



*Edelweiss Mystery Tour 2017*

# RIDING INTO THE UNKNOWN

*Story & Photos By Ken Lee*

Day by day,  
we haven't a clue  
where we're going.  
But Edelweiss unveils  
wonders like this climb up  
the Alps, where we met  
a gent riding his  
vintage Guzzi.

**“Are you crazy? Why would you sign up for a motorcycle tour that gives you zero information about where you're going? Even worse, why would you sign up for some so-called Mystery Tour if the guy leading the group is a rookie guide?”**

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**Top: Is it possible to have too many switchbacks on a tour? A couple of riders on this Mystery Tour thought so. But I disagreed, respectfully and wholeheartedly—it was so much fun!**



**Switchbacks are a necessary hurdle if you're planning to reach the top of famous mountain passes such as the Passo di Gavia, pictured above, left. Rainer included plenty of great roads and jaw-dropping passes on the agenda, but he also made time for photo ops.**

Yadda, yadda, yadda—almost everyone I talked to asked these very questions about my joining Edelweiss Bike Travel's Mystery Tour 2017. For me, the answer was easy: when the Editor-in-Chief tells me to go, I simply grab my helmet and go. Ours is not to reason why... etc. That's not to say, however, that such questions weren't legitimate. Fact is, I couldn't wait to interrogate the group when we met up in Austria to reveal the reasons they signed up for the ride.

As for the rookie guide, that would be Rainer Buck, company CEO. He, along with wife Gaby, has participated in many Edelweiss tours—as would be expected. But this time he alone was responsible for selecting the routes, hotels, restaurants and points of interest for the tour.

Also, he would be taking full responsibility for leading the entire ride for the first time ever. No pressure... ha! But being the boss, Rainer could cherry-pick support guides from among the extensive Edelweiss crew and he brought along two of the best, Ursula Peter and Claudia Wenhart, who took turns riding in the sweep position or driving the chase van full of our luggage. Together they formed a terrific team that served very well during the entire tour.

True to form, on our first road day Rainer announced we would travel north, whereupon our Mystery route actually took us due south to the magnificent Timmelsjoch in the Southern Tyrol, an 8,117-foot high pass pioneered by goats and wandering tribesmen during the early Bronze Age. With that, we were in northern Italy where we would

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Since only the guides knew the route for this Mystery Tour, the group all followed behind the leader, with a sweeper in back. The roads were often so tight, this turned out for the best on this trip. Right: Every now and then, Edelweiss likes to change things up, doing things like preparing this terrific picnic we enjoyed in a park one day instead of stopping in town for a lunch.



spend the next several days—although we were still in the dark as to itinerary at that time.

Air temps warmed significantly as we wheeled down curvy mountain passes featuring incredible vistas. Following an outdoor lunch in an open tree-shaded courtyard, we received our second briefing of the day with a few teasers—setting the standard for the trip with two-a-day briefings since we had no idea where we were headed next. Another big serving of twisty passes brought us to the outskirts of Bolzano and one of the Messner Mountain Museums, created by Italian extreme mountain climber Reinhold Messner in Sigmundskron Castle. The theme of Messner's five-museum project revolves around the history, art and science of mountaineering, and the castle grounds served well as a fun surprise stop.

Our night's lodging, Schloss Hotel Korb, is a converted castle sited on picture-perfect hillside slopes surrounded by lush vineyards in Missiano, just outside Bolzano. The hotel's deck and outdoor dining area featured gorgeous 180-degree-

plus views of the city and Überetsch Valley below, with the southern end of the Dolomite Mountains off in the distance. The fine dining we enjoyed that evening echoed the positioning of the Mystery Tour as an Edelweiss Royal Tour—upscale accommodations and exquisite regional food, plus some terrific wine offerings.

The next morning Rainer assured us we'd continue traveling north (a running joke; we didn't!) as we found ourselves smack dab in the middle of prime wine country. We enjoyed winding through vineyards on roads so tiny you could literally reach out and touch the vines as we rode past. Turns out we were following portions of the Strada del Vino dell'Alto Adige, or the South Tyrolean Wine Road. We headed toward the Manghen Pass, famous among motorcyclists for its winding climb upward, but it was unexpectedly closed for two days for roadwork. So a short detour took us to the Rolle Pass at 6,526 feet and we didn't feel cheated at all.

We enjoyed this awe-inspiring view of Verona from our hotel, Agriturismo San Mattia. We later toured town and enjoyed a magnificent dinner plus local wines.



Above: Here's what local knowledge does for you; our guides brought us to this out-of-the way viewpoint, the "gacher blick" or "steep view." Bottom: Terrific mountain roads, excellent pavement, almost no traffic; this is why we all signed up to ride with Edelweiss.

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We laced our way through the forests of San Martino Natural Park, and Rainer led us to a small restaurant hidden away amongst the trees. Once again, an amazing find in the middle of nowhere.

The mountain passes in the Dolomites provided huge entertainment later that afternoon. At one point we came to a section of the mountains too sheer for road building, so the road instead burrows through the mountainside in a series of tunnels connected by switchback turns—so fun! It felt like a motorcyclist's version of Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean ride, more like an amusement park ride than a real-life road.

At the lunchtime briefing, Rainer promised a surprise when we arrived at our hotel for the night. And when we pulled into Villa Marcello Marinelli in the tiny town of Cison di Valmarino, there it was: the cool, shady central courtyard was all set up for a session of prosecco tasting. Turned out to be a tasty and enlightening experience, a tune-up for our "slow food" dinner featuring a wide span of regional dishes done the old-fashioned way. After eating ourselves into a food coma, Rainer broke out Cuban Cohiba cigars for those who wanted to top off things the right way... an absolutely amazing evening.

The leisurely dinner and post-meal cigar gave me time to circulate and chat among the riders—nine Europeans and six Norte Americanos including myself. Not surprisingly, all were Edelweiss returnees who had logged between three to 26 prior trips. When asked why they signed up for the Mystery Tour, all offered nearly identical observations: Edelweiss had earned their trust; they were confident Edelweiss would make life easier by taking care of all the details of travel; and they knew they would be riding on great roads they'd never seen before. Most of all, they all embraced the notion of not knowing where we would be traveling; it was something special to be surprised, to get a taste of



Above: We spent only a brief time in Switzerland on this tour, but this achingly perfect view of the Swiss Alps reminds us that the best part of motorcycle travel not only surprises you with breathtaking views and vistas, but also warms your heart with memories to treasure forever. What started as the Mystery Tour left us all convinced that Life is Beautiful indeed...

the unknown. Riddle solved, and I agreed 100 percent.

A short hop the next morning brought us to a tiny jewel of a prosecco vineyard and winery. Perched on a hilltop, the vineyard offered spectacular views of the surrounding area. Its steeply sloped and efficiently terraced hilly terrain leaves only enough clearance for the vines to be worked by hand; no automation possible here. It's a real labor of love, for a deservedly celebrated result.

Soon we tackled the undulating slopes of Monte Grappa, blasting over tight, serpentine, snotty and dirty roads one-and-a-half-lanes wide or narrower. The initial thick green canopy cover gave way to conifers and then only boulders above the tree line as we neared the mile-high summit. It's one heckuva ride and I was constantly torn between riding, sightseeing and stopping for photos, but I achieved all three and lived to tell the tale. A huge lunch and more switchbacks and hairpins took us down to the lovely town of Bassano del Grappa for the evening.


In the morning we climbed up out of the sun-drenched lowlands to play among high mountain passes once more. The open mountain landscapes and pine-flavored air were a tonic for all of us after suffering in unusually warm 97-degree temps the day before. Alpine bowls unfolded before us and we stopped for coffee at a compact, single-lift ski resort. Picture-perfect mountain villages dotted the way between driveway-sized roads laced with scenic switchbacks. These tiny roads didn't show on our maps, and when we stopped for a break high up in the mountains Rainer explained how the Italian and Austrian armies fought here during World War I. The jagged peaks directly above us are still laced with walkways and tunnels formed during the war to resupply the men who were fighting from peak to peak. That scenario beggars the imagination; we could hardly reach this spot on motorcycles, much less ferry supplies and engage in combat as those brave soldiers did 100 years ago. That evening we settled in to our hotel in the hills overlooking Verona. We supped well in town; it's a gorgeous city steeped in history and we thoroughly enjoyed our all-too-short stay.

At 8:30 a.m. it was already too hot in Verona, but

again we climbed more twisties to cooler high altitudes. The roads were more open and flowing this day, and the pavement in excellent shape. We crested the Monte Baldo mountain range before braving the blistering temps once more on our way down to Lake Garda. At 32 miles long, this is Italy's largest lake. We're all just glad to roll onto the ferry and get out on the water where cool breezes provided relief from the heat. For many of us, Grand Hotel Fasano, sitting smack on the Garda shoreline, earned its place as top hotel on this trip. The setting is absolutely spectacular, and most of us wished we could enjoy the facilities more with a layover day right here.

But the Alps beckoned to us and we heeded the call. We attacked switchbacks littered with cow pies, scenic waterfalls and, to my absolute delight, an older gent riding a pristine, early, fully restored single-cylinder Moto Guzzi. He was out in the Alps enjoying his vintage ride rather than sitting at home polishing it, and after a brief stop at the coffee hut we too had chosen, he moseyed off, climbing to the mountain top via a dirt road... so cool!

That chance meeting symbolized for me what this Mystery Tour for 2017 was all about. All of us had signed up for the unknown, banking on surprise encounters that would genuinely enrich our lives. Edelweiss set the stage and prepared the way with great care and planning, but ultimately it's the joy of the open road that makes motorcycle travel so satisfying.

This Mystery Tour 2017 will appear among the new Edelweiss offerings as the Life is Beautiful Tour, albeit with some fine-tuning to come. Some of the hotels may change, a layover day or two may be inserted, and some route changes may come; a couple participants judged the roads and schedule to be a bit too demanding, although I felt it slotted nicely within the Royal Tour category. And for those searching for a bit of mystery and surprise in their lives, there will be a new Mystery Tour for 2018...with details not to be provided! 

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