



Eastern Europe



Riding Around *the* Bloc

Story and Photos by **Costa Mouzouris**

Although he's travelled the world, Costa Mouzouris has never been to Eastern Europe. Edelweiss Bike Travel's two-week Kings and Castles tour offers a close-up view of the area.

FAST FACTS

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

"Eastern Bloc" refers to the Cold War era, Soviet Union-aligned, formerly Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as those of the Warsaw Pact.

EDELWEISS KINGS AND CASTLES TOUR

The starting price for the two-week Kings and Castles tour is around US\$5,750.

INCLUDED

All hotels, breakfasts and dinners are included, as well as the guided walking tours on rest days.

A vast selection of motorcycles is available, and all the bikes on the tour are equipped with luggage.

A truck is provided to carry the bulk of your luggage to each evening's destination hotel, but note that it takes a different, more direct route, so you must carry whatever gear you want to travel with for the day.

NOT INCLUDED

You have to spring for gas, lunch on all but two picnic days and any other expenses (beer, scotch or whatever your evening reward is). Airfare is also extra. Bring good walking shoes.

Edelweiss Tours introduces motorcyclists to the former Eastern Bloc

We arrived in Vienna a full day before departure on a two-week motorcycle journey that would take us through a number of former Eastern Bloc countries, to an area of the world I'd never before seen. Our trip was booked through Edelweiss Bike Travel Tours and would take us from Austria to the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary and back to Austria, covering more than 3000 km.





It was later that evening, during the introductory dinner, that we met our tour guides, as well as the 15 other tour participants. There were six Americans, one Australian, my girlfriend, Roxanne, and me representing Canada, and the rest were Brazilians. When spending two weeks on the road with a bunch of strangers, the inevitable happens: they don't remain strangers very long.

The tour guides are serious riders, selected through a stringent screening process. There was Thomas Kastner, with the company since 2007 and baptized "Shiny Tom" by us participants because of his shiny, bald cranium, but also to distinguish him

from the other tour guide, "Hairy Tom," a.k.a. Tom Ritt, with the tour company for 12 years and who obviously wasn't bald. The newest addition to Edelweiss was Ted Goslinga, who'd recently retired from the Dutch navy and was on one of his first tours.

Following dinner, Ritt handed out the bike keys; mine was for a 2014 BMW R1200GS, which I'd selected some time earlier.

A Tale of Two Toms

Early the next morning, we all realized that the Brazilians hadn't bothered with the change in time zones and were running on their own schedule. Arriving rather casually and very close to the scheduled departure

Český Krumlov is an early stop along the Kings and Castles tour. It is a well-preserved example of 13th Century Bohemia, and a precursor to the architecture showcased throughout the tour. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

time, the Brazilians further delayed the group when one of them lost his bike key, before a single wheel ever turned. Edelweiss makes it a point not to bring extras, in a way forcing riders to really mind their keys. Fortunately, someone found it just as the guides began rolling out a spare Kawasaki ER-6n to accommodate the keyless rider. He wore his key on a rope around his neck for the rest of the tour, though it wouldn't be the last time one of the Brazilians lost a key.

Because of the tour group's size, riders were split into two groups, each one following a different Tom, along a slightly different route. Group selection was voluntary, so on the first day I rode with Kastner and four other

riders. The pace was engaging as we crossed into the Czech Republic, though we got some heavy rain before lunch. Thankfully, it stopped raining as we hit the road again. The other group, we later learned, did not see a drop of rain.

Later in the day, just before arriving at our destination, the roads got much tighter, so Kastner let a couple of us go by to set our own pace. I led for a while, but the earlier rain had wet the pavement, so I rode cautiously. Kastner, who often takes part in track days, caught up and blasted by, followed closely by American Barre Bull and his passenger, wife Sandra, on a BMW R1200RT.

Although his name would suggest otherwise, Bull, 62, is a stand-up guy. The couple lives in Maryland, where Bull is a computer security contractor for the U.S. government - read Homeland Security. He's not particularly tall of stature, has closely cropped grey hair, dresses quite conservatively and, on appearance alone, would otherwise come across as a pencil-pushing fuddy-duddy. He was anything but, because behind the handlebar of a bike, the guy was an animal!

He thrashed around that fully loaded RT, two-up, like it was a 400 lb. super-sport machine. I lost pace with him and Kastner until the pavement dried, after which I caught up, but busted a sweat keeping pace. It was also immediately evident that Sandra had ridden like this with him many times before. She was cool as a cucumber on the pillion, looking over his shoulder into the turns as if she were at the controls.

I later learned that Bull's first motorcycle was a 1969 Honda CB750, bought new, and that his current collection includes a first-generation Valkyrie, a current F6B, a Kawasaki ZRX1200 and a Pacific Coast. He told me that when he was in the military, he cut his riding teeth racing others on tank roads while stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Bohemian Rhapsody

We rode into the Bohemian town of České Budějovice ("Budweis" in English) early that first evening, where we spent the night at the four-star Hotel Budweis in the centre of town. This



medieval town has been brewing beer since the 13th century and is home to the original Budweiser Budvar brewery, which still brews beer throughout much of Europe, but is not to be confused with the American Budweiser, which was originally brewed as an imitation, though it went on to much larger success in North America.

The next day, I rode with Kastner again, and two more riders joined our group, including Murray Pratt, standing tall at six-foot-seven. Pratt, whom I'd met during the introductory dinner, hails from San Diego. He'd come into an inheritance and was enjoying the first of probably many bike tours. He

A modest walk from the city centre, Buda Castle towers atop Castle Hill and overlooks Budapest.

had shown up late for breakfast that morning, looking rather haggard. "Tip of the trip," he said, as he leaned toward me bloodshot and hoarse, "don't go out late with the Brazilians." From that moment on, the Brazilians, who looked rather cheery and full of vigour, were nicknamed "the Brazil Nuts."

We left Budweis and headed for Prague. One of the stops along our route was in the postcard-picturesque town of Český Krumlov. The entire



Rookie tour guide Ted Goslinga stands between "Shiny Tom" Kastner and "Hairy Tom" Ritt. (left)



The Slovakian village of Čičmany is known for its dark wooden cottages decorated with patterns that make them look like gingerbread homes.



town looks more like the set for a medieval adventure movie, with a prerequisite castle, which is guarded by a pair of bears. You read that right.

Along the way to Prague, Kastner let Bull, Pratt and me by a couple of times, letting us set the pace. I followed Bull, who, again, set a holy-crap-that's-fast pace on his RT. Shiny Tom wasn't one to miss out on a good ride, and joined us for the blitz into Prague.

Arriving in the Czech capital, we ran into a downpour with rivers of water running through the streets. Meanwhile, the Brazil Nuts had again eluded the rain following Hairy Tom. *It was time to change Toms*, I thought.

I was completely enthralled by the beauty of the city, lined with cobblestone streets and sidewalks, and with baroque, Gothic and Romanesque architecture characterizing the metropolis – absolutely stunning.

We had a non-riding rest day in Prague, so the two Toms took us on a walking tour of the seemingly laidback city, while towering can't-miss-Murray became our designated locating beacon, easily spotted from quite a distance in his red ball cap. We hit the road again the next morning, and I made a mental note to return to Prague, because a full day is nowhere near enough time to experience the historical capital of Bohemia.

Riding with the Brazil Nuts

This day I chose to follow Hairy Tom and the Brazil Nuts. We headed for Dresden, Germany, through rolling hills and farmland, in 27-degree sunshine, and finally no rain (switching Toms paid off). We made a rest stop in a small town, but just before leaving, we were thrown into a key-searching frenzy, as one of the Brazilians lost his key. By pure chance, it was discovered at the bottom of an enclosed plastic recycling bin, where the unlucky rider had inadvertently thrown it along with the remnants of his banana, which didn't belong there in the first place. It was eventually fished out with a wire on the end of a long stick. As we all cheered, I decided to ride with the Brazilians again the following day, as adventure was almost guaranteed.

In stark contrast to the warm, picturesque Prague, Dresden was cold and bleak, and lacked the baroque beauty of the Czech capital. This contrasting landscape was the result of a massive bombing campaign in February 1945, which left Dresden in ruins, before being rebuilt during the East German socialist era.

Well, I didn't care much for the architecture anyway, because there, in the square in front of our hotel, in the centre of the city, was a beach volleyball

tournament taking place, complete with sand, stands, nets and tiny, tiny bikinis. We enjoyed a rest day in Dresden, though I forfeited the day's walking tour for some reason.

The next couple of days were spent meandering along the northeastern border of the Czech Republic, with overnight stops in Lázně Bělohrad and Starý Jičín. One thing I noted about Czech drivers during this time was that they are borderline insane, especially if they're behind the wheel of a small cargo van; it seemed every time we came up on a driver of one of these small utility vans, it was game on. As our lead rider would pull out to pass, said van drivers would nail the gas, pushing hard enough into the turns to almost roll the tires off the rims, often smiling maniacally behind the wheel.

Oświęcim

From day one of the tour, I had a slight uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, a mix of anxiety and trepidation, but also of anticipation. That feeling peaked as we left Nový Jičín, for on this day we would enter Poland for the two-hour ride to Oświęcim, which is the Polish spelling for Auschwitz.

We were told on the first day that we'd be taking a guided tour of the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial and museum, set in the former Second World War concentration/death camp. All I've ever known of this disturbing, ominous place is what I'd seen in gloomy black-and-white documentary footage. Adding a third dimension and colour made it no less sombre.

We entered the main gate at Auschwitz and passed under the metal sign declaring "*Arbeit Macht Frei*," a message that gave prisoners a false

hope of freedom through work. Despite the huge crowd of visitors at the entrance, once inside, it was remarkably deserted, the desolation only occasionally broken when another tour group passed in the distance. Adding to the bone-chilling ambience was weather that taunted us with bright blue skies, only to be interspersed with angry, dark clouds and heavy rain. Despite the woeful disposition the place left on me, I was glad to have visited it, and having walked on its forever tarnished dirt, I now look upon it in a different light.

We enjoyed another rest day in Kraków, where we took a walking tour of the city and left the next day for Slovakia.

We entered Slovakia from the northeast, and immediately noticed the poorly maintained roads and generally squalid condition of the surrounding homes, which were inhabited by Romani, otherwise referred to as gypsies. We got a pleasant welcome nonetheless, as children ran to the edge of the road upon hearing our engines and waved frantically with huge smiles on their faces. Most everything in Slovakia is inexpensive, and you can have a coffee and pastry for just over one euro, so I made another mental note to return.

On the penultimate day of our journey, we rode to Budapest. The early threat of rain never materialized, and it ended up being a hot, muggy day. I rode with Ritt and seven others along wonderfully twisty roads, crossing the Danube River by ferry for a paltry four euros per bike. In the group on this day was the sole Australian, Gary Gill, a 69-year-old retired doctor who started riding at 48. Being the only other Commonwealth representative, I considered him almost Canadian, something he affirmed after we each kept apologizing to each other any time we bumped into one another.

Hungary is an alluring country, and Budapest became my second-favourite



Although an unlikely highlight for a motorcycle tour, the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial and museum is a poignant reminder of a dark time in recent history. Among the many exhibits is a display of countless shoes taken from prisoners as they entered the camp.



city along this tour, behind Prague. Unfortunately, we also discovered that Hungary has become a very capitalistic country, and you've got to empty your pockets of change any time you want to empty your bladder – pay toilets are the norm here.

We returned to Vienna the next day, wrapping up what was an exceptional riding experience that took us to places we'd never seen. We met fascinating, like-minded people, many of whom extended invitations to their homes if we're ever in their area.

Is it Worth it?

Absolutely! Edelweiss tours are not

cheap (the Kings and Castles tour starts at US\$5,750, excluding airfare), but they offer a peace of mind you just can't get if you manage all the planning and logistics of such an endeavour on your own.

To give you an idea of how I feel about the value provided by Edelweiss Bike Travel Tours (edelweissbike.com), a few friends and I are thinking seriously of a motorcycle tour with the Austrian company in the near future. I've already started putting money aside. **MM**