

# IN GRAND STYLE

Story & photos by Kevin Wing





# Edelweiss Grand Alps Tour

It's been 25 years since my first – and only – on-road motorcycle tour with my father, a two-week Edelweiss tour through the Mediterranean Alps. It was the trip of a lifetime, an unimaginable adventure for that lucky 9-year-old kid who found a Honda XR75 in front of the Christmas tree in the late '70s.

Growing up in Southern California, my friends and I all rode dirtbikes. We thought a big loop was ripping around our campsite in Red Rock Canyon in the Mojave Desert. As I got a little older, I became more interested in chasing waves and pursuing a photography career. Pops spent time on streetbikes, exploring backroads all over the western U.S. and Canada with his sport-touring buddies.

Motorcycles have always been a connecting point with Dad and me: in the garage, on the trails, and on the streets. It continues to this day, even though his riding days are behind him. When EIC Drevenstedt asked if I wanted to go back to the Alps on another Edelweiss

tour, my bags were packed before he finished the question.

Edelweiss Bike Travel's 15-day Grand Alps Tour goes through Austria, France, Italy, Lichtenstein, and Switzerland, with 10 riding days and three rest days bookended by arrival and departure days. Highlights include Italy's Stelvio Pass, which is famous for its switchbacks; France's Col de l'Iseran, the highest paved pass in the Alps; and Austria's Grossglockner High Alpine Road.

What makes the Alps so unique is that, in the span of half an hour, you can ride through vertical rock sections with multiple tunnels while viewing alpine lakes, forests, meadows, orchards, and villages and then descend alongside chalky blue glacial rivers to a valley floor surrounded by towering peaks covering most of the horizon. It's an incredible rush riding a 145-hp motorcycle on roller-coaster roads, sometimes with no guardrails or barriers, nothing but crisp mountain air between you and cliffs that drop into nothingness.



The Alps' high peaks and deep valleys offer fantastic scenery and variable conditions. Our tour had perfect days, hot days, windy days, and wet days. Here we enjoy a break from the rain atop Austria's Hahntennjoch.





My nerves were tingling with excitement as we eased out our clutches. I flashed back to my first Alps tour 25 years ago: On the first day, somebody's improperly attached saddlebag flew off their bike, ricocheted off a rock wall, and exploded, spilling the contents in front of me. That was a freak occurrence, and this time we arrived trouble-free for an espresso stop on a large wooden deck at Kühtai, a ski resort perched on a saddle between two valleys surrounded by towering peaks.

The roller-coaster ride began in earnest with a curvy descent into a lush, narrow valley, followed by a climb to a small pass and another winding descent. Next up was 6,214-ft Hahntennjoch (joch means "yoke" in German and is similar to "pass" in English) and Flexen Pass (5,817 ft), where we rode through avalanche tunnels known as "galleries" because they are open on one side.

After an action-packed day of riding, we arrived in Galtür, another Austrian ski village. With a few hours of light left, I rented a mountain bike and pedaled even higher into the mountains. I could hear cowbells but couldn't see any cows due to low clouds, and I happened upon a beautiful alpine lake. To get back to the hotel in time for dinner, I dropped into a downhill bicycle run that was prepped to perfection, finishing off with a raised wooden roller-coaster feature. What a great first day!

The next day we learned that a landslide had closed the Silvretta High Alpine Road, preventing us from visiting Liechtenstein. The situation reinforced the luxury of letting the pros navigate. The guides know the best roads as well

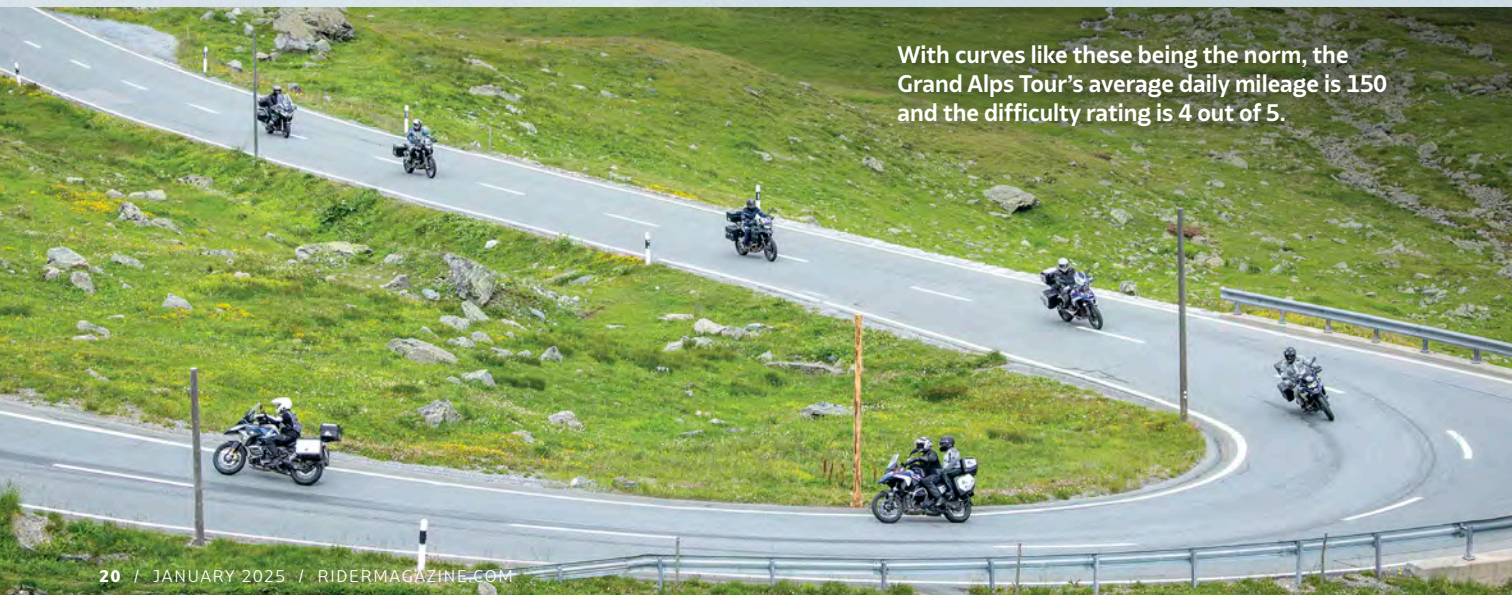
## Awesome Austria

The tour kicked off in the charming alpine village of Seefeld, Austria, not far from Edelweiss' headquarters in Mieming. Our group of 10 included guides Peter and Franziska, seven riders, and one passenger. Seven of us were from the U.S. and one guy, Bin, was from China. Although Edelweiss rents many brands of motorcycles, we all rode BMWs – three of us on the latest R 1300 GS, three on smaller GS models, and one on an R

1250 RT. The guides set up a group in WhatsApp (a free messaging app) so we could all communicate and share photos.

After a welcome briefing and dinner on the arrival day, we began our first riding day with a hearty breakfast and then got packed, geared up, and ready to roll. Peter briefed us on the day's itinerary and advised us there was rain in the forecast. All bikes are equipped with saddlebags and a top trunk for carrying extra layers, raingear, etc.

With curves like these being the norm, the Grand Alps Tour's average daily mileage is 150 and the difficulty rating is 4 out of 5.







**Top:** This road ladders its way up the mountainside to Switzerland's Grimsel Pass. **Middle:** Riding to Switzerland's Susten Pass was like being inside a 3-D postcard. **Bottom:** Hotel Belvedere is on the road up to Switzerland's Furka Pass and was featured in a car chase scene in the James Bond film *Goldfinger*.

as the best ways to detour around obstacles or bad weather, allowing us to focus on the curves and the scenery.

### Super Switzerland

We spent the morning navigating deep canyons and postcard-perfect villages in Austria before crossing into Switzerland, where we enjoyed a tasty lakeside lunch atop Flüela Pass (7,818 ft). The weather warmed up, and the route and vistas delivered all the beauty the Swiss Alps are known for. During a mid-afternoon break, the gelato tasted even better because of the scenic location.

We worked our way toward Andermatt, where we'd spend two nights. Just outside town, a group of motorcyclists were camped in a lush green field, and the photographer in me noted the sun dipping beyond the horizon line of snow-capped mountains. It was getting ridiculous – everything I saw looked like a movie set!

After a night of deep sleep in a cool open-windowed room, I was awoken by the glorious sound of the historic clock tower. It was an optional rest day, but most of us couldn't pass up another epic day of riding that included five high alpine passes – Furka, Grimsel, Susten, Gotthard, and Nufenen. Ranging from 6,900 to 8,100 feet, they offered dizzying





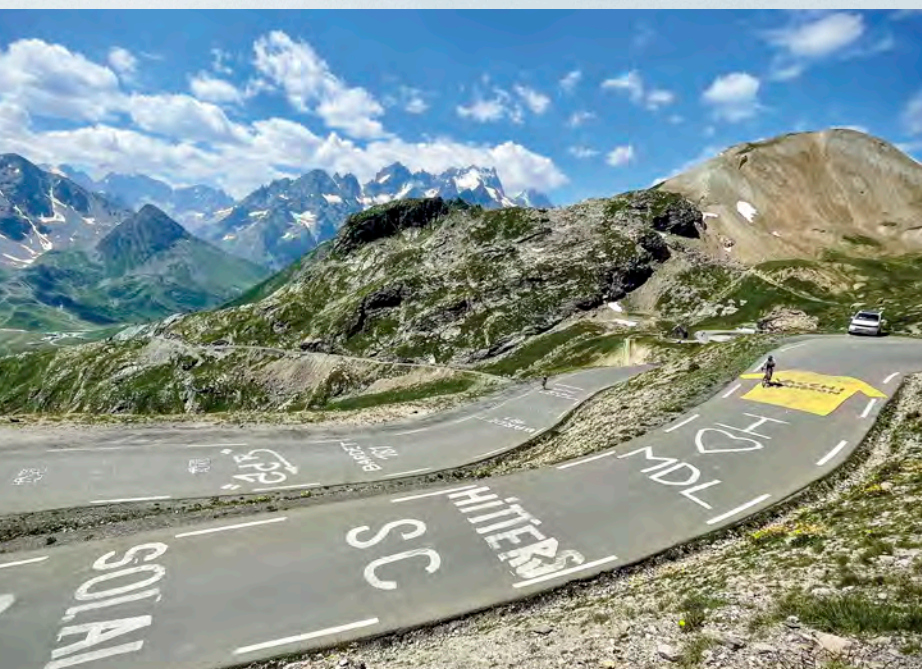


panoramic views, pristine alpine lakes, towering snowcapped peaks, steep-walled granite canyons, and narrow forest roads. Jason from California, Caleb from Vermont, and I chased each other up, down, and around endless switch-backs, all white knuckles and big grins.

### Fantastic France

On our way to France, we summited Furka Pass again, but no one was complaining. It was a warm day spent riding through the wide, lush valley carved by the chalky-blue Rhône River, the previous day's high passes replaced with boulevards and roundabouts, and the snowcapped mountains replaced by vineyards on terraced foothills. After lunch at a roadside pizzeria, we rode through bustling Chamonix, a famous winter-sports city.

We spent the night in Saint-Gervais-les-Bains, a small town near Chamonix that sits at the base of the Mont Blanc massif. We enjoyed a group dinner on the patio of our chic hotel, where our



**Top:** Col du Lautaret is on France's Route des Grande Alpes. **Left:** Graffiti painted by Tour de France fans near Col du Galibier. **Bottom left:** When you get to the top of a high pass in the Alps, you can't help but smile. **Below:** Celebrating the awesome scenery near France's La Rosière ski resort on the road to Col du Petit-Saint-Bernard.







**Far left:** The charming ski village of Bonneval-Sur-Arc was the perfect place to have lunch before riding to Col de l'Iseran, the highest paved pass in the Alps. **Left:** Shannon and Jason were the only two-up riders on this tour, and the dynamic duo loved it all.

waiter served cheese-wheel pasta to a young couple on a date and an aspiring vocalist sang an eyebrow-raising rendition of "Amazing Grace." *Excusez-moi, monsieur* – make it a double!

The next day we took on a series of high passes that are on the Tour de France. We warmed up with Col des Saisies (5,436 ft) and continued to Col de la Madeleine (6,539 ft), where we had a fantastic outdoor lunch. Another great thing about touring with Edelweiss is that they know the best places to eat, eliminating the tourist-trap guesswork.

After lunch, we continued climbing and descending: Col du Télégraphe (5,138 ft), Col du Galibier (8,668 ft), and Col du Lautaret (6,752 ft). The tops of

the passes were covered in graffiti from Tour de France races, where the world's best bicycle racers pedal their way up steep climbs through a sea of crazed fans, smoke bombs, and waving flags.

Late in the afternoon, we arrived in Briançon, where we stayed at a charming old hotel for two nights. On our free day, Bin and I rented bicycles, him on a pedal-only roadbike and me on an electric-assist mountain bike. Like Tour de France wannabes, we climbed to the summit of Col du Galibier, riding 52 miles with 6,100 feet of elevation gain.

The next day, back on the BMWs and happy to trade pedal power for gas power, we rode to the unique and rugged stone ski village of Bonneval-Sur-Arc

for a hearty lunch at the base of the Col de l'Iseran, the king of high alpine passes at 9,068 feet. On the climb up to the summit and the steep dive down the other side, we were surrounded by landscape that looked rugged, raw, and untouched, with layered mountain peaks and ridge lines extending to the horizon in every direction.

A highlight of the day was riding through a gallery tunnel with a waterfall crashing over the open side. Being inside the waterfall felt like being in the tube of a wave at Hawaii's famous Banzai Pipeline. Gnarly, dude! And I wished I was wearing board shorts and flip-flops when we ended our day in Aosta, Italy, where it was 100 F.







## Impressive Italy

From Aosta, Franziska led us through the Dora Baltea River valley. We met Peter on the shore of Lago d'Orta, where he had set up a picnic of assorted meats, cheeses, fruits, salad, bread, and cold drinks. After lunch we crossed Lago Maggiore by ferry. I could have spent the entire day exploring the picturesque lake lined with beautiful villages, but we had riding to do. Back on solid ground, we tackled an impossibly twisty and narrow supermoto-style backroad through a canopy of trees. Our day ended back in Switzerland, at a ritzy hotel in the lakeside town of Lugano.

The next day we rode back into Italy, and the hits kept coming. Stunningly beautiful Lake Como. Splügen Pass (6,934 ft), a true feat of engineering with a mind-blowing section that has an incredibly compact set of switchbacks. And then an overnight at a modern resort in Livigno, where you could find your zen at the spa or raise your heartrate on a shiny red Ducati mountain bike.

A series of hot days faded in our rearview mirrors, and we welcomed the cooler air. Next on the hit list was the iconic Stelvio Pass (9,045 ft) and its 48 hairpins. Franziska turned

**Left:** Like many lakes in northern Italy, Lake Como was carved out by glaciers. It's a haven for the rich and famous, and Moto Guzzi is headquartered in the lakeside town of Mandello del Lario. **Right:** The eastern approach to Italy's Stelvio Pass includes 48 switchbacks.

us loose for a run to the summit at our own pace. Caleb and I leapfrogged our way through traffic with one focused, calculated pass after another until we found a stretch of open road.

Even though it was midweek, there was quite a scene at the top, with rows of interesting motorcycles, food carts, souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels, exotic cars, and heaps of bicyclists. While taking photos from an overlook, we heard the glorious sound of a pair of 2-stroke supermotos ripping up the mountain.

We continued to Gavia Pass (8,599 ft), which had less traffic and nicer pavement, so we enjoyed a better flow. Our group was small and agile, and we attacked each pass like a swiftly moving school of barracuda. We were all impressed by Samantha, Caleb's mother from rural Vermont, who was holding her own despite having only one year of riding experience.

Our third rest day was in Bozen. Four of us followed Peter on a half-day loop through the incomparable jagged peaks of the Dolomites. Traffic was light, and the fast sweepers were a nice change of pace from the point-and-shoot curves we'd been riding in prior days. By the time we reached Lavaze Pass (5,932 ft), I was completely sold on the Dolomites. Great roads and fantastic scenery.

More riding in the Dolomites the next day, thank you very much, followed by another outdoor picnic lunch next to the deep blue waters of Lago di Misurina. As soon as we dropped our kickstands, the weather started to turn. Thunderstorms rumbled in the nearby mountains, and it lightly rained during our al fresco lunch.

We crossed back into Austria on our way to the Grossglockner High Alpine Road. It was raining when we paid our toll, and soon we were riding into the clouds. It doesn't rain much

Riding through Italy's Dolomites region is an exceptional part of any Alps tours.







This is the road to Gardena Pass in the Dolomites, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site because it offers “some of the most beautiful mountain landscapes anywhere.” Below left: Saint Gervais Hotel & Spa, France. Below right: Enjoying a picnic lunch at Lago di Misurina in Italy.

in my home state of California, so the conditions were a treat. As we worked our way to the top, I concentrated on smooth lines and inputs as wet rooster tails sprayed off our rear tires.

After riding through a short tunnel near the top, we popped out the other side into a complete deluge. Within seconds I felt water running into my gloves and boots, down my neck, and through open vents. My faceshield was open, and I used it like a visor to see better, rain bouncing off everything and spraying me in the face. Sheets of water ran across the road, but I was more concerned with the pro cameras in my backpack. We all made it down the other side and to our hotel in one piece, and my cameras survived.

### Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

For the better part of two weeks, we always had days of great riding ahead of us – new roads, new sights, and new experiences. But we had finally come to the final day, and it greeted us with more rain. The highlight was the Zillertaler High Road, a 30-mile panoramic route through the Zillertal Alps. There's never a dull moment when dodging wet cow pies and manhole covers while trying not to get distracted by the beautiful landscape that's always trying to lure



attention away from the road. In the upper sections, it was like we were flying in a small plane, with time-lapse clouds revealing and obscuring the dramatic mountain views.

We squeezed everything we could out of the last few hours on backroads that connect charming little villages. Swirling in my head were images of all we'd seen and experienced over the past two weeks. Riding some of the same high passes in the Alps that Dad and I rode decades ago opened the floodgates of memories, and sharing the trip's photos with him when I got home was a special experience.

This tour was a phenomenal 15-day, 2,000-mile alpine adventure. Top-notch guides, state-of-the-art motorcycles, and

an addicting mix of amazing roads, epic scenery, varied cultural experiences, cuisine, and group camaraderie. I didn't want the tour to end, and I'm already plotting my return to the Alps – but I won't wait another 25 years next time!

*Edelweiss Bike Travel's Grand Alps Tour will run twice in 2025: July 27-August 10 and September 21-October 5. For more information, visit EdelweissBike.com.*



*Contributing Photographer Kevin Wing's photos first appeared in Rider's February 1994 issue, for a test of the Suzuki RF600R. He*

*has shot for most major motorcycle publications and manufacturers. 📷*