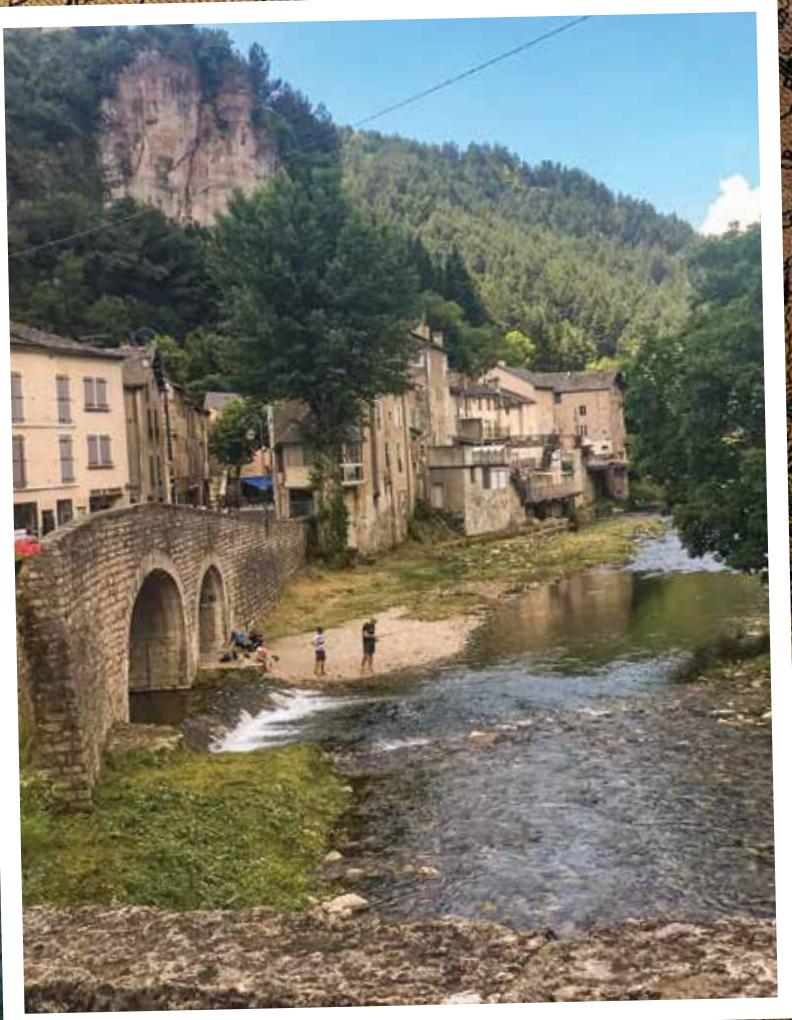
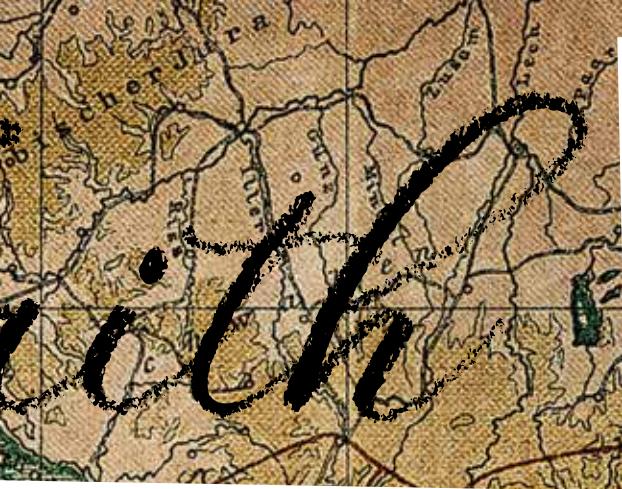


Leap of Faith

EDELWEISS MYSTERY TOUR 2018





Left: Riding high above the Gorges de la Nesque in Provence on one of its many “balcony” roads carved into the rock canyon walls. Above: The tiny village of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, with its narrow streets and vaulted passageways, is considered to be one of the most beautiful in France.

By **MARK TUTTLE** Photography by **the author** and **GENIE TUTTLE**

would you travel halfway around the world for an 11-day motorcycle touring vacation that promises fantastic roads and scenery, delicious food and drink, interesting foreign culture, fun and camaraderie every day? Of course you would. What if each day's route was a secret, and you had no idea where the tour is going other than the arrival airport, not even the hotel names? Signing up seem a little nuts? Well, it probably is, but that hasn't stopped Edelweiss Bike

Travel's Mystery Tour from selling out both times it has run, partly because of the company's solid reputation for delivering everything in the first sentence above and partly because of repeat customers, from both the original Mystery Tour (now called the Life is Beautiful—Alpine Wonderland tour; see ridermagazine.com) and other Edelweiss motorcycle tours.



Above and near left: Limestone cliffs form the walls of the Ardèche Gorges; their most famous feature is this 197-foot stone arch called the Pont d'Arc. Far left: The Sénanque Abbey was founded in 1148, and monks have always lived there since except for a few decades, growing lavender and tending honeybees.

When my wife Genie and I committed to the “MT” starting and ending in Nice, France, in June 2018, it felt like agreeing to do a trust fall with a stranger—you know he or she is probably going to catch you, but there’s always that tiny bit of doubt. We knew we’d be in good hands though, if not on good roads, since the MT is the one EBT tour led by Managing Director Rainer Buck and his wife Gaby, who may not know exactly where we’re going but have lots of company credit cards. Rainer was assisted by guides Michael Goebel and Pablo Piferrer, who between them have nearly 20 years of experience guiding EBT tours around the world and made the 17 of us riders and co-pilots from the USA, Austria, Mexico and Switzerland feel like family.

CANYONS, NAPOLEON AND BEAUTIFUL VILLAGES

Once rescued from the row upon row of private jets and wall-to-wall resort high-rises surrounding Nice airport on the French Riviera, that afternoon we sipped prosecco in celebration of a rider’s birthday while “rookie” guide Rainer,

or RR, gave the first tour briefing on the veranda of a lovely hotel in Vence, in the foothills of the Maritime Alps above Nice. The Mystery Tour is different from other EBT tours in that—since only RR and the guides know each day’s route—the group stays together the entire time, with no riding off on your own. It’s also one of EBT’s Royal Tours, so all of the meals are included, even lunch on all but the rest day. Each of us also received a crossword puzzle, the six clues for which were printed on RR’s fresh T-shirt each day. Complete the puzzle correctly and you might go with RR on a special bonus ride on the penultimate day—more on this later.

With no clue from RR where we were headed except his daily dubious cry of “North!” we left Vence in the morning and instead headed west, over the 3,159-foot Col de Vence (Vence Pass) in the Maritime Alps. The endlessly winding road rising up through a green forest and imposing dolomite-type rocky mountains set the stage for the rest of the tour (rated a 4 out of 5 for difficulty among EBT tours), since we spent very little time on the center of our tires, or even in fifth or sixth gears. Quite happy I had chosen an

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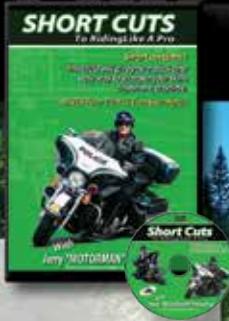
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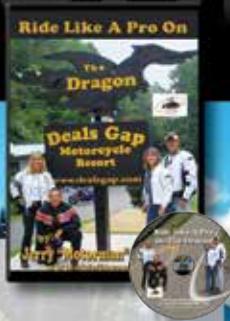
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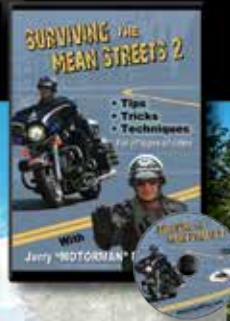
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Above: The River Tarn formed 33 miles of spectacular Gorges du Tarn flanked by limestone cliffs as much as 1,640 feet high. Left: Sustenance on the Mystery Tour was delicious, varied and frequent, and the *vin* superb.

agile BMW R 1200 RT for Genie and me, as we explored an 11th-century church at the first of many coffee stops, I was also thankful for the mesh riding apparel we had brought for the warm temps in Southern France.

Picking up the Route Napoléon, which the emperor took on his return from exile in Elba in 1815, we zoomed around its smooth cambered corners through the diverse landscapes of Provence at a fun, brisk pace set by RR and most of the group riding BMW RTs, R 1200 and 800 GS models and Ducati Multistradas, with a guide in back sweeping up the slower riders. Detouring onto snaky roads far above gorgeous valleys and down alongside turquoise-green rivers, lunch was at a 9th-century chateau perched high above the verdant scrubland. Our first of many deep gorges and the tunnels and arches along amazing “balcony roads” carved into the canyon walls high above were on the dessert menu as we rode along the spectacular Gorge du Verdon in the afternoon—at 15.5 miles long and up to 3,000 feet deep it’s aptly nicknamed

the Grand Canyon of Europe. This part of France is also famous for its endless “blue gold” lavender fields, and the afternoon coffee-stop village of Moustiers, voted the prettiest in France—which is really saying something!

Briefly rejoining the Route Napoléon, it took us into Château-Arnoux-Saint-Auban for the evening, the end of a 162-mile riding day that was about par for each riding day of the tour. The chase van driven by one of the guides and carrying our luggage and a spare bike was rarely more than an hour away from the group, yet somehow always managed to beat us to each night’s hotel.

Hotels on the 2018 MT ranged from, as RR put it tongue firmly in cheek, “zero to five stars,” which really meant that the one lovely auberge or inn on a bucolic farm in the Côtes du Rhône (the famous wine region in the Rhône Valley), my favorite, simply didn’t have a Michelin rating. The rest of the accommodations were equally or more wonderful, whether it was a castle, modern hotel with a river view, in a historic city or the base hotel in Vence. We dined like kings



Above: Picnic time at the sanctuary of La Madone d'Utelle, high atop a mountain with a view of the French Riviera. Right: No wider than a walking path through its arches and tunnels in places, the magnificent Combe Laval is virtually suspended from the side of the canyon.



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Top: The 2018 Mystery Tour group enjoys a “boot” beer (we’re done riding but still in our boots) in a hotel parking lot in the Côtes du Rhône. Above: Wildflowers were everywhere on the June tour. Left: Descending from yet another pass in the French Alps.

as well, sometimes on French specialties like pâté and veal but more often on meat entrees with truffle-infused sauces and farm-to-table vegetables and salads, sumptuous fresh baked bread and a wide variety of cheeses. RR is passionate about wine, too, so he made sure that a nice selection of local *vin rouge* and *vin blanc* was available each evening and treated us to a special tasting one night as well. Southern France is also home to the Carthusian monks who create the intoxicating neon green liqueur Chartreuse, which some of us enjoyed one night with Cuban cigars to the smooth sounds of Michael’s folk guitar and vocals. One really can’t say enough about guides Pablo and Michael—their efforts and camaraderie helped make the tour *magnifique*.

GORGEOUS GORGES, ENDLESS PASSES

The food, hotels and culture stops, such as the Caverne du Pont-d’Arc in the Ardèche Valley with its 36,000-year-old cave paintings, sprawling 12-acre Bamboo Park in the Rhône Valley and historic villages and towns with their

lovely old French architecture and genuinely friendly people all made for a deliciously rich experience during our regular stops, lunches and evenings. It’s truly amazing I didn’t gain more weight, or run out of camera memory cards. But the *raison d’être* of the Mystery Tour is the roads and riding, made all the more fun by not knowing exactly what was in store each day. Southeastern France is laced with deep gorges carved over the centuries by impressive rivers like the Verdon, Nesque and Tarn, and the ride connected the many gorges with the beautiful valleys, mountains, plateaus and national parks of Provence, the Languedoc region and French Alps. We crossed one of the most extraordinary areas in France, the Cévennes, on the Corniche de Cévennes, a wide sweeping road originally built in the 1700s by the Huguenot army that this day was nearly deserted and like a racetrack through the forest flora. Our rest day—yet another riding day for many in the group—was among the spires and massifs of the Gorges du Tarn on the Tarn River, where some of us hiked, swam



Many of Europe's highest passes are in the French Alps. Right: Looking down from 8,688-foot Col du Galibier.



and kayaked before ascending and circling the Causse Noir and Causse Méjean on the bikes, giant limestone plateaus of rich farmland surrounded by gorges and strung with more exciting balcony roads and tunnels. If there was a problem with the roads and scenery on this tour, it was not being able to look away from either....

From the Parc des Grands Causses we made a giant U-turn back toward Nice and the Côte d'Azur, but some of the best riding was yet to come—the French Alps. Over the next several days we conquered a dozen passes lined with snow in places, including the 2nd- through 5th-highest in France, and briefly crossed into Italy over the 9,003-foot Col Agnel to have a refreshingly different lunch of pizza and pasta while the three crossword puzzle winners enjoyed a helicopter tour with RR of Mont Blanc, at 15,777 feet the highest in Europe. After returning to France, the finale was a twisting ascent up to La Madone d'Utelle for a tasty picnic lunch skillfully prepared by Pablo at this hilltop sanctuary with a 360-degree view over the French Riviera. How he got the big van up—and down—that crazy road I'll never know. Just one of the wonderful mysteries of the Mystery Tour.

The 2018 Edelweiss Bike Travel Mystery Tour is now called the Life is Beautiful—Magical France tour and will run next June 6-26, 2019. The arrival airport for the next Mystery Tour is Athens, Greece, May 3, 2020...but *shhhh*, it's a secret! For more info visit edelweissbike.com. 

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