

A MOVEABLE FEAST

EDELWEISS BIKE TRAVEL DISHES UP NONSTOP CURVES ON THE MEDITERRANEAN ALPS EXTREME TOUR.

Do you dream of feasting on tons of awe-inspiring twisting roads linked directly to one another, hour after hour, day after day? Hidden gems tucked away with hardly a trace of traffic? In go-for-it Europe? If so, boy howdy, does Edelweiss Bike Travel have the ride for you.

This Mediterranean Alps Extreme Tour fits into its Ride4Fun category; there's no chase van to carry your luggage so you pack it all on your bike, and accommodations lean toward the modest side rather than deluxe, although some offer distinctive regional and historic flair. Included meals might not wow a hard-core "foodie" but it's plenty good. So how's that all work out? Bottom line: very well indeed.

Our tour covered seven days of riding aboard a BMW R 1200 RT through France and Italy. Don't try to follow our daily itinerary; most waypoints show up as blank spaces on your average auto club map. So there's no we-went-here-and-saw-that-castle/museum/shopping travelogue here. Because we saw mainly corners, switchbacks and tiny roads. Nonstop. We ended up riding stinking hard, all day long, 9 or 10 hours. Which is a very good thing, if that's what you came for. But maybe not so good if you're not fully prepared.



Main: Riomaggiore, so impossibly gorgeous your heart aches.

Facing left inset: Convenient courtyard parking in the medieval village of Zuccarello.

Facing center inset: On a layover day, guide Michael took us up the canyon seen in the background.

Facing right inset: Can you spot the hidden road in this pic?





Above: Panoramic vistas, deserted roads.
Top right: A shady break amidst ferns and moss.
Bottom right: Think you could find this road on your own? Ha!
Below: This is as close as we cared to get to traffic-laden Monte Carlo.



RIDING DAY 1: DAY OF THE SORTING OUT

Riding Day 1 takes our 12 bikes plus two guides, Michael Göbel and Pablo Piferrer, out of Vence, on the outskirts of Nice, France. Four solo riders hail from Canada, while the rest of our group are USA minted, including three couples riding two-up. We ride along the Grand Canyon du Verdon, and while it's not on the scale of Arizona's Grand Canyon it's still big, beautiful, scenic country. The roads aren't super tight, but twisty enough for us to get acquainted with our bikes and get tuned in to our European environment. We encounter traffic at the canyon's most scenic spots, but soon leave most of it behind as we climb toward Castellane. We're just settling in and the route is still only medium-tight when disaster strikes; one of the Canadians goes down hard, breaking two ribs, and needs to be airlifted out.

Michael deposits most of us at a nearby lunch stop and then rejoins Pablo who is overseeing things along with the rider's friends. They are the consummate professional guides, and handle this emergency extremely well. Of course, this delays things considerably, but everyone feels only concern for our fallen comrade. It's a hard lesson, but one we all take to heart the rest of our journey.

RIDING DAY 2: DAY OF THE "DRIVEWAYS"

We're about a mile high at our hotel in Valberg, a French ski resort. On this layover day, a group of four bikes and six people join guide Michael on the optional long ride. The cool mountain air soon turns warm, then hot and humid as we descend onto incredibly twisty, secret mountain roads with virtually no traffic. We carve our way through miniature roads lacking centerlines, far narrower than public roads back home. By the time we reach the picturesque village of Utelle for a courtyard lunch it's blazing hot even though we're shaded by colorful umbrellas.

A big buffet of tight, twisty roads serves as our dessert after lunch. We gobble them up, but it's tough work in such close quarters, navigating switchback-laden roads sized like driveways. The few times we encounter small cars there's barely room to squeeze past, and to pass a minivan we all have to cooperate at a wide spot in the road. The highlight of the day is a special tiny track tracing through the pine trees, which crests at the Colle de Trebuchet. It's like God's own driveway even though it crests far below heaven's door, pure joy offering three-dozen switchbacks.



Above: Common stuff: 30 switchbacks in an afternoon
 Right top: Just over the hill from Monte Carlo, peace resumes in the French countryside.
 Right bottom: Courtyard lunch in Utelle. Not a McDonald's in sight.



Above: Zuccarello's street-sweeping crew.
 Top right: Think you could find this bridge on your own? Ha!
 Close right: Coffee break, French style.
 Far right: The sun breaks through above Genoa.
 Bottom left: One bunch of very happy riders.
 Bottom center: Morning calm in Vicoforte.
 Bottom right: Brightly painted Cinque Terre houses let fishermen spot home from the sea.



RIDING DAY 3: DAY OF THE PASSES

Today's route covers nine mountain passes, including one leading us from France to Italy. Not all are super-high, but the roads are again fantastic and little traveled. Some sections narrow down to become something like forest-service roads, dirty and bumpy. But the pervasive scent of pine and well-aged loam grows intoxicating. We pass through innumerable tiny towns with a posted (and enforced) speed limit of 30 kph—18 mph. These slow speeds reveal so much: the amazing variety of front doors; the scent of dinner on the stove or laundry in the dryer; old men sitting by the roadside watching life roll by. I wave and smile, and they return the gesture.

day in Rapallo, where our hotel overlooks the Mediterranean. Today, most visit the picturesque Cinque Terre or "Five Lands," the famous little villages perched on the sea's shores. Some ride there with Michael, some travel via train. But I need to create photos and Pablo offers to ride as photo model. Next he finds several scenic overlooks, and then we arrive on the doorstep of Riomaggiore, the southernmost of the Cinque Terre chain. So, I give up the full Cinque Terre tour for you, dear readers. But I do get to walk the sloping streets of Riomaggiore, even though we return to Rapallo late for a quick dinner. Work, work, work!

RIDING DAY 4: DAY OF THE TRACTORS

We leave the Piemonte region and ride into Liguria by tracing backcountry Italian farm roads. Early on, tractors on the road outnumber cars. Ridgetop vistas reveal panoramic rolling green hills, and bales of hay rolled into 5-foot-tall cylinders lay on their sides, gigantic cigar butts littering the sun-bleached fields. Then the "driveway" roads narrow down to garden-path size. The pavement grows rougher and more broken, and we roll through more pines as the forest scent returns along with big clumps of ferns and moss-covered rocks. A road sign on the small "garden path" we're following shows converging lines, indicating "road narrows." I laugh as the road indeed shrinks further, becoming an honest-to-goodness working garden path servicing orchards of figs, then apples, then hazelnuts.

RIDING DAY 6: DAY OF THE EXTREMES

Thunder awakens me in the night, and morning reveals a steady rain. Luckily, it stops just as we depart. But the hills behind Rapallo run slick, covered with wet leaves, muddy runoff and more. As we climb the mountain its head and shoulders plunge into the clouds. Sheathed in gray, the sky opens up for a few moments with brilliant blue, then the clouds slam shut once again. At the crest we luck out with some open patches showing off Genoa and the sea gleaming in the distance.

Following lunch at a mountaintop alpine hut, clouds finally give way to sun as we attack what seems to be a dual-sport road featuring bad, broken pavement and off-camber corners. The GPS on my bike shows our location as merely "riding on road"—Michael has faked out Mr. Navi by taking up a tiny path within a national park! Too cool....

RIDING DAY 5: DAY OF THE MAGNANIMOUS ACT

It's not all about me. Really. Well, at least not always. Our group seriously doubts that I'm actually working on this ride, which is their vacation trip. But I indeed schedule work on this layover

RIDING DAY 7: DAY OF THE LONG GOOD-BYE

Our final day of riding takes us back to France, and Michael is determined to give us our money's worth. The star of this long day is SP17, a twisty-turny road covered by a canopy of trees, bordered by ferns reaching far onto the roadway, all lined by



fragrant leaves embossed with patches of moss. Gorgeous as the setting may be, it feels more like a Supermoto course as bumpy pavement transitions to dirt. In a blink, this close-quarters road gives way to a big, wide switchback turn with a huge, panoramic overlook; so stunning in its scope and beauty I simply stop. Following another photo op in the medieval village of Zuccarello, we attack more spectacular backroads, and then hotfoot it via highway to an overlook with a fantastic view of Monte Carlo. We immediately depart for more French country roads before another highway stint takes us back to our starting point in Vence. To my amusement, this is the first and only time I've engaged the cruise control on the R 1200 RT after a whole week of riding.

This RT Beemer, which I feared might be too much bike for these tight roads, has performed splendidly. Supremely

comfortable yet extremely athletic for such a big, powerful bike, my only complaint concerns its fairing; it's too effective at blocking wind in this hot, humid weather so I've been overheated most of the time. Next year's Mediterranean Alps Extreme Tours are scheduled for the cool of May and October, a better match weather-wise.

As for the Tour itself, this amazing collection of roads has proven absolutely fantastic, a dream come true for aggressive riding. And it was just fine for the two-up couples as well; they too raved about the roads. But be forewarned; this trip is not for everyone, as it requires an unusually high degree of riding skills and tough mental focus. But bring your A Game along, and it really doesn't get any better than this.

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