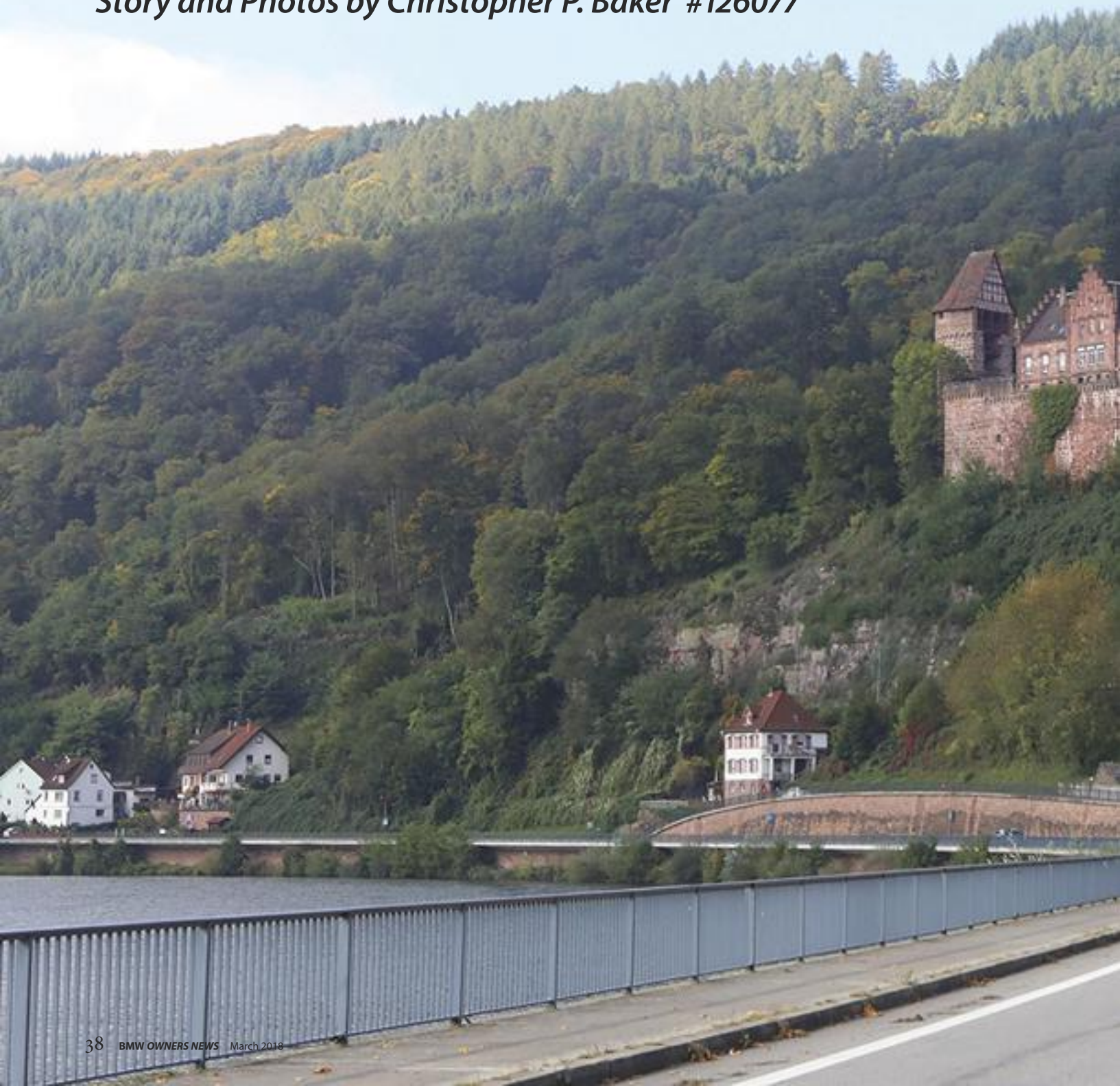


The Best of EUROPE

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Zwingenberg, on the River Neckar, in Germany.

TROP D'ACCIDENTS. RALENTIR.

(Many accidents! Slow down!)

The yellow warning sign for motorcyclists screamed “fun ahead” as we sped past vineyards, golden and glistening with dew in the early-morning, late-September sunlight.

This was day four of an Edelweiss Bike Travel nine-day tour, and the pace had quickened considerably as we headed into the Vosges Mountains. Sweeping bends tightened into whiplash-sharp coils as the road steepened by exponential degrees.

By now, we'd broken into two groups. Behind, content with a more leisurely pace, our two lady riders, their spouses, and a sprinkling of others, mostly on Harleys. Ahead, myself, plus a six-pack of middle-age pals from Colorado here to ride. Björn Greibig, our 28-year-old tour guide on a BMW R nineT, poured on the gas. He tore through the mountains like Raffaele de Rosa. Perry Cogburn, on an aggressively agile Ducati Multistrada, stayed glued to his tail and I, on a BMW R 1200 GS Adventure, to Perry's. It was exhilarating as we leaned through the curves at the max and exited near the redline for an absolute philistine thrill.

I was still grinning inanely five fun-filled hours later as we augged down through the hairpins to Ribeauvillé, with its half-timbered 14th-century buildings leaning drunkenly over meandering cobbled streets resembling a Hollywood stage set.

“If we knew our kids were riding like this, we'd take away their keys,” said 61-year-young Perry, laughing, as we dined that evening on mushroom soup and lamb stew washed down with a hearty Alsatian Sylvaner.

I'd signed up with Edelweiss Bike Travel for its “Best of Europe” five-country tour, looping west from Erding (43 km northeast of Munich) through the Black Forest, Alsace, northern Switzerland, Liechtenstein, the Austrian Tyrol, and Bavaria.

I rode R 1200 GS Adventure Triple Black, complete with keyless ignition and personalized monogrammed leather notebook. At home, I ride a 2009 R 1200 GS Adventure. This was my first time riding a water-cooled GSA model. The difference left me slack-jawed as we swept through the rolling hoptland of Franconia and across the Fränkische Alb uplands, north of Erding. Not only did this bike have a far more precise gear box, Shift Assistance Pro, throttle-by-wire, and

other high-tech gizmos, it had a 25 percent increase in ponies that generated blistering acceleration as we scattered fresh-fallen leaves on the straights. The bike seemed infinitely more refined and responsive, teasing the twisties with the gazelle-like agility of an F 800.

The first day's undulating terrain proved ideal for familiarizing ourselves with our bikes. Giant wind turbines studded the hill-tops, their blades scything a leaden sky overlaying a precise checkerboard of fields farmed with Teutonic efficiency. Long scimitar curves gradually gathered into tighter arcs as, beyond Eichstätt, we dipped down through forested hillsides to dance alongside the River Althaud. At Dinkelsbühl—an archetypcal walled medieval town seemingly pickled in aspic—we joined the scenic “Romantic Road” stitching together a quintessential fairytale Germany of Middle Age villages pinpointed from afar by church steeples topped by pomegranate-shaped domes.

I'm English. I feel warm, fuzzy pride for Stratford-Upon-Avon, Oxford and York. But my bubble burst as we rode into Rothenburg—Germany's largest and best preserved walled city—at the end of our

View over River Neckar from Hirschhorn Castle, in Germany.



day's 270-kilometer ride. "Wowww!" I exclaimed predictably as we passed through the Galgentor Gate into a time-warp of iconic medieval Germanic cuteness. The sloping cobbled lanes were well-worn and slippery. I rode on the pegs. Mostly spared from Allied bombing in WWII, Rothenburg's higgledy-piggledy houses date back to the Crusades. Our lodging, the 12th-century Hotel Reichsküchenmeister, packed a thousand years of history beneath its eaves. A striking counterpoint, my chicly rehabbed accommodation was a honeypot of contemporary styling and accoutrements.

From Rothenburg we turned west through the rippling farmland of Baden-Württemberg. At the hilltop town of Langenburg we corkscrewed into the valley of the River Jagst on the L1025. The flexuous, fastidiously manicured highway unfurled flat and fast, scrolling in broad arcs past a quilt of golden wheat, purple flax, and bottle-green meadows. We broke for lunch at Kloster Schöntal, a palatial Cistercian monastery and extravagant Baroque cathedral. The sun was now struggling to break through, and crepuscular rays streamed down like a celestial blessing. But chill autumnal showers stung like a wildcat's bite as we sped west through Möckmühl for Mosbach. I kept the traction control in "DYNAMIC" and "RAIN" modes.

The swooping curves and horseshoe bends limning the River Neckar delivered



Edelweiss Bike Travel group at Kloster Schöntal, Germany.

us to Hirschhorn—a great place to break at the hilltop castle-hotel, with a Rapunzel tower and a sensational view over the valley, carved deep into the wooded hills of the Odenwald uplands.

Edelweiss, wisely, operates a strict no bottles and throttles policy. I enviously eyed a tourist knocking back a glass of foamy Erdinger Urweisse.

Soon enough we arrived in Heidelberg and the Hotel Hirschgasse, an ivy-clad, rambling, 15th-century gem heaped with antiques. This being Oktoberfest, the town's über-historic core was thronged. Every

plaza hosted a music concert (from medieval to oom-pah-pah and techno) crammed with beer-swilling celebrants served by Dirndl-clad wenches.

We burst out of town, streaking south on the Autobahn in a devil-take-the-hindmost dash for Karlsruhe. I took the GSA well over the ton. When my throttle hand started to tingle from the vibrations, I eased off and watched tour leader Axel Allgaier disappear on a Triumph Tiger 1050, tailed by Perry on his 1078cc air-cooled V-twin. Then David Briedenbach flashed past on a hypersonic speed test aboard a 160hp BMW K1600 GTL. He clocked 250kph before his wife Jeri, riding pillion, tapped his shoulder: "Enough!"

The real fun began south of Baden-Baden as the B500—Germany's oldest panoramic highway—coiled sharply into the Schwarzwald (Black Forest) like a viper that had been stamped on. The writhing snake of a road required hyper-attention and a judicious, nonstop interplay of throttle and clutch. I kept my eye on the Ducati's bootylicious rear end as Perry and Axel taught a masterclass in calm, composed mountain riding. I loved it—and so did the bike. Superbly balanced, the GSA displayed massive athletic credentials as it powered effortlessly uphill on the switchbacks and flew through the fanged bends like a buck.

Drizzle and clouds couldn't dampen our dopamine day. Nor even the dense veil of cold fog shrouding the gunmetal-gray Mummelsee—at 1,036 meters elevation the



Oktoberfest celebrants in Heidelberg, Germany.

Schloss Linderhof, Bavaria, Germany.





literal high point of the celebrated “Schwarzwaldhochstraße,” acclaimed as one of Europe’s top ten driving routes.

Then down through tight hairpins to Freudenstad, and on through Wolfach and Schweighausen...over the Rhine and into France...and along the “Route du Vin” to postcard-perfect Ribeauvillé, nestled in a valley framed by vineyards—golden corduroys on the hillsides—and hilltop castle ruins.

Edelweiss had classified day four as a “rest day.” The three ladies opted for spa treatments and shopping. “Hell no!” the guys exclaimed as one, opting for our adrenalin-fueled “Route des Crêtes” loop through the Vosges Mountains. Our high topped out at Collet du Linge (987m) and the Musée Mémorial du Linge WWI battle site. Talk about an antidopaminergic! This somber and emotionally wrenching memorial museum occupies a rocky mountaintop ridge crisscrossed with rock-lined trenches, bunkers, and rusty barbed wire barricades. Here the Germans organized their

defensive positions to prevent the French advance on Colmar. In the summer of 1915, more than 17,000 men died in intense hand-to-hand fighting, involving flamethrowers in trenches mere meters apart. I departed feeling melancholic.

“Today we ride through the Black Forest again, and we’ll have fun riding the twisty roads into Switzerland,” said Axel at our next-morning briefing. I hadn’t imagined the Black Forest to be so mountainous, so cut through by steep gorges. But back across the Rhine we were soon climbing through dark forests of fir and spruce on a tortuous mountain switchback that delivered us to Kandel—a wind-swept pass at 1,242 m, with vast views over the Rhine Valley. Then down, down, down at an exhilarating Daytona pace to Hexenlochmühle for cappuccinos and Blackforest cake in an old mill-restaurant festooned with Cuckoo Clocks.

Björn showed me the Gear Shift Assist Pro. I soon got the hang of this wizard gadget, enabling me to power up through the

gears on full throttle, while deftly blipping the gas for clutchless downshifts into the curves. Plus, the GSA’s lean-angle-sensitive dynamic traction control tightened up the suspension in the tight stuff and whipped my back end into line when it started to break lose on throttle-to-the-stop exits. But Bob, ahead of me on a R 1200 RS and pushing hard to keep up with Perry, twice almost lost his rear end as he fishtailed going into tight curves at speed. Then he misjudged a bend, careened over the center line into a guard rail, and went down. Fortunately, no traffic was coming the other way. He was shaken but unharmed, and the bike sustained only minor damage.

We rode on for a picnic lunch in a meadow on the edge of Naturpark Südschwarzwald. Edelweiss’s purpose-designed support van (driven each day in rotation by Axel, Björn, and our third guide, Mike Woltering) featured retractable shelving and on-board refrigeration. Impressive! We lunched on a King’s banquet: salad, sausage, ham, cheeses, sweet pepper, breads, fruits,

Altar in Baroque cathedral at Kloster Schöntal, Germany.





Above: Tour guide Bjorn Griebig on a BMW R nineT in the Vosges Mountains, France. **Below:** View east across Tyrolean Alps from Furkajoch, Austria.





Snowy dawn over Wanderhotel Jägeralpe at Hochtannbergpass in Tyrolean Alps, Austria.

and wine gums and Toblerone chocolate.

Soon came the Swiss border and Schaffhausen, with an obligatory pause at Rheinfall—a raging whitewater spectacle (the largest waterfall in Europe) spanning 150 meters and tumbling 23 meters with a Harley’s roar—before checking into the Hotel Promenade.

We awoke to blue skies—finally—and the start of an incredible day. First up, Lake Constance, with its peninsulas surging into Caribbean-blue water. At Ermatingen we turned south to follow intestinal B roads through archetypal Swiss landscapes of lime-green meadows munched by cows wearing bells, quaint villages pinned by church spires, and Swiss chalets adorned with red, pink, and purple geraniums. The distant Alps drew us on as the scenery built like a Mozart concerto.

Beyond Urnäsch we spiraled up into the Alpstein beneath an intense Paul Klee cobalt sky. We lunched at Schwägalp beneath the jagged Säntis peak—at 2,501

meters the highest mountain in Switzerland’s Alpstein massif. While most of the tour group rode the cable car for a magnificent panoramic vista, I stayed below to photograph. The lead group’s tight-pack race pace was killing me! After lunch, I switched to the second group, strung out, with each person riding at their own slower pace. I could photograph each as they passed, then overtake them to await their passage further along the route. Coulda, shoulda figured that out long ago!

Above Gams we stopped to take in the breathtaking view over Leichtenstein—a mega-wealthy, pipsqueak principality embedded deep in the Alps. We seesawed downhill into the fairytale nation and within minutes crossed to the Austrian border. Benoit, from Canada, stripped off his Joe Rocket Ballistic riding suit, donned sneakers... then sprinted into Austria and back, to the amusement of the border guards.

The grandeur built in crescendo as we

clawed past ski resorts of the Tyrolean Alps. Looping in sensuous curves, the Faschinastraße snaked through long tunnels to deposit us at Furkajoch, a mountain pass (1,760 m) with stupendous views. Then down dizzily through Damuls to climb once again, on the Bregenzerwaldestraße (B200), through classic Tyrolean hamlets framed by sheer, snowcapped mountains. Above Schröcken, a long, fast, banked, and curving climb atop stilts slingshot us up the final switchback to the Hochtannbergpass (1,679 m), separating the watersheds of the mighty Rhine and Danube rivers. The sky was thick with pewter clouds, ominously threatening snow as we pulled in to the Wanderhotel Jägeralpe, hunkered beneath the pass.

The next morning, I looked out on a wintry landscape, the ski resort buried beneath fresh snow and a charcoal sky. The GSA’s temperature gauge displayed 4 degrees C as we set off in snow flurries! We cautiously descended the switchback to Warth and the



Above: Edelweiss Bike Travel tour group in the Vosges Mountains, France. **Below:** Edelweiss tour guide Bjorn Greibig on a BMW R nineT in the Vosges Mountains of France.

Lechtal Valley, framed by serrated summits shrouded in wispy clouds. Warming coffee and light lunch awaited at Schloss Linderhof, where Edelweiss had included a guided tour. Inspired by Versailles, the baroque palace—the smallest of three palaces built by ‘Mad’ King Ludwig II of Bavaria—drips with enough gold to make Trump green with envy.

We were now only two hours from Erding. We sped through Bavaria, weaving a convoluted route between two major storms to arrive wet and elated at the end of a spectacular nine-day tour. 🏍️

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