

ZOOM





LONG WAY DOWN

The view is pretty spectacular but it pays to keep your eyes on the road as you descend this Alpine road. Contributor Costa Mouzouris got his first taste of the high Alps by bike and found it to be a once in a lifetime experience. You can read about his travels and see more eye-catching photography starting on page 82 of this issue of *Inside Motorcycles*.

PHOTO BY ROXANNE GALLERY

Unexpected thrill

First time through Alps a memorable trip



By Costa Mouzouris

Photos by

Roxanne Gallery and Franziska Falkner

I guess you can say I have the opposite of a bucket list. It's not a list of things I'd like to get done before kicking the proverbial bucket; the risk of having unfulfilled dreams is just too great with that formula. It's rather a list of things I did that I never thought I'd actually do — an anti-bucket list of sorts.

I began compiling this list several years ago, the first item being a change of career from motorcycle technician to what I now do. Soon after that came a ride on a Valentino Rossi's Yamaha YZR-M1 MotoGP machine, a truly rare opportunity that very few riders will ever experience, I being the

last to imagine it possible. But it happened.

More recently, my anti-bucket list grew, though this time the content was much more accessible — a motorcycle tour of the High Alps. I've heard the Alps referred to as the Mecca of motorcycling, the rider's Shangri-La, but until I actually rode through this mountainous region of Europe, I had no idea just how motorcycle-friendly the rugged landscape was.

My portal to this motorcycling heaven on Earth came via the High Alpine Tour, one of numerous motorcycle tours offered by Edelweiss Bike Travel. My girlfriend Roxanne and I were part of a group of 22 tour participants from Germany, Canada, the United States, Brazil and Venezuela.

The six-day tour took us from Munich,

Germany, along serpentine back roads through Austria, Italy, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, and then back to Munich, covering 1,600 unforgettable kilometres.

Being that the High Alpine Tour was graded as "tough" on Edelweiss' website and guaranteed challenging riding along narrow, winding mountain passes riddled with switchbacks, my chosen steed for the deed was a 2010 BMW R1200GS, equipped with ESA and hard saddlebags and top case.

The tour group was split into two to make it more manageable for the guides, and though I usually baulk at the thought of riding in groups of more than four bikes, after meeting our eclectic bunch it was clear that the ride would be much more enter-



taining if we flocked.

Among the colourful bunch was Rich, an outspoken architect from New Jersey, who carried ice in a cooler on his bike to make sure his cola was cold when we stopped for a break. In fact, he made sure everything he drank was ice cold, including his evening lager, which he also iced — to the bewilderment of more than a few barkeepers.

Then there was Chick, a portly train engineer from Nebraska with a hearty laugh and a passing resemblance to Jerry Garcia, who's business card boldly listed services rendered, including such rare specialties like kingdoms overthrown, couches broken-in, and my favourite, virgins cured. Yup, I was definitely going to ride with this group, a decision I did not regret, as we gelled im-

mediately and formed friendships.

Markus Hellrigl, Edelweiss' senior tour guide, has 17 years of caring for his "little ducklings" (as he refers to riders in his charge) under his belt. Hellrigl, an Austrian, is a 54-year-old ruggedly handsome and wind-burned former UN peacekeeper with an infectious personality. The crow's feet flanking his eyes are either evidence of a life spent outdoors squinting in the bright sunlight or a product of his constant laughter; either way he's an affable gentleman with endless travel stories — and he's a hell of a good rider. No less enthusiastic were his partners, Andy Bucher and Alan Magnoni, all three men leading the daily rides more like riding buddies than tour guides.

Leaving Munich we headed south towards our introduction to the Alps, Austria's Grossglockner Pass. Hellrigl told us the Hohe Tauern mountain range, which includes the Grossglockner (at 3,798 metres it's Austria's highest mountain), acts as a continental weather divide — weather to the north is temperate and comfy; weather to the south is cold and wet. I took his word for it when I saw him slip into his rain gear at the top of the pass and did the same.

Sure enough, as we descended the Grossglockner High Alpine Road it was as if someone hit the "change season" switch and the temperature plummeted into the single digits Celsius and rain began to fall. Fortunately it was about the only rain we encountered on the tour.

The High Alpine Tour wouldn't be tough if it didn't include several mountain passes. The most memorable — and challenging — of them was along the Italian/Swiss border: Passo dello Stelvio. Approaching from the north, it contains 48 gruelling switchbacks — some so tight you could catch a glimpse of your own taillight — to climb the 1,870 metres to the crest of the pass.

Despite temperatures in the low teens Celsius I busted a sweat that soaked my riding gear from the inside on the ascent, my arms pumped and tingling. Frantically tugging and pushing at the GS's handlebar, and wringing its throttle on short straights while hammering the brakes before hairpin turns, I finally reached the summit. Stopping to glance over a stone barrier at the impossibly convoluted strip of asphalt below I felt triumphant. I had conquered Passo dello Stelvio, the second-highest mountain pass in the Alps.

Up top were parked dozens of motorcycles, their riders mingling and sharing their own Stelvio experiences. Meanwhile, Bruno grilled sausages from his cart, and for five euro served them up in a bun with sauerkraut and mustard — a succulent reward for a successful ascent.

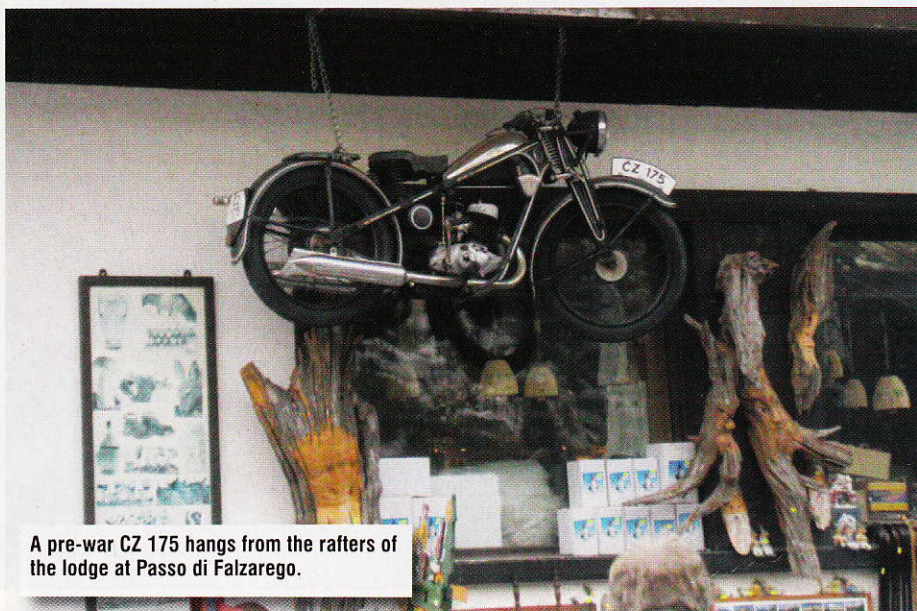
On the way to Bolzano, Italy, where we enjoyed a mid-tour rest day, we passed through the Dolomites. Monolithic, jagged and barren, they looked like they erupted skyward at a time when the planet was an angrier place. If you were to picture the Alps in your mind without ever seeing them in person, it is the Dolomites that your imagination would conjure up.

Part of the allure of such a tour was the unpredictability of the experiences we encountered, and in Bolzano I experienced a rather improbable coincidence. During dinner on a terrace a few of us were discussing the merits of the BMW R1200GS and the Ducati Multistrada 1200, both among the machines included in the tour. As we discussed ABS, traction control and wheel sizes, another patron of the restaurant approached and introduced himself as Stefano Ciuti.

Ciuti, who was also on a motorcycle vacation, had taken a keen interest in our conversation; he was an engineer working for Ducati in Bologna. As part of the Multistrada 1200 design team, he developed the bike's engine management system.



Travelling through the Alps definitely produces motorcycle culture shock and the narrow, cobbled village streets and winding roads offer a challenge.



A pre-war CZ 175 hangs from the rafters of the lodge at Passo di Falzarego.

Should you decide to make the trip, riding the High Alps will have you tied in knots with winding passes barely a car wide and scenery that fights to pull your attention from the task at hand: negotiating them.

You should also prepare to experience a motorcycling culture shock. Europeans are very receptive to motorcyclists, especially in the Alps where the enticing geography and serpentine roads offer an alternative form of tourism for the summer months, when ski hills are lush and green.

You will often find signs proclaiming Motorbikers Willkommen in front of hotels and bars, sometimes accompanied by some form of motorcycle art, like the retired pre-

war CZ 175 hanging from the rafters of the lodge at Passo di Falzarego in the Dolomites. And the biggest revelation yet: automobile drivers respect and watch out for motorcycles, something drivers are still trying to figure out over here.

Edelweiss Bike Travel tours include the motorcycle, lodging in modest to very nice hotels located conveniently in city centres, breakfast and dinner (there are a couple of midday picnics included), as well as the route and tour guides. Tour prices vary depending on the motorcycle chosen and single or shared occupancy (the High Alpine Tour starts at \$2,800 U.S.). You provide airfare, fuel, the occasional meal and incidentals, like the after-ride drink.

The tours offer challenging riding, scenery that will occupy several gigabytes on your camera's memory card, unforgettable moments, and the opportunity to make new friends. And bring two cameras — a spare in case one fails — you wouldn't want to return from such a memorable trip without pictures.

If an Edelweiss tour of the high Alps sounds like the ideal motorcycling vacation, well it almost is. I did, however, uncover one major flaw in the Edelweiss formula, and this only after returning to eastern Canada, where the sudden absence of switchbacks, mountain passes, Alpine vistas and smooth Bavarian lager triggered a withdrawal that gave me cold sweats and made my stomach churn. I vote that Edelweiss fund a support group for High Alpine Tour veterans — to help them cope with their return to reality.

For tour info, visit edelweiss.com.



At the top of the gruelling Passo dello Stelvio motorcyclists gather to share their experiences.



The BMW R1200GS seemed ideally suited to the challenge of Alpine touring.

My Alpine guide 2010 R1200GS

Having never ridden the Alps before I greatly anticipated the High Alpine Tour. Wanting to make the most of the experience, I needed a bike that would easily manage the switchbacks, offer a comfortable riding position, which for me meant upright, and maintain its handling while loaded with a passenger and luggage for two.

Having previously attended the press launch of the 2010 BMW R1200GS at California's Yosemite National Park, I got a precursor as to how the bike handled mountain roads — and in that case, snow-covered ones to boot. There was only one choice for the Alps: BMW's legendary adventure-tourer, this year celebrating 30 years of production.

With its upgraded HP2 powerplant, the R1200GS easily handled the weight of two, with a healthy bottom-end punch for gassing it out of those second-gear switchbacks. Passing cars quickly along winding roads, which you must do often in Europe, was effortless — though I had to pay attention to how much throttle was applied when passing in the lower gears so as not to lift the front wheel.

My bike was equipped with ESA, and I set the suspension to Sport for two-up riding, but without luggage (which sets spring preload lower than with luggage) most of the time so the seat height would remain manageable.

This provided smooth yet firm compliance, allowing the bike to transition wallow-free through esses. The only issue I had with this setup was that the front end felt vague through very slow-speed switchbacks, as the rear of the bike sat a bit too low. Bumping up the preload when we climbed mountains cured this, and I reset it lower again when the road was less twisty — it was a matter of pushing a button after all, though I had to do it when the bike was at a stop.

The bike was also equipped with BMW's Variable hard side cases and top case. The expandable cases offered a maximum of 103 litres of storage capacity, but since Edelweiss carried the majority of everyone's luggage in a truck, I only carried essential riding gear and items we needed daily like shoes and sweaters, and didn't expand the cases. They were easy to operate and remove from the bike, proving very convenient during overnight stops.

Despite the load and the sometimes spirited pace, the bike managed a very respectable 5.6L/100 km (50 mpg) fuel consumption, which kept expenses to a minimum, as fuel cost up to 1.50 € per litre.

The High Alpine Tour was one of the more memorable motorcycle trips I've taken, and the R1200GS was certainly a contributing factor.

Costa Mouzouris