



ALTITUDE SLICKNESS

Off-season Alps – Austria and Italy
– worth a springtime visit?

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Blipping down to second gear for the umpteenth downhill hairpin, I glanced down along the bike's fork legs and thought for a moment that the callipers were glowing orange, which would have been no surprise given the punishment they'd been forced to take. But no, the Brembos were still their normal gold colour, exactly as per the brochure.

I had set off from Edelweissbike's headquarters a few days earlier, in the sleepy Austrian village of Mieming. The contents of my suitcase had been transferred to the pair of Touratach telescopic panniers and top case, and my hastily revised route maps had been stashed under the transparent cover of the tank bag. This was to be the 'Stelvio, King of the Alps' option of the four self-guided tours offered, but a freakishly late winter had put paid to any thoughts of accessing the really remote passes. Eva at Edelweiss had kindly spent hours with a pair of highlighter pens coding impassable routes in pink and open routes in green, which I had then marked out on my full-size map.

ABOVE: There's a twisty road in there somewhere

BELOW: The road to Warth



Sunday had seen me climb the main road north towards Reutte before tacking southwestwards along beautifully surfaced and virtually empty roads to the small town of Warth, where I pulled in to join the local bikers for a rest and a milkshake. This was followed by a run down through the ski resort of Lech where, like everywhere else on this tour in late May, all the hotels and almost all of the restaurants and cafés were closed.

IMMACULATE AUSTRIA

Austria is quite simply immaculate. I saw no litter anywhere, and most of the Alpine meadows are scattered with quite beautiful one-off designer homes, which look seriously built to last. Yet I saw hardly any signs of human life – what do people here do all day, chop firewood? I can only assume that people here live in strong extended family groups and entertain at home, as there are no other options in these small, isolated settlements. And the locals all demonstrate great pride of ownership, both of their homes and their environment, as nowhere is it less than pristine.

Hotel Both at Schruns was a real one-off. The very kind elderly lady, who had insisted that I park the GS



ABOVE: Lipstick? Pigs? David liked the GS Rallye anyway

TOP: Spotted in Warth, coffee time obviously

TOP RIGHT: Glaciers were in the retreat



safely in a neighbouring garage and then brought me a cracking cup of coffee, had then vanished, leaving me as the only guest in this out-of-season ski lodge with seemingly zero staff. It was a lovely old building, but if you've seen 'The Shining,' you can imagine the atmosphere; I half expected those dead twin girls to appear in the corridor inviting me to play 'for ever and ever and ever...'

The following morning saw me head off, via a huge toll road tunnel, for St Moritz. Once south of Landeck, I took the fork to the right marked simply CH & I, to find myself alone on a great piece of road, as ever running alongside an opaque green-grey river of melt water, so cold that I'm sure I saw a salmon wearing a wetsuit. After discovering the only place in Zernez open for coffee, I rode into St Moritz and found the very plush Schweizerhof hotel high above the lake, but shrouded in drizzle, which was to last all night and into the next morning.

At €9 for a beer, I was glad to leave early. After dropping down the edge of a precipice into another beautiful valley, I headed down into Italy and that day's primary destination, Lake Como.

If you'd not noticed the Italian border, where the guards seemed more concerned with playing Candy Crush than with policing any passing traffic, there is



ABOVE: Misty St Moritz

BELOW: Surfaces are good

mirrors, but as I found the road to Sondrio, the heavens opened and I got a real drenching, especially when the traffic built up nearer the town and I had to slow to maybe 40mph, at which speed the GS's windshield and bodywork couldn't deflect the deluge.

So you can imagine my embarrassment as I dripped on to the bare wooden designer floors of the beautiful, isolated boutique hotel Reticci Balzi, where my only dining option was the very swish Il Poggio restaurant next door.

I thought I was ordering some kind of meat pie, but what arrived was a piece of smooth mashed potato, sculpted into the exact size and shape of a fishfinger, five slices of courgette and a dozen medallions of beef. Now I know that quality beef is supposed to be served quite rare, but I'm convinced that supervet Noel Fitzpatrick could have got this stuff to moo again. Mind you, two bottles of a superb Viennese beer made up for that.

Next day I headed eastwards and, spotting a couple of traffic cops ahead, totally bamboozled them by braking hard, pulling in and asking them to confirm that I was on the right road for that night's stay, Bozen (as the Austrians call it), or Bolzano in Italian. The

another sure-fire way to know that you're in Italy. Just check your mirrors. The car behind will be very close, seemingly obsessed with reading the dealer's name at the bottom of your number plate, and will overtake closely and cut back in, again close enough to read the brand of your front tyre. I think my mum called it 'small man syndrome'. Then, of course, you just filter past everyone at the next traffic lights.

Approaching the lake, I made the mistake of taking signs for Lecco, aware that this town was at the southern end of the eastern shoreline, but found myself on a horrible road through manifold tunnels, glimpsing the shimmering water way below to my right as each tunnel ended and began again.

I managed to find my way to Mandello del Lario and the Moto Guzzi factory's museum, which opens only between 3 and 4pm, but is free of charge. The bikers and other enthusiasts who had gathered saw a great display of this fine marque, which started a century ago. For me, the star of the show was the 1955 500cc V8 Grand Prix racer - I only wish we'd heard it fire up, but I guess the old girl has split her last eardrum.



BELOW LEFT: V8 racer is star of the Guzzi museum

BELOW: Bikes are popular round here

SNOWLINE

I found myself leading a group of a dozen bikes northwards along the lake's eastern rim, their headlights shining off the wet Tarmac into my





ABOVE: Edelweiss book the hotels and work out the route

LEFT: St Leonards Pass - some were still snow-blocked

RIGHT: Alpine scene



ABOVE: You can still get close to snow in May

BELOW: So this is where the pink bicycles come from - mystery solved

Giro d'Italia cycle race had just been along part of my route that day, and every small hamlet and village had pink bikes strung up on fences and posts to support these supreme athletes. At over 2000 metres, the top of the Jaufenpass was pretty godforsaken, the snow still banked high on either side from being cleared, reminding me that it might be late May, but we were a long way up.

After my night in the superb Scala Stiegl hotel, I turned homewards towards Innsbruck and measured a southbound traffic jam of cars and bikes of 30km around the Brenner Pass. I was glad to be heading the other way.

If you think that the R1200GS is a common sight on British roads, over in the Tyrol they hunt in packs. It's easy to see why this machine is known as the Swiss Army knife of motorcycles - it really is pretty damn good at everything. Despite a friend's comment on the Rallye ('Why put lipstick on a pig?'), I grew to be very attached to my bike and really liked the paint job and coloured chassis. No matter how long the day's ride, I never got cramp nor felt uncomfortable and, of course, the riding position does allow you to stand on the pegs and have a stretch occasionally, pretending to be Simon Pavey.



I even found myself using the cruise control on some long tunnel sections, not really necessary as the fly-by-wire throttle is extremely light. Together with the road/rain engine management switch, the toasty heated grips and electronic suspension adjustment on the fly, BMW really have built a go-anywhere machine, but I do wonder if the Boxer would have survived this far down the road without Messieurs McGregor and Boorman's exploits of 2004.

This is a corner of Europe you really need to ride. Some Brits prefer to take their own bike, which involves a long grind across France, whilst others like to plan and organise each facet of the tour themselves. But I reckon that once you've totalled the cost of bike hire, insurance, accommodation and planned your route, you really wouldn't be saving much compared to letting the experts do it for you. Although I missed out on the really remote passes and the skies were perpetually grey, I really enjoyed my Edelweissbike tour and would thoroughly recommend it to anyone who has promised themselves to do a continental ride, although I would advise a couple of things - go after mid-June, and take a satnav.