

SWEET CATALONIA

**GOOD TWO-WHEELED
TIMES IN THE
PYRENEES NEVER
SEEMED SO GOOD...**

BY BOB GRIFFITH
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR,
JASON F., KEVIN &
KRISTEN S., MICHAEL S.,
AND EDELWEISS
BIKE TRAVEL

While I've been lucky enough to have sampled the geographical, cultural, culinary and road-engineering excellence of the Alps in a motorized sense — a three-and-a-half-month college-graduation-gift-to-myself sojourn in a Citroën 2CV (aka the *Deux Cheveaux*, or “two horses,” which was pretty much

all the power it had) from Wales to Croatia (still known as Yugoslavia back then) to Spain and Portugal — I had somehow never done the deed on a motorcycle.

Which, to anyone who knows anything about Alpine travel and the motorized two-wheelers we love, borders on the

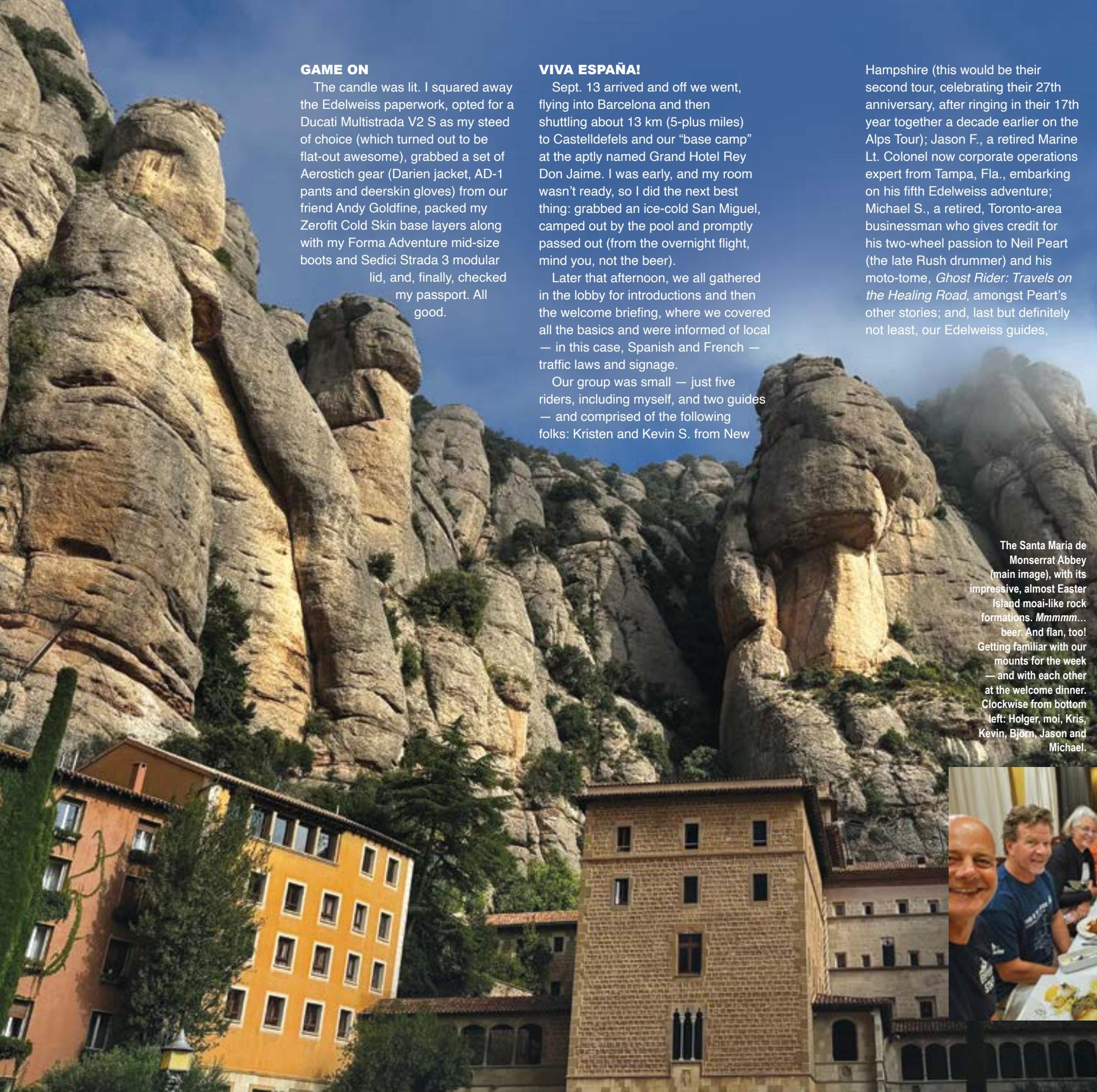
sacrilegious.

Still, given the upside of the concept, I was willing to take my baptismal lumps, and when The Boss asked one afternoon if I'd like to do the 2025 iteration of the AMA Alps Challenge with our friends at Edelweiss Bike Travel, it was pretty hard to say no.

So, I checked out the Edelweiss website. Alas,

the Alps tours still accepting riders — including the AMA Alps Challenge 1 and 3 — didn't really sync up with my work and personal bandwidth, so I tossed another destination by him... that storied mountain range running from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic separating France and Spain known as the Pyrenees. And, lucky me, he was thumbs up!





GAME ON

The candle was lit. I squared away the Edelweiss paperwork, opted for a Ducati Multistrada V2 S as my steed of choice (which turned out to be flat-out awesome), grabbed a set of Aerostich gear (Darien jacket, AD-1 pants and deerskin gloves) from our friend Andy Goldfine, packed my Zerofit Cold Skin base layers along with my Forma Adventure mid-size boots and Sedici Strada 3 modular lid, and, finally, checked my passport. All good.

VIVA ESPAÑA!

Sept. 13 arrived and off we went, flying into Barcelona and then shuttling about 13 km (5-plus miles) to Castelldefels and our “base camp” at the aptly named Grand Hotel Rey Don Jaime. I was early, and my room wasn’t ready, so I did the next best thing: grabbed an ice-cold San Miguel, camped out by the pool and promptly passed out (from the overnight flight, mind you, not the beer).

Later that afternoon, we all gathered in the lobby for introductions and then the welcome briefing, where we covered all the basics and were informed of local — in this case, Spanish and French — traffic laws and signage.

Our group was small — just five riders, including myself, and two guides — and comprised of the following folks: Kristen and Kevin S. from New

Hampshire (this would be their second tour, celebrating their 27th anniversary, after ringing in their 17th year together a decade earlier on the Alps Tour); Jason F., a retired Marine Lt. Colonel now corporate operations expert from Tampa, Fla., embarking on his fifth Edelweiss adventure; Michael S., a retired, Toronto-area businessman who gives credit for his two-wheel passion to Neil Peart (the late Rush drummer) and his moto-tome, *Ghost Rider: Travels on the Healing Road*, amongst Peart’s other stories; and, last but definitely not least, our Edelweiss guides,

raconteurs and all-around great dudes, Holger H. and Björn F.

From the meeting room we were then taken down to the garage and our respective rides for the week. Like me, Michael S. had chosen the Ducati Multistrada V2 S; Jason and Kristen (who we’ll henceforth refer to as Kris) a pair of Beemer R1300GSs; and Kevin a BMW R1300GSA. Holger and Björn would swap days riding a Honda Africa Twin or driving the support van.

Post-briefing, we gravitated to the hotel’s restaurant, where we supped on a delicious meal (my beef tournedos with a savory wine sauce was the bomb), accompanied by moderate amounts of *vino tinto* (must pace ourselves...early morning, after all) and capped off with an indulgent dish of flan. As has been noted in past Tour stories, one does not partake in an Edelweiss adventure to lose weight.

MUST HAVE COFFEE
Days 2 & 3/Riding Days 1 & 2 — Castelldefels to Peramola

No failure to launch today, with gorgeous, low-70s temps to send us

on our way into the Pyrenees range and the heart of Catalonia. After a massive breakfast and probably too many espressos, we met for the daily pre-ride briefing (which is essentially a high-level review of that day’s route and all the fun stuff in between) and were off. Björn had guide duties for this leg, navigating us out of town to the northeast briefly along the coast before heading northwest into the interior and arguably some

of the most perfect, raspier aggregate tarmac I’ve ever ridden on. Like one big emery board. And clean, too! Not a hint of detritus anywhere.

“They must come out and sweep it or something,”

Michael kept saying, and I wasn’t gonna disagree. Holger told us later that Spain directs the bulk of its infrastructure budget toward its roads (while France allocates its euros to agriculture), something my constantly



The Santa Maria de Montserrat Abbey (main image), with its impressive, almost Easter Island moai-like rock formations. Mmmmm... beer. And flan, too! Getting familiar with our mounts for the week — and with each other at the welcome dinner. Clockwise from bottom left: Holger, moi, Kris, Kevin, Björn, Jason and Michael.



potholed hometown in Colorado could learn a thing or two from.

The first stop of the day, with the requisite espresso recharge, of course, was the Santa Maria de Montserrat Abbey, a stunning Benedictine monastery nestled into the crags and towers of what translates to the “serrated mountain,” dating back to 1025. There wasn’t time to check out the 16th-century Basilica, though we definitely made a mental note to pay it a visit should we ever return this way.

Saddled up once more, Björn



pointed us north and northwest and we strafed our way through a seriously fun mix of roller coaster twisties and higher-speed sweepers. We all fell into a fairly brisk pace, with some separation here and there. Kris was probably the least experienced of the bunch, but by no means slow, having ridden for 10 years — incredibly enough, she'd only had her moto license for two



Sidewalk café re-caffeinating. Autonomy or not to be... Catalonia continues the "fight" for independence from Spain. Carving one of many left-handers. For those about to ride, we salute you!



"THEY MUST COME OUT AND SWEEP IT OR SOMETHING," MICHAEL KEPT SAYING, AND I WASN'T GONNA DISAGREE. HOLGER TOLD US LATER THAT SPAIN DIRECTS THE BULK OF ITS INFRASTRUCTURE BUDGET TOWARD ITS ROADS.



months before embarking on her Alps Tour in 2015. Talk about being thrown in the deep end your first time out. All told, she tossed that big GS around quite capably, which was fun to watch when I was cruising astern of her.

Passing through the towns of Manresa and Cardona, en route to our lunch stop in Solsona, I couldn't help but note that the arid climate and greenish-brown landscapes aren't all that different from the Southern and Central California locales where I've spent so much time riding. And did I mention it was warm? Like 80-degree warm? No need for base layers here.

Lunch in Solsona, a picturesque town with quite a few *¡Independència para Catalunya!* banners flying, was tasty, as most of us sampled a variety of local tapas and refueled for the final leg of the day to our terminus in Peramola. The final tally on the day's tripmeter was "just"

195 km (121 miles), and even after you throw in the coffee and lunch breaks, it's amazing how the trip from Castelldefels still took almost a full eight-plus hours. Time flies when you're having two-

wheeled fun, eh?

Landing at Peramola and the Can Boix, our digs for the next two nights, we all peeled off our sweaty gear and ambled toward the very inviting pool just outside the main building. But first, *cerveza fría*, anyone? We didn't have to ask twice, and the Estrella Galicia flowed, serving as a refreshing pre-dinner apéritif.

We dined in the Can Boix's restaurant around 8 p.m. — most dinners fell in the 7:30–8 p.m. range, which is actually kinda early by Spanish customs but suited us fine, allowing for some post-ride downtime before reconvening — where I thoroughly enjoyed a roasted pork loin with puréed apple dressing and, naturally, a glass or two of the local *vino tinto*, selected by our group's unofficial sommelier, Jason.

TO RIDE OR NOT TO RIDE...

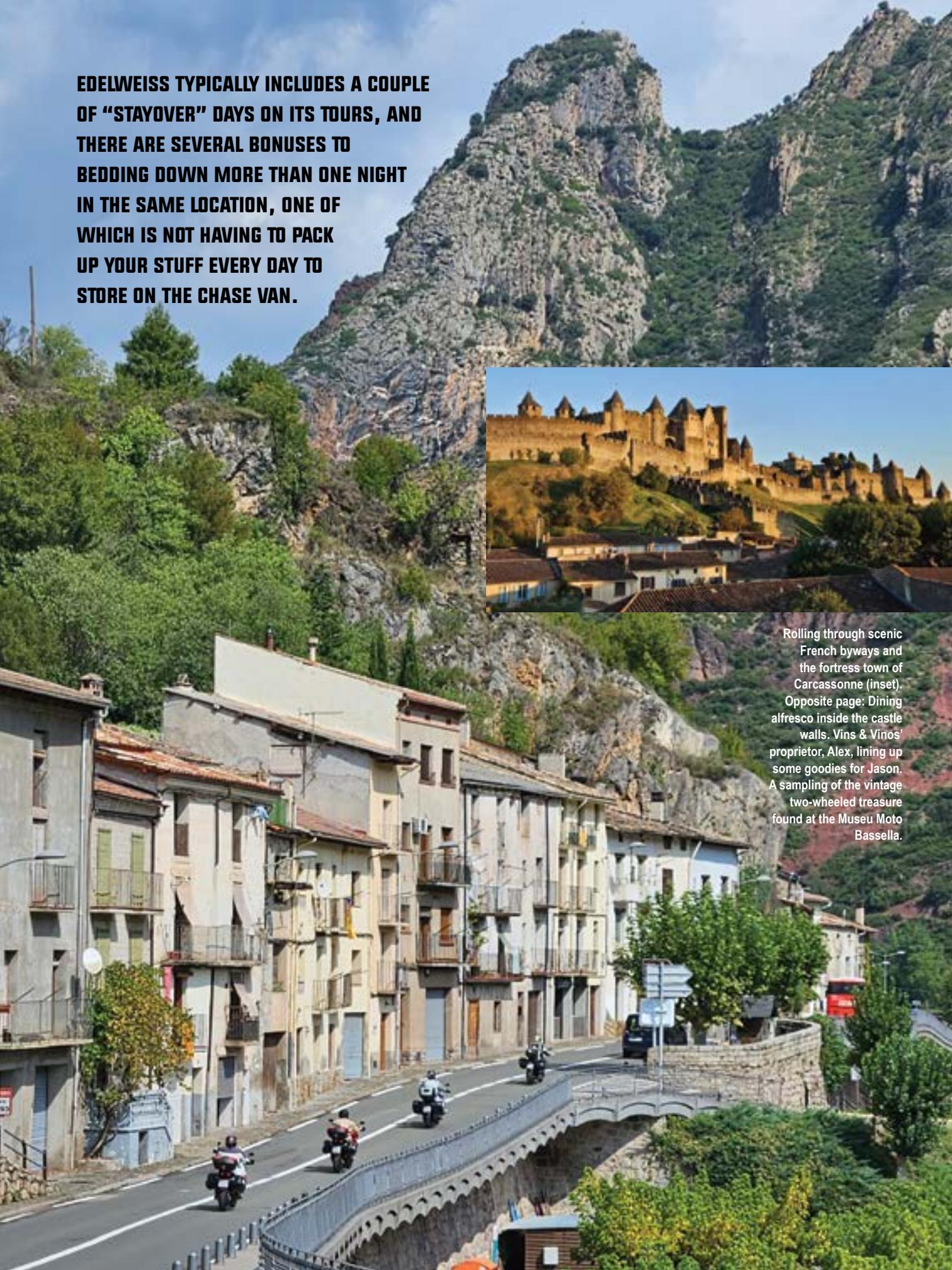
Edelweiss typically includes a couple of "stayover" days on its tours, and there are several bonuses to bedding down for more than one night in the same location, one of which is not having to pack up your

stuff every day to store on the chase van. Another is having the option of resting and either exploring the local environs on your own or partaking in the pre-planned, three-quarter-ish-day loop around the area.

I opted for Door No. 2 (hey, I was there to ride as many dry, gravel-free twisties as I could, especially seeing as winter wasn't that far off back in my Rocky Mountain abode), and we took off into a slight drizzle (the only rain we'd see all trip) that quickly turned to clear, sunny skies and an incredible 121-mile route that circumnavigated the Serra de Boumort range and summited the Coll de Boixols pass at roughly 4,150 feet.

Not the highest or most dramatic of passes, but what it lacked in spectacle it more than made up for in sheer moto-giddiness thanks to zero traffic and pristine conditions. And since the support van didn't need to travel anywhere that day, both Holger and Björn were able to join us (turned out the boys had a BMW S 1000 XR stashed in the van for just such an occasion), which was a hoot — and a slightly (and welcome) brisker pace

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Rolling through scenic French byways and the fortress town of Carcassonne (inset). Opposite page: Dining alfresco inside the castle walls. Vins & Vinos' proprietor, Alex, lining up some goodies for Jason. A sampling of the vintage two-wheeled treasure found at the Museu Moto Bassella.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION
Days 4 & 5/Riding Days
3 & 4 — Peramola to Andorra to
Carcassonne

Alas, we bid *adiós* — or *adéu* in Catalan, an interesting tongue that seems like a mash-up of Spanish and French but is a distinct Romance language all its own — to the Can Boix and headed due north, destination the microstate of Andorra, nestled cozily between the Spanish and French borders. A mere 181 square miles in area (think one-sixth the size of Rhode Island), with a population of just under 88,000,



than the previous day. Yes, they both go fast.

Side trip side note: Just minutes from the hotel Can Boix lies the Museu Moto Bassella, housing a collection of nearly 200 vintage motorcycles from every era and every corner of the world. We didn't have a



chance to get there (the museum has odd hours, which of course conflicted perfectly with our ride), though Kevin did (he overslept and missed the loop, alas), and you can see a few snaps of his tour through moto-history on these pages.

Back at the hotel, it was back to the pool...and, of course, the young gent so ably pouring Estrella Galicia behind the bar. Dinner was again sumptuous (Edelweiss plans and executes everything in stellar fashion, and scouting out the exquisite *cafés* and *bistros* where a group will dine each night is no exception), enhanced by yet another lovely vintage handpicked by *Monsieur Jay-son*.



Andorra boasts the highest capital city in Europe (Andorra la Vella at 3,356 feet) and is a mecca for tourism (primarily skiing) and...duty-free shopping. Good thing I was on a bike, else I might have brought home one or 10 items I really didn't need.

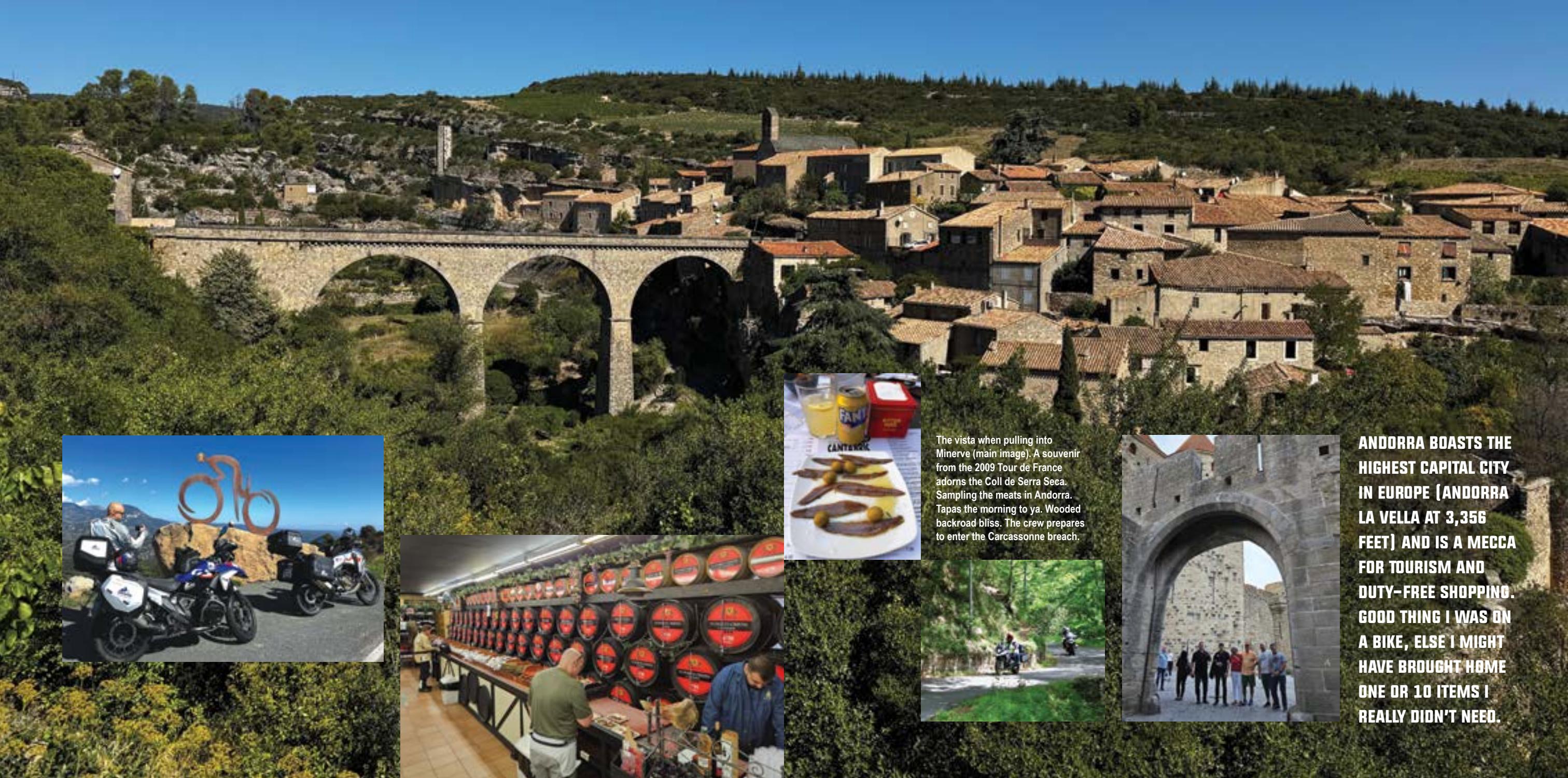
Holger, who was the moto-guide for the day, did take us by the Caves Manacor, a four-story “*supermarché*” of goodness boasting entire floors of charcuterie, liqueurs and assorted



other delicacies, where we picked up some local *pastis* (an anise and licorice-flavored aperitif) and venison salami. Happy hour later, perhaps?

As we made our way northeast to the French border, we traversed the Porta d'Envalira, the highest pass in the Pyrenees (7,900 feet) and descended into our first set of switchbacks, sections of which are sometimes part of the Tour de France hill-climbing stages. There were quite a few cyclists heading up, in fact, and I have to say, even though I was headed *downhill*, I was glad to have a motor. I have plenty of tight, low-speed hairpin turns in northern





The vista when pulling into Minerve (main image). A souvenir from the 2009 Tour de France adorns the Coll de Serra Seca. Sampling the meats in Andorra. Tapas the morning to ya. Wooded backroad bliss. The crew prepares to enter the Carcassonne breach.

ANDORRA BOASTS THE HIGHEST CAPITAL CITY IN EUROPE (ANDORRA LA VELLA AT 3,356 FEET) AND IS A MECCA FOR TOURISM AND DUTY-FREE SHOPPING. GOOD THING I WAS ON A BIKE, ELSE I MIGHT HAVE BROUGHT HOME ONE OR 10 ITEMS I REALLY DIDN'T NEED.

Colorado, but I'd never been on true switchbacks. And even though the velocity was relatively tame, the "challenge" was trying to lock in the best line and rhythm through a series of I forget how many 180-degree left- and right-handers. Might not have been all that fast, but it sure was fun.

Bienvenue! Vous êtes arrivé en France read the sign greeting us as we picked up the pace and blazed

down into a lush, green valley dotted with alpine-ish farmhouses. We were entering the Languedoc region of southern France, a popular holiday destination famous for wine (more than a third of the country's grapes are produced here). After a quick lunch break in Ax-les-Therms, a natural hot springs mecca dating back to Roman times, we saddled up and pointed our mounts east on



the D25 toward the second of the day's spectacular passes, the Port de Palihères, an 18.1-mile collection of switchbacks summing at 6,560 feet with a maximum grade of 10.4 percent that has also been used every few years in the Tour de France as one of its more challenging climbing stages.

This day's ride was one of the longer legs (165 miles), so Holger

kept our post-lunch breaks quick and our pace through the French countryside even quicker. Again, we were met with what seemed like a smorgasbord of oh-so-flickable, roller coaster twisties and constant-radius hairpins mixed with a dash of triple-digit (in km/h, of course, but nonetheless still pretty fast when my metric-challenged gray matter was able to convert to mph) sweepers.

We started hitting slightly bumpier, more ripply tarmac (we weren't in Spain anymore, Toto), but nothing too jolting. Here it looked like the GSs soaked up the imperfections with more aplomb than my Duc (an observation I later confirmed with Jason, Kris and Kevin), which I guess was to be expected given the Beemers' pedigree.

Miles and miles of vineyards,



AGAIN, WE WERE MET WITH WHAT SEEMED LIKE A SMORGASBORD OF OH-SO-FLICKABLE, ROLLER COASTER TWISTIES AND CONSTANT-RADIUS HAIR-PINS MIXED WITH A DASH OF TRIPLE-DIGIT (IN KM/H, OF COURSE, BUT NONETHELESS STILL PRETTY FAST WHEN MY METRIC-CHALLENGED GRAY MATTER WAS ABLE TO CONVERT TO MPH) SWEEPERS.



Yea, though I ride through the valley near Carcassonne, I shall fear no twisty (main image). Holger (l.) and Björn get their King Kong on. Carcassonne and its heavily fortified double walls and towers have been besieged and captured many times through history.

bursting with luscious red grapes, led us toward our stop for the night, Carcassonne, whose massive fortress (52 towers!) rose up in the distance like some medieval oasis. Founded as a Roman settlement around 100 BC, Carcassonne today is separated into two areas: the fortified hilltop section (*La Cité de Carcassonne*) and the lower, more modern part known as *La Ville Basse*. Lucky for us, we were ensconced just a five-ish-minute stroll from the



fortress' main gate at the delightful Hotel du Pont Vieux, where, like in Peramola, we'd spend two nights and a full day exploring what curvy concrete the surrounding hills could throw our way. The next day's loop was only 96 miles, so those of us who wanted to ride were excited at the prospect of getting back to town early to explore the old walled town and its many shops and cafés.

Dinner that first night, I'm gonna say, was the best of the trip, and if you're ever in Carcassonne, you must carve out some time to eat at Adelaïde Restaurant, located in one of the old city's many hilltop squares. We dined alfresco (the temp was a perfect 70-ish degrees), and I partook of the *Tournedos de canard au miel*, a pair of exquisitely cooked duck breast filets topped with a savory-sweet

honey sauce. As per custom, our wine steward Jason picked out a lovely bottle (or three) of the local Languedoc varietal (I want to say it was a Mourvèdre, but don't hold me to it) and we supped like, well, kings and queen... have to say that being surrounded by castle walls and parapets didn't hurt that "royal" vibe any, either.

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

As mentioned, Carcassonne was a two-night stay, so the following day was of the ride or rest variety. All but Kris decided to mount up for the short-ish loop Björn and Holger had laid out, which circumnavigated the Montagne Noir (Black Mountains) and smaller hills surrounding Carcassonne's plain. The views from Pic de Nore, the Montagne Noir's highest peak at almost 4,000 feet, were spectacular, offering sweeping, 360-degree vistas.

Scooting back down to lower elevations, we lunched in the beautiful medieval village of Minerve, once upon a time (the early 1200s, to be exact) a major stronghold for the Cathars, a



Christian sect believing in dualism whom the Catholic Church considered heretics.

After a light meal of melon and *jambon de Bayonne* (think the French version of prosciutto) and the requisite double espresso, we boys jumped back on our machines and diced our way back to Carcassonne, but not after a quick stop and photo op in the new city alongside the *Canal du Midi*, part of the canal network built in the late 1600s connecting the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

Back at the Hotel du Pont Vieux, with our steeds bedded down for the night, we all went about exploring the area. It was also a "free" night, with no



set dinner plans, so everyone was on their own. Jason went off to find the local wine dealer (shout out to Alex at Vins & Vinos), snatching up five bottles of various Languedoc varietals, while Michael, Kris and Kevin all set off to do their thing. Myself, I changed into whatever articles of clothing I hadn't yet sweated profusely into and decided to storm the castle.

I was surprised how many little shops and bistros and, *oooooh*, gelato stands were tucked away behind the old city's walls. Rounding one alleyway's



corner, I stumbled upon *La Musée de L'Inquisition*, where one could peruse "instruments de torture, cachots & chatiments" (loosely translated to, as I'm sure many of you have already perhaps figured out, "instruments of torture, dungeons & punishments"). Makes sense, seeing as the fortress was one of the HQs for the Catholic Inquisition in the 13th century. It was tempting, but *non merci*. Plus, I'd actually been to one of these in Italy some 10 years ago, and, well, like the saying goes, you've seen one torture museum, you've seen 'em all...

THE QUEST FOR FOIE GRAS

We'll be giving Jason his own little section here in honor of his unwavering focus and dogged determination (hey, once a Marine...) to find "the best foie gras in Carcassonne." So, J, who you gonna call? Grok and ChatGPT, of course, with the latter infobot steering us to La Marquière just inside the castle walls. Turns out it was a pretty swank

place, and while I couldn't say it was the *best* foie gras (I've never really had *bad* foie gras. You?), it was nonetheless pretty dang delicious — rich and savory, like *buttuh* melting in your mouth. Paired with a tomato and burrata salad and, naturally, generous pours of *vin rouge*, this promptly became the second-best meal of my Pyrenees adventure.

SPAIN-WARD BOUND

Day 6/Riding Day 5 — Carcassonne to Molló

It was time to return to España, with another full day of riding (143 miles) pretty much due south, and mostly still inside France, before rolling into the town of Molló just over the Spanish border for the night. It was Holger's day to ride, and he teased the group with images of "very, very twisty backroads" galore, as well as a quick photo stop at the Château de Peyrepertuse, an ancient fortress sitting high atop the cliffs of the Hautes Corbières with, reportedly, stunning 360-degree views for miles.



It was too bad time didn't allow for the hike up to the ruins for those views (was hoping to work off that foie gras, too), but what lay ahead — the Gorge de Galamus — more than made up for it. One of the Pyrenees' more popular hiking, mountain biking and canyoning (which entails donning a wetsuit and helmet and sliding

down the gorge's multiple water chutes) destinations, the gorge's other star attraction is the narrow 1.5-lane road, literally carved into the canyon walls, snaking through it. Imagine a sheer rock face and overhanging cliffs to one side and a 300-plus-foot drop on the other, add in a maybe hip-high stone wall separating you from that canyon-floor plunge, and hope you don't suddenly discover you have vertigo. Thankfully, no one did, and that was a



good thing because they would have missed out on the picnic feast Björn had laid out in the rest stop parking lot at the canyon's opposite end.

PICNIC TIME

I'd heard and read a fair amount about these Edelweiss roadside picnics (it seems most tours offer one at some point), and they definitely live up to the billing. After feasting on a plateful of assorted charcuterie, cheeses, fresh fruit and a pudding cup (heck yeah!), I was ready for a siesta, but alas — we must push on to Molló, so one double espresso later, we were off again.

After another maybe three hours of



Jason at rest atop his GS and yours truly kickin' it post-picnic lunch. The Saturn V-like radio tower atop the Montagne Noir. Björn and his movable feast, and the Gorge de Galamus (main image) we had to traverse to partake of it. Survey says, go left, young man.

IMAGINE A SHEER ROCK FACE AND OVERHANGING CLIFFS TO ONE SIDE AND A 300-PLUS-FOOT DROP ON THE OTHER, ADD IN A MAYBE HIP-HIGH STONE WALL SEPARATING YOU FROM THAT CANYON-FLOOR PLUNGE, AND HOPE YOU DON'T SUDDENLY DISCOVER YOU HAVE VERTIGO.

IT'S BEEN AN ABSOLUTE, UNADULTERATED BLAST WITH SOME REALLY FUN, LIKE-MOTO-MINDED PEOPLE, AND I COULD HAVE EASILY GONE ANOTHER WEEK, MY SWEAT-RIPENED WARDROBE BE DAMNED!

Around every corner lies a new architectural discovery. Interactions with livestock were, fortunately, limited. Speaking of livestock... may I present my colt with pommes frites repast. Enjoying a photo atop the Coll de Bóixols. A most relaxing dinner for seven in Molló.



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barnstorming through more creekside canyons and wooded backroads, we rolled into the Hotel Calitxo in Molló around five-ish, and as tradition dictated, promptly reconned from whence the frosty Estrella Galicias were flowing. There's nothing quite like rewarding oneself with a cold adult beverage after a day of dissecting miles and miles of hypnotically twisty tarmac.

PONY UP

That evening, we convened for our penultimate meal in the hotel's bistro. Dinner was, as usual on this trip, both delicious and entertaining, especially after both Björn and I ordered the *Colt with Pomme Frites*. You read that right — colt...with french fries. Let's just say that it didn't take long before the Secretariat and Rodney Dangerfield in "Caddyshack" jokes started flying.



southeast out of the mountains and eventually back to the coast for a mesmerizing seaside romp along the Costa Brava. Our crew, however, opted to stay inland on an alternate, more twisty-abundant segment suggested by Björn, so this we did, carving up countless kilometers of the always-plentiful, quick-flick roller coaster offerings before spilling out onto the AP-7 *autopista* back to Barcelona and Castelldefels (which finally gave me a reason to tap into the unused-till-now sixth gear on the Ducati as well).

Arriving back at ground zero, aka the Grand Hotel Rey Don Jaime, we said goodbye to and toasted our machines, courtesy of Holger and Björn, with iced cans of Estrella Galicia. The hotel was hopping, having been overrun by a huge wedding party, so we navigated our underdressed selves to our respective rooms and prepped for our last supper, which was every bit as sumptuous as the first night's.

With the meal wrapped, we all said our goodbyes, promised to stay in touch (which, thank you, WhatsApp, I do think will happen), and for those of us not flying out at dawn, one final round of *cervezas* at the poolside bar. Good times never seemed so good indeed.

So good, in fact, I'm afraid I'm hooked on the notion that sitting astride a motorcycle is now the *only* way to see this part of the world — or



most others, for that matter.

Maybe I'm wrong, but it seemed like everybody and everything just "flowed together" harmoniously while scooting around Spain and France. Sure, there were speed limits (mostly as you come into a town) and common road usage courtesies, but there weren't drivers screaming or flipping the bird at you if you passed them at speed. In fact, I think the only people we did piss off were a bunch of cyclists flying around a corner who were actually the ones beginning to encroach into *our* lane. I hadn't heard that much Spanish profanity since the last time the U.S. beat Mexico in soccer.

All musings and random observations aside, I do want to say, unequivocally, that if you're hunting for a stress-free two-wheeled adventure (there is much to be said about having a support van



shlepping your bags to your lodgings each night), then hunt no further than Edelweiss Bike Travel. As Mitch has noted many times in his past stories, these folks are nothing but first-class in every detail, from the planned routes to the rest/coffee stops and sightseeing to the nightly hotel and dinner selections.

Huge kudos and thanks to Holger and Björn for seeing to our every need (as well as entertaining us with Edelweiss tales of yore) and to my new "Pyrenees Posse" — Jason, Kevin, Kris and Michael. Pretty sure you're already planning (or at least seriously considering) your next adventure.

So, too...*cough, ahem*, Bossman...am I. **AMA**

THE PARTY'S (ALMOST) OVER Days 7-8/Riding Day 6

—Molló to Castelldefels

Sigh...the final day in the saddle is upon us, and I'm not gonna lie — I'm getting a little *verklemt*. It's been an absolute, unadulterated blast with some really fun, like-moto-minded people, and I could have easily gone another week, my sweat-ripened wardrobe be damned!

This day's route typically takes one