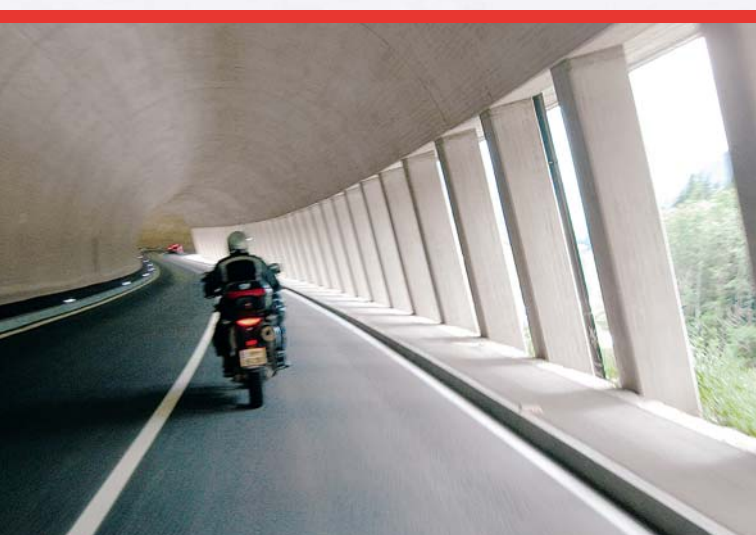
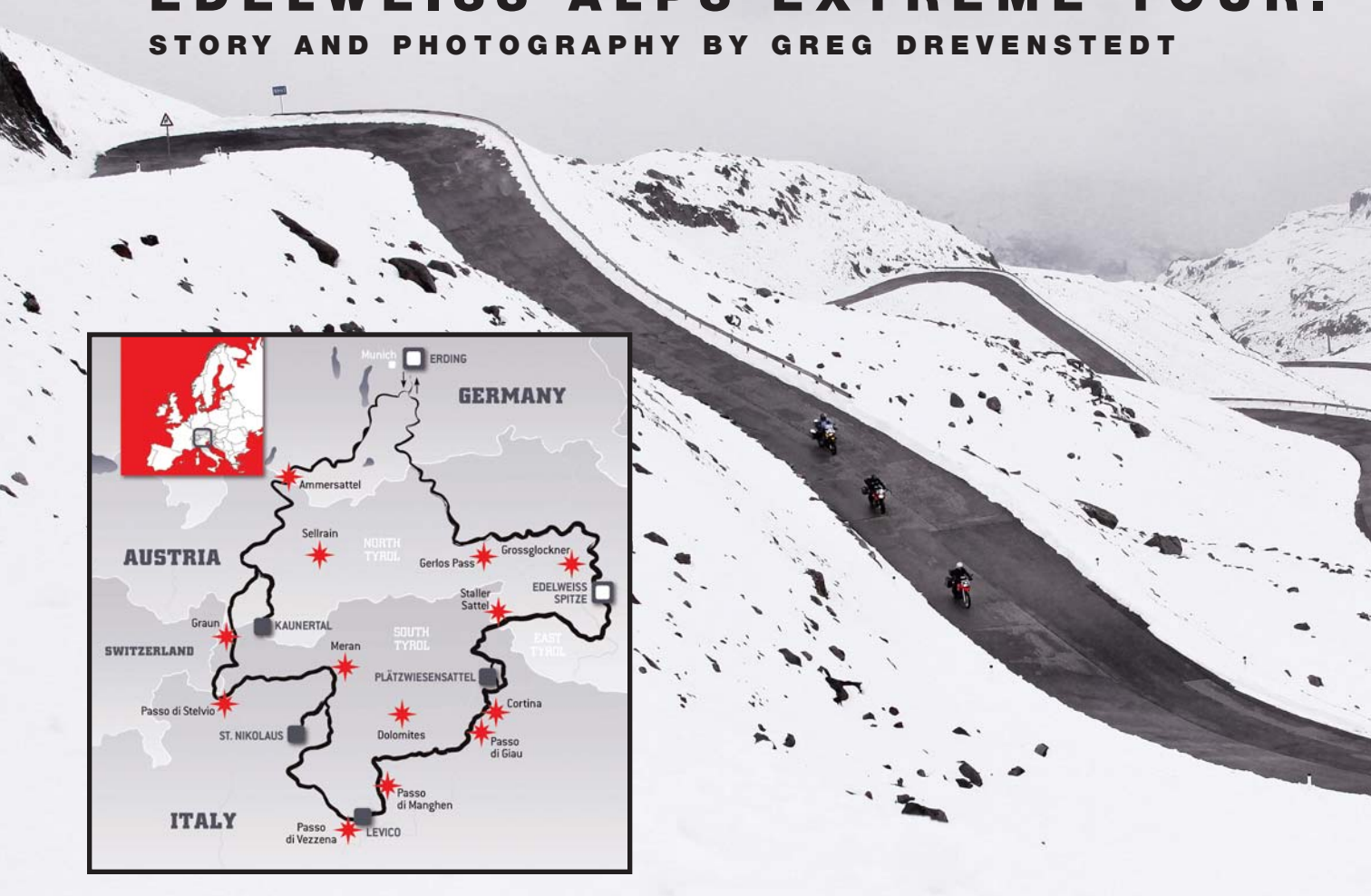


Pass the Test

EDELWEISS ALPS EXTREME TOUR.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG DREVENSTEDT





If the Alps isn't near the top of your "ride there before I die" list, it should be. Formed hundreds of millions of years ago when the northward-moving African tectonic plate smashed into Europe, the Alps have since been sculpted by glaciers and rivers into a masterpiece of contrasts. Being in the heart of Europe, a continent that has been inhabited, subdivided and fought over for millennia, roads have been cut through the Alps in the most unlikely of places.

Edelweiss Bike Travel's Alps Extreme Tour, a six-day romp through this Wonder of the Motorcycling World, is a rider's tour: challenging roads, long days in the saddle and an itinerary unburdened by touristy stuff. As a value-priced Ride4Fun tour, all gear is carried on the bikes (no chase van) and accommodations are modest but cozy. Though short and long daily routes were available, our hearty group unanimously opted to go the distance. Thirteen of the 24 participants were friends and family from Mexico, with the balance from the United States and Canada. Language was not a barrier, but familiarity and simple math meant that we ended up riding with the same "team" every day, led alternately by our guides, Michael and Ramon. Wearing custom-made Alps Extreme shirts and jackets, the Mexican group looked like pros!

Underscoring the adventure ahead, we departed Erding, Germany, on a dreary, rainy, 50-degree Monday morning on an armada of BMWs, Hondas and Suzukis. The first pass of the trip, Kesselberg (2,815 feet), was modest, but the road up and over provided our first taste of the Alps: tight corners, tunnels, cobalt lakes and snowcapped peaks. And, of course, getting stuck behind a tour bus. We stopped for lunch at Café Edelweiss in Ettal. Edelweiss ("noble white" in German) is a rare, protected mountain flower found at high elevations that is a symbol of the Alps. Now in its 30th year, Edelweiss Bike Travel started out offering tours of the Alps, and the company adopted the elusive yellow and white flower as its namesake. Fittingly, we ate at restaurants, stayed in hotels and drank wheat beer named after the edelweiss.

The Alps, at least the areas accessible by paved roads, are never far from civilization. Most alpine passes have a café/hotel perched right at the crest, making it easy to stop for a coffee and enjoy the view. Fern Pass (3,966 feet) was followed by a narrow, wooded road that crossed into Austria. We had to skip the highest pass of the day's route (Hahntennjoch, 6,213 feet) because of slide damage. Auspiciously, our tour began on the summer solstice, but that also meant many roads were under construction to repair winter damage. After crossing the Pitztal ridge, we rode up the Kaunertal Gletscherstrasse (Glacier Road). Our first night's stay was at a rustic, 1870s-era mountain "hut" overlooking a glacier-fed reservoir. To celebrate the completion of our first day, we toasted Edelweiss beer over hot soup and goulash and enjoyed Michael's singing and guitar playing.

When I fired up the BMW F 650 GS the next morning,

Top left: With great relief, descending from the Kaunertal glacier on dry, non-icy roads. The snow flurries were a nice touch.

Far left: Open grazing areas were commonplace on this tour, with cows and manure adding hazards to already challenging roads.

Here a couple of cows "kick tires" on the BMW F 650 GS. Not quite enough load capacity for these biker babes.

Middle left: The Alps have every type of tunnel you can imagine. This "gallery" tunnel is open on one side to let light in and exhaust out.

Left: The Hochtortunnel is at 8,228 feet and was lined with icicles.

“**The road, which has 60 switchbacks, has changed little since it was built by the Austrian Empire in the 1820s.**”

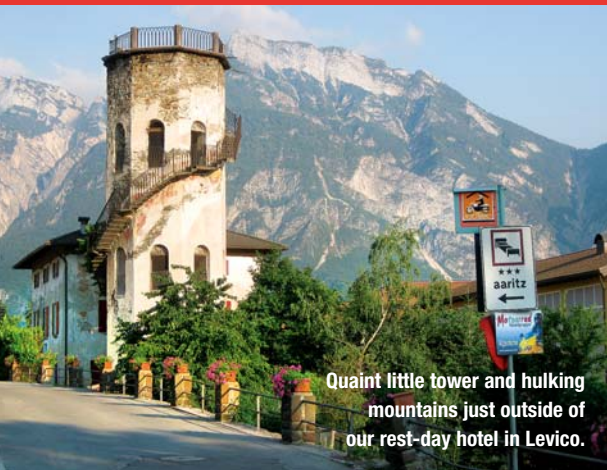
its computer flashed “2.0° C,” warning of near-freezing conditions. Many steep, wet hairpins later, we arrived at the glacier. Thick fog and snow flurries blocked our view and the temperature gauge flashed -3.5° C (26° F). We retraced the Gletscherstrasse, checked Finstermünz Pass (3,566 feet) off our list, then descended another tight, switchbacked road and crossed the border. Though Switzerland is the country most associated with the Alps, we logged only about 50 miles there—just enough for coffee in the restored, 17th-century village of Guarda and to bag Ofen Pass (7,070 feet). Umbrail Pass (8,218 feet) was snowed in, so we detoured into Italy.

You’ve probably seen photos of the road up to Stelvio Pass (9,045 feet), the second highest paved pass in the Alps. Unobstructed by rocks or trees, the view from the top shows a jagged line of asphalt wiggling its way down into an impressive valley. The road, which has 60 switchbacks, has changed little since it was built by the Austrian Empire in the 1820s. We had the good fortune of riding up and down, sharing the road with bicyclists, cars and tour buses. In the valley below, the clouds finally parted, ushering in blue skies and sunshine that stayed with us the rest of the tour.

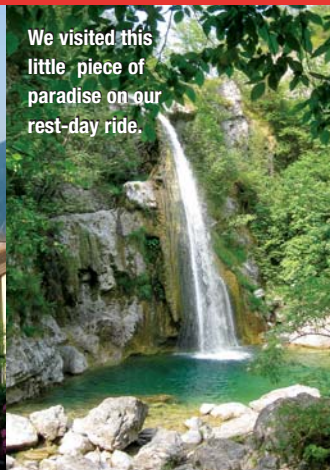
Our third day’s route went over only one pass (Gampen, 4,980 feet) on a road that hugged the leafy green mountainside and passed through arched tunnels paved with brick. In the Alps, every tunnel has a name and a personality. They range from a few meters to several kilometers in length, from barely one lane wide to multiple high-speed lanes across. Arched and rectangular, asphalt and brick, enclosed tubes and open “galleries”—there are too many to count. We entered the craggy Brenta mountains and visited little-known and hidden but beautifully picturesque Lake Tovel.

Day 4 was our “rest” day. We stayed in the same hotel in Levico for our third and fourth nights. Some went to Venice, others cobbled together their own ride. I joined our guides and four others on a special excursion. We rode up and down the narrowest, steepest roads yet, bagging Passo del Sommo (4,406 feet) along the way. We let our brake pads cool and sipped coffee in tourist-dense Riva del Garda before taking on Gardesana Occidentale. This road hugs the western edge of Lake Garda and is perhaps best known for the opening car chase in the film *Quantum of Solace*, when James Bond races through tunnels (there are 74 in a 17-mile stretch) in an Aston Martin DBS.

Via Benaco, which is chiseled out of rock and snakes its way through a mazelike gorge with



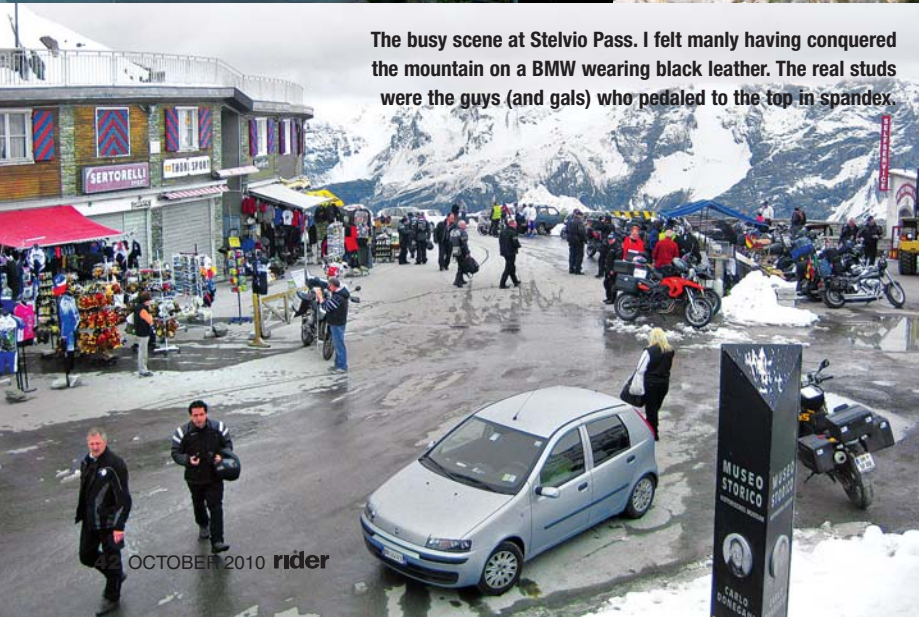
Quaint little tower and hulking mountains just outside of our rest-day hotel in Levico.



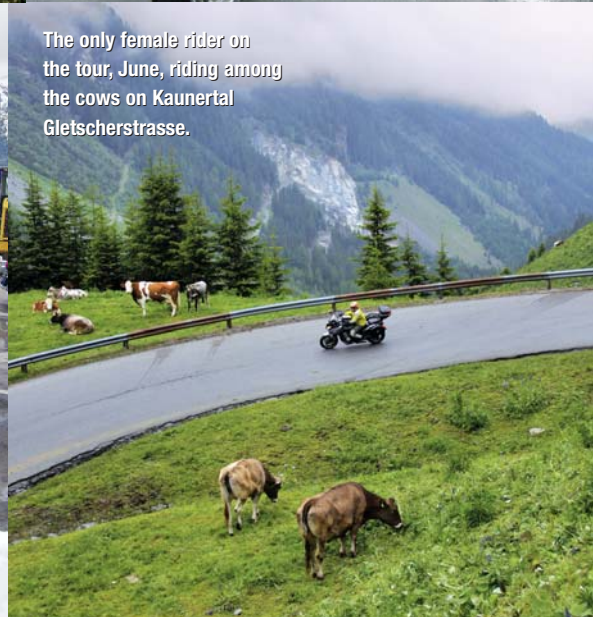
We visited this little piece of paradise on our rest-day ride.



Waiting for traffic to clear where winter road damage was being repaired.



The busy scene at Stelvio Pass. I felt manly having conquered the mountain on a BMW wearing black leather. The real studs were the guys (and gals) who pedaled to the top in spandex.



The only female rider on the tour, June, riding among the cows on Kaunertal Gletscherstrasse.

cavernous tunnels, took us to the village of Tremosine perched high on a bluff overlooking the lake. Via Valvestino, which winds its way through mountain forests and along Lake Valvestino, has more than 1,000 curves in 21 miles. We made a quick stop at a deli in Capovalle, then rode up into the hills to Michael's rustic, secluded farm for a picnic.

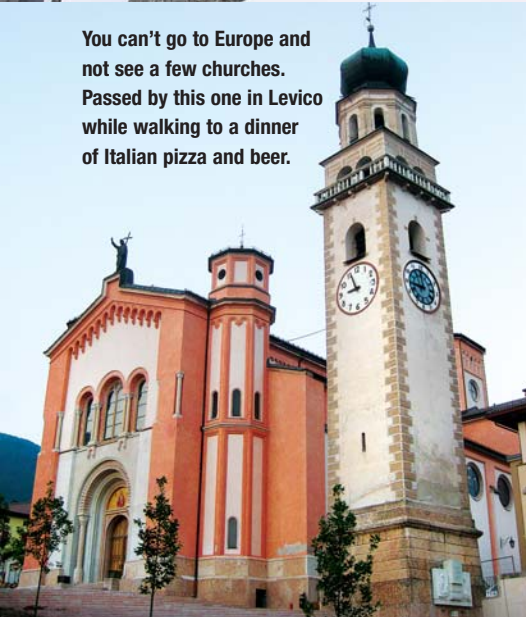
Our fifth and penultimate day took us into the Dolomites, a jagged, rocky mountain range recently named a UNESCO natural heritage site. We rode up and down seven passes: Manghen (6,716 feet), Rolle (6,463 feet), Cereda (4,491 feet), Duran (5,253 feet), Forcella Staulanza (5,817 feet), Giau (7,326 feet) and Tre Croci (5,923 feet)—all breathtakingly beautiful.

We thought it couldn't get any better, but Edelweiss had saved the best for last. We began our final day riding up to Staller Sattel (6,732 feet), where we crossed back into Austria. Next up was the Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse (High Alpine Road), a 30-mile asphalt playground named after Austria's highest



Switchbacks on the road to Stelvio Pass.

You can't go to Europe and not see a few churches. Passed by this one in Levico while walking to a dinner of Italian pizza and beer.



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peak, in Hohe Tauern National Park. We snapped photos of the Pasterze glacier then rode through the ice-walled Hoctor Tunnel (8,228 feet) and up a winding brick road to Edelweiss-spitze, a 8,435-foot peak known as “Biker’s Nest.” The Grossglockner peak was shrouded in dark gray snow clouds, which we were lucky to avoid.

The fun wasn’t over, but the remaining 150 miles felt anti-climactic. At some point, you just get saturated. I shrugged at the famous Krimmler waterfall and ho-hummed over our final pass (Gerlos, 4,921 feet). Back in Erding, we concluded the tour with a hearty farewell dinner. Every last one of us was amazed at the roads, and we felt triumphant having conquered over 1,200 miles of the most challenging, picturesque roads imaginable.

The Edelweiss Bike Travel Alps Extreme Tour will run twice in 2011, in June and August. For more information, see www.edelweissbike.com or contact Tri Community Travel, (800) 507-4459 or (760) 249-5825; email: edelweiss@trict.com. 



Riding through the Dolomites near Giau Pass in Italy.



Bird's eye view from Edelweiss-spitze on Austria's Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse.



The merry band of travelers in front of Edelweiss Hotel in Vernagt, Italy.



Cliffs lining the western shore of Lake Garda. See the road way down there?



Enjoying a picnic at Michael's farmhouse on our 300-kilometer "rest" day.



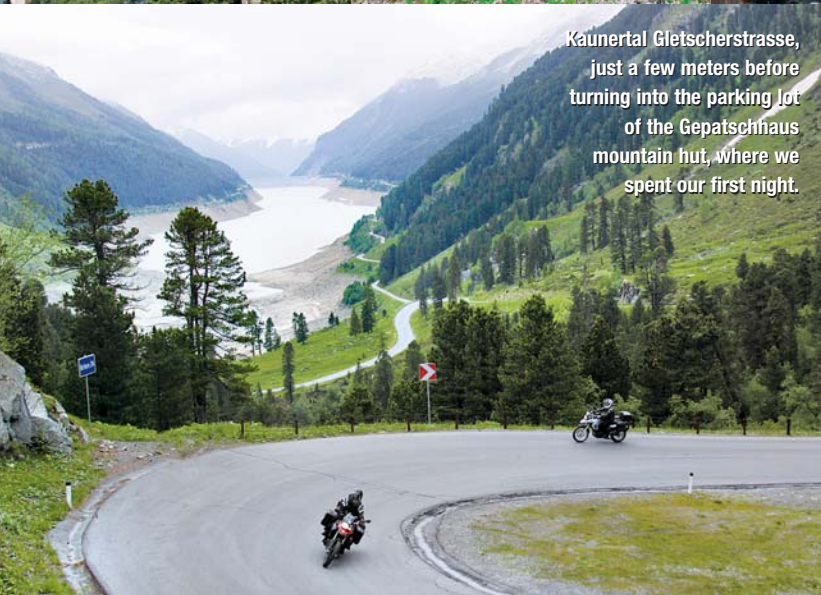
Nice hat, dude.



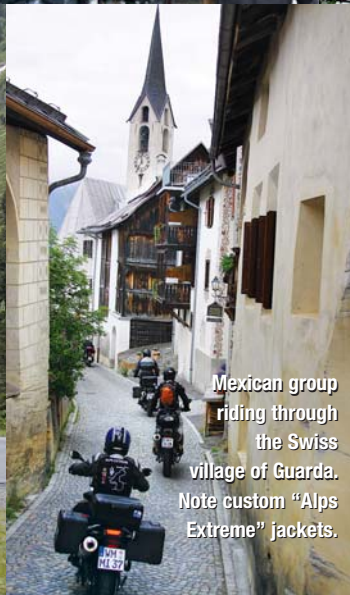
Lake Tovel, in the Brenta mountains of Italy.



The author atop Stelvio Pass.



Kaunertal Gletscherstrasse, just a few meters before turning into the parking lot of the Gepatschhaus mountain hut, where we spent our first night.



Mexican group riding through the Swiss village of Guarda. Note custom "Alps Extreme" jackets.



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