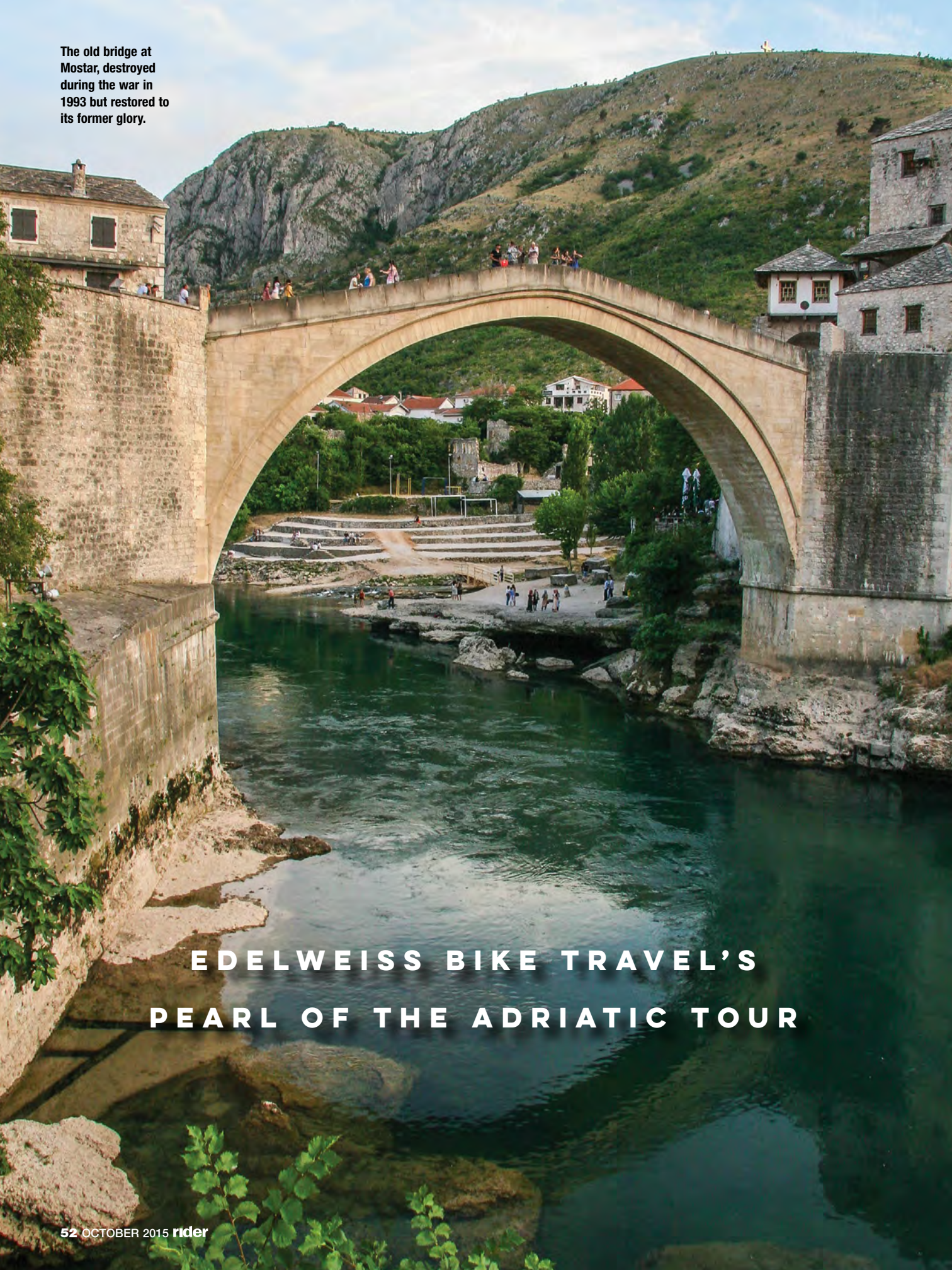


The old bridge at Mostar, destroyed during the war in 1993 but restored to its former glory.



EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL'S PEARL OF THE ADRIATIC TOUR

WOW! MOMENTS IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA



Our group leaves an overlook above Dubrovnik, Croatia.

As our jetliner began its lumbering descent over Dubrovnik, Croatia, I noted from the window the contrast between a modern suspension bridge hanging by threadlike cables, and the Old City fronting on the Adriatic Sea, its blocky buildings with red tile roofs centuries old. While this mix of old and new was my first “Wow!” moment on Edelweiss Bike Travel’s Pearl of the Adriatic motorcycle tour last June, it certainly would not be the last.

As a lead-up to this adventure, Edelweiss had sent tour participants a large map and detailed tour book of the 9-day itinerary, a list of tour participants and our hotels.

To help deal with the 9-hour time change from California, my friend Patti and I flew into Dubrovnik a couple days early

and were delighted with our starting point, the Adria Hotel. It provides stunning views of the city, its inlets and islands. We spent the next couple days touring the walled Old City.

Soon, the other 19 members of our tour group began arriving, and at the welcome dinner we became acquainted with each other and our three Edelweiss guides, Tony, Tedy and Oliver. In a brief meeting, our guides informed us of the rules of the road, Croatian-style, which included being alert for aggressive drivers/riders coming up from behind, taking it easy on the hairpins, shifting to first gear if necessary and modulating the throttle and clutch on the uphills and the rear brake on downhills. Each bike carried a GPS unit and we were welcome to go exploring on our own, and only asked to inform our

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BILL STERMER

Looking down at the Old City of Dubrovnik, surrounded by the Adriatic Sea.



guides if we did so. Our international tour group consisted of riders from Mexico, Canada, Australia, Ireland and the United States, our guides were all Europeans, but the entire tour was conducted in English.

After a briefing the following morning, our riding tour began with a shakedown ride of approximately 175 miles. Because of our number we split into two groups, each led by an Edelweiss guide and backed by a volunteer riding sweep. With roundabouts substituting for most traffic lights, it was fairly easy to keep the groups together and we never had a problem. Our third tour guide drove the luggage van and, without fail, our bags would be waiting in our rooms each evening.

Our first border crossing was into Montenegro, where by flashing our passports and bike's insurance card we got through easily. Our next coffee stop and “Wow!” moment was in Kotor, a 2,000-year-old city with a compact, walled old town and twisting alleyways that date to the 12th century.

From there our route climbed Mount Lovcen, the black mountain for which Montenegro is named. Here began the switchbacks, more than 20 of them, and butterflies twinkled across the road as we rode to Lovcen National Park.

The following day, we checked out of the hotel and rode up the coast to the town of Drvenik, where we dined on *cevap-cici* and octopus salad at an open-air restaurant on the beach. Several from our group went swimming, and when the ferry appeared in the distance I paid 62 kuna (about \$10) for passage for two and a motorcycle.

The 25-minute ferry ride took us to the island of Hvar, where we rode to Stari Grad, which dates to 34 BC and is the oldest town in Croatia. We soon reached the Amfora Hotel, and again were treated to an incredible view of the bay, islands and the hotel pool.

The next day, Friday, was officially a rest day as we would spend the night in the same hotel, but our guides had arranged for a walking tour of Hvar. We prowled the plazas, narrow



The Adriatic coast offers scenic villages and curves aplenty.



Inland Croatia abounds with farms, forests and ever-present twisty roads.



PHOTO BY TEDY KUNICIC

Dinner in Mostar with the classic bridge in the background.



Relaxing on the ferry ride, returning from the island of Hvar.



alleyways and the scenic waterfront, enjoying the textures and colors, and the coolness inside the churches.

Afterwards, most members of our group chose to follow our guides to Humac, a settlement built in the 17th century to house herdsmen and artisans. There we were treated to lunch, more meat and octopus, cooked in a pan with a bell-shaped cover. Today was our Aussie tour member Peter's birthday, and mini cakes were served to all.

This tour included a personal touch that we riders really appreciated. The mother of one of our tour leaders, Tedy Kunicic, lived on the island, and that Friday Tedy led us through a collection of local roads to his mother's home. As we hiked up her narrow street, Tedy pointed out a plaque on a building that stated a famous local writer, Petar Kunicic, had lived here. It turns out that he was Tedy's great-great-uncle, and this house in which his mother now lived had been in the family since it was built in 1795. A delightful lady, Tedy's mother, Marija, greeted us and served cookies.

After taking the ferry back to the mainland on Saturday,

we continued north along the Makarska Riviera, which many regard as the most scenic part of the Adriatic coast with its long rocky, cliffs providing "Wow!" views of the sea below us and often vineyards above. Our guides led us to the Radmonova Mlinice restaurant for lunch, set along a river and shaded by a grape arbor. Trout swam in the large pool, which many of us ordered for lunch. It came with tasty bread and potatoes that literally melted in our mouths. The only thing forbidden on our trip was to partake of alcohol until the bikes were safely put away at night.

We saw our next overnight, Primosten, from a distance—an island graced with red tile roofs and dominated by a church steeple. Once at our Hotel Zora, we hit the beach for some sunbathing. Some of the other bathers were apparently confused, as several women seem to have forgotten to wear the top parts of their bathing suits. I'd refer to it as a "Wow!" moment, but Patti would hit me if I did....

During our breakfast buffet on the deck of the hotel the next morning, church bells suddenly rang out and I realized it was Sunday. One sign of a good vacation is that you've forgotten what day it is.

Our route led us along the Velebitski Kanal, then just a few kilometers out of Karlobad we came upon our Edelweiss van at an overlook, providing a picnic! It was a nice touch, with Tedy arranging plates of sliced meats and cheeses, fruits and veggies, while Tony, Oliver and Stephan (also with Edelweiss) set up tables and chairs.

Though the inland route from Opatovac to Skradin did not offer the spectacular sea views of the coast, it did provide



In Mostar, minarets are prevalent. Our group dined under the awning at right.

PHOTO BY TEDY KUNICIC

A ruined building in Mostar, a hold-over from the civil war in the early '90s.



The main waterfall at Krka National Park, where some of our group went in for a swim. Inset: The wooden walkway at Krka National Park.

twisting roads and switchbacks. Once we reached Skradin, a major “Wow!” highlight was Krka National Park with its scenic walks among waterfalls, rapids and ponds. Here several from our group donned swimsuits for a dip below a huge, rushing waterfall.

The area through which we were riding was formerly known as Yugoslavia, before a bloody civil war in the early 1990s caused its various regions to split once again into separate countries. There had been fierce fighting, and in places we could still see shrapnel damage and ruined buildings. At no time, however, did we notice or experience any evidence of current hostilities.

Many of those problems originated with religious differences, and I noted that Mostar had a very different vibe. It's situated in the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Muslim region, and from our hotel room I could see a number

of minarets, the towers associated with mosques. At 5:00 we heard, broadcast via loudspeakers, the Muslim call to prayer, eerie and strangely beautiful. I noted that the tallest building in the city by far was a Christian church tower, and atop the hill overlooking Mostar was a huge cross.

Our group strolled to the town center, which consists of a bazaar that extends for many blocks and leads to the Old Bridge, which was built in 1556 and had become a symbol for Mostar. It was destroyed during the fighting in 1993, then completely rebuilt and reopened in 2004. In this diverse area, women in burkas walked among women in shorts and brief tops, and the contrast could not have been more obvious. Young men collected money from the tourists to encourage them to dive from the bridge, and I kicked in a few euros for the performance. Dinner was at a restaurant with a full



PHOTO BY TEDY KUNICIC

Left: The island of Primosten from our hotel. Above: Happy riders at a roadside stop near Dubrovnik. Facing page top: Our group stops for coffee in another picturesque Adriatic town. Below: Our group rolls through another park-like setting; the smile on her face says it all.

“Wow!” view of the bridge.

For this tour, Edelweiss made available various models of BMW, Ducati, Honda and Triumphs to rent. I had chosen a BMW R 1200 RT for the two-up comfort its multi-adjustable suspension provides, but its size and sophistication were essentially overkill on the tight roads and lower speeds we were usually traveling. Even on the hairpins it provided acceptable maneuverability, and its voluminous storage was always welcome. Had I been traveling solo, however, I would have chosen a smaller-displacement bike.

When I had originally heard of this tour, I expected to find the Balkans in general, and Dubrovnik in particular,



PHOTO BY TEDY KUNICIC



to be some sort of gray and grim late Soviet-style holdover. However, nothing could have been further from reality. The city is not only vibrant and beautiful, but a delight. And speaking of delights, on the final night of our tour, in Cavtat, members of our tour group lavishly praised our guides for their attention to detail, for keeping the groups together, for the well-planned coffee and lunch stops, and for the hotels and well-chosen route. The Pearl of the Adriatic Tour is certainly a highlight of my riding career, and I recommend this pearl very highly. ⁴¹

The Pearl of the Adriatic Tour will run in June and September of 2016. For more information, visit edelweissbike.com.

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