



Issue 189  
Summer 2015

# THE RIDER'S DIGEST

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## VILLARRABINES





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### Editor

Stuart Jewkes

### Managing Editor

Dave Gurman

### Features Editor

Martin Haskell

### Contributors

Jonathan Boorstein, Ian Dunmore, Wizzard, Ricardo Rodrigues, Thomas Day, Michele Harrison, Kevin Williams, Paul Blezard, Claudette Torneden-Bauers, Harriet Ridley, The Boy Biker, Andy Kyriacou

### Photographs

Stuart Jewkes, Dave Gurman, Martin Haskell, Ricardo Rodrigues, Wizzard, Ian Dunmore, Andy Kyriacou, Gigi Soldano, Michele Harrison, Claudette Torneden-Bauers, Paul Blezard, Kevin Williams, the late Kevin Ash, and as credited

The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy. Honestly, they don't. In fact this issue is probably the most balanced in opinion terms that we've ever done because the Harley Divide is almost exactly 50/50. You'll see what I mean...

Wanna write for us? Send us ideas, suggestions, articles, news etc. to the address on the right..

### Contacts

#### Editorial

Stuart Jewkes

+44 (0) 7884 198256

[editor@theridersdigest.co.uk](mailto:editor@theridersdigest.co.uk)

#### Advertising

Dave Gurman

+44 (0) 20 8707 0655

[advertising@theridersdigest.co.uk](mailto:advertising@theridersdigest.co.uk)



# From the editor...

You might notice a preponderance of Harley-Davidsons and references thereof in this issue. At least you will now that I've mentioned it.

Not that I feel the need to justify it [why the hell should I?], but it's just a coincidence that's resulted from summer having arrived, everyone being back out on the road and, since the last issue was published back in March, the industry having noticed us again and begun offering us stuff, which is as it should be, let's face it.

Most noteworthy among this resurgence was an intriguing email from the Spanish Tourist Office, detailing a trip that they were laying on during May that was for the benefit of the UK motorcycling media and ultimately for the promotion of tourism in Spain.

If anything came under the category of 'no-brainer' then this was it. Just three weeks after getting the email, Harley-Davidson UK were on board and Martin was taking a Road Glide Special down to Portsmouth for the ferry to Spain for a week's road trip down the modern-day course of an ancient Roman road - the Ruta Via De La Plata.

Regular readers and fans of our Facebook page will have followed his daily posts along the way, but now, here in this issue, is Martin's *mahoosive*, visually-sumptuous report of the entire trip, and I have no doubt you'll agree with me that it's a minter.

\*\*\*\*

But that's not all! This issue is one of the most voluminous issues of the mag ever, we have another new column to introduce

in the form of Kevin Williams' 'Survival Skills' (named after Kevin's own rider training outfit), we've got a pop star on board, and there are more female contributors in this issue alone than in the whole of the annual output of the mainstream (is that actually true? It should be so I'm calling it anyway). By the way that last point is partly in response to DG demanding to know 'where's all the women?' after the last issue. In fact one even used to work here back in the day, so if you approve of Harriet's Guzzi retrospective on page 74 then tell us so we can convince her to jack in her job at the BBC and come back to the Digest full-time...

\*\*\*\*

As I type this, as part of the final act before running the virtual printing press, it's 'Ride to Work Week' here in the UK. When I heard this I had a disturbing flashback. Some of us ride to work every day, some of us ride to work then ride *for* work; some of us reckon it sets them up for the day and some of us like to be *seen* to ride to work as a demonstration of a form of piety, as if one isn't a proper biker unless you do (which is every bit as bollocks as saying you're not a proper biker unless you ride a Harley - look what Harley themselves have done on page 148. How proper is *that?*).

I, on the other hand, offer a dissenting voice. I have no problem with the real initiative behind 'Ride to Work Week', but my experience of commuting on a motorcycle was during an Autumn/Winter and to a job that involved shift work and permanent 5am starts, so it was constant darkness, invariably crap weather, and a total absence of traffic due to the

ungodly hour. Now that third point is what I'm coming to: riding over that kind of cager-free commute involved a level of concentrated repetition that only racers are familiar with - braking, gearchanging, accelerating, all in the same places, every time. I got so bored with this that I almost challenged myself to ride to work with my eyes shut.

The other thing was that any suggestion of time-saving was totally negated by the need to get changed at either end of the journey, then I spent all day concerned that my stuff was going to get nicked because I had nowhere to stash it.

My point is this: it's all very well riding to work if your place of work is set up somehow to accommodate it. If it isn't, then it becomes an ordeal, and I defy any of you to disagree with me there...

Before you unleash a righteous shitstorm of 'what about people who have no choice', well neither did I, until I exercised the other choice of quitting the job, because it came down to either quit the job or quit riding, and we can't have that. We just can't.

The ultimate point is this: don't ever let anyone in this culture tell you what you should do with your bike and definitely don't ever let anyone tell you you're not a proper biker unless you adopt the value system of a self-flagellating masochist; and if you too have ever felt unwilling to admit that *no, I don't like riding to work either*, then you're not alone.

*I am Spartacus...*

**Stuart Jewkes**

[editor@theridersdigest.co.uk](mailto:editor@theridersdigest.co.uk)



# In the saddle...

Got something to say? Send it to:  
[editor@theridersdigest.co.uk](mailto:editor@theridersdigest.co.uk)

Hello Stuart

Just discovered your excellent digital magazine. Very enjoyable and topical read – only problem is I've now got to find the time to catch up on all of the past issues!

Still passionate about biking but just gave up riding a Sprint ST to have something more upright. – a VFR800X Crossrunner - and just off across the Channel riding with some pals and with my wife on the back. Also have a classic 1978 Honda CBX1000 and a 1989 US market GB500TT that I'm still working on.

I'd be happy to take part in your 'Riders Lives' if you would like me to.

As someone who grew up building cafe racers in the late 50's I was never very keen on the custom scene, but I find this whole 'shed bike' trend a very healthy one I can appreciate and can't wait to get to the 'Bike Shed' show. Will you be there?

Kind regards,  
Gerald Davison

*Thanks for the endorsement Gerald. That CBX you mention there has triggered our rarity radar so we might be sending someone over to check it out shortly! As for the BSMC show, we didn't make it this time but quite a few of the Bike Shed regulars are on our wavelength - if you have any*

*photos of the event then send them our way and we'll put them on the Facebook page.*

Hi Stuart,

I am Rod, from Brazil. Just getting in touch to congratulate about the magazine.

I lived in London for 5 years, 2006-2011, went there to study law, then needed to make some extra money to pay the expenses and ended working as courier on a big bike in London, that was a crazy job!!!! That's how I had the first contact with the magazine. Every workshop I went, I always looked for a new issue.

Got so enthusiastic with the bike community that travelled from USA to South America by bike. Back in Brazil just couldn't lose touch with bikers, so, in my free time I host bike travelers, most of them from Europe, specially from UK.

All I've got now is the online version of the magazine and sometimes I see articles about guys traveling in South America, which makes me very interested to see their point of view.

Anyway, if one day you need to make an article about South America or about a safe point down here, Brazil or whatever related

with South America, please let me know, I have hosted more than 100 bikers and I'm sure some are your readers.

All the best !!!!

Rod

*Couriers seem to lead short glorious lives in London so I'm glad to hear you made it out in one piece Rod! I'm sure you're aware of this mag's origins in the previous century's London courier community too (think Mad Max 2 and you're not far out..) so you're on familiar territory. The last time we featured South America in depth was Paul Browne's epic 'Two Wheels To The End Of The World' back in 2012 so an update is most definitely in order!*







**Image of the Month: Wizzard's latest project - 1947 Magnat Debon from France, featuring a 100cc 2-stroke with 'suicide' gearchange, girder forks, hardtail, period panniers, the original airpump and a nice 'patina'.**



# THE BOY BIKER

## WHAT A COMBINATION...

**I've had a few good rides out on my Dad's side-valve 1971 Ural M72 two-wheel drive bike and sidecar since I last wrote. Basically he got me insured on it for my 21<sup>st</sup> and he hasn't had a look in since! In fact I've loved it so much he had to get on and put together another one for himself!**

One worth of sharing was trying to find the back roads down to Whitstable with a mate and gear loaded up one Friday afternoon. A boring blatt along the A2/M2 which is an hour on my 90's 250cc, was going to be no fun on a bike which tops out at around 60...-ish. Being on the old bike I knew the iPhone would be off all afternoon as I jotted a few directions and road numbers down from a tatty atlas while explaining to my passenger how to check the oils.

The Ural is a pleasure to ride. Having your co-pilot alongside rather than behind makes for easy conversation and they don't miss one bit of the action. In fact they get it better without a helmet and being able to lean back on a comfy seat. They can check the map, have a drink, roll and smoke a cigarette and wave to all the people who wave at them, all in safety. Try saying the same for two up on anything other than a sidecar or a Goldwing!

I was well aware that picking our way cross-country would take a while, but nothing had prepared me for the endless stream of red lights and other traffic-calming measures that are the Medway and Kentish towns. This air-cooled flat



twin is happiest at 50, with sufficient air to cool the barrels without too much going on to use up the oil too quickly. They really don't like all the stop-starting. Taking this into consideration it came as no great surprise when after one of our stops to take on vital fluids (beer for us, half a litre of 40w for the outfit) she ran, but not well. You could hear the timing was all over the place. Missing, backfiring, lack of power up hills, occasionally running on one cylinder then back to two, pops and smoke out the exhaust...

We stopped and checked the vitals and decided to push on, knowing that the caravan (and the cool sea), were only about 30 miles away. Being young and foolhardy, despite having a mechanically sympathetic ear, my motto in this type of situation is usually 'use it until it seizes, just keep your hand over that clutch!' The added blessing of European breakdown recovery makes this kind of riding a lot more comfortable!

We made it to the sea and once all concerned had cooled off I took the points cover off to have a look at what was going on. The side-valve Urals use a simple system for ignition timing whereby a rotor sits on

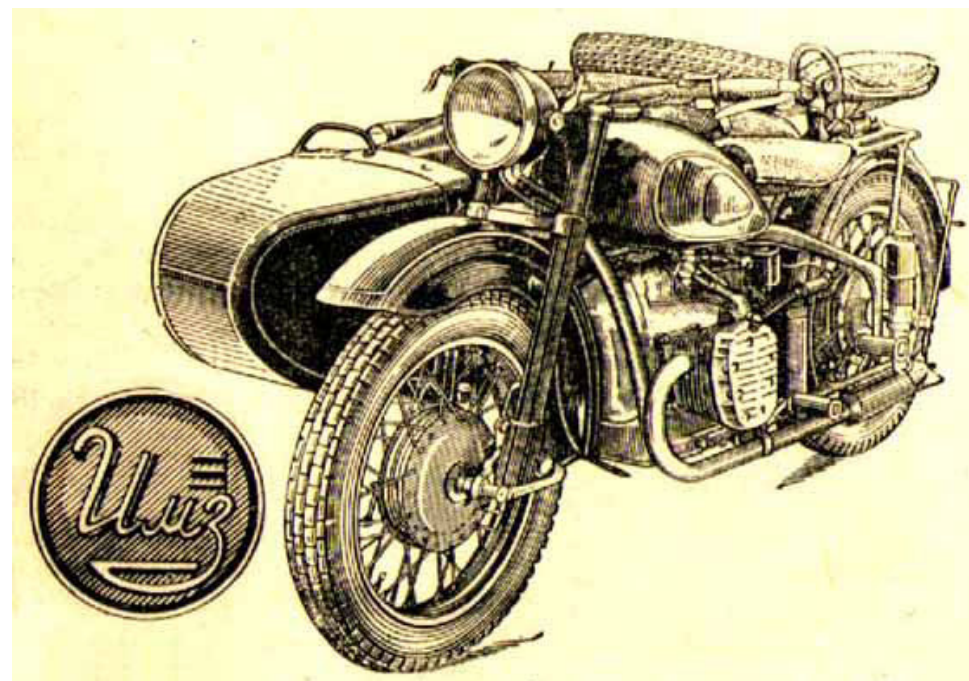
the end of the camshaft, with two magnets corresponding to two pickups, so as the cam shaft turns, the spark is delivered to the correct cylinder at the right time. The rotor is held onto a slotted shaft by a small brass screw. Said brass screw was worn beyond apple core shape. I thanked the biking gods when it came out in one piece despite its knackered state! I had a teeny screw in the tool box (another joy of having a chair) which would do the job, a bit of Loctite and we had timing again! As much as it was a hairy journey, not knowing when or where power would suddenly be lost, if we would get going again and how much damage I was actually doing by pressing on, only to find that play on the rotor arm was all that was wrong was a relief to say the least!

After a couple of holiday rollies I lay in the sunset thinking about it all. That machine, which would run on paraffin and piss in a 50:50

ratio; run on whatever oil in any hole you put it in and go as fast up a 1:7 hill as it would down it as I had learned today, will run for a good hot hour through the hop-lined lanes with timing completely out and with no lasting effects once the issue was sorted. What. A. Bike.

We've since swapped it back to one wheel drive. A world of fun was opened up to me. Trying to keep a three wheeled machine on two of them for as long as possible is for me much more fun and a higher test of balance than getting a two-wheeled one up on one. Obviously I only condone this sort of riding on closed roads or private land... but more to come on that next time!

## The Boy Biker





# The Silver Route

## The Adventures of Don Martin and Senora Bath on the Harley-Davidson Road Glide Special

Words & Pix: Martin Haskell



### In the beginning...

**T**he email came out of the blue at the end of April, on an otherwise rather routine day:

"I don't suppose on the off-chance you happen to be free for, say, five days in May do you?"

Stuart Jewkes - TRD Editor - had received an invitation from the Spanish Tourist Office in London for 'Moto Journos' to ride a route from Gijón in Northern Spain down to Seville, with the main stipulation being that the ride had to be done over 5 nights in May.

He'd wanted to do it, but for a number of reasons it wasn't going to work. So he asked me.

I immediately thought of a dozen reasons not to go for it: too little notice; my bike probably wouldn't make it; and even if it did I'd probably end up walking like John Wayne at the end of each day, possibly damaged for life.

And the main reason? I'd never done anything like it before. Sure, I've been all over the place on bikes, including relatively recently riding 275 miles home on my old K100 from 'The Eden Project' in Cornwall, stopping only for petrol and a sandwich, but not doing that kind of mileage day after day.

And while I'd driven thousands of miles on the continent, I'd never been across the water on a bike. It all seemed rather daunting. So I'm afraid I chickened out and dismissed it rather too easily.

When I got home, I mentioned the trip to my wife, and added that I didn't think my bike wouldn't make it.

'Get it fixed then' she said.

I hadn't expected that response. It changed my attitude towards the trip. The more I thought about it, the more I became determined to go.



My daughter told me I should go. My son even said I could use his Suzuki SV650 if I needed to.

So I dusted off my sense of adventure, and after taking a deep breath, I confirmed to Maria at the Spanish Tourist Office that I would be going. The fine details could be tweaked, whatever it took, I had now committed myself.

On chatting with Stuart and TRD Managing Editor Dave Gurman, we decided to try and get a press bike to review alongside the road trip, and we already had leads from the UK arm of a well-known manufacturer who were showing an interest in the project.

Sadly as with the best laid plans of mice and men, that particular thread failed to come to fruition. Despite riding (and liking) their bikes, logistical issues involving commitment to a promotional tour proved a bridge too far for them.

Looking at ferry departures and arrivals, along with a reasonable chance of being able to physically do the ride – from Gijón in the north to Seville in the south, and back again - in the stipulated five nights in Spain meant an outward bound ferry crossing on a Tuesday, returning the following Tuesday.

But the bikes in question were only available from Monday to Friday, so it was back to square one.

While all this was going on, the proposed departure date was drawing ever closer. It's not easy preparing for a trip that you're unsure about in the first place, but when key elements like finding a bike to ride are looking iffy it can be fairly tough on the nerves.

One or two sleepless nights followed, along with a brief dalliance with another major manufacturer, famous for a 'state of the art' tourer celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but again, too little notice.

Nonetheless, I moved a few things around,



cancelled a couple of meetings, and booked my ferry tickets. A draft tour itinerary was drawn up, a document that was to see changes, more detail and fine tuning as it winged its way between Maria's office in London and my desk several times.

Stuart talked about how I might approach the project from a writing point of view, suggesting that I might try to re-write 'Don Quixote' by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, a book that I'd read at secondary school.

Trouble was, more than 40 years on I'd largely forgotten it, so bearing in mind the timescale and the time it would take to read a novel, to jog my memory I decided to watch the TV movie made in 2000 starring John Lithgow and Bob Hoskins.

I could see the similarities; bearded, balding middle aged guy steps away from his mundane day to day life and embarks upon a journey of

discovery across Spain on a noble steed.

But after watching for a while I didn't like the way things were going, this guy had clearly lost his marbles, and was going from delusional disaster to catastrophe, and usually coming off worse. In danger of losing the will to live I reached for the off switch.

Back in the real world, just as things seemed to be becoming hopeless on the press bike front, with just a week and a bit until the planned departure date, I received a reassuring email: 'Dave's got you a Harley...'

That was on a Friday evening, so I had a whole weekend to ponder on what it might be, would it be suitable for touring, or even if it was going to happen.

As it turned out, the offer was genuine, and on the following Monday I spoke to Jess Jones at Harley-Davidson UK, who offered me the choice of a Street Glide Special, a Road Glide

Special or an Electra Glide Ultra Classic Low, which would have been preferable in terms of available luggage space, but Jess explained that at 5'10" I would probably find the Ultra too low.

I've always had a fondness for Harleys, having ridden several over the years, and I would love to own a Fatboy if funds ever permitted. But apart from having a quick butchers on Google I wasn't really sure which of the two remaining available bikes would be the better option, so I headed off to Lakeside Harley Davidson in Essex, and after a very helpful chat with Business Manager Martin Howard, I decided that the bike to go for was a Road Glide Special.

With that decided and the process of arranging the paperwork for the loan of the bike well underway, it suddenly dawned on me that I'd never actually sat on one, and with it being too late to actually back out, I thought I'd better try one for size, and see if my camera bag fitted in one of the panniers.

I visited Maidstone Harley-Davidson on the Sunday before the trip, and after a brief but helpful chat with Sales Advisor Steve Thompson, he pointed me in the direction of a 'Black Denim' model of the FLTRXS 'Road Glide Special' and told me to help myself.

I was relieved to find that I could easily see over the huge frame mounted fairing, but my camera bag was not going to be coming with me.

### Preparation for the journey. 'Go west young man...'(306 miles)

With the bike I was to be using based in Gloucester, I decided that the best option was to collect the bike the day before the ride was due to start, and take it home to see just what I could fit on board luggage wise.



I got the impression that Dave Gurman, (who'd actually facilitated the Harley in the first place) was expecting me to take a full wardrobe and a collection of shoes that Imelda Marcos would have been proud of, but in reality all I needed was a sweater, a few t shirts, socks etc., something half decent to wear in the evening after a fly splattered day on the highway, and a pair of lightweight shoes.

Along with a few essentials like iPod, iPad, phone, DSLR camera, a few lenses and cables, a tripod, and some chargers. Not forgetting an oversuit in case it rained.

When I arrived at H-D's central logistics depot, the scene reminded me of one of those CSI programmes, where lifeless forms were filed away in a drawer under a sheet.

Ian Fagg looked up the bike's stock number, grabbed a pallet truck and wandered off into the vast warehouse before stopping by a row of galvanised stillages; their contents covered in black sheets.

After pulling one of the long frames out from the ranks, Ian removed the sheet, unfastened a couple of ratchet straps and wheeled the huge bike off its storage platform as if it was a moped.

He then gave me a full run down of the controls and the bike's features. Initially showing me how the FM radio worked. It then remained softly tuned to BBC Radio 3 while he explained the operation of the satellite navigation system, programming the destination of 'Gijón' in using the handlebar mounted joystick controls, all to the gentle accompaniment of Don Giovanni.

Surreal. The bike was already beginning to assume a character different in nature to those at H-D Maidstone, which were all mean, black, loud and menacing, with ZZ Top and Lemmy Kilmister playing in the background.

This Harley was finished in a fetching 'Superior Blue' and along with the acres of chrome, the sun - rapidly disappearing behind a bank of grey clouds - set the metallic paint off a treat as steady rain started to fall.

With the loan of a single pannier shaped liner case, I headed east in the direction of Kent, initially wobbling about on the slippery streets of Gloucester and Cirencester while Madame Satnav admonished me with frequent calls of 'route recalculation' as she tried to prematurely point me towards Spain.

My oversuit - packed into its carrying pouch - stayed firmly in the pannier as the optimistic promise of sunshine the other side of several showers dissuaded me from the heinous act of stopping to get covered up, opting to stay clad in slightly damp Hood Kevlar jeans and an Alpinestars textile jacket, both borrowed from my son Ben for the trip, I'd decided that I'd better get used to them before I crossed the Bay of Biscay.

Actually I stayed largely dry, with the 'shark nose' fairing offering substantial protection, while housing a system of 3 vents to control airflow depending on the weather; one like a letter box at the base of the sliver of screen - designed to reduce buffeting for the rider's head, and two large half-moon shaped ducts beside the headlights that could be opened to let the breeze flow through the fairing when it gets hot. This had swayed me towards the futuristic looking Road Glide Special over the more traditional Street Glide Special.

The fairing also housed a 'Boom Box' entertainment system, complete with iPod connectivity via a USB lead hidden away in one of two waterproof cubby holes, and using a combination of the two joysticks you could swap between a variety of media options like different radio wavebands and station presets,



Bluetooth, the Satnav and 'Martin's iPod', which displayed the track listing and also allowed you to toggle between tracks on the move via the full 6.5" full colour screen. No air conditioning though.

I quickly got used to the size of the 369kg bike, with a low centre of gravity it proved to actually be quite nimble, especially on roundabouts. The lack of a top box however was going to mean a rationalisation of what I would be able to pack for the trip.

150 odd miles later when I got home, my wife Jude immediately declared that the bike looked like 'Bender' - the alcoholic whoremongering chain smoking (to quote Turanga Leela) robot from Matt Groening's 'Futurama' series. The name stuck.

I could see what she meant, the twin LED headlamps were sat in a black oval surround, and did indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to the eyes of the swarthy wise cracking robot. I hoped the bike's character might be a little more wholesome.

With just two medium sized top loading panniers for all my worldly goods and chattels

for the following week and a bit, I was going to have to make some tough choices about what I really needed to take - and what to leave behind.

First to go was my 55-300mm lens, would I really need it anyway? I wasn't planning to be that far from the bike if I was photographing it. That saved a decent chunk of space, and meant that I might actually get the lid of the left pannier closed.

The right side was doing OK, with some clever packing (by Jude) involving rolling t-shirts, socks and trolleys, and then folding a couple of shirts and pairs of trousers up small everything fitted into the branded H-D inner bag, with even enough room to squeeze my iPad down the side. A lightweight pair of canvas shoes lay nicely along the top, and my Oxford mini tool kit and Muc Off visor cleaning kit slipped nicely down the back.

The left side was a bit more of a struggle, with only one H-D bag available, I had to fit my wash bag, chargers, flat LED torch (well you never know, do you?) a small bunch of cable ties, a roll of insulating tape, hi viz vest

(legal requirement) and my remote flashgun into a soft Wenger rucksack which just about squeezed in on top of my tripod.

With my camera in a smaller bag it just about all fitted with the aid of some tyre levers and a jar of Vaseline, and I just about managed to get the lid shut. But my oversuit wouldn't fit anywhere.

Both Dave G and my son Ben individually assured me that I was going to Spain, where it's hot and dry, and that I wouldn't need it. Besides, reasoned DG, if you do get wet, summer rain dries quickly, and you've got a change of clothes. Absolutely. They were both right.

Common sense prevailed, I took the plunge, left my oversuit at home and headed for warmer climes. What could possibly go wrong?

### **Day 1, Kent to Portsmouth. 'Four seasons in one day...' (98 miles)**

After topping up the six gallon tank, with everything loaded and some good music blasting out of the two large speakers in front of me, I set off in the early afternoon down the M26 heading for Surrey, and some menacing looking dark clouds on the horizon.

By the time I got to Cobham services on the M25, Aha's version of 'Crying in the Rain' began to play on the iPod with rumbles of thunder and the sound of rainfall. What was weird was that there was also lightning ahead. Quickly followed by torrential rain. More thunder, only real this time. Remembering how the fairing had largely protected me the day before I wasn't really bothered.

Then the hail started, misting up my visor, so I lifted it, only to have the hail stones battering my face like shotgun pellets. I slowed down to a crawl in the second lane, there was



nowhere else to go, and I could barely see.

As the Daf behind me closed right up my Khyber, the idiot in the 3 Series to my left decided to undertake, carving in front. The steering was becoming vague due to the slushy ice on the road, and then Kate Bush's 'Cloudbusting' started thumping out of the speakers. Very funny.

It was a relief to be pulling up the slip road to the roundabout for the A3, I was totally drenched and shivering. So far I wasn't enjoying my mega tour, and I'd only left home less than an hour ago.

Bizarrely, 'Cloudbusting' was followed by 'Four Seasons in One Day' by Crowded House, and I managed a wry smile. The hail had stopped but it was still chucking it down with rain.

As I got further down the A3 there was a little more hail but then the roads started to dry out. When 'Dead' by They Might Be Giants' came on I decided to do away with the music, the random selection had so far been uncannily accurate, and I didn't want to tempt fate.

The satnav was pretty accurate and in what seemed like no time I was in a queue to check in at the ferry terminal in Portsmouth behind another Martin on another Harley, piled up with loads of gear, and sensibly wearing an oversuit. "Did you get caught in that lot?" he asked. I replied that I had.

"Did you get wet?" he enquired. "Oh yes" I said, laughing, "a good and proper soaking".

The thing that sets riders apart from car drivers is that everyone queuing up in the holding lanes is chatting to one another, asking about where you're going, talking about the bikes, with the groups usually gently taking the mickey out of at least one of their party.

After a security check (I'm not a religious type, but I was praying that they wouldn't ask



me to unpack the panniers...) we were riding onto the massive Brittany Ferry, the 'Pont-Aven' and heading down the ramp into deck 2, where the bikes are parked in between a series of long steel hawsers mounted the length of the floor.

Then it's a rush to get your bags off the bike and make sure it's parked in first gear. I'd jotted the instructions to disable the alarm on the Harley on a piece of card in my wallet, and rushed through the procedure, unsure that I'd succeeded.

The Harley's keyless ignition relies on a fob in your pocket which disables the alarm when you're close to the bike, activating the alarm and the immobiliser as soon as you walk away.

After a second try the indicators flashed three times, telling me that I'd succeeded. I didn't want the alarm going off every time the ferry moved, resulting in a flat battery when I got to Santander. I didn't fancy trying to bump start it.

Crew members then placed a large cushion on the bike's saddle and fastened it securely down with a ratchet strap between two of the hawsers. Very efficient.

Grabbing my Harley bag, my rucksack and my camera I then headed off to find my cabin on Deck 5, which was just like compact hotel room, with a 'berth' that folded out from one wall, a sofa that flipped down to make another berth, and another two tucked away in the ceiling.

Along with heating, air conditioning, tea and coffee making facilities, a large port hole and an en-suite shower room it was a great place to be spending the next 24 hours when you weren't shopping, going to the ship's cinemas, having a meal in the café or the restaurant or maybe a pint in the one of the bars.

I didn't fancy a dip in the pool, I was already



wet, so I cranked the heating up and changed into some dry clothes, turning my Kevlar jeans inside out and hanging them and the rest of my damp gear up to dry in my warm cabin.

After a meal of fish and chips in the café and a few glasses of Bayeux Cider in the Piano Bar while I updated my daily Facebook blog I retired to my cabin to get some shut-eye.

I was awoken at about two in the morning by a choppy sea accompanied by a chorus of distant car alarms. I opened the curtains and expected to see monumental waves crashing over the topsides, but instead I saw a gentle swell with the ship making good progress through the night sea. I went back to bed, and awoke at around nine, heading off for a full English. Old habits die hard.

## **Day 2: Santander to Gijón. 'The rain in Spain...'(109 miles)**

With the announcement that the previous night's swell had slowed us down a little and

would cause us to dock about an hour late, I used the wi-fi upstairs in the café to email Maria in London to say that I would probably be late getting to the hotel, where I was due to meet the lady from the Ruta Via de la Plata office for dinner.

A little while later the reply came to say that the lady - Raquel Bores Campillo - had been contacted and was already aware of the delay, so not to worry, there would be someone at the hotel to greet me. On docking there was a slight delay while a few trucks were pulled off the ferry first, but then the bikes were all released and suddenly I was in Spain!

Although the skies still looked stormy it was noticeably warmer than it had been back in Blighty. I attempted to programme the Satnav for the hotel, but my inexperience with the various menus and layers meant that I could only go back to find the town I had entered on the menu rather than the hotel.

Keen not to keep Raquel waiting any longer

than I had to, I set off through the streets of Santander, accompanied by dozens of other bikes, following the Satnav's plummy female voiced instructions.

The more experienced riders soon headed for the town's Repsol station to fill up, but as I still had plenty enough juice to cover the 109 miles to Gijón I decided to press on.

As I rode further out of town the other bikes started to head off into different directions, and groups of riders passed me on the motorway, shaking a boot, nodding or waving as they went by. Then it started to rain, quite heavily. The groups who had previously passed me pulled over to put on their oversuits. But with no point in me stopping, I ploughed on past them into the night. I wondered what they thought - Tough or insane?

Then the rain stopped for a while before resuming another 40 or 50 miles down the road, this time even heavier. This was turning out to feel like a bit of a trial. Here I was, half nine at night in a strange place on a strange bike, on the wrong side of the bloody road and getting soaked in the pouring rain. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a mistake by taking this trip on, with a long, long way yet to go, and I started feeling a bit sorry for myself.

Then I thought of my late father, who at the age of just 17 was whisked away from his loved ones for basic training, given a uniform and a gun, hundreds of miles from home, before being sent away to Iraq to play his part in the Second World War for five years.

Suddenly I felt rather pathetic and ashamed of myself, so I lifted my chin up, stared ahead into the cloudy dusk and just got on with what promised to be a great week. It was only a drop of rain, after all.

With the fuel gauge finding its way down to the quarter of a tank mark, I decided to pull





*Raquel and the late arrival*



*The 'rock album steps' in Gijon*

over into the service area at Bricia to get some petrol, and have a break from the downpour. My discovery that most of the filling stations in Spain seem to have attended service took me by surprise, and my English/Spanish 'cheat sheet' of phrases was still packed away somewhere.

As I got off the bike the attendant looked at me, flashy bike but dripping wet. I sort of shrugged my shoulders and turned my palms upwards. He shook his head and proceeded to fill the tank, it came to almost exactly 20 Euros, which was more or less what every subsequent re-fill would cost.

I then got back on the bike, and rode off into the gloom. The rain soon stopped, and I started to dry out in the warm breeze as I caught glimpses of the coast off to my right.

Eventually after heading through a long downhill tunnel, the road bathed in bright white light from the powerful LED twin headlights, I found myself riding into my destination for the night, the seaside town of Gijón. After pulling over for a quick play with the satnav I found the Parador de Gijón Hotel filed under 'Places of Interest', and within a few minutes I was parking the Harley outside what I believed to be the reception.

Wandering in, in what I thought was my best tourist Spanish I informed the young lady behind the bar that I'd had a room booked for me by the Tourist Board. She looked puzzled.

In desperation I asked (for the first of many times to come) 'do you speak English?' and to my relief she said yes.

Again, I explained that I had a reservation made by the Tourist Board, and that I was here to meet someone. She said 'ah, yes!' and wandered off into a side room. 'Home and dry' I thought.

She came back with two dessert spoons

and asked if they were OK or if I would like something smaller...

I eventually found my way to the main entrance, where the receptionist asked if I was Mr Martin, and as I said that I was, he introduced me to Raquel, who despite the fact that I was almost two hours late had waited for me, and in an Australian accent welcomed me to Spain.

With plans abandoned to go to a local tapas bar on the beach we had a late supper in the otherwise deserted hotel restaurant.

Raquel, born in Australia of Spanish parents had moved to the country as a child, and with a combination of perfect English, fluent Spanish and limitless enthusiasm seemed ideally suited to her role of Senior Travel Consultant for Exclusive Spain Tours, with the Ruta Via de la Plata being part of her responsibility.

Among other things, we discussed the forthcoming schedule for my journey to Seville, and I announced that I intended to do as much of the trip as possible on the N630, which was in effect the old single carriageway road.

Raquel told me that I probably wouldn't have time, and that while the road is brilliant and has so many twists, turns, rises and falls that she'd even found it tiring in her car, so she advised me to alternate between the A-66 motorway and the N630.

This turned out to be sage advice, as the road was exactly as it had been described.

With the Harley securely parked up beside the hotel entrance for the night beneath a CCTV camera, a little before midnight I said goodnight to Raquel and headed for my rather lavish and comfortable en-suite room.

The hotels of the state run Parador chain are usually located in castles, palaces, convents, monasteries, fortresses and other historic buildings, where these are not available they



are also built in more modern surroundings.

Luxury, and elegant furnishings are practically guaranteed whenever you visit one of the Paradores, and Gijón is no exception, with a stream running through the grounds and tasteful classic décor throughout.

### Day 3: Gijón to Plasencia via Zamora. 'They say Spain is pretty, though I've never been...' (297 miles)

The following morning I was up early and had had breakfast before my 9 am meeting with Miguel Villar, who is the head of Press at the local tourism office in Gijón.

Miguel called us a taxi, which took us to a viewpoint high on the cliffs to the east of the city, with spectacular views of several of the beaches and across the bay to the industrial areas and docks.

After taking several photographs we were back in the taxi and heading for the old town, where the lawns conceal ancient Roman baths at the start of my route south, marked by a sign showing a map of the entire Ruta Via de la Plata. It looked a long way.

I was seriously impressed that after about ten minutes of wandering about on foot and taking photos, the taxi driver found us and gave me back my lens cap, which had fallen out of my pocket in his car.

The city is steeped in history going back to Roman times, a heritage the locals are keen to preserve. In later times the city's fortunes were protected by the erudite Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, who was responsible for much of the development, success and industrialisation of the region, ensuring an income and prosperity for the locals during changing times.

With an eye to the nightlife, the city is famous for its many cider (sidra) bars, where to oxygenate the drink it is poured at arm's length



into a glass held down low, quite an attraction for the tourists. An indication of the city's cider preference is a tall tree of empty cider bottles built near to the marina to illustrate the commitment to recycling.

Music is also very important to Gijón, as well as a vibrant local scene a major stadium (near to the Parador) has played host to Paul McCartney and the Rolling Stones among others, with forthcoming gigs from Elton John and Lenny Kravitz this summer. A set of steps leading down towards the city's marina area have been brightly painted with the names of several famous rock albums written onto them.

While many Brits flock to the sun in southern Spain in the summer, this resort would suit those who prefer a more temperate climate, while not being spoiled by the usual 'kiss me quick' trappings of tourist hotspots. With several beaches to choose from whether you prefer surfing or just soaking up the rays, this city seems to have it all. I just realised I sounded like Judith Chalmers then. Sorry. It is a lovely place though.

After an enjoyable and informative walk around the city with Miguel, we stopped for a coffee outside one of the seafront cafes before taking a cab back to the hotel, where I thanked Miguel and bid him farewell before packing the Harley, checking out of the Parador and setting the controls for the heart of Zamora, 162 miles away, where I was due to meet Estrella Torrecilla at 3.30 pm.

Before I left, Miguel advised me to take the motorway over the mountains, as the N630 between Oveido and Leon was a small mountain pass, with twisting series of hairpin bends and villages which although fun would probably take some hours to traverse – hours I didn't have.

So the motorway it was, for at least some

of the route. But instead of the stereotypical vision of a motorway you might think of in the UK, the road follows a series of fast sweeping bends, with a general speed limit of 120 kmh (slower through numerous tunnels beneath the mountains) it is possible to make good progress while enjoying spectacular scenery and great roads.

Another advantage of the motorway is that the Spaniards have had the good sense to choose several vantage points to install picnic areas, where you can pull over to take in the views and the mountain air. And in my case, put a jumper on. It was bloody freezing, with low cloud in places.

There was a €13 toll just beyond the mountains, which caused a little delay to other drivers while I removed gloves and searched for a ten and a five, but I was quickly off down the road again.

After getting the bulk of the mileage to Zamora out of the way, I then swapped over to the N630, the old road. To be fair, in places 'old road' is a poor description, as there are huge chunks of brand new highway with immaculate surfacing, much to the annoyance of Madame Satnav, who by now had gained the nickname 'Ruth Recalculation'.

South of the Cantabrian Mountains the road flattens out a little in the province of Zamora but still has plenty of interest, through open countryside, with occasional roadside bars, restaurants and frequent filling stations. The speed limit drops from 100 kmh to 80 and then 50 as you approach the many villages along the way. The Harley and the satnav, with her plummy English tones turning a few heads among the locals.

As I entered the outskirts of the city at just about three, it was the usual mix of supermarkets, one way systems and car

showrooms that you'd expect to find anywhere. The number of tractor dealers in the mix gave heavy clues to the surrounding countryside, but as I zeroed in on Plaza Mayor, next to the San Juan Romanesque church the streets became tiny cobbled strips with no discernible pavement.

For the first of many occasions 'Ruth Recalculation' was actively encouraging me to go the wrong way down one-way streets, and then to enter a zone restricted to taxis and police cars. I'm glad I chose to park 'Bender' on a street corner opposite a seminary at that point, as the next street would have led me right into an area littered with police cars and a number of officers, what with it being the local cop shop and all that.

I sat in the sun next to twin statues of the 'Merlu' – two hooded monks whose job it was to walk the streets at 2am on Good Friday with a drum and a trumpet to raise the worshippers in time for the 5 am service. No wonder they were hooded...

A huge bird flew low into the square and wheeled in a big circle before landing on a precarious looking nest on top of the town hall. This turned out to be the first of very many stork nests that I was to see in the coming days, taking me back to my childhood, when I read 'A wheel on the school' – a novel by Meindert De Jong about a village in Holland where the roofs were so steep that the storks couldn't nest, so they mounted a cart wheel on top of the school.

Maybe if you're having any difficulty starting a family, you should move to this part of Spain, the storks shouldn't have any trouble finding you.

After pondering these vast nests adorning various rooftops I was then approached by a glamorous blonde lady wearing film star

shades, who asked if I was the journalist from London. I said I was, and she introduced herself as Estrella from the local tourist office, before thoughtfully suggesting that I leave my lid and gloves at the nearby Parador.

As we walked and talked through the streets for the next couple of hours it became clear that Estrella, like Miguel a few hours earlier, certainly knew her stuff, telling me about how the city featured 22 Romanesque churches, the struggles over the years between the Catholics and the centuries of Moorish rule. We visited a number of the churches and even bumped into the Bishop, who said hello.

The scenery is absolutely stunning, the religious architecture is awe inspiring, and the magnificent interiors illustrate obvious all-encompassing dedication to the deity.

On the southern edge of the old city the Rio Duero carves a scenic valley through the landscape, the high city walls providing a spectacular vantage point over an ancient stone bridge, and the southern sprawl of the city. Am I gushing?

After a couple of hours spent with this delightful lady in these beautiful surroundings we returned to the Parador, a former fifteenth century renaissance palace.

The manager, Zacarías Antón was very keen to show me his best rooms, including telling me in confidence about some very special guests who'd stayed there, and where they'd hung their crowns. I'm not allowed to tell you who they were though.

After saying goodbye to Estrella with a kiss on both cheeks (look, it's the local way OK?) I programmed the address of the Parador in Plasencia into Ruth Recalculation and started to make my way down and out of the old city.

Back in Gloucester Ian had warned me about the linked ABS braking system fitted to

'Project Rushmore' machines (where Harley-Davidson asked their customers what they could do to make their bikes even better) as the brakes can be a little unpredictable at low speeds. He also advised me that on the 'Rushmore' bikes the steering head is ahead of the fork legs, which can also make for interesting low speed handling.

This was very much on my mind as I rode this enormous 1,690cc motorcycle down a series of steep cobbled hairpin bends to get out of the old city. No mishaps though, just an enormous sense of relief when I got to the bottom, along with the realisation that it had suddenly become very warm.

I pulled over to the side of the road, opened the half-moon air ducts, pulled the zip on my jacket down a little and unfastened my cuffs. Once I got out onto the open road, with my visor cracked open a couple of clicks, the warm breeze was bliss!

I made my way south on the short section of dual carriageway leading out of the city, before the road opened out into flat, open countryside, scented by some distinctly agricultural aromas from time to time.

On this section the two roads run absolutely parallel for quite some distance, and with 123 miles to cover in a couple of hours I swapped between the two roads, which was easy-peasy, so long as you could put up with the constant calls of 'route recalculation' every time you chose to take the 'wrong' route.

There are options for 'twisty roads' on the Harley's satnav menu, but it seemed so simple to jump from the motorway to the old road there didn't seem much point, the left joystick made it simple to turn the volume down, but when you'd taken this option it was quite a knack to actually catch Ruth talking to raise the volume again, otherwise





*Main pic: the bridge at the Rio Duero in Zamora  
Inset top/left: Zamora's 'Merlu' monk statues*





you ended up with loud media (radio or iPod) and a muted satnav, which is not very helpful.

While on the subject of sounds, it had by now become clear to me that the varied selection of music on my playlists wasn't always suited to blasting along the road on a large and visually loud American motorsickle.

Rock, blues, some jazz and pop seemed to work, but the more subtle sections of prog rock and quieter folk became lost with the rush of the wind.

I do have to say though, the sound of Spiers and Boden's rendition of the traditional Norfolk tale 'Prickle Eye Bush' from hundreds of years ago worked very well as I rode through a tiny village, and is a memory that will stay with me for a long time.

As I approached the centre of Plasencia in the early evening after a varied mix of slower rural roads and faster motorway sections, the cobbled streets were taking me, Bender and Ruth (isolation insanity creeping in?) further and further from sea level on smaller and smaller cobbled streets, until I reached the Plaza San Vicente Ferrer, a cobbled courtyard in front of the sprawling gothic Santa Domingo Monastery, another Parador built way back in the 15th century.

On checking in, after a little confusion that initially had me believing that I might end up sleeping in a doorway somewhere, the coin dropped and the manager apologised for not understanding what I was babbling on about. He had nothing to apologise for.

He then produced a map of the city and drew a pencil line showing me where their car park was. Monasteries obviously never had these in those days for some reason.

The route once again took me down steeply cobbled streets until I was outside the city walls. But then I found myself at the

entrance of a small tunnel at the bottom of a huge stone wall. Inside the tunnel was a gate, and inside the gate were two vehicle lifts.

The lift took whatever your conveyance was to the third floor, and my dedicated parking bay, one floor below the flag stoned reception area. All very James Bond.

Three floors further up I was shown to my room, along forbidding looking darkened corridors, through a large oak door which led to a small lounge, and then into the bedroom, with a king sized bed and a small sized window looking out over the cluster of houses squeezed onto the hillside.

The air conditioning was set for 19 Celsius, and as I unpacked my modest bags a plate of water melon cubes and a welcome note arrived. This was all very nice, but I felt like an imposter.

After freshening up, I wandered off to find dinner, in the pre-booked Succo restaurant, down a tiny path, the Casa Vidrieras, just off the city's bustling main square, also known as the Plaza Mayor.

Fortunately after some initial 'Spanglais' the manager appeared and we conversed in perfect English. I'm such a lazy git.

Mind you, it made ordering a whole lot easier, except that the waitress who served me spoke about as much English as I do Spanish. It wasn't a problem though, we communicated perfectly well except for when I may have asked her for a photograph of a donkey on a skateboard.

The restaurant was an oasis of calm, situated in the back room of a lively bar that was crammed with people of all ages having a great time. The fact that it was so tucked away from the main areas of the town spoke volumes for its popularity. The food was great; I had a starter which was a



range of local cheeses, and a main of a local stew made from pig cheeks. Aside from any obvious thoughts about which cheeks they might have been, the meat was very tender and cooked to perfection.

The Spanish way is to close their restaurants and bars during the late afternoon for a few hours and then open again until late, when the air is cooler, and it seems like the whole town are sitting outside bars and cafes, socialising and generally having a wonderful evening.

For me the only downside is that I was finding myself with a belly full of good food and beer quite late at night, which made it harder to get to sleep, so as the night was warm and relatively young I went off and wandered the streets of Plasencia for an hour or so after thanking the manager and his staff at the Succo.

#### **Day 4: Plasencia to Carmona via Casar de Cáceres. 'I'll see you on the road down...' (233 miles)**

The following morning I was due at the local tourist information office at 9 to collect information on the city's culture and places of interest, but unlike the manager of the Succo, the lady behind the counter and I were well matched in our inability to understand one another.

Somehow we managed to communicate that I needed some information on the city, and at one point she looked very pleased about something I'd said. If only I knew what it was...

Fortunately I had already seen much of what had been highlighted on the map during my walkabout the night before, so after taking the long way back to the Parador, I collected my things and checked out, making a 'Thunderbirds' style return to the cavernous

underground parking area, where I travelled down to street level once again in the elevator.

With my next port of call being the Museo del Quaso (museum of cheese) just over 40 miles away at Casar de Cáceres, I took the old road out of town, and took the opportunity to have a few stops for photo opportunities along the way as I had an hour and a half to get there.

If there is a fault with the N630 side of the Ruta Via de la Plata, it's that despite having such stunning countryside, bends, hills, lakes and other sights to see as you enjoy the roads, there are precious few places to actually stop and take in the surroundings, which is a shame, because the scenery is absolutely spectacular in so many places.

Pull-offs tend to be limited to small entrances and drive ways; most of these slope away from the highway and are usually either soft or gravelly. Call me a coward, but I didn't fancy the prospect of trying a bit of off road riding on a borrowed £20k Harley-Davidson, although I did manage to find a spot on the banks of the 'lake-like' Rio Tajo, just south of Cañaveral, a particularly twisty and interesting road where they were also building a cable span bridge to the east as part of a bypass.

Once I reached the village of Casar de Cáceres, Ruth Recalculation was attempting to steer me towards the Museo del Queso via every one way street she could find, but (obviously) the wrong way.

So the elderly locals in this haven of peaceful existence were then subjected to the repeated spectacle of a large blue motorcycle with its rider being nagged by an invisible middle class woman to 'now turn left' even though I could only turn right. The solution was to head back to the N630 and enter the village from the southern end, which took me straight to the museum.



*Outside the cheese museum in Casar de Cáceres*



*Bridge works near Cañaveral*





After watching a video of a master of the curds & whey do his thing, and then inspecting a variety of ancient wooden implements of torture or possibly cheese making, it was time to start heading south towards Seville, but not before returning to the entrance of the museum to find two pretty girls from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees standing there. I have absolutely no idea why they were there, but I thought they deserved a mention in despatches.

Interesting though the museum was, despite what Raquel had told me a couple of days earlier, there was no cheese to sample. I have since made up for that.

Once on the road south, I pulled in to a Repsol station near Villafranca de los Barros and after topping the tank up, sat down a little way from the bike with a sandwich and a bottle of water. To my horror I noticed a pool of liquid under the engine. I then noticed what appeared to be a drip going into it.

Thoughts raced through my mind – was there a signal here? If I called Ian in Gloucester would he be able to help? Where was the nearest Harley dealer? (There is a menu on the satnav for this)

In desperation I grabbed a lump of paper towel from a nearby roll and mopped up the liquid. It turned out to be water. What a pillock.

As I finished the rest of my sandwich a Japanese guy came across and said 'Fatboy?'

'Sorry, are you talking to me?' I asked. 'Yes,' he said. 'That's a Fatboy isn't it?'

I explained what the bike was, and he asked me to start it up and give him a blast of 'that Harley sound'. I'm afraid he was a bit disappointed. The bike starts and ticks over with a pleasing rumble, but there is a squeaky exhaust valve that seems to strangle the exhaust note as you give the bike any welly,

in fact the induction noise far outweighs the exhaust note.

His friend took his photo next to me with the bike though.

For the remainder of this leg, once again I swapped between the old road and the motorway; the terrain was becoming noticeably more arid and the heat more intense. I selected a playlist of songs from the Robert Cray Band, which seemed to fit well with the sandy looking soil and sparse vegetation.

As I headed further south the clear blue skies broke into patchy but light cloud, giving some light relief to the increasing heat blowing in under my visor.

As Seville edged closer once again I was climbing a mountain, leaving the region of Extremadura behind in the Harley's crystal clear wide set mirrors and then entering the long tunnel passing beneath the Sierra Morena mountain range, before descending through majestic sweeping hills towards the city.

Once I started getting further into Seville I encountered something unheard of so far – congestion.

A very modern feature of this classic Harley is that when stationary in hot conditions, the engine management system will shut down the rear cylinder and use it to pump air to the front one. So if it suddenly starts sounding like an 850 single you know why.

A guy filtering on a Honda Transalp wearing shorts and a short sleeved shirt asked where I'd come from. 'London' I replied.

'Long way!' He called as he disappeared into the traffic. The time by now was about 4.30 pm, I'd left Casar de Cáceres at about 1, so I'd made pretty good time. Signs for Carmona started to appear, which I always take as being a positive indication that journey's end is nigh.

I then saw signs telling me that Carmona



was the next junction, but Ruth Recalculation was having none of it. Another junction appeared and that too passed us by; I was beginning to question my otherwise reliable navigator, but even so, I decided to stick with it. By now we had left all signs of civilisation behind and were heading east into the famous Spanish Plain.

Then a cluster of buildings appeared, high on the top of a hill to the south. I was hoping that was where we were heading, by this point I was fancying a shower and a cold beer, and I had to meet a tour guide at 6.

Sure enough the instruction came to peel off to the right and head up the steep hill, through the Puerto de Cordoba and up the narrow cobbled streets, before parking on a paved area by a magnificent view right in front of my hotel for the night, the Alcazar de la Reina.

As I entered the reception, the manager, Manuel Sanchez de Lamadrid knew all about why I was there, and seemed pleased to see me.

As he reeled off a list of attractions that his hotel had to offer, including the restaurant beyond the outdoor saltwater pool, several conference rooms and the bar, which was in fact a very accurate replica of an Irish pub.

Then Manuel came outside to see the bike, and complemented me on my 'moped', before showing me to the entrance to the hotel's underground car park – with its steep tiled ramp – and secure parking for the night. I was pleased that it wasn't raining.

Up a flight of steps into the entrance of the hotel, the receptionist informed me that I would be staying in a 'deluxe' room, with a view across the central plain of Andalucia.

I found the welcome I had been given pretty well everywhere in Spain, as a tourist

- and indeed a motorcyclist – really quite touching. They love their motos here.

After a quick shower, I repaired to the 'Irish Pub Donald' where after hooking up with the free wi-fi I enjoyed a chilled glass of Guinness at authentic Dublin prices (6 Euros) to celebrate the fact that I had reached the halfway point, having travelled the entire length of the Ruta Via de la Plata.

All I had to do now was go back the other way.

But first I was meeting Almudena, from the local tourist office, who was very punctual, and led me off through the tiny streets to give me an insight into the local history and culture, starting with a convent.

The Convento de las Descalzas was unusual in that it was still very much a working convent, with two friendly nuns kneeling in prayer and contemplation behind a huge screen dividing part of the main church from the public area. One of them came over to say hello and engage in a conversation with Almudena than I can only guess the subject of.

Convents are a dying breed in Spain, for some reason the modern señorita feels less inclined to take holy orders, with increasing numbers of sisters from far-away lands populating the decreasing numbers of monastic establishments.

Once again, the interior of this historic building was quite stunning, with whole walls given to intricate carvings and statues. It's hard to do any justice to the centuries of devotion and preservation in just a few paragraphs, the best solution would be to pay a visit yourselves.

With an evening service due in a few minutes, we moved on to the nearby archaeological museum, which I learned would be where I was dining later that evening.

After studying the relics on display and



*The Casa Palacio de Carmona*



learning about the origins of the griffin symbol adopted as the city's tourism logo, we moved on to the first of a couple of hotel visits, the Casa de Carmona.

This classic 16<sup>th</sup> century hotel and restaurant was cool and effortlessly elegant, with courtyards filled with plants and huge ceramic olive oil urns. Owner Felipe Guardiola Medina was very welcoming as he gave us a tour of the ground floor, too modest to mention that among his past guests he could list recently departed blues legend Riley 'B. B.' King and Star Wars Director George Lucas, Felipe also once had the classical cellist Yo-Yo Ma playing in the courtyard - just because he felt like it.

Felipe and I then engaged in a brief conversation about the range of Harley-Davidson's new electric bikes before he told me that an Indian born English friend had given him a statue of the elephant god Ganesha as a wedding present. Even though I'd been in his hotel for just minutes, Felipe made me feel as though I'd known him for years.

Wandering the tiny cobbled streets where a selection of mostly battered old cars with peeling paint were either parked haphazardly or chugging slowly towards their destinations, we visited perhaps the grandest hotel in the city. It was of course the Parador.

Set high on the hill, the views from their terrace bar were almost as striking as the arched entrance to the cobbled courtyard through the old city walls. Seriously impressive.

Given the choice of staying in either the Alcazar de la Reina, beneath which the Harley was parked, the Casa de Carmona or here at the Parador de Carmona, I would have been hard pushed to choose. They were all lovely, but in their own ways.

Just as I thought Almudena and I were

getting on well, she suddenly turned to me and said 'sometimes I don't understand you.' I can't say I've never heard that from a woman before.

Of course, I apologised and promised to make more of an effort in future...

After a wander through the city square, Almudena then gave me an exclusive private viewing of the Puerta de Sevilla, the gate to Seville, a small fort where her office, the Oficina de Turismo de Carmona was. We had a stunning view of the city and the plain beyond from high on the rooftops.

With the visit over, I thanked Amudena and made my way back through the city to the hotel, and after dropping my camera off I headed to the Abaceria Museo Restaurante, where I enjoyed a tapas selection including Russian salad, veal stew, and pork sirloin with Roquefort sauce. Oh, and a couple of beers for good measure. Very welcome it was too.

As I made my way back to the hotel, I was stopped by an Irish couple who were asking me in considerably better Spanish than I could muster if I could direct them to the hotel I was staying at. After listening patiently to them, I told them they'd had it as I was English.

Unfortunately although I knew where I was going, I was walking, but they had a car, and would need to negotiate the labyrinth of tiny one way streets. I gave them my map though, and I had breakfast with them the following morning, so I knew they'd made it OK.

### **Day 5: Carmona to Hervás via Seville. 'Nobody knows where you are, how near or how far...' (254 miles)**

The following morning I made another early getaway for the nearest thing to a commute as I could get on the Glide. As was becoming habit, I loaded the bike before breakfast and got away at about 8:45.

Heading for the Plaza de San Francisco in the heart of the city, I made good time, with Ruth Recalculation directing me through the city's one way systems and tiny back streets, almost without sending me the wrong way down a one way street. Almost.

It was only an overgrown traffic island. No harm done. Anyway, I got to my destination by about 9:20, parking amid preparations for the announcement of election results the following day.

But despite the construction of a stage and canopies outside the main government buildings, fortunately the authorities had kept the free bike parking areas clear.

Having memorised where I was due to meet Alicia from the Seville Tourist Office, I made my way through the busy streets, past coffee shops and pavement cafes to an area by a fountain in front of the cathedral. It seemed a very good place to meet someone, with the horse drawn open carriages plying their trade (€45 for half an hour) and a large pedestrianised area preparing for the influx of tourists, just like me.

Unfortunately I was about 100 metres from where I should have been, so my tour was a little truncated, and would have been a whole lot shorter still if Alicia hadn't had the presence of mind to come and look for me. Just as I was considering my options she spotted the large Englishman with a crash helmet and worked out that it was me.

After depositing my lid and jacket at the exit to the Real (Royal) Alcázar, we went the wrong way into the palace, which is said to be one of the most beautiful buildings in Spain.

The Alcázar is still used as an official residence by members of the Spanish royal family; it was developed in the middle ages by Moorish Muslim kings before being later

commandeered by Christians. Let's not get into the 'whys and wherefores' here, I'm just filling you in on a bit of culture to enrich your general sense of wellbeing.

The Islamic influences are very much in evidence as you wander through the archways and courtyards. The intricate mosaics covering many of the walls have a kaleidoscopic effect as you view them from a distance, but even that was a challenge as for the first time on this trip I was encountering mass tourism and queues.

Many of the ornate wooden carvings and masonry feature writings and messages left through the ages tipping a nod to the Islamic roots of the buildings but reminding the reader that the palace is now very much in the hands of the Christians.

Various parts of the palace have been used for film locations, including the 2005 flick 'Kingdom of Heaven', Peter O'Toole's classic 'Lawrence of Arabia' and the forthcoming series of 'Game of Thrones'.

As previously stated, I could go on for several pages about the stunning facades, breath-taking interiors and spectacular gardens, but by far the best way to take it all in would be to visit. It's hard to do it justice, except to say 'Wow!'

The sunken gardens in the courtyard feature yer actual Seville orange trees; known for their slightly bitter taste, they are widely used for slightly bitter tasting marmalade.

While I was wandering the gardens with Alicia, we spotted a bride and groom having their photograph taken on a high level belvedere above a pond, nearby an extended spout was forming an effective fountain with water falling about maybe ten metres, crossing a walkway below. Not for the faint bladdered.

From a raised walkway we were able to











look across the gardens, and even as someone who doesn't often frequent National Trust properties at home, I have to say they were absolutely beautiful.

We then slipped through the queues outside the Catedral de Santa María de la Sede in order to get in a look around before my departure for my forthcoming ride north to Hervás.

Alicia had a few words in a few ears and we were ushered in like VIPs to the accompaniment of a childrens' choir and an orchestra who were rehearsing for Corpus Christi day in early June.

This awe inspiring cathedral, one of the three largest in the world, features fifteen doors and 80 chapels, an organ that blows wind through more than 7,000 pipes, and borne on the shoulders of figures representing the four kingdoms of Spain is a casket containing the remains of Christopher Columbus. Well some of his remains.

It seems that after his demise he carried on travelling to various places including Valladolid in Spain, Santa Domingo in the Dominican Republic, Havana, and then Seville. Recent DNA tests confirm that whatever is contained in the casket was at one time the property of Señor Columbus.

Alicia then asked me if I would like to climb the 105 metre high tower known as La Giralda, and of course I agreed, despite the fact that it was now quite hot outside, I was wearing armoured Kevlar jeans and bike boots.

Alicia then wisely announced that she would wait for me at the bottom! Unlike my last foolhardy tower climbing venture, up the comparatively tiny 40m Tower Bridge. La Giralda is slightly different in that to get to the top you climb 35 ramps designed to enable the muezzin to ride a horse to the top, as yes, this was once the domain of the Muslims.

From the top of the tower, as you hope that the considerable array of bells won't start ringing, you can see the whole city, making me wish I had much longer than just a few hours to spend there.

All too soon it was time to part company with my lovely guide, but not before she'd shown me photos of her young son with her chef husband's BMW R1200RT at the recent Moto GP race in Jerez. Alicia prefers her car, apparently.

After collecting my helmet and jacket, and finding my way back to the Plaza de San Francisco I attempted to programme Hervás into the satnav. One small problem with this in foreign parts is that in Spain there are several cites with similar names, identified by a five digit number afterwards. But you can't see the number due to the font size. Maybe I needed to zoom out a little.

According to Ruth Recalculation, Hervás was over 900 miles away, with my time of arrival estimated at 4 the following morning. I knew that wasn't right. In the searing heat and with a long way to go that afternoon I wasn't in the mood to either play games or get lost.

Knowing that Hervás is a little way north of Plasencia, I programmed my destination from earlier in the week in and started to head out of the city. As I turned left across the box junction on Calle Reyes Católicos I felt the front wheel slip off the edge of the thick paint, only to be collected safely up by the H-D branded Dunlop 19" front tyre. This wasn't the first time this had happened, but in fast moving city traffic with a cab up my exhaust pipes it was probably the most alarming.

As with previous days I made my exit from Seville on the motorway before chilling out on sections of the N630. The music system on the bike works well at lower 'visor up' speeds, but



like the satnav instructions it can all be lost with the visor down and the throttle cranked open.

I'm not really sure why, but for some reason American music seems to work so much better on the Harley. With a playlist set up featuring tunes from Springsteen, Steely Dan, Robert Cray, Tom Petty, REM and the Chilis (among others) the music from across the Atlantic just seemed to sound better than home grown sounds.

The music, along with the estimated time of arrival and the number of miles left to travel, made riding the big Harley a pleasure. The riding position was akin to sitting in the office chair I'm in now, albeit with a bit more padding.

Your feet sit perfectly on the footboards, and the bars with their fat grips are exactly where they need to be, enabling you to hang back off them if you feel like it.

With the effortless torque, and that big V twin engine thumping softly and uncomplainingly away it was easy to imagine putting thousands of miles away as you crossed from the east of The States to the west coast.

Except that I was now crossing Spain from the south (not 'that' far from the coast) to the north, I was very much on the return leg of the journey, and despite initial reservations about the size of the bike and remembering everything I'd been told over the years (by people who have clearly never ridden one) about Glides being big, fat, soft, heavy, slow and uncomfortable; with no handling to speak of and zero ground clearance, I was having an absolute ball.

This bike was undoubtedly big, I wouldn't fancy having to pick it up, and although I'm not exactly Marc Marquez I hadn't managed to scrape anything, nor did I for the rest of the trip.





*Pit stop outside Villarrabines*

I was bonding with this bike. It'd had just a few hundred miles on it when I collected it, so it had spent most of its active life with me, and I liked it.

Far from being a chore, I was looking forward to going out each morning, greeted by a chirp from the alarm to acknowledge my (or the fob's) presence, loading the panniers, programming the satnav, sticking some music on, and setting off for new adventures in new places.

The gearbox was only a little clunky (like most bikes I've ridden) going into first, but I discovered that if you took your time, the gear changes were as smooth as silk. Especially engaging first, where more than once I was so sure it hadn't gone in that I hooked it out and snicked it in again. I used the heel of the rocker gear change a few times, but for me it worked well with the toe of my left boot.

You can feel the primary chain picking up when you put the power on after cruising downhill, and you could feel a slight clunk through the chassis as the ABS linked brakes made contact with the discs, but all in all this was a refined and smooth machine. Can I have one please?

More by luck than judgement my random choices between the old Silver Route and the motorway on the way south had mostly left me exploring sections of road I hadn't ridden when I was heading north, so it was consistently interesting.

Rolling mountain passes, long flat plains, villages, towns, tunnels, twists and turns, lakes, river bridges, roundabouts and one way systems, but rarely any other traffic.

You'd see something coming the other way every three or four minutes. You might get overtaken by a local who had considerably

less respect for the speed limits than I did (I've never liked the idea of 'on the spot' fines...) and a few times you could drop down a gear and motor past someone who seemed to be ambling from one place to another without a care in the world.

I'd asked one of my guides why there was so little road kill in evidence. I was told that there's not much traffic, and whatever is unlucky enough to not make it across the road is soon scavenged by the eagles and vultures circling overhead. Comforting...

As I approached Plasencia, Ruth Recalculation was attempting to take me back to the Parador, and to be frank I wouldn't have minded, but I had a room booked at the Hospedería Valle del Ambroz in Hervás, if I could find it.

The road north of Plasencia has a combination of twists, turns, inclines, falls and views that made it very memorable, sadly there was nowhere to pull over and take a snap. I must get a Go-Pro if I ever get the chance to do something like this again.

On the map it looked very much as though I would reach my destination within a few minutes of leaving the city, but all I found was a filling station and a few cafes and bars. Pulling over to fill up, I asked the attendant in what I thought was improving Spanglais if he knew how far Hervás was.

In prefect English he said 'seventeen kilometres, cross the motorway at Aldeanueva del Camino'. You couldn't say he had a smiley disposition. Maybe he was having a bad day. Maybe he was sick of people asking for directions to Hervás.

So mentally trying to convert kilometres into miles I continued to head north, but while there were plenty of signposts, none of them mentioned my destination. Everywhere else,

but not Hervás.

Just as I was thinking I'd gone past it and was starting to wonder about asking someone again, I spotted a tiny sign, telling me to take an exit off the next roundabout.

It took another lap of the roundabout to spot the next sign but then I was on my way.

Resting just above a valley below the Castañar Gallego Mountain, Hervás is a picturesque rural town with an interesting mix of the old and the new, with a thriving culture of café bars and historic buildings.

I needn't have worried about finding the hotel, the approach roads have bright yellow finger posts pointing to everything from camp sites, hostels, bars and of course hotels, so I rode straight into the rear car park of the Hospedería Valle del Ambroz, a former convent, parking the Harley by a well.

I went through my now daily ritual of checking in, taking a quick shower and then having a wander round the village. I was due at the local tourism office at six to collect a GPS device and a numbered map to correspond with the churches, palaces, museums etc.

Having collected said device, map and a very generous collection of tourist information including a road map of Spain, I sat on a bench for a while to get my bearings.

There was one museum I was particularly interested in here, the Museo de la Moto y el Coche Clasico, which roughly translated means the museum of bikes and classic cars.

The young lady in the tourism office had informed me that the museum was open that very evening, so after thanking her for all the info I was off down towards the river like a shot, looking for an old stone bridge in the hot sun.

When I found the museum I wasn't disappointed, it was a bizarre collection of curved and circular pavilions with pink painted



rendering and bright blue doors, windows and guttering. It reminded me of Telly Tubby Land for same reason.

The owner and founder, Juan Gil Moreno had amassed an enviable collection of Spanish motorcycles of all shapes and sizes, mostly marques I'd always associated with trials bikes; Montesa, Bultaco, Ossa to name but a few, along with a few BMWs, the odd BSA and a couple of relatively modern Hondas as well as some classic sidecars, many of which look like tiny cars. All in perfect condition.

There is also a pavilion that contains unrestored bikes and cars, including a Citroen 2CV pick up that is being held together by rust, with hay bales sitting on it for effect.

Other exhibits include a three wheeled Moto Guzzi utility truck and several other three wheeled devices that look like early mobility scooters.

Other pavilions include carriages, prams and a selection of military vehicles, for example a BMW combo with a machine gun, a VW Kubelwagen and an early Auto Union jeep, while through the doorway sat a NYPD squad car.

It's a great place with spectacular views across the valley to the town and the mountains.

I spent quite a while there, which meant that I had less time to follow the GPS device, but when I eventually tried the battery had gone flat.

But after already spending a couple of hours walking round Seville and then doing more than 250 miles on the Harley I was now ready for a beer.

Heading back to the hotel to drop my camera off I noticed that there was a large church next door, so I opened the door, camera in hand, only to find a mass underway.



*Montesa Impala Sport...*



*...and an Isard Rieju 125/Bombyx 500 sidecar combo at the Museo de la Moto*

The priest and the congregation turned and looked at me as one. I kind of waved, nodded and reversed silently out, closing the door as quietly as I could.

At 9pm I had a table booked for me at 'A Fuego Lento' (a slow fire), a small restaurant in Calle Vedejejos, a short walk from the hotel. As I entered the staff were getting ready for the evening rush, so, having my pick of the tables I opted to sit out on the rear courtyard.

I have to say, the music I'd heard in the evenings hadn't been fabulous so far in the week; one place I visited had played fairly authentic copies of popular hits, like those 'Top of the Pops' albums you used to get in Woolies for 79p. Another featured the real thing, but it was all Celine Dion and boy bands pouring their hearts out, which is probably great for a lot of people on their hols, but to be honest, it's not my cup of tea.

But tonight, the music was fantastic, right up my 'calle', with a variety including Harry Nilsson, Neil Young, Eric Clapton and many other favourites as well as a good mix of Spanish artists.

The service was excellent, with the staff taking turns to come and talk to me – in English – and the food, mostly cooked in a wood fired oven, was sublime. As a starter I had a selection of Extremadura cheeses (all incredibly tasty) and a main course of Iberian sirloin steak with Torta del Casar, a cheese sauce made from ewes milk. You may have gathered by now that I like cheese.

This was all washed down with a few local beers, and not being a dessert type of person I went straight to a café Americano, which came with a chocolate flavoured pastry.

By the time I thanked the staff and left the restaurant it was filling rapidly, this is a region popular both summer and winter as the nearby



mountains apparently are very good for skiing so if you find yourself in Hervás I would certainly recommend you pay a visit.

### **Day 6, Hervás to León. 'With your chrome heart shining in the sun, long may you run...'** (193 miles)

After a good night's sleep it was the usual routine of loading the bike before breakfast in order to make a noon meeting with tourism officers nearly 200 miles away in Leon, requiring an average speed in excess of 60mph if I didn't leave until 9 am.

With breakfast starting at 8, Things looked a little tight, especially with finding the hotel and parking the bike safely, but fortunately there were few other early risers so I was able to get breakfast sorted and check out by 8:30, leaving me a little time to play with if I needed it.

Once again the mileage countdown and the estimated time of arrival on the satnav proved invaluable, although it can give rise to temptation to improve on the time. With an indicated 11:45 arrival showing I decided to get the bulk of the journey out of the way on the motorway, and depending on how much time I had to play with, travel into León on the N630, enjoying the old road.

This turned out to be a little futile, I left the motorway just north of Benavente, leaving me with around 50 miles to finish this leg of the trip on a single carriageway and maybe take some photographs along the way.

What I didn't bargain for was the fact that this stretch of road is one of the straighter, flatter sections of the Ruta de la Plata, and it was also rather windy.

While I was bonding with the Harley, and getting to like it more with every mile, it would be fair to say that it has rather a large profile,

with a lot of bodywork to catch the side winds. One rider I was speaking to at Santander informed me that it was better in this respect than the bikes with the handlebar mounted fairing, namely the Electraglide and the Street Glide Special, but even so it was starting to feel a bit like a land yacht, a situation exacerbated by the single carriageway with a ditch on either side.

Easing of the throttle helped, as did the lack of traffic. I stopped for some water and a few pics by a bus shelter near the village of Villarrabines, and while I was messing about with apertures and shutter speeds I heard the distinct sound of a lazy V twin approaching.

A very cool looking dude on a Soft tail came out onto the main road from the middle of nowhere, glanced in my direction, and then turned towards León at a very sedate pace, the loud pipes audible for an age, long after he'd disappeared into the distance.

After continuing on this rather uneventful section of the Silver Route, I found myself approaching León via the industrial areas. As I grew closer to the Parador de León it would have been hard to miss it.

To quote the Paradores website: 'The Hostal de San Marcos is one of the most extraordinary historic hotels on the Old Continent. It was built to house the peninsula's western headquarters for the Military Order of Saint James.'

The façade was massive, with a large paved plaza to the front and parking areas to the rear. On checking with the guard at the gate, I parked the Harley in a convenient space and made my way into the reception, just on 12 noon.

My guide Blanca and a colleague were there to greet me, and after putting my lid behind the desk Blanca and I made our way out into the city for a few hours to take in the

### ***The Hostal de San Marcos in León***





## The cathedral of Santa Maria de León



history and culture.

Again the romans made their mark on León, so much so in fact that an imprint of a Centurian's foot is used as an indication of the tourist walking route. They had tiny feet!

As we visited the San Isidoro basilica I was shown to an area where photography was forbidden (I was watched carefully by members of staff!) which depicted mosaic scenes from the bible in the vaulted ceilings, dating back dozens of centuries.

After seeing a view from the top of the city walls, I was ushered into a room containing what is thought by many to be the Holy Grail. It is indeed spectacular, but as I stepped aside for a gentleman taking a snap of it on his phone I raised my camera to my eye but was once again told 'no photos'. It was beautiful. But don't just take my word for it, there are loads of photos on the internet, just Google 'Holy Grail León' and you'll see what I mean.

There was so much to see, and so many things to take photographs of, the magnificent cathedral apparently boasts the largest square meterage of stained glass in the world, much of which was amid the process of being cleaned, the difference was very noticeable.

With it being a Sunday we managed to sneak into the cathedral between masses, and after having a good wander round we were chucked out in the nicest possible way by the ecclesiastical equivalent of a doorman, if I can say that in a non-offensive way. He was wearing rather splendid cream coloured robes and looked very important, so we didn't argue. I'm certain I heard Blanca say 'Bueno estente' to him as we left, but maybe I'm mistaken. Do they have 'The Fast Show' in Spain?

Certain paths in the city are marked with hand painted yellow arrows, which are maintained to show the way to the cathedral

for the thousands of pilgrims who travel from afar using many forms of transport. There was even a pack donkey parked near a café. Really.

Again, I am unable to do justice to this fine city in just a few paragraphs, except to say that you really ought to visit.

By mid-afternoon I had said goodbye to Blanca and checked into the hotel. It wasn't quite how I'd expected it to be.

After collecting my lid from reception I told the manager I had a reservation and he picked up a phone and spoke briefly to someone - I was expecting to be escorted from the premises - this was a very posh hotel, and I was wearing bike gear, old habits die hard.

Instead, a porter arrived and asked for my luggage. We went outside to the car park and after unlocking the Harley's panniers, he loaded my bags, my lid and my jacket onto his trolley before leading me to a large oak door on the third floor - Room 360.

Inside was a marble bathroom, and a huge four poster bed, mini bar, TV and a couple of armchairs in a large room. Crikey. After I had tipped the porter I noticed another door slightly ajar.

I ventured inside to find a large lounge, a very plush suite and an even bigger TV. On a large oak coffee table sat a tray with a large bowl of fresh strawberries, a bottle of water and a note from the manager welcoming me to his hotel and hoping that I enjoyed my stay in León. This was all for me???

So I'd completed my tourism duties for the week, the only appointments I had to keep were for a meal later that evening, and the ferry the next day.

I had a large suite at my disposal a vibrant city within walking distance and a few hours of 'me' time. What to do?

I got my helmet and jacket, started the





*Statue of Anton Gaudí outside the Casa de Los Botines in León*



bike, turned the satnav off and went off on completely random ride for a few hours.

When it got to about half six, I turned the satnav back on and found my way back to the hotel. Where did I go? No idea. All I can tell you is that the surrounding countryside was leaning towards arable with several small villages, a few industrial areas, and largely flat except for north of the city where it gets a bit more hilly, with forested areas.

When I returned I got ready for my evening meal amid some confusion, my schedule told me that I would be visiting 'El Palomo', but Blanca informed me that a table had been booked at 'Clandestino'. As the latter was nearer I walked there first, but as the member of staff I spoke to seemed completely oblivious I assumed that it was indeed 'El Palomo'.

Except that when I got there it was extremely closed. Shutters and everything. So I went back to 'Clandestino' and again tried to communicate with the staff, in desperation I pointed to their bookings diary, laid open on the counter. There it was, 'Ruta Via de la Plata' at 8pm.

From there it was easy. I was treated like somebody important, so they obviously didn't have a clue who I was! They prepared a special tasting menu for me, starting with a tomato and strawberry smoothie aperitif.

This was followed by a salmon tatin. The next dish was octopus on a bed of potato with black garlic and several other sauces in punctuation marks around the plate.

The dish that arrived next was a sea bass risotto with edible flower petals, this was followed by sweetbreads, and the last dish was a rare steak garnished with guacamole, pesto, tomato puree and a local mustard.

It was certainly an interesting experience, all helped along by several local beers, and

while I am not going to pretend that I loved everything, it was all excellently presented and the introduction to each course was a lesson in the art of presentation, it was all very professional. And mostly very tasty.

I wish I'd paid more attention to the beers, they were very good and apparently quite strong.

From the maze of tiny streets in the heart of the city, the Parador is located at the far end of the Avenue Gran via de San Marcos, a long straight road lined with shops and bars, with a large roundabout, the Plaza de Immaculada with several tall palm trees at the centre of the convergence of eight roads.

Taking care not to get lost in the city late at night, I checked the street signs after every crossing until I found myself back on the Ave de San Marcos.

After walking past the late night bars and brightly lit shop windows for a further ten minutes or so, I found myself right back where I started...

This was my last night in Spain, and after a quick tally up, I had spent about 14 hours walking about with the tour guides I had met, plus another few hours just walking around the towns and cities, which at an average walking speed of 3 mph minus a bit of time for standing about still works out at about 40 miles walked in a pair of canvas shoes.

The schedule had been quite tight, but this was by my own doing, I would have hated to have visited these incredible places and just seen the hotels. Looking back, it would have been a great trip to do over a fortnight, I would have done the whole distance on the old road, but having said that, the motorway was mostly interesting and at times a lot of fun.



**Day 7, León to Santander. 'Sittin' on the dock of the bay, wastin' time...' (197 miles)**

I didn't leave León with the same kind of urgency that I'd had with departing my previous overnight stops. I needed to be at the ferry port in Santander in plenty of time, and the ferry was due to leave at a quarter past three, but the lesson I'd learned from my first crossing was that the earlier you get to the ferry, the longer it will take to get unloaded, so while I didn't want to be late, I also didn't want to be early.

Closing the two large vents in the Glide's fairing as I left the city, I remembered Miguel's advice and took the motorway across and through the mountains, stopping at the rest area/view point near the lake at Mallo de Luna for a few snaps, the bright morning sun picking out the chrome work and lustrous blue paint on the now filthy Harley.

I then picked up the pace, parting with another €13 for the toll to enjoy the largely empty sweeping and swooping bends between León and Oviedo before branching off to the right and picking up the coast road toward Santander.

The weather had become colder across the mountains, but having become a little bit closer to being a seasoned international traveller I had layered up, so my temperature was spot on. Even this stretch of motorway was absorbing, ducking and diving its way between and sometimes through the peaks until the landscape became less inspiring and the roads busier as I edged nearer to the port.

I stopped at a service area after about 120 miles, fancying one last café Americano and a pastry before hitting the hustle and bustle of Santander docks. Determined to use my Spanglais for one last time before I



immersed myself back into English speaking surroundings.

The dark eyed beauty behind the counter didn't look at all happy with my efforts and practically threw the pain au chocolat onto the plate. Oh well. I tried.

Before too much longer I found myself on the outskirts of the city of Santander, and my feelings were becoming very mixed. I was exhausted at the end of a hectic week that had felt more like a month, I was very sorry to be leaving Spain's largely empty and completely breathtaking countryside behind me, and while I was looking forward to a lie in and getting home, I was also very aware that my time with the Harley was drawing to a close.

But before entering the ferry port, I decided to take a spin round the one way system and fill up one last time for €1.33 per litre (about 97p) at the Repsol station that everyone had been using on the way out.

Queuing up with the guys and girls on the bikes everyone was swapping stories about where they'd been, broken phones and broken bikes, flat batteries on satnavs, but luckily no spills.

As we moved through, step by step, we ended up beneath a large open roof structure next to the ferry. As I needed to make it back to Gloucester by 6pm at the latest the next day I was in no hurry to board, as I was hoping to be one of the last bikes on.

After a while as I was changing the satnav from Spain to England and programming my destination in, I became aware of someone trying to get my attention. The guys next to me were pointing to the fence to the rear of us, where a pretty girl was waving to me and beckoning to me to go over. I didn't know what to think until I heard my name being called.

Just as I was beginning to think that





tiredness was getting to me and I was daydreaming I realised that it was Raquel, who was in Santander visiting family and remembered that I was getting the ferry that afternoon.

After forcing my hand through the wire mesh to shake hands I reported that I'd (more or less) made all my meetings on time, and met all the tourist guides, and visited all the points on my detailed itinerary. I suddenly had an immense sense of achievement.

It would have been great to meet up for that lost meal in a tapas bar on the beach, and to have a good chat, but I was being called to get on the boat. After saying goodbye to Raquel I rode the Harley down into deck two and parked it up like a professional, left in first gear, steering locked, and alarm deactivated.

After finding my cabin, just a few along from my previous one, but weirdly a mirror image, I went up on deck with my camera to get a few last shots of this beautiful country.

The French captain had an amazing accent, sounding just like Raymond Blanc chatting up a lady as he told us over the Tannoy that there would be a gentle swell (oo-er missus!) and that 'eet might get a leetle choppy'

As Spain disappeared towards the horizon, I wandered back to my cabin and fell asleep for three or four hours, later making my way up to the restaurant for a meal and then off to the bar for a few glasses of Stowford Press.

### **Day 8, Portsmouth to Kent via Gloucester. 'I see your true colours shining through...'(268 miles)**

I'm not really sure why, but the voyage back to England from Santander seemed a lot quicker than when I'd left for Spain a week earlier. Maybe with knowing the layout of the ship a little better I'd spent less time wandering

aimlessly around exploring, or maybe the discipline of preparing for things had stayed with me, as I'd planned my last day out fairly effectively.

After pondering the announcement that the ship's cinemas would be showing 'American Sniper' and 'The English Patient' (sounded too much like an attempted assassination to me) I opted to spend the last few hours looking at the sea and reading before getting my bags together for one last time.

After getting a few small gifts for my family in the on board shop, (no room for large gifts) I headed for the lower decks, and after a short wait I was ready to go. Passport control took a lot longer at Portsmouth as quite rightly the officers insisted on the removal of crash helmets when checking passports, and with dozens of bikes trying to get through it was fairly time consuming.

Once out on the open road I was determined to enjoy my last few miles on the Harley, as always the satnav was pretty spot on, but there was SO much more traffic around.

After taking the M27, the A34 and the M4 I was finally heading for the Air Balloon roundabout and into Gloucester's dual carriageways, where the bike proved adept at sprinting between sets of traffic lights and hustling around roundabouts.

As I parked the bike in the large warehouse door at Harley's logistics depot, I suddenly realised that this was it, it was time to say goodbye to this huge lump of bike that I had initially been a little apprehensive about, but had grown to love during our week together.

It was really hard to walk away. I felt like I'd taken a big sappy wolfhound to a rehoming centre. Ian placed a card with the stock number into a holder on the handlebar, and suddenly Bender and Ruth Recalculation had become a



number in a system again.

I apologised to Ian about the state of the bike, with hundreds of Spanish flies plastered all over the front, dirty water stains around the engine and exhaust pipes, and dust all over the paintwork. It still looked a million dollars though. And I'd left about half a tank of petrol in it.

I was told that I'd failed my journalist test, as they usually manage to bring the bikes back on fumes.

And with that, I headed home to Kent, and Bender awaited a full valet, before being put back on a stillage and covered up, waiting for the next time someone wanted to go for a ride on a truly remarkable bike.

## Martin Haskell

Full details on the Ruta Via De La Plata are available on the official website here:

[rutadelaplata.com/en/](http://rutadelaplata.com/en/)

## Huge thanks to the following for their help and hard work in making this hastily planned trip so successful:

Maria Dolores Milla Lara and Valentina Beteta at the Spanish Tourist Office in London.

Christopher Jones at Brittany Ferries

Jess Jones at Harley-Davidson UK

Ian Fagg at WMB

Raquel Bores Campillo at Exclusive Spain Tours

Miquel Villar Morán at the Gijón Tourism Office

Estrella Torrecilla at the Zamora Tourism Office

Almudena Tarancón Jiménez at the Carmona Tourism Office

Alicia Caro at Seville Official Tours

Blanca Lobete at León Official Tours

The staff and management at:

Parador de Gijón

Parador de Zamora

Parador de Plasencia

Alcazar de la Reina in Carmona

Hospedería Valle del Ambroz in Hervás

Parador de León

Succo restaurant in Plasencia

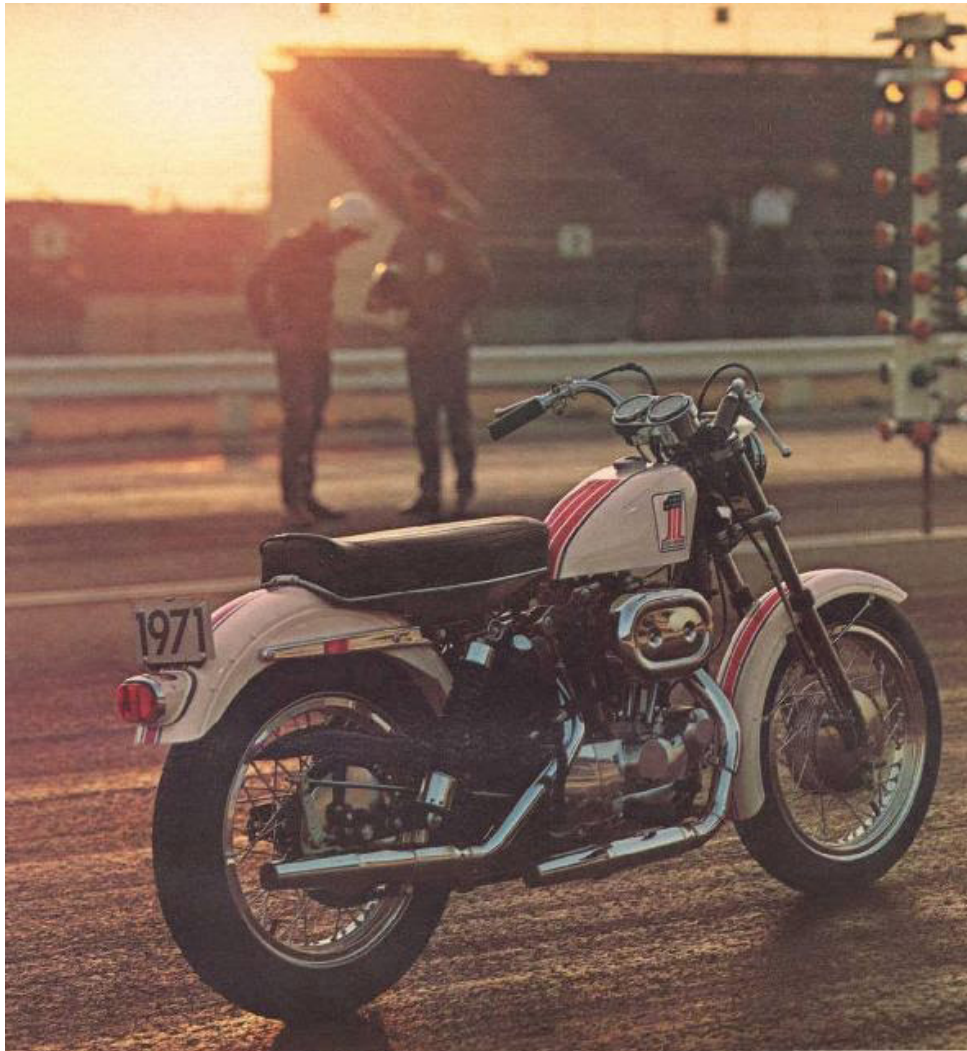
Museo de la Ciudad in Carmona

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And of course Stuart and Dave at The Rider's Digest





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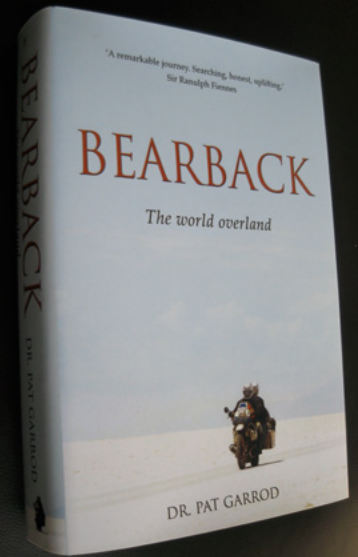
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# A View from the Group W Bench



**A**bout the middle of January I am riding home from work at dark o'clock. There is a coach waiting to pullout and turn right from Campsfield House and I am coming up to it on the opposite side of the road with no other traffic on my side. The 30 mph limit is probably uppermost in my mind.

The coach driver sees a small gap in the traffic big enough to pull out in forcing the oncoming traffic to halt. I ride on not thinking about the 6 foot or so overhang in front of the front wheels which swing the cab of the coach almost fully over on my side of the road.

I survive by riding against the curb (not a good option and certainly not at dark o'clock) and by not having the panniers fitted. Hmmm, lesson learned.

Two months later I am riding home in the daylight and coming up to a main road. I am on a B or C road. Fifty feet in front of me I see a shiny new white and glass coach with huge rear view mirrors start to turn into my road so I stop, put my feet down and watch.

Smartly dressed (and nice looking) driver is taking a great deal of care getting the coach safely round the corner making full use of both mirrors. When happy she then looks forward and sees me, immediately putting her hand to her mouth as she realises what could have happened had I continued to travel forward. Yes she could have got her shiny new coach scratched and been held up getting her job done.

Seriously I think she took it more importantly than that but a lesson learned and also reinforced.

Old army saying: never become an expert. An ex is a has been and a spurt is a drip under pressure. The moment you stop learning is the moment you start forgetting.

Six years ago Moto Guzzi brought out the Bellagio, it looks like a parts bin special to me.

Six months later a MGCGB club member took his son for the holiday of a lifetime by flying out to Italy and arranging for his son to have a guided tour of all the specialist car and bike factories and museums. You can feel the love by the way the father put himself out.

Anyway they needed transport so dad tried to hire e a Guzzi and the only one they could get was this ugly parts bin special. So they had no choice and took it.

End of first day of hire and both agreed it was the best Guzzi they had tried. I guess being in Italy helped.

Then I met Dave Shaw (940V) who runs (?) Bellagio Banter on the MGCGB forum and more importantly met a Blogger in real life for the first time. Dave is also part of the FineBeau forge co-operative who make fine accessories for the gentry (Guzzi riders). First impressions can be very wrong.

So a year ago I am staying at Pftzfeld in Germany and Paul Harris (director of Corsa Italiana) was on his Bella and I mentioned that if one came up I would like one. Only 97 were ever imported into the UK and most

owners have no intention of selling so a rare machine. 2 weeks ago I am listening to our abysmal performance in the Windies when the phone rings. Paul Harris wants to know if I am interested in a low mileage 5 year old Bellagio which they have serviced from new. You can't rip a blokes arm off down the phone but I tried.

The next moment after putting the phone down I am out in my garage clearing out a load of rubbish, tidying up and sweeping the floor. It was like preparing a room for a new baby (pic, below).

So Brian (Paul's brother and fellow director) lets me know the price and I paid off my card, Paul got it MOT'd and I taxed it today. A Jota owning friend is taking me down on Friday to pick it up. Weather looks fine so a lot better than my first trip on my lil'Breva in the pouring rain on the M4 down to the BIAMF.

And for Paul Harris persistence pays off.

He has been trying to sell me a Guzzi since Inchelgeaghla in 2005 when he dangled the keys to one of the first of the Breva 1100s imported into the UK. I had to refuse as I already knew I wanted one but couldn't afford it.

Ride Safe,

**Ian Dunmore**

An ancient Guzzisti

PS I should say here that this is a free and unbiased opinion and I have nothing to do with the business or persons mentioned, but I would be lying like a politician who has been caught with his hands in the till and is allowed to pay it back rather than spending some years at Her Majesty's displeasure. The people mentioned herein are all fine chaps who let another chap bum a cig now and then, and that is good enough





*Bars, Dives, Roadhouses  
and Mythology*

words & pix: Claudette Torneden-Bauers





**The biker bar. A mysterious creature shrouded in legend, dimly-lit dives perfumed with stale beer and oil, filled with mean-eyed men you daren't cross and tattooed women you definitely daren't cross; wild music pouring from every opening and the constant sound of bikes firing up and screaming into the distance.**

A nerdy civilian walks in and the jukebox screeches to a halt, insults fly and out he's thrown, ass over teakettle into the parking lot to a chorus of jeering laughter. Every guy looks like he invented cool, and each woman behind the bar is hotter than the last, in clothing to shame BDSM culture. Something like that, anyway.

That's the Hollywood fantasy - one I never quite got. Biker bars are absolutely nothing like that. Sure, you have the big-scale jokes who set up some sad Disneyland ride version of the above to make a quick buck off the suckers, but those barely constitute a real bar, much less a real biker bar. Rather, they're more on a par with the flash in the pan nightclubs who fashion themselves around the latest fad and vanish with same fad.

Because young artists have to pay rent, I bartended throughout most of my twenties and not surprisingly worked in a few biker bars. Some were great, some not so much, but they all had the same thing in common: they are just another bar. Somewhere I have just burst someone's bubble, but it's true. Most are standard dive bars, albeit with slightly more leather clothing, garage paraphernalia on the walls, and specialized parking in the front. Sometimes they're fun, more often not, and unlike the movie version, typically no more raucous than any other bar.

Truth be told, the only time I've seen biker bars become unruly to the point of being semi-

dangerous, is when some unfortunate with a need to compensate for their myriad life deficiencies is disappointed that the bar isn't like what they wanted, i.e. steeped in booze, fights and machismo; then reacting by being an absolute ass: mean mugging, getting drunk, and starting fights usually with one or more of the people with whom one really shouldn't start fights.

But these are the same kind of people who need to buy all the accoutrements they are sure the real bikers don, the kind of sad people who honestly believe those "biker" television shows, the kind of guys who brag constantly about all their riding experience (check their odometer) or gals who think they are the first woman to ever ride a motorcycle and proclaim so in an obnoxiously loud bid for attention. Basically, the kind of people who make the rest of us cringe and the kind of people who will never understand why the biker bar isn't what they pictured because being a biker will never be what they pictured, which not the fault of the bars or bikes, but through their own inadequacy.

The reality of the biker bar is laughter and music, dirty jokes and playful joviality, camaraderie and a rowdy yet friendly environment for everyone, no matter what sort of bikers are there. Biker bars may be one of the last bastions of people interested in engaging with each other instead of their phones. The crowd shifts rapidly on warm days as people stop in for a single beer or glass of water and are gone again, just needing a break and a little social interaction. Yes there's a certain social etiquette specific to a biker bar, but it's set on a rapid learning curve. They are the last places you would want to start a fight and fewer people overdo it on the drinking than the myths imply as they love their bike too much













## When In Rome...

**I** was eight when I walked past the Trevi Fountain with my dad for the first time. He'd chosen Rome as his next assignment in his job as foreign correspondent for United Press International. He'd spent time here as a journalist in the 50s and loved it. No matter how much time you spend away, he said, Rome never changes - it really is the Eternal City. And he's right!

Here I am with Moto Guzzi in Rome, 15 years after leaving Italy for the UK, riding past my mum's favourite restaurant down the road from where I spent my childhood and teens. And it's still standing. So are the garage, the flower shop, and the bar I'd stop at for a Cappuccino in the early hours of Sunday mornings on my way back from clubs. Not even the shop signs have changed which makes everything look really old. And it's here in Rome that I nurtured a love of bikes that has dominated the rest of my life.

My dad, a World War Two hero decorated with the Military Cross for bravery (he's also 20 years older than my mum, and a year older than my mum's mum, go dad!), always forbade me to go near motorcycles. He was on the front line in Italy, but insists the time he came closest to death in the war was on his motorcycle.

So that was it. There was to be no tearing in and out of Roman rush hour traffic on a scooter with no helmet like every other Italian did by the age of 12 ("There goes another heart transplant" was my dad's favourite saying as the kids whizzed past our brown Ford Escort on the way to school). I was royally stuffed. And as for motorcycles...





I disobeyed, of course. I could never afford a bike of my own. But it didn't stop me riding pillion everywhere I could.

It all started at the age of nine when my best friend Francesca's dad had what I remember as being a HUGE Moto Guzzi (or maybe I was just very small...). I'd go to her house after school and her dad would carry us there in turn pillion. It was awesome. I loved the ride to Francesca's house way more than playing silly dolls with her.

Then one day, when I was 11, I was walking down Piazza dei Giochi Delfici on my way home from school. I stopped in awe as a girl with long flowing hair sat astride a big trailie-style motorcycle at the lights. She looked so cool. I promised myself that as soon as I could, I too would have my very own motorcycle.

As I hit my teens, a prerequisite for being my boyfriend was to own a motorcycle. My most vivid memories are of Giovanni. He had a very-fast-for-its-day red and white Honda CB1100F Super Bol D'or. This was the late 80s, when motorcycle safety was a relaxed affair in Italy, especially in summer when things got hot. We had helmets, but we slid them over our elbows rather than our heads (please direct your letters of complaint to the Italian government that let us get away with it, I was just an irresponsible teenager!). I'd ride pillion to and from our secret beach on Lake Bracciano on the outskirts of Rome in a bikini and espadrilles with my hair blowing freely in the wind. I have no idea how I ever survived those years (or how I ever got those tangles out of my hair...).

After months together Giovanni and I split up. How I missed his motorcycle. I was just 17 when I promised myself for the last time that as soon as I could, I'd pass my test and get my very own motorcycle. A couple of years later I



was back in the UK roaring around on my first proper bike.

There's a lot of nostalgia going on with Moto Guzzi too. The famous Italian marque is still trading on the glory days with retro-style bikes such as its new-for-2009 V7 Café Classic, updated Nevada V750ie and Griso 8V SE (that's Special Edition), which I'm taking in turns to ride across Rome and beyond.

The V7 Café Classic is basically the same bike as the V7 Classic launched for 2008, but with the low, slanted handlebars of a café racer. And it seriously looks the part. Moto Guzzi is keen to appeal to a young customer with its V7 Café Classic. A crowd who wouldn't remember the days when Moto Guzzis won all the races and built the most beautiful bikes. But it doesn't matter because anyone can see the V7 Café Classic, like the V7 Classic, looks stylish and straight out of a motorcycle history book.

The seat is for the rider only on the standard bike, but big butts are in as it's very spacious (a twin seat and pillion footrests are available as optional extras). I feel instantly comfortable as I swing a leg over the Café Classic. My five-foot-six frame fits the bike beautifully and you would be alright if you were a lot shorter as the seat is low. But you can't afford to be much taller. One of my six-foot-plus companions had his knees up against the handlebars, plus he looked a bit silly dwarfing the bike (sorry long tall Kev!).

The twin cylinders on the V7 Café Classic sound so cool I can't stop revving the engine like I'm about to start a drag race. I'm sure the Moto Guzzi engineers have played about with the exhaust harmonics to perfect that deep, raspy growl. The engine has plenty of low-down punch, which is brilliant in traffic, and power comes in smoothly with no jerks as you

roll on and off the throttle. It pulls from very low revs and there's no power band, just more strength as the revs climb towards 7000rpm, after which it tails off. If you're experienced and like a bit of speed, you'll find it runs out of puff pretty quick. I had to keep the throttle pinned round the corners to keep myself amused. It only puts out just under 48bhp – that's a good 5bhp down on my 1995 Ducati 600SS Desmodue racebike. I suppose this Moto Guzzi is spot-on for people new to biking though, or for Moto Guzzi enthusiasts who love to gently flow through the twisties rather than dust off all-comers as naughty me prefers to do.

The Nevada is the same as last year but with a new instrument panel, horizontal rather than slanted exhausts and a different finish. It shares the same fuel injected, two-valve, 90° transverse-V engine and running gear as the Café Classic (and Moto Guzzi's Brevia 750) so the bike feels (and sounds!) much the same. Except it looks completely different in its cruiser clothes.

The Nevada's a breath of fresh air in the class. The styling is subtle, displaying all the low-slung cruiser lines and curves without the excess of chrome or other extremes. But I still cringe when Moto Guzzi tells me the pearl white Nevada is built with girls in mind. Apparently, girls like cheesy cruisers plus it's easy to ride so even 'girls' can handle it. Humph! But the chassis does display an agility you expect to sacrifice when you buy a cruiser. It handles sweetly, neither understeering nor dropping awkwardly into a turn. As on the Café Classic, the lightweight clutch engages smoothly while the gearchange – in complete contrast to the reputation of Guzzi transmissions – is quiet, light and dependable. Plus the riding position's super-comfortable. I don't hesitate to jump on the Nevada for a relaxing cruise back from





Lake Bracciano. Yes, that's right. Moto Guzzi led a ride to Lake Bracciano, scene of my bikini-clad pillion riding madness! Except this time I was wearing full leathers with a helmet firmly planted on my head.

But when it came to posing around Rome trying to look cool like all the other Italians do, I opt for the V7 Café Classic with its gorgeous green/yellow matt colour and retro style. The special edition Griso looks even more impressive and may have caught an even greater number of roving eyes from passers-by. But the Café Classic is smaller and more agile and therefore easier to weave in and out of the crazy Roman traffic – which is even worse than I remembered.

But first, let me tell you about the Griso 8V SE, my definitive weapon of choice for the Bracciano twisties.

The Moto Guzzi Griso is unlike anything I've ridden. It has a completely unique, gorgeous, hunky style with a strong, torque-laden engine. One side of the bike is all chrome and flowing exhausts, the other is all big engine, single-sided swingarm and hefty Guzzi-patented shaft drive system. The Special Edition gets little more than a fabulously retro matt green paintjob and tan leather seat to set it apart from the original, but any excuse to travel to Italy to ride this shapely motorcycle is a good one!

Fire up the engine and the strong side swaying from the air-cooled 1151cc 90° transverse-V engine with eight valves (four valves per cylinder, even I can do those maths) almost knocks me off my feet. It's the action and reaction caused by those famous transverse cylinders with the crank that spins sideways instead of front to back. BMWs also have transverse cylinders, but the Bavarians counteract it with the movement of the clutch

to cancel out excessive swaying. After an initial strong sway the Griso settles down and you can feel the torque oozing out of every engine bolt. You can take a slow corner in a high gear and there's still enough grunt to drag you round then propel you manfully forward to the next turn.

The riding position is comfortable and imposing. You're sitting on top of the Griso rather than in it, as if you're ready to attack the road ahead. While the seat is low, the bike is wide so shorter people would struggle to touch the ground. I'm ok, although the weird positioning of the sidestand way out in front means I need a telescopic leg to reach it. Despite the massive and heavy shaft drive contraption, the bike handles beautifully, no doubt because the weight is carried so low. Rather than dropping sharply into corners, the Griso obediently goes where you want it to, remaining stable and reassuring. What a bike.

After stretching these three Moto Guzzis' legs along Bracciano's twisties we head back to the centre of Rome, to that traffic I touched on earlier. I can't believe I ever complained about the standard of driving of us Brits back at home. I should know better given my Roman upbringing. It's not the amount of cars squeezed down the narrow streets of Rome that form the crux of the problem, although that's pretty bad. It's the pure chaos created by sheer bad driving and utter contempt for traffic lights or any kind of rules of the road that sets Rome apart from all other European cities (I won't say world cities because I've been to South America!). And the old-style Mini squashed against the side of a bus doesn't help the traffic flow that day. I watch a guy on a Husqvarna avoid the traffic by mounting the pavement. As they say, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' (not 'When in Rome, do as many Romans



as you can' as my sometimes photographer Mr Cobby assures me), so I find myself doing the same to avoid the chaos as well as dodging the odd pedestrian who doesn't seem the least bit perturbed by the crazy woman on the big green/yellow bike heading straight for them. (When in Rome, run over the Romans?)

As I hit the centre of Rome on the Café Classic, I suddenly remember the need to wear a sports bra when travelling across the small and uneven cobblestones. It's not that the suspension is bad. In fact, it's as good as you'd wish for given this Moto Guzzi's decent price (the V7 Café Classic will cost £6,270 when it becomes available in April and the Nevada costs £5,975); it's just that in Roman times they didn't consider making the streets smooth for us future motorcyclists. The Griso SE is clearly more expensive, but it's a lot more of a motorcycle built with the more experienced Moto Guzzi enthusiast in mind.

You know what it's like when you live somewhere. You become so jaded with the sites that you never bother to do the tourist thing. The same applies to growing up in Rome. I'd become so used to strolling round the corner to be confronted by some majestic ruin that I never thought twice about it. But I've become wiser with the odd extra year (ok, decade...) and now I don't live there anymore, I'm amazed to find all these fantastic monuments packed so tightly together. It's like living on a postcard rack in a souvenir shop. Twist the throttle and you find yourself at the top of the Spanish Steps. Straight line it and there's the Pantheon. Turn the corner and you're at the Coliseum. Awesome!

My favourite memories are at the Spanish Steps where I spent my teenage years hanging out with friends and travellers, the warm air filled with the sounds of guitars and bongos.



PIAZZA DEL POPOLO  
ROME



TOP OF SPANISH STEPS  
ROME



Pics: Kevin Ash



COLOSSEUM 4  
ROME

Nothing seems to have changed here. I keep expecting to see old friends stroll up the steps clutching large brown bottles of the cold Peroni beer we used to drink through the night. Of course, no familiar faces show up among the sea of tourists. Plus Peroni beer only seems to be available in the disappointingly small Nastro Azzurro green bottles nowadays.

As we head for the Coliseum I push Kev off the Griso to take ownership. It's the kind of bike you'd imagine a Roman gladiator riding, especially a hunky one like Russell Crowe. Or a proper girl of course, so I had to be seen riding it here.

Despite my 12 years in Rome, I'd only ever ventured inside the Coliseum twice. The first time was with my mum who dragged me there as a child one scorching summer's day when I'd have much rather stayed by the pool. The second time was in my teens with, you guessed it, Giovanni! We rode there at one in the morning, parked the bike outside then clambered the gates and sneaked in to smoke a, erm, cigarette. It was spooky sitting inside the Coliseum amid all the ruins with a full moon shedding the only light. But I had hunky Giovanni and his Honda Super Bol D'or (did I mention he had a motorcycle?) to protect me from the ghosts of the lions.

Two days spent in Rome had me revisiting my youth, touring sites haunted by memories and riding bikes in places I'd spent years dreaming of one day riding them... But that was quite enough. By the end of day two I was ready to go back to the future and my life in Britain. It's not good being stuck in the past for too long. Moto Guzzi knows this too: Although their bikes have the cool retro look, they're firmly rooted in the modern world with up-to-date parts – the Griso SE even gets radial brakes – and strong performance.





The Nevada and Café Classic are ideal machines for the new rider who wants a stylish and gentle ride to learn on, or for the enthusiast with a rose-tinted visor who loves the look of the good old days but still enjoys a modern ride. As for the Griso SE, it's a real woman's (or for those stuck in narrow outmoded thinking, man's...) bike that's exciting and fast, stops and handles as well as you'd expect from a motorcycle these days and has unique looks to

die for. The years have rushed by, yet the Moto Guzzi brand is still going strong.

Nostalgia really is big business.

### **Harriet Ridley**

*Reprinted from The Rider's Digest, Issue 138  
May 2009*



# Dutch Diesel Exotica

The Thunderstar 1200 TDi



Words & pix:  
Ricardo Rodrigues



**D**iesel powered motorcycles aren't something that goes through most people's minds. After all in the modern world bikes are more of a passion than a convenience and I dare say most of us are not really worried about their fuel economy.

Even the less frugal of bikes (my V-twin KTM and Ducati, included) are able to deliver supercar levels of performance at supermini miles-per-gallon. If you ride you long distances everyday and want to save some cash on petrol you can just get a detuned parallel twin or four and get twice the mileage of the most efficient of diesel cars. It's fairly easy to understand why production diesel-powered bikes never really caught on.

A quick search on the "interwebs" will find you no more than a few examples of shed built conversions, military spec prototypes, the odd Indian-built Royal Enfield Taurus or the short lived Dutch-built Track T800CDI. - all as uninspiring as the basic HTML sites that write about them.

That is until you find one very special bike: the Thunderstar 1200.

I first came across this bike in this year's edition of Motorbeurs Utrecht ([see TRD #188](#)), dressed in full carbon fibre and race livery - announcing it's recent participation on a parade lap of the Manx GP while burning very environmentally friendly biodiesel, courtesy of a Japanese sponsor. Even without much time to admire the bike, elbowing my way in the middle of the packed hall I got the feeling I was in front of something quite special.

A few weeks and a couple of phone calls later an interview was arranged with the creative genius behind this contraption: Kees van der Starre from StarTwin Motors in Loenen, Netherlands.



If I ended my story here and jumped to the technical details of this unusual bike you would be forgiven for imagining the setting for the interview as a shed in a small village lost amongst fields and polders.

Well let me try to paint a picture for you then: StarTwin Motors is the place for all things Italian - official dealers for Ducati and MV Agusta and service agents for Aprilia, Moto Morini, Benelli, Cagiva and Husqvarna. The showroom floor includes everything from the newest models by Ducati & MV (think Diavel, Panigale, Rivale, Turismo Veloce...), the exotic VeeDuo Squalo, a selection of 996, 998 in various S and R iterations, a one-of-a-kind Scrambler and a Mike Hailwood Replica Ducati 900.

Everything inside the wide sloping industrial architecture-style building screams racing exotica.

For the few minutes I spend waiting for Kees I almost forget why I am there, lost in lust for all the shiny red racing metal.

Am I really in the right place for feature on a VW diesel-powered bike?

It's when I meet Kees that everything starts to make sense. Equal parts racer, creative mastermind and genius mechanic, he spends his weekdays creating one-of-a-kind bikes and accessories, and the weekends racing one of his many exotic creations. The weekend before this interview I saw him racing in the 3-Hour Oss Classic Endurance Race where he finished 5th on his Ducati 900 Supersport-engined Cagiva Elefant 350; the weekend after he was taking the ultra exclusive VeeTwo Squalo (with Hyperstrada 1100 engine) to Assen for the Ducati Club Races.

Opening the door to the workshop, a MV Agusta F4 is naked on the workbench having the top end rebuilt, one door further and we



enter the place of dreams: a fully equipped metal fabrication workshop - on the corner, a somewhat dusty Thunderstar 1200 waits for me.

A full-fledged superbike built around a VW Lupo 3L engine, the all aluminum 1.2-litre direct injection turbodiesel chosen for this project for it's lightness and efficiency.

By this point the main question is probably why?

With all that racing exotica in the shop, why bother with the hassle of building a whole bike from scratch, and a diesel for goodness sake!

Kees: "Because I like to stay that nothing is impossible and the modern diesel engines in cars are so good, we believed we could do better than the rest and build a fast, competitive diesel bike."

An intern that had worked at VW sourced the engine and the work could start.

The whole engine was modeled in 3D in-house prior to the build. New engine casings were designed and cast to allow for a new custom-made 14-plate dry slipper clutch mated to a 5 speed gear box out of a Yamaha FZR1000.

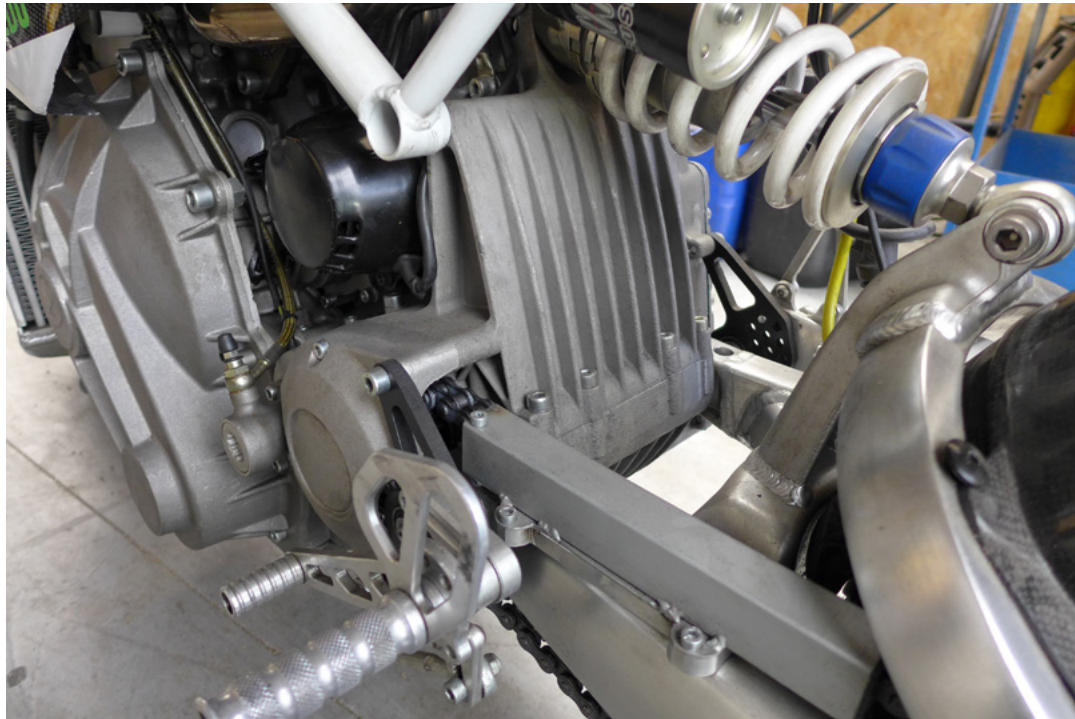
The massive torque from the engine created a challenge even for the notoriously sturdy FZR gearbox, so an additional output shaft was fitted to increase torque demultiplication. Despite the lower revving nature of the diesel, the gearbox actually works at a similar RPM as it did in its donor bike.

A new turbo was fitted, and the increase in boost pressure to 2.5bar required stronger intake valve springs as the standard valves were being pushed open! Fuel injectors were also replaced for bigger units running a higher pressure.

Throughout it's development several turbo configurations were tested but in its







current and most powerful iteration so far, the bike is running a Mitsubishi turbo. The final result is a very healthy 125hp and 250Nm of torque! (61hp and 140Nm from the standard VW engine) and a top speed of over 250km/h (155mph).

A lighter flywheel (2kg instead of 7kg) with no balancing shaft allows the engine to rev faster and helps bring the total weight of the engine to around 125kg. Heavy by motorcycle standards but incredibly light for a diesel.

With the goal set on building an exciting and fast sportsbike, the rest of the bike was built with top components, the engine was used as a stressed member with the bearings for the rear swingarm (out of a Ducati 900/1000 SuperSport) housed inside the casings.

The rear suspension comes courtesy of a top of the line WP GP monoshock fitted in a cantilever arrangement between the top of the swingarm bracing and the rear engine casing.

Making use of their extensive experience in building racing bikes and specials, a lightweight trellis frame was built in-house weighing a mere 6kg! Combined with full aluminium WP GP forks, BST Carbon wheels and PFM 6 piston monobloc front brake calipers (Brembo at the rear) and full carbon bodywork it brings the bike to a total dry weight of 205kg - 230kg fully fuelled - a full 35kg lighter than a Suzuki Hayabusa, with almost twice the torque!

The whole fuel tank for example weighs a mere 300g - the same as the fuel cap itself!

The initial engine development took 4 years (from 2004 to 2008) and it has been a labour of skill and passion, the all new engine casings make the engine almost unrecognizable and the technical solutions developed around it are impressive. The three massive aluminium radiators dominate the front of the bike. On the right side for the water cooling system, on the





left the intercooler for the turbo and behind the front wheel - at the bottom - a small black unit acts as a diesel cooler, a necessity given the injectors are cooled by the fuel and the heat generated by the engine would heat up the fuel tank.

Unfortunately the bike is currently not running while waiting for an upgrade to the primary drive from chain to gear-driven, and that meant no test ride. I did however get the chance to extensively appreciate the bike while sitting on it. Strangely for a sports/race bike the ergonomics felt spot on. With the exception of the hard seat it is one of the most comfortable sports bikes I've tried

The reach to the handlebars is long - old school race bike style - giving it a purposeful but not uncomfortable stance, the sculpted fuel tank wrapping around my knees as if it had been built for me.

The handling I'm assured is fantastic, different from a regular sports bike because of the dramatic centralization of weight as basically all the weight is in the engine, very low down, but very effective, especially at speed with a very sure-footed and stable behaviour mid-corner before jumping out of the corners riding the massive wave of torque.

A testament to how special this bike is, was that fact that it showed up on the radar of the executives at Revo International Inc., a Japanese company that produces biodiesel from used cooking oil.

There is no shortage of motorcycle builders in that part of the world (do the names Honda, Suzuki, Yamaha or Kawasaki ring a bell?) but Revo, having already finished a Dakar Rally with a 4x4 powered by biodiesel, now wanted a race bike to show off the performance of their alternative fuel. Where better to start then to

ring a small dealership in rural Netherlands and ask if they want to take their bike to the Isle of Man?

A few months forward and Kees was riding the VeeTwo Squalo (see pic, left) around the Isle of Man doing some reconnaissance of the course. (hard work right?!).

The Thunderstar was stripped of all the road-going necessities like mirrors and licence plate (the beautiful Cagiva V-Raptor-sourced headlight being the exception) and painted in it's new colour scheme: white and carbon, ready for a lap of the course at the hands of pro rider Yoshihiro Kishimoto.

The goal of the Parade Lap in the 2014 ManxGP/Classic TT was to show that biodiesel could be a competitive alternative to electricity in the clean energy based TTXGP, and open the class to a possible participation in 2015. For several reasons this didn't happen this year but the bike's performance was certainly not one of them.

By this point I'm sold and the question is: how much did it cost to develop and would Kees build another one for someone interested?

Kees: "The development of the up to now one off a kind Thunderstar 1200 cost us about €300,000 and yes, we can supply a complete engine with electronics, drivetrain, front frame assembly and all the electronics for €40,000 plus taxes, leaving you to source the suspension, wheels, subframe and fairings. We currently may have one client interested in this so we will see."

Ok, so that is definitely outside my budget, but not at all an unreasonable amount of money, when compared to some limited editions that are being built by factories like Ducati, Honda and MV and are nowhere near as exclusive!"

At the end of the day you would have to cover an absolutely insane amount of miles to take any advantage from the economy of the diesel, and most likely the running costs of a special bike compared to any conventional production bike would put an end to any kind of saving, but that is not what this bike is about!

It's about showing that you can go against the current and build something truly unique, exciting and beautiful using a different engine and a different fuel. All you need is a bit of imagination and the skills to match it (and some money to spare and a fully equipped workshop...).

The original design of the Thunderstar is now more than 10 years old but, parked next to my shiny Multistrada 1200S, it made mine look uninspiring and ordinary, so forget all the new age hipster cafe racers and go get yourself a real macho bike, a diesel powered monster of a race bike by StarTwin Motors!"

## Ricardo Rodrigues

[Check out the StarTwin Motors website here.](#)



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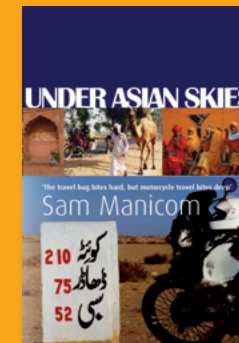
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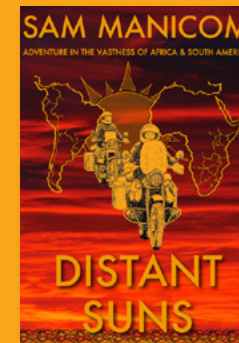


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by Kevin Williams

**M**y very first biking trip to France was in 1979, and was a proper continental adventure. I spent a month and over three thousand miles touring France, Andorra, northern Italy, Lichtenstein, Switzerland and south-west Germany. It's still the longest trip I've ever done.

And I returned the following year and the year after that. I carefully loaded up the bike, checked the destination on the map to figure out a route that I hadn't ridden before, booked a ferry, headed off to the bank to change some Sterling to local currency, serviced the bike and cleaned the number plate and the GB sticker.

Then I'd pick up my passport and off I'd go, reminding myself to ride on the wrong side of the road coming off the boat, that French speed limits were the same in town, a bit lower on ordinary two lane roads, a bit higher on motorways, and that on the very rare occasions you spotted a speed patrol the French police

manning it were carrying guns.

That was then. This is now.

Now, my first thought is "which bit of euro-legislation has changed since last year?"

For example, you'll probably know about the shenanigans 22 miles (or should that be 35 kilometres) away in our nearest European neighbour regarding hi-vis patches and reflective helmet stickers.

If you don't, a few years back there was an official and ultimately abortive attempt to force riders to have palm-sized reflective patches on their jackets. It was supposed to become law on 1 January 2013 and there was a lot of fuss in France from the riders rights organisation FFMC and also in the UK about whether it would apply to UK riders. Then the order was delayed, then suspended and then it all went very quiet indeed.

But very quickly that was followed up by anecdotal (but widely circulated) reports of the Gendarmerie enforcing a long-forgotten piece

of legislation that requires a rider's helmet to have a reflective sticker on it, and fining those that don't have it, including - according to some reports - one group of UK riders. Then that went quiet too.

I was minded off all this this week when the website of the French riders' rights organisation, the FFMC (Federation Francaise des Motards en Colere or French Federation of Angry Motorcyclists), carried a story that the French government passed a decree earlier this month (May 2015) which will require all motorcyclists in France to carry a high visibility vest as of January 1, 2016.

What this means is that firstly, every rider, including those on three wheelers and quadricycles, must have a hi-vis garment either on their person or carried on the vehicle, although there is no requirement to wear it under normal circumstance. Second, if the rider has to stop for some reason on the road or at the roadside for a breakdown or other emergency, then the rider must put the garment on. And finally, the police can ask to see your hi-vis garment to prove you have one.

The penalty for failing to carry one is only an €11 fine (and no penalty points) but should you be caught failing to use one in what the police consider to be an emergency situation, then the fine increases to a whopping €135.

The garment itself is defined as "any garment worn on the upper body, such as jacket, parka, vest, shirt or tunic" and it also needs to be CE-approved as a conspicuity aid. That requirement for it to be an approved garment presumably means Sam Browne style belts aren't enough. And quite likely it also means that your bright yellow riding jacket, complete with built-in reflective panels isn't legal either, because it may have CE-armor, it may even be CE-approved as Personal

Protective Equipment for motorcyclists... but it's highly unlikely that it's approved as a conspicuity aid too.

Sounds complicated? Well it is, and it isn't. This move only brings motorcycles into line with cars, and as with cars, only the vehicle operator needs to have one. So your pillion or your car passengers can wander around in black clothing getting run down at night by the driver dodging the driver, and that's perfectly OK.

Unless you're driving a car in Spain. Now - and much more logically - every person in the vehicle needs to have their own hi-vis and to be able to put them on inside the vehicle - no keeping them in the boot!

But right now you don't need to carry a hi-vis vest on the bike in Spain, either for yourself or your passenger.

And there's the problem in a nutshell. Though we live in a European Community, what was once described as a 'common market', when it comes to crossing borders as an ordinary road user, we're far from being a community that has all the various traffic rules in common.

Do you need to carry first aid kits, fire extinguishers, spare bulbs, breath test kits, hi-vis vests or warning triangles? Are you allowed to use a hands-free mobile phone with a headset in the helmet in Spain? What about speed camera databases on your GPS?

Speed limits, insurance, on-the-spot fines, road signs and important words you'll see on them, driving licenses and international driving permits, minimum age requirements for operating a motorcycle, emergency services numbers, whether motorcycles must be ridden with headlights on by day, whether you need a vignette to use motorways and where you can get one, local weather conditions and seasonal



Kevin and the full suite of EU paraphernalia...



road closures, even blood alcohol counts - did you know many countries abroad now have a zero-tolerance limit on alcohol?

And some of the laws are even weirder. In some cities in Spain, cars must be parked on the side of the road where houses bear uneven numbers on uneven days of the month, and on the side of even numbers on even days. Riding through Vienna, make sure you don't use your horn - it's prohibited within the city. In Switzerland (not part of the EU but surrounded by it), pedestrians generally have right of way and expect vehicles to stop. Some may even step into the road in front of oncoming traffic so make sure you keep your eyes peeled.

Mind you, it's not just the EU which has mad laws. Cross the big pond to the USA, and should you ever feel the urge, you're apparently OK to drive

in a dressing gown in California. Unless you are female, when it's illegal.

How the heck are we expected to find all this out?

Someone is probably saying right now "search the internet" so guess what? I did that.

After several hours of research I realised:

a) none of the answers are all in one place (though the AA site gets top marks for trying)

b) most of the information I did find refers to cars, vans and campers, and not motorcycles (AA again does well)

c) a scary amount of information (and not just 'amateur enthusiast' sites) is out of date and incomplete

d) a lot of information and advice on rider forums and the like is just plain wrong, particularly the "well, I have never been stopped" kind of comments

There's a page of 'driving abroad' information and a downloadable PDF which some very generalised information on Europe

here on the [.gov.uk site](#):

For more detailed information on driving rules and regulations, probably the next stop should be the two major motoring organisations. In the past, references to motorcycles have been few and far between, despite both organisations having plenty of two-wheeled members, but in the last year or so, the AA has totally overhauled [its Euro-driving page](#) and it's now not only much easier to navigate, it's actually got useful information for bikers.

Then from options below select 'Touring tips by country'. You can download PDFs for each nation. I had a quick look at the one covering France and Monaco, and it covers the salient points:

Motorcycles: Use of dipped headlights during the day compulsory. The wearing of crash helmets is compulsory for both driver and passenger of any two-wheel motorised vehicle. A law requiring the helmet to display reflective stickers was introduced some years ago but has not been enforced until now. All helmets must display reflective stickers on the front, rear and sides - see 'compulsory equipment'.

It's even got the precise regulation regarding the stickers:

Reflective panels (Motorcycles) - UNECE Regulation 22 permits contracting parties (countries) to require helmets to be fitted with retroreflective material visible from the front, rear, left and right and lays down the specification with which the material and its location must comply. All helmets worn in France must meet the retroreflective material requirements of Regulation 22 - a sticker of minimum surface area 18 cm<sup>2</sup> must be visible from the front, rear, left and right and within each sticker it



must be possible to mark either a circle of 40 mm diameter or, a rectangle at least 12.5 cm<sup>2</sup> in surface area and at least 20 mm in width.

Note the statement "WORN in France". Not bought in France, or worn by French riders. The implication is that if you go to France, you must have the stickers.

However, the PDF hasn't yet been updated with the information about hi-vis waistcoats.

What other useful things do we need to know about in France?

Most people by now are aware of the requirement to carry portable breathalysers - it is compulsory to have one unused, undamaged, unexpired single use breathalyser in the car or on the bike. But guess what? There's an exception. This rule doesn't apply if you're only riding a moped! There was supposed to be an on-the-spot fine of €11 from 1 March 2013, but the fine (not the requirement to carry the breathalyser) has been indefinitely postponed.

Headlights on? Yes, at all times. Beam deflectors? Yes, you shouldn't dazzle oncoming drivers and you WILL be flashed, even in the day time? Yellow tinted headlight? Not for donkeys years. Spare bulbs? Not compulsory but advised by the AA.

Warning triangle? Not compulsory for motorcycles. Nor are first aid kits and fire extinguishers.

And speed camera data on the GPS? Since the French have been removing warning signs of speed cameras ahead and installing an awful lot more of them than there were a few years back, they don't want you to know where they are. The simple answer from the AA is that a sat-nav which has maps indicating the location of fixed speed cameras "must have the POI function for them deactivated", and "ideally they should be removed". If your device

is checked - and it includes a phone used as a sat-nav - and found to have speed camera locations on it, it can be seized.

What about helmet intercoms and audio links to GPS in Spain, another potentially hot and expensive potato? Well, the AA PDF on the country says:

"Only fully hands-free phone systems are permitted. The use of earpieces or headphones while driving is banned. Failure to comply carries a fine of €200."

That says to me that in-helmet speakers are illegal, which is what I thought. The explanation I found on a forum that only wired earphones inside the helmet are illegal, and that bluetooth speakers are OK because they are wireless would seem to be incorrect. After all, they are earpieces, and my understanding is that it extends to bike-to-bike coms as well as links to GPS systems for turn-by-turn navigation. But I agree that it's not entirely clear.

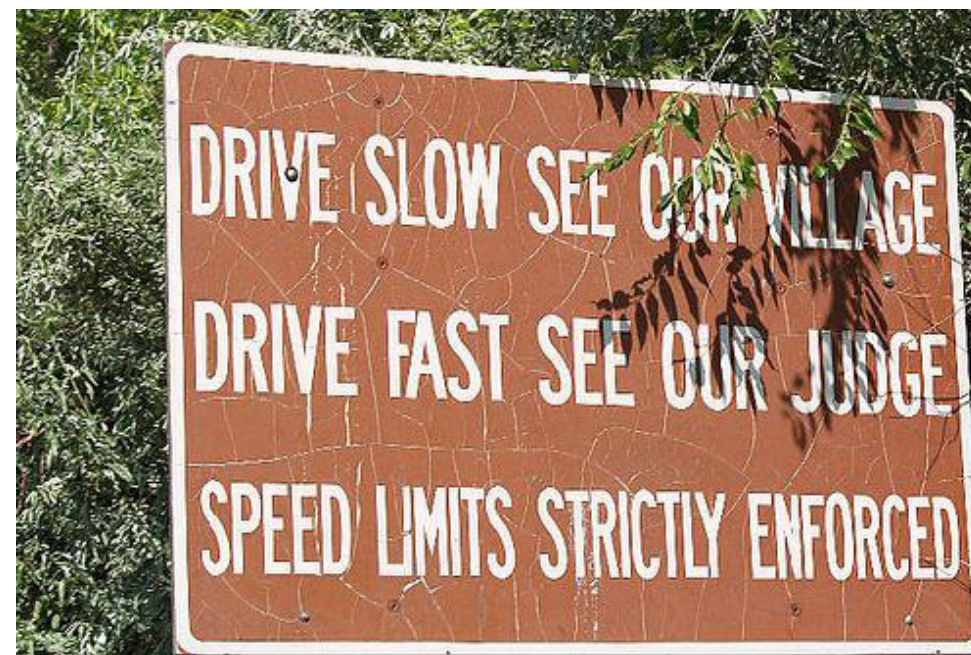
And that's just a couple of countries. There's a lot of trawling through all those PDFs to get the answers.

[The RAC site](#) has also had a big overhaul and also provides useful information for bikers. For example, don't be fooled by tales of locals ignoring the helmet law or carrying a scantily clad beauty on a single seat scooter in Italy:

"Mopeds and motorcycles can be confiscated for 3 months in the following cases:

- \* failure to wear a safety helmet
- \* carrying a passenger unless allowed (specified in certificate)"

Most of us like a drink at some point, either with a meal or at the end of a long day, but it's important to understand that not every country has the same rules on blood alcohol, and penalties can be very severe indeed for the unwitting transgressor. A website devoted entirely to the topic has a page which covers





international rules, [which can be found here](#):

Also worth a look is [Drive Alive](#) even though the site is mostly trying to sell you services via its partner links, because it has some useful information all in one place, not least European speed limits! As these vary from the UK limits, they are worth checking out, particularly as the cost of on-the-spot fines skyrockets the more you are over the limit. And if you blast through speed camera thinking you're immune because of your GB plate, just wait till you get stopped - all those unpaid fines will catch up with you when you do get pulled over. Many countries also have the power to seize your vehicle and your licence - and even crush it - even if the UK doesn't have any agreements for reciprocal points.

Whilst you're on that page note that there is no speed limit on German motorways (autobahn) "unless shown". What that means is that there are extensive sections, particularly around junctions, where there ARE speed limits. Don't fall into the trap of thinking all German motorways are unlimited. They are well-policed, often the location of speed cameras and fines are steep.

And whilst German motorways are free and French autoroutes may be free or toll, if you want to use those in Switzerland and Austria then you need to pay up front for an annual vignette. In Hungary, you need a vignette for motorways and expressways but in neighbouring Romania a vignette is required for all roads - unless you are on a motorcycle. Skipping the rules can lead to hefty fines too - in Switzerland it's well over £100.

Oh, and just what happened to the original proposal for reflective patches on clothing that was supposed to come in in 2013? It turns out the French law making it compulsory for motorcycle riders and passengers has been

abolished. Did they tell us? Not that I'm aware.

So there you have it. I really do wish that the EU would standardise traffic rules across the federation. There are far too many country-specific rules just waiting to trip the unwary traveller up on their way across the frontier! The only way to be cast-iron certain you know the local ropes so that you don't get roped by the local police is to do some research. Or you can always trust the local bike forum and the person who says they've never been stopped yet for [insert your offence here].

**Kevin Williams**

[www.survivalskills.co.uk](http://www.survivalskills.co.uk)







# Nepal Revisited

Words and pics:  
Michele Harrison



**I met the man of my life, John, in Nepal in May 1998. I was on a motorbike; he was on a pushbike. He was the wiry round-the-world solo cyclist on his overloaded tourer and I was the solo biker-chick travelling on her trusted Enfield 500 - a.k.a. Big Thumper (pic, right).**

It sounds more romantic than it was. The weather was atrocious. The monsoon was fast approaching and the skies were usually grey and overcast; that is, when they weren't offering us deluges of biblical proportions. Pre-monsoon showers, they called them! That can be a bit of drawback in Pokhara where the main reasons to come are trekking the 30 day Annapurna circuit, or admiring the beautiful Himalayas from the peaceful and majestic Fewa lake. I'd been there for a few days already and everyday brought more rain. Then one morning, the manager of my hotel knocked on my door at six a.m. to announce: 'Come! The sky is clear and you can see the mountains!'

Only half believing him, I dragged myself out of my comfortable bed and came onto the veranda: through the haze I could faintly see the white jagged outlines of the Himalayas. Rather disappointing, I thought. The manager said, 'If you ride up to Sarangkot you will get a much better view. But be quick!'

At this hour, the streets were empty of cars and motorbikes, but not of buses, trucks, bicycles, people, cows or dogs. Children were walking to school, women were going to the market, men were taking buses to work, and farmers were already in the fields. No tourists though. In fact, most of Pokhara seemed empty of foreigners. A lot of hotels, restaurants and shops were already closed. The high tourist season is from September to December. Come the new year, it starts thinning down and by the time the monsoon arrives in June, very few



foreigners remain.

I rode my Enfield along the country lanes and up onto a steep hill to Sarangkot village, overlooked by an army fort. I parked my Enfield by the side of the track and walked the last 100 metres in the mud. Still no-one there; neither locals nor tourists. I enjoyed the silence and admired the clear majestic mountain range. I could see Annapurna (7940m) to my right, the perfect pyramid of Fishtail (just under 7000m) facing me and Dhaulagiri (8170m) to my left.

The mountain range was so wide, so high, and crystal clear. It looked a bit unreal: the painted backdrop to a Bollywood movie.

The way back down was quite a bit more challenging on the motorbike. It was now almost eight a.m. and bus-loads of Nepali tourists and schoolchildren were making their way to the viewpoint. Not only did I have to dodge enormous potholes and cope with

puddles and mud, but often I was forced off the track altogether as buses overtook each other.

However, the sun was shining and the dew was evaporating off the grass. I pulled over to take pictures of the mountains and the sunflowers. By eight o'clock the buses had all mysteriously disappeared and I made my way back down the hill on a steadily improving road.

Around a bend, I almost slammed into a Western man who was very painstakingly

cycling up this steep slippery road. I pulled over and asked if he could take a picture of me in front of Fishtail (pic below).

We introduced ourselves and started talking.

The rest, as they say, is history – well, our history at least.

Fast forward fifteen years. John and I live in the French Alps; our two children go to school in a small town when they are not skiing or playing ice hockey. John now also rides a





motorbike, although it is mainly to go to the airport so he can get to his job as a firefighter in London.

I am no longer this 30-something free-spirited woman who could point her motorbike in any direction she liked. I am now facing my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and living a comfortable life.

Of course, we still love travelling and have taken our children to many exciting places such as India, Vietnam, Oman and Sri Lanka. But with young children, it is just not the same, is it? When was the last time we really had an adventure?

Instead of just accepting those days are over for the time being at least, we decide to try to re-create some of the thrills of adventure touring by re-visiting Nepal. So in October 2013, we grabbed the kids' motorbike helmets, bought tickets to Kathmandu and set off on a family motorcycle tour. Mum, Dad, two bikes, and two kids. Sounds like a mid-life crisis? Yes probably, though we were probably already too old for that: more of a half-century crisis.

We chose Nepal because we both loved it the first time around and we wanted to show our children, Allie (11) and Tom (9), the exact bend on the road where we met. And we wanted to see it again. Who says romance is dead?

Kathmandu was little changed: perhaps a bit cleaner but just as (more?) crowded. First time around, we had stayed in Freak Street – the area of town where the real budget travellers stay. This time we stayed in the touristy area called Thamel in a mid-range boutique hotel with a large family room. We even had our own bathroom.

The decision to travel on motorbikes with Allie and Tom was taken despite considerable opposition from grandparents who considered us irresponsible with the lives of their beloved



grandchildren. They had never been to Nepal but imagined all sorts of horrible stories of mayhem and carnage on the roads.

John and I promised to take our own helmets and judge the situation for ourselves once we got there. If the traffic was just too horrendous we would go to plan B and take buses. Secretly we both thought that trusting a driver of a public bus was in fact much more dangerous than riding motorbikes: at least we would have some degree of control. The children on the other hand were totally unconcerned. They were more interested in knowing whether we'd get to stay in a hotel with a pool, go white-water rafting and see any elephants. Yes on all three counts.

They had already ridden on motorbikes in France. They liked it when we picked them up from school: it made them look cool. But the idea of spending hours on the back of a bike

was not particularly appealing. We had to plan a trip where there would be no more than a few hours of riding a day. And we had to promise at least one 'fun' activity a day: swimming, fishing, rafting, safari, etc.

On our second day in Kathmandu we found a motorcycle rental shop in the tourist hub. All the bikes were in fact scooters. Nothing big enough. We asked around and were directed to another street where we found two Bajaj Pulsar 220s (pic, above). New, they cost about \$1,200 in India. These two were in very good condition and the price for renting them was just \$8 a day each. We tried a bit of bargaining but got nowhere. We were, however, offered an Enfield 350cc for \$30 a day.

I was tempted for a nanosecond. Looking at it brought back memories of my own trip in 1998. It stood there looking gleaming and gorgeous. The kids were impressed. 'Please,

please, can we rent that one?' Fortunately there was only one Enfield for rent. We knew that not only would the kids argue over who would get to ride on it but so would John and I.

In any case, it would be a very stupid idea: Enfields are notoriously temperamental; we did not carry spares; neither John nor I knew how to repair the bike; and the kids would not see the fun side of breaking down. 'What do you mean, it's all part of the adventure?!

So we were sensible and rented the most popular 'big' bike in Nepal. The Bajaj Pulsar has front and rear disc brakes, 20 brake horse power and a torque of 19 lb/ft. That would be more than enough for us, as long as we minimised our luggage.

To even-out the weight on each bike, I took Allie, our eldest and John took Tom. Hence we had the boys' bike and the girls' bike.

Our plan was to do a leisurely two week trip to Pokhara, Chitwan, Daman and back to Kathmandu.

But first we explored Kathmandu. We rode up to Swayanbhunath temple to watch the monkeys jump from tree to tree and admired the play of light on the painted faces of the Buddha at sunset. We also got familiar with the bikes. Once we felt more brave, we ventured through the tiny alleyways of the capital to Durbar Square, the tourist centre of the city with its numerous temples – and very many people.

Despite the narrowness of the alleys in Kathmandu, vehicles are allowed to travel just about everywhere. Sometimes the streets are designated one-way but the rule does not seem to apply to two-wheelers or even taxis.

Because John and I are extremely competitive with each other, we devised a game to see which one of us could ride the longest through the hordes of people and





*On the road to Daman...*

vehicles circulating in the alleyways without putting a foot down. The slower, the better. We both managed to ride at a speed of only 4 kilometres an hour. I refuse to say who put their foot down first.

The next day we set off on our little family adventure.

Kathmandu is in a valley at 1400 metres high with the High Himalayas only vaguely visible to the north through the dense haze of pollution. We were heading west towards Pokhara, a smaller city at the base of Annapurna. But first we had to get out of the city.

With a population of less than one million, Kathmandu ranks as a smallish capital. But this is deceptive. There are very few roads out of town, and the main arteries are too narrow and extremely crowded, apparently at all times of the day.

Fearing it would take us many hours to get

out, we checked out at seven in the morning, left a bag at the hotel for us to collect at the end of the trip and loaded up the two bikes. Each one of us was allowed only one change of clothes, one swimsuit, a pair of boots and sandals, a fleece, a raincoat, and only two towels between the four of us. Even with this rationing, the bikes felt quite heavy and the children complained they did not have much room on the back. Eventually we learned to load the bags in such a way they provided comfortable back rests for them. So comfortable, Tom would sometimes (worryingly) doze off.

The journey from Kathmandu to Pokhara is just 200 kilometres which we planned on doing in two days. We knew the road would be difficult, especially the first 50 kilometres when we would be losing hundreds of metres in altitude on a road we would have to share with hundreds of Tata trucks. Fifteen

years ago, the road had been very bad and it still was. Apparently, every year chunks of the road get washed away by the monsoon rains and landslides. The beauty of riding a motorbike, however, is that you can insert yourself between two very long columns of immobilised trucks and overtake them for five thrilling kilometres. At the end of the column we spotted the cause of the traffic jam: a bus with a broken axle spread across the two lanes.

Once we had overtaken the bus, we were able to travel on relatively empty roads for a good hour: the traffic being held up behind us.

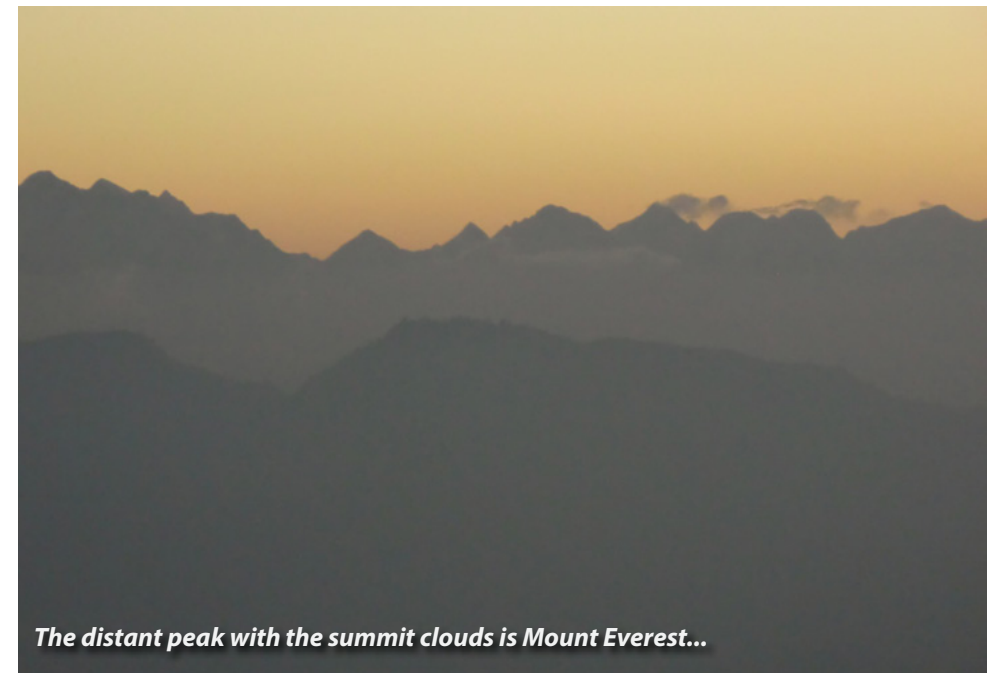
John and I were loving it. Once we had reached the lower valley, the road surface improved and we could let the throttle out. By that I mean we reached a top speed of 45 kilometres per hour. That felt a bit fast to me, so I settled back to just 40 kilometres per hour. At that speed, overloaded buses and even trucks would overtake us at regular intervals.

The buses amused me. They would overtake us, accelerate for 100 metres and then stop suddenly to drop off or pick up passengers. We would then (carefully) overtake them and the whole thing would start again.

Riding with another motorbike is very different to riding on your own as I found out. The speed you ride is something very personal. It is a bit like hiking in the mountains. Everyone has a speed they feel comfortable and can sustain for a long time. It is rare to find someone with exactly the same speed. Hence even in a group, I always end up hiking up a mountain on my own, usually at the back.

Also, what I love about being on my own (even with my daughter on the back) is that I can get lost in contemplation: what people call helmet time. But with John ahead of me, I was constantly aware that I had to keep up. I felt pressured to go a bit faster.

When I mentioned it, we decided the way



*The distant peak with the summit clouds is Mount Everest...*



around this would be that I would let him get out of my sight and 'pretend' Allie and I were riding on our own, at whatever speed felt most comfortable. I would not try to spot him ahead of me and he would not try to keep an eye on where I was. Every half hour or so, he would stop and wait for me to catch up. I think that worked better for me than it did for John because he had to keep track of the time and also make sure I did not miss any road signs...as I have been known to do.

The children loved the first couple hours but come lunchtime, their backsides, and ours, were aching. We pulled over for lunch at a small but luxurious hotel on the Trisuli river. The curries were delicious and Allie and Tom enjoyed eating the rice with their fingers. The hotel had the added attraction of a swimming pool and white-water rafting. The kids did not have to beg for long before we gave in and checked in for the night. At nearly 50 years of age you do not need much of an excuse to pull out your credit card for a bit of comfort. Actually the credit card machine did not work so we pulled out a large wad of cash. John's travel budget for a whole month back when he was a round-the-world cyclist was blown on one night's stay.

Although the credit card machine was broken, I was amazed to see that there was WiFi. I find it rather incongruous to be on the web while supposedly in the middle of the foothills of the Himalayas. The world seems smaller because of it. And maybe a little less exciting?

The children of course find it totally normal and Tom wanted to find out how Arsenal was doing. A waiter overheard him asking me to check online and told him the score against Chelsea: Arsenal lost 2-0.

Top Gear and football: the top British

exports to the rest of the world. When I was travelling in the 1990s, it was Princess Diana and football.

We spent the next morning white-water rafting on the the Trisuli river. It was both a thrilling experience and a soothing way of passing through the countryside.

At the end it took us three days to reach Pokhara as the kids demanded a break every hour; it is much more comfortable riding in the front than in the back. Also more interesting I think. You have something to do and you can absorb much of the vibrations through your arms.

While riding towards Pokhara I remembered my trip on the same road in May 1998. Right from the beginning, my Enfield had given me a lot of mechanical trouble. Most of these problems had either been my fault due to the absence of any motorcycle maintenance on my part or had become bigger problems than they needed to be because, again, of my lack of knowledge about motorcycles.

A good example happened on the exact same road we were now riding the last time I rode it during my round-India trip in 1998, and as described in this excerpt from my ebook 'All The Gear, No Idea':

*"The road from Kathmandu to Pokhara, a lakeside town nestled in the Himalayas, is quite bumpy on some stretches. After a particularly bad jolt, the power on the bike died, and no amount of kick-starting could get it going. As a car overtook me I tried to look like I knew what I was doing – even a self-confessed bike ignoramus sometimes wants to look cool. Nonchalantly, I crouched in front of the engine and, lo and behold, I found the problem: the wire to the spark plug had come off. I just needed to stick it back on and off we went.*

*One kilometre further down the road, the*



*power died again but this time the wire was still in place. I dismounted and checked for dangling wires. Everything seemed in order. Suddenly I heard a car coming up behind me around the tight bend. I pressed on the horn to warn it of my presence – no response... No response?! In a moment of clarity, I remembered the man who sold me the bike telling me that this means the fuse has blown. Very helpful but where was the bloody fuse? And anyway I didn't have a spare one.*

*Another car passed, I waved it down and asked the occupants if they had a fuse. As I hoped, the five Indian tourists got out of the car and took over. They knew where the fuse was and they knew how to wire it up if there is no spare. Unfortunately what I didn't know is that fuses blow out for a good reason, a reason that should not be ignored.*

*I thanked them and set off again but a few*

*minutes later, my bike exploded.*

*Yes, just like that, with a bang and lots of smoke. With apprehension, I looked down at the source of all the black acrid smoke and saw that the wires below my tank were an oozing multi-coloured mess of melted plastic. It was obvious this time it wasn't going to be a quick road-side repair. I dismounted and started pushing the bike towards a village, which according to my map was two kilometres away. What had felt like reasonable level terrain when I was riding the bike turned out to be very much uphill.*

*As I sweated, a man on a motorcycle overtook me.*

*He stopped. 'Hello. Where are you from?'*

*'England,' I panted.*

*'What is the problem?'*

*'I don't know. The wires are all melted. Look.'*

*'Yes, that is a problem.'*

*You're telling me.*







*'Do you know a mechanic?' I asked.*

*'No, but there is a village this way.'*

*'Thank you.'*

*'Bye.'*

*I continued to push.*

*A young boy looking after a cow in a field, saw me and ran up to the road.*

*'Hello, where are you from?'*

*'England and you?'*

*'Nepal,' he laughed.*

*He walked along the other side of the bike.*

*'Why are you walking?'*

*'Because my bike is broken.'*

*'Ah.'*

*One more kilometre to go. A motorbike came towards me. I squinted through my sweat-blinded eyes: it was the motorcyclist from before - with a passenger.*

*'I bring you a scooter mechanic from the village,' he said.*

*With relief and gratitude, I pulled over under a tree and put the bike on its centre stand.*

*My saviour deposited the mechanic and turned his bike around. 'You want me to stay here with you? He is a trustworthy man but...'*

*'No, no. I'm fine. You've gone to a lot of trouble for me. You go.'*

*He hesitated. 'I would like to stay because you are a guest in my country, but my friend is waiting for me at home.'*

*'No, no, thank you. Now that I have a mechanic everything is fine now. You've been very helpful.'*

*He rode off and I recuperated in the shade while the mechanic had a look. He called me over.*

*'See, problem is the wire is touching the carburetor, fuse blows and then everything melts.'*

*'Yes, I see. Can you repair it?' I asked.*

*He didn't answer but stood up, looked at a small hut in a nearby field and started walking towards it. Nonplussed I sat back down and*



*waited. So much of travelling is waiting, often not knowing why. Ten minutes later, the mechanic reappeared accompanied by an old man dressed in a dirty shirt and lungi, and carrying an old-fashioned transistor radio.*

*'You buy electrical wires from this man,' my mechanic instructed me.*

*We agreed a price and the mechanic cut the lead off the radio and used the various wires to replace my melted ones, with no attempt at trying to match the colours. Then, without paying too much attention to what he was doing, he wrapped black masking tape around the various wires, including the bike's accelerator cable. When I pointed that out to him, he shrugged and said it would still work.*

*'Yes, that's true but what if the accelerator cable breaks and I need to change it? I'll then have to cut off all the masking tape to get it out,' I responded.*

*Laughing, he agreed and unwrapped the masking tape..."*

Back to the present day...

As I looked down on our Bajaj Pulsar I was reassured to see nothing untowards: no wires dangling; no smoke rising; John was ahead; we had mobile phones in our pockets. It all seemed so much safer. I would almost say a bit more boring but doing it with John and the children also gave the journey a whole new dimension. I could try to see it through their eyes. Okay, it was not completely new to John or me, but it was certainly new to the children.

So when we checked in to Mike's Restaurant, the same hotel - and the same room I had stayed in 1998, I decided to tell them (again) about the first time we came here and how their mother and father met each other.

They were reasonably interested but when we woke them up at seven a.m. to take them to the exact spot of that fateful encounter, there was mutiny.

'This trip is all about you!' Tom cried out, bleary-eyed, from his bed.

We laughed. 'True, but without that meeting neither you nor sister would even exist!'

Reluctantly, they came up to the viewpoint and suffered us telling them (yes, one more time) our story and they even agreed to take pictures of John and his bike, me and my bike (pic, left) and even posed so we could take a picture of all four of us on a bike, using the timer on the camera.

After that we rewarded them with a fishing trip on Fewa lake which they found much more fun.

Our next destination was Bandipur, a small town 80 kilometres east of Pokhara located on a high mountain saddle 700 metres above the Marsyangdi valley. It is connected by a winding access road off the Kathmandu-Pokhara highway. Bandipur's main interest to tourists, apart from the beauty of getting there, is the Newari architecture of its car-free main street. One side of the street consists of a long covered veranda with two storey brick buildings on either side, covered with intricated carvings.

Another tourist pull is the paragliding off the nearby hillside. John spent a great hour watching the sun set whilst flying tandem with a French instructor.

After that, we rejoined the highway and headed south to Chitwan National Park where we rode elephants and spotted a rhinoceros, which we suspect had been planted for our enjoyment.

Throughout the journey, I had been singing the praises of the road to Daman, a





View from Daman

small town located at an elevation of 2300 metres and on the way back to Kathmandu. We were approaching it from Sauraha, the village alongside the Chitwan National Park where we'd been staying. At just under 200 metres high, the temperature was balmy and the sun was shining. We headed east towards the sun on a gently rising road alongside the East Rapti river. After just two hours we turned left at Hetauda.

Even when I had travelled this way back in May 1998, the conditions of this road had been quite good with at least half of it tarmacked. This time, things were even better: the road surface was near perfect and there was still virtually no traffic. The route called The Rajpath was the first road linking Kathmandu to India and had been built in the 1950s. Because it was quite challenging for large vehicles it was

eventually replaced by the faster but longer Mugling/Narayangadh section of the Prithivi Highway which took most of the traffic with it. The combination of amazing scenery, good surfaces and lack of use makes this road ideal for motorbikes, and mountain bikers, although strangely we saw neither on that day.

The stretch from Hetauda to Daman is an unending series of ups and downs but mostly ups. It traverses plains, tropical jungle, forest and mountain passes. Over 60 kilometres, we gained 2000 metres of height and dropped 25 degrees of temperature. All our clothes came out of the bags and we went for the layered look. My hands were so cold I even put on socks as gloves. By the time we reached Daman, a few snow flakes were falling. And there was no view.

On my last visit in 1998, at the end of

another overcast day, the daughter of the owner of my guesthouse had called me outside to see the view. This was how I described it back then:

*'The mountains are visible. Come and see.'*

*I ran up to the top of an ugly observation tower to watch the High Himalayas come out of the milky white sky. It remains one of the most moving sights I have ever seen. Each mountain emerged like a shy child actress being coaxed on stage by an anxious mother. Reluctantly they walked onto the stage, one by one, until the whole chorus was completed and they filled not just the horizon but most of the sky too.*

*And as the sun set, they changed from a pale milky blue, to a warm pink and at last to a fiery orange. As they did, they grew in confidence to become first seductive teenagers and finally femmes fatales daring men to try to conquer*

*them.*

*I saw my first and only glimpse of Mount Everest. From this vantage point it looked like only a minor peak, overshadowed by its more dramatic sisters of Annapurna South, Fishtail and Dhaulagiri.*

Since the children were a bit deflated, and cold: I had promised an amazing sight after all, we decided to stay in the best hotel we could find – the Everest Panorama Resort. The resort is a few kilometres outside Daman and can only be reached on foot. We parked the bikes off the road and carried our bags over to this once grand but now crumbling resort with extremely friendly staff. We were the only ones staying and chose a large room with a balcony in the hope that the clouds would eventually clear.

The food was wonderful but the heating





almost non-existent so we went to bed very early to stay warm. Our plan was to wake up before dawn and see the Himalayan range emerge in the sunrise. Since the best laid plans usually do not work out, it took me a while to fall asleep. Would I have to deal with family disappointment?

No. Things were on my side and we stood in amazement as three hundred kilometres of the highest mountain range in the world came out of the darkness.

Our ride back to Kathmandu was equally gorgeous, well at least until we rejoined the suburbs of Kathmandu itself. We eventually flew back home two days later.

Riding a motorbike in Nepal sounds scarier than it is. Once you get outside Kathmandu, there is relatively little traffic on the roads and the great majority of the network is now tarmacked. In addition, drivers are even-tempered and although they may insist on overtaking at any opportunity, there is never any malice or aggression. We did ride very slowly, never in the dark and never more than a few hours a day. I would love to do it again somewhere else soon.

### **Michele Harrison**

Ed's note: Michele's ebook 'All The Gear, No Idea' (see right), detailing her epic year-long road trip round India in 1998 that is excerpted in this feature, is also available to buy from her Amazon page [right here](#).

Contact Michele at [indiamotorcycle@yahoo.com](mailto:indiamotorcycle@yahoo.com)







# A CAR!!!!

**Words & Pix:  
Dave Gurman**

When I informed the editor that due to a series of unforeseen events, I would be substituting a Saab convertible for the BMW/Ural combo that I described in "The Grand European Tour revisited", he responded with, "I'm fascinated to see how you're going to work a car article into a bike mag."

Which made me chuckle; I'd already considered appalled letters to the editor demanding to know what A CAR!!! (exclaimed in the manner of Lady Bracknell saying "A Handbag!") was doing in a MOTORCYCLE magazine!? But I really thought the editor would have understood, particularly as he came to motorbikes comparatively relatively late in life.

The thing is I'd be willing to bet that most of the people reading this don't do the majority of their annual mileage on a bike. I'm aware that there are many notable exceptions, including hundreds of thousands of commuters, who cover the same ground up to 500 times every year; but a lot of them do so out of sheer practicality, they have no great love of riding and wouldn't dream of taking their bike out for a jolly at the weekend.

On the other hand there are people out there who are older than me, who don't even possess a car licence and have ridden a bike to just about every place they've been since the fifties and all I can say is fair play to them, if they don't epitomise the term 'biker' I don't know who does. However, when it comes to the rest of you, let he - or she - who has never driven a car, cast the first "Cager!"

By the time you read this I'll have been riding bikes for exactly forty years (that's right ed, literally since you were in nappies!). Twelve years ago my wonderful world of motorcycling had reached a zenith. Although I still had a

day job, ever since the end of the previous year I'd been borrowing a different press bike every month and writing about it in The Rider's Digest. My test-riding career had started with a bang in December '02 on a Ducati Monster S4 but it ended with a whimper the following June, when the Aprilia Caponord that I'd had such a craic riding in Ireland just a few days earlier, was pushed onto me, dislocating my right knee and cracking my tibia into tiny pieces.

I was back on two wheels again soon after I had my full testicles to toes plaster removed because it was far and away the most practical means of getting around (it used to tickle my consultant that I travelled all the way across London - from Streatham to Archway - with my crutches strapped to the side of a scooter) and once I'd finally finished with all the corrective surgery - which was over four years later - I began sourcing press bikes again.

A lack of bend in my replaced right knee has meant that any bike with anything resembling rear-set foot pegs, is out of the question; but on the upside I soon discovered just how comfortable tourers and cruisers can be and I rode all sorts including a full-dress Electraglide and Triumph's mega Rocket III.

I also tested the various contenders in the super scoot sector and in spite of scooter riders generally being dismissed with the same sort of contempt as 'cagers', I decided that a large capacity automatic step-through was the most practical machine to meet my motoring needs and still provide me with some two-wheeled fun.

With the fun factor very much to the fore, in spring 2009 I persuaded the lovely people at Piaggio to give me one of their wonderful GP800s on a long-term loan. Unfortunately exactly a week after picking up the Aprilia





engined grin generator, a young chap in a Golf decided he could steal a jump on the traffic lights and left me eating tarmac with a posteriorly dislocated shoulder and a few thousand quid's worth of damage to a machine that I'd been looking forward to riding for next twelve months.

The shoulder dislocation was slightly less painful than the knee when it happened (a mere 9.8 as opposed to a full 10!) but it still gives me gyp six years later and needs replacing so - and this is where we get back to the original story - after quite a few of my friends - including a very old one with considerable experience of combos both off and on road - warned me that 'driving' a bike with a sidecar is a decidedly physical experience that demands that the pilot both push and pull on the bars, I began to get just a little worried about whether or not I'd be able to manage it.

Between times Rod Young, the owner of the BMW/Ural I'd planned to use for the trip had been forced to move to new premises and was obliged to sell the combo to help with the expense so I decided that the best way to ensure that I had a machine in place for the summer would be to buy the component parts and get Rod to put them together. Then I would be able to advertise the combination by blogging en route to Italy and back and hopefully be able to sell it on my return for enough to recoup my outlay and provide Mr Young with a good return on his labour. I've always thought the Triumph triple is the best engine I've ever experienced and Rod agreed that it would work perfectly with a sidecar so I started looking for a nice Thunderbird.

However, by this time it was getting on towards the end of May and I still hadn't even so much as driven a combination around the block so I had no idea how difficult it would

prove to be with my dodgy shoulder. Basically I'd accepted that it would almost certainly be at least a little bit painful; but Wendy had booked three weeks off, we'd rented a remote villa in Italy that we would be unable to access without transport, and we'd paid for a flight for my 19 year old to join us out there, so in the absence of any other option, I would just have to 'man up' and get on with it.

Wendy questioned the logic of potentially crippling myself daily simply to deliver on what had only been a toss away idea in the first place? It was supposed to be an eight year old's dream holiday, rather than a sexagenarian trying to prove that - even with a body that's been badly battered and broken by bikes - he can still deliver the goods for a wife who's more than a dozen years his junior. I had to concede that she made sense and as soon as I did Mackenzie (our boy) admitted that he had been having nightmares about the sidecar coming loose - the way it does in "The Lady and the Tramp"! - while we were riding around the Alps and that sealed it.

But what about the Digest's readership? I'd written an introductory article in the last issue and they are expecting an update in 189 and a full report in 190. "Sod the readers" said the missus "it's our holiday not theirs and I'm way overdue for a decent break" - and once again I had to bow to her superior wisdom and sense of perspective.

I did consider saying nothing and hoping not too many people would notice and even fewer would bother to write in about it; but then, as I said at the top, I figured that as long as I was upfront, I could probably get away with mentioning a (ssh, whisper it) car within these pages, without the cries of outrage being too deafening.

Our big problem was that having decided

that the sidecar plan was a non-runner, we now had a three-week holiday that required a vehicle. My Burgman's a big and very capable old scoot but we weren't planning to visit south east Asia and I figured the police in the EU states we'd be passing through might take a dim view of riding three up! The trouble is I haven't owned a car for over a dozen years (yeah, like I said, I'm a real biker me!) and the cost of hiring one for twenty-one days would be prohibitive.

We decided it would be a lot more sensible to buy a cheap left-hand drive car for the holiday and then sell it again when we got back. However, when I began to explore our options, I discovered that although I have over two decades of claim free bike riding and I've driven any number of hire cars over the last twelve years, my long period of non car ownership had left me with zero no claims bonus, which meant that the insurance was more than the cars we were looking at.

Consequently we raised our sights somewhat and bought an immaculate Saab convertible, which prompted comments about me going through a mid-life crisis. Besides being rather ironic given that at least half of the jibes came from born again bikers, it also suggested the worrying prospect that I might live to be a hundred and twenty! More importantly though, they ignored the reality that it was my wife - who has never so much as held a provisional licence - who fell in love with the car and paid for it so that I could chauffeur her around in style.

Rod Young has renamed his sidecar outfit (see what I did there?) "Three Wheels Better"; a term he used in the title of an article in issue 140 (way back in June '09) and many of the words on the "[Sidecar fun](#)" page of his web site - where he lauds the many benefits of driving a





combo - were in that same feature.

Now far be it from me to suggest that motorcycles - and sidecars by extension - are anything less than the greatest things ever to be attached to wheels, but reading through Rod's list of advantages, I couldn't help noticing that most of them are equally applicable to a car with a soft top and it occurred to me that if you're the sort of person who is heavily inclined towards enjoying yourself, you are likely to do so irrespective of the number of wheels on your wagon.

I'm sorry that this article isn't what you'd expected and that I won't be able to deliver the epic tale I'd hoped for part three. If you are a friend - whether in the real world or online - I'm sure you'll see plenty of photos and read the odd word about our adventures and you can be sure I'll share any links on The Rider's Digest's Facebook page (in my own name rather than as the page to avoid cluttering its timeline with car crap!) so that anyone who's

still interested can see just how much fun we're managing to having in spite of having more than the optimum number of wheels.

### Dave Gurman

Because of the sort of space a combination takes up, our ferry booking had us down as a car anyway so it was a simple case of using the "Manage my booking" feature on [the AFerry web site](#) to insert the new registration number and vehicle details - and by doing so online you only incur a £10 admin charge.

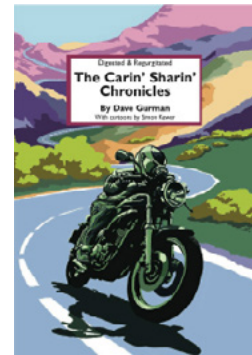
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"Dave Gurman is the thinking motorcyclist's Jezza. He's deeper, balder, funnier and infinitely less irritating - and he's had a lifelong passion for bikes!"

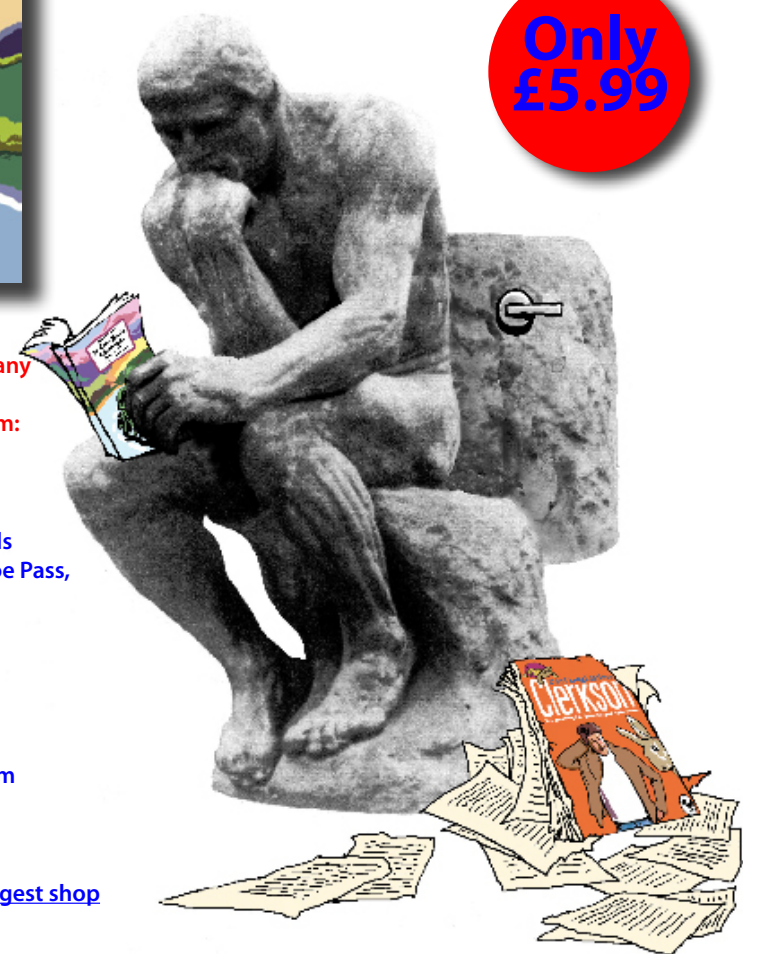
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## Making a Dangerous Bed...

**B**ack in my Colorado days, I used to hang out with a trio of guys who had a variety of motorcycle skills. The leader of the pack was Brett, a guy who practically grew up on motorcycles and who is one of the nicest, most patient and loyal people I've ever known. I have considered Brett my best friend for two-thirds of my life, even though I haven't seen him more than a couple of times in the last ten years.

David was a newbie to motorcycling, but he had taken an MSF course and had a pretty good grip on his skills and physical and mental limits. Richard was slightly less new to motorcycling than David, but had started off thinking motorcycling was going to come naturally to him and discovered it didn't. He'd crashed his bikes a couple of times, trying to keep up with Brett and me, and had moved from overly confident to massively paranoid. By that time, I'd been riding for twenty-five years and had way more confidence than skill. I'd moved to Colorado from California by myself and was wallowing in my independence and a relatively responsibility-free, semi-single-guy life. So, my moto-motto was "Shut up and ride." I even wore a t-shirt with that printed on the front and back.

One "feature" of this collection of diverse skills was an assortment of different start-up times for a ride to anywhere. If we were going to ride to downtown Denver for coffee, it would take anywhere from five minutes to an hour-and-a-half for the four of us to be ready to

roll: five minutes for me and ninety minutes for Richard, for example.

One weekend, we decided Pikes Peak needed climbing one more time before the mountain riding season ended. Brett and I did most of the planning and we picked a filling station on the south end of Aurora for the rendezvous. Our start time was 7:00AM with some margin to accommodate the late risers and slow movers, but 8:00AM slipped by with one of the guys still "on the way." The first part of our route was going to be Parker Road (Colorado Highway 83) south to Colorado Springs. It's about 80 miles, via 83, to Colorado Springs and another 35 miles to Pikes Peak Park through some backroads around the Springs. Two-and-a-half hours on a slow day. Once you got into the park, the old road was 19 miles of beautifully unpaved twisty mining trail to the top. (This year, they finished widening and paving the whole thing and there is no more point in seeing the damage done than there is hoping that Newt Gingrich is married for life, this time. When the Peak was unpaved it was "America's Highway." Now, it's just a tourist path.) We had a breakfast plan for Colorado Springs, but with the late start Brett and I decided to move the meal to the café at the top of the peak. An hour after our start time, we had a mild disagreement about waiting or going.

Since I hadn't planned on plodding along at the pace the two newbies would be setting, I decided to meet them at the park. We'd done

this a dozen times in the past and Brett and I sorted out where we'd be about when and agreed that if the pack didn't catch up to me at the base of the park by 11:00AM, we'd meet at the top. That settled, I hit the road. I'd loaded camping gear and a change of clothes, in case I decided to take the long way home after the Pikes Peak trip. I took a few deviations from the short route to the park, hoping that the guys would catch up or pass me. Still, I arrived at the base of the park on time and waited a half-hour in the tourist center before I bought a pass and headed up the mountain. We had some late season rain that year and the road was pretty torn up from traffic and erosion, so it was in perfect condition and I pretty much had the Peak to myself. I got to the top pretty quickly, for me, and figured I had an hour or two to myself before the pack arrived.

My bike, a 1992 Yamaha 850 TDM, was coated from the wet road and my chain was bone dry and caked in clay. I found some rags in the tourist trap's dumpster and filled a milk bottle with water to get started on some maintenance. I scrubbed off the muck from the chain and gave it a WD40 rinse before applying fresh chain oil. It didn't need it, but I went through the chain freeplay adjustment routine. After cleaning up the frame and engine, I made the rounds of all the fasteners, making sure everyone was in place and tight. I was parked right on the edge of the old tourist center's parking lot, so the workshop view was spectacular. I pulled the air filter, which was clean, and reapplied some fresh filter oil for no reason other than that I had it out and I had the oil with me. Short of checking valve clearances, I'd done everything I could think of to the bike.

So, I went back into the tourist center and had breakfast; a couple of donuts and a large cup of coffee. I walked out back and

got into a conversation with a cog railroad conductor about the first and last train trip of the year, which often involved pushing a lot of unexpected show up or down the track and a lot of scared passengers. He went back to work and I was bored.

As long as you don't exit the park, you can ride up and down the mountain all you want for your park pass. So, I decided to ride down the mountain and meet the guys on their way up. I did that, twice, and, still, they weren't anywhere to be found. In 1992, none of us had cell phones so calling wasn't an option. I wasn't really worried, but closing time was approaching and I didn't want to be stuck on the mountain in the dark. Finally, just a few minutes before the visitor center closed, the three guys rolled into the lot. Brett looked pissed. I couldn't figure out the other two guys' expressions.

It turned out that, in spite of the late start, Richard and David insisted on stopping for breakfast, which burned an hour-and-a-half. After eating, they plodded along at a barely faster than walking pace until they got to the park. To "celebrate" riding the mountain, before they'd ridden the mountain, they stopped at the park store and bought "I Rode the Peak" patches for their jackets. Once they started up the mountain, the pace slowed even more. The switchbacks, the wheel ruts, the deep drainage ditch on one side and the steep drop-offs on the other combined to make the last few mile sheer terror for Richard and David. Brett stuck with them, dedicated friend that he is, and had about as much fun riding the mountain as he would have had in a dentist's chair; although the chair might have been a faster ride.

As they rolled into the lot, a park ranger was herding the straggling tourists to their cars so he could close the lot's gate. The guys





didn't even have time to take off their gear before they were being hustled off of the summit and back down the mountain. That might have been a good thing, since riding downhill scared is much worse than riding uphill and they didn't have time to work up a good batch of fear before they were on their way down the mountain. The first few miles were the roughest, especially with the road in end-of-season condition and some pretty energetic bursts of wind near the top. They paddled around the sharpest of the corners and I took up the rear so that Brett could at least go down the mountain without herding sheep all the way. After we left the parking lot, I shut off my motor and coasted behind the guys, stopping every mile or two to let them get a ways ahead of me so that I could collect enough momentum to roll through corners without having to push. It took a good bit more

than an hour to get to the park entrance. The gate was closed, the park was abandoned, but it was easy enough to get the bikes around the barrier. Just before the park road merged into Manitou Avenue, I saw Brett parked just off of the road. He was in much better humor, since he'd had time to find an ice cream shop and had drained a large milk shake while waiting for us to crawl down the mountain.

It was dark and riding back home via I25 was the only practical option, since Parker Road would be filled with deer and antelope for the next few hours and none of us was up for picking antlers out of our teeth. The guys settled for finding a cabin in Manitou Springs for the night. I was all for snagging a campsite in Garden of the Gods or just heading out Colorado 24 for Buena Vista and finding a campsite where ever one turned up. David and Richard convinced me that I wanted to hang

with them for the night by insisting that they would cover the cost difference between a campsite (free, if I camped between Manitou and Buena Vista) and the cabin. Like an idiot, I became a follower.

They had a cabin site in mind and found it quickly. It was a two bedroom cabin with two fold-out beds in the huge living room. I took one of the living room beds. Our plan was to get the room sorted out and walk to a nearby restaurant for dinner. So, I was going about that when I dropped the damn bed on my left foot. I was pulling out the frame, expecting it to swing up before it lowered to the floor. Instead, the thing shot out about two feet and dropped like a spring-loaded anvil; right on my big toe. I'd pulled off my boots at the door, so there was nothing between my foot and that assassin's weapon and it almost amputated my toe.

In moments, the toe turned black. It was bleeding like a stuck pig, so I used up all of the stuff in my medical kit to medicate and bandage the bit toe to it's nearby partner. We went to dinner, me shoeless on my hobbled foot. I drained a bottle of some kind of painkiller to try to sleep that night and woke up to find that the toe nail had lifted off of the toe, in spite of my having drilled a neat pressure-letting hole in the nail and taped it tight before I went to bed. I could not get my left boot on, so I had to cut the boot and gaff-tape it together; once my foot was in it. Walking was miserable and awkward. Shifting was painful and had to be done with my whole foot or heel. Buena Vista was out of the question. Getting back home would be an achievement.

We had breakfast in Manitou Springs. I set out ahead of the guys under the assumption that they'd probably catch me and, if I ended up stuck on the side of the road unable to ride, we'd work out a plan to get my bike and me

home. Once I hit the interstate, I was pretty sure I'd make it home and that didn't turn out to be a problem. The next day, my doc pulled the toe nail, stitched a patch over the exposed toe, and put my toe in a brace that would be my hobbling partner for about two weeks. The bone at the end of the toe (distal phalanges) was crushed.

For the next several months, I took a lot of crap about being the "big bad bike racer who was crippled by a hide-a-bed." Obviously, the real reason I ended up crippled was that I stayed back to be a nice guy and escort the slow guys down Pikes Peak. Not only do "nice guys finish last," but they might even get hurt for the effort. Screw being nice. "Shut up and ride."

## Thomas Day

[geezerwithagrudge.blogspot.com](http://geezerwithagrudge.blogspot.com)

[minnesotamotorcyclmonthly.com](http://minnesotamotorcyclmonthly.com)





# ISCHGL PAVES THE WAY

Words & pix: Andy Kyriacou



[Ed's note: Andy is the vocalist for 80's pop band Modern Romance, and he puts down the microphone long enough to write this review from the perspective of a "ride for fun" biker.]

**M**y invitation to Ischgl as part of a planned press trip (my other, more casual occupation), was originally scheduled for last year, but other activities in my music career prevented me from taking up the offer. However, this year I was able to go to what promised to be, the jewel in Austria's skiing / biking crown.

Indeed, this trip encompassed a major variation for me compared to other such trips, in that it involved a motorcycle as an integral part of the experience. The whole idea was to traipse over the Alps on motorbikes with other journalists / bikers, and write about the opportunity for bikers to fly to Austria (via a number of routes and airlines available), hire a motorbike, and take great pleasure thereafter by riding on some of the apparently amazing roads which snake through these imposing mountains.

Once I had accepted the invitation to attend, I felt a little apprehensive, as my knowledge of bikes is primarily as a "ride for fun" biker, using the machine for days out with fellow bikers, and for 90% of my trips to the West End, City of London, etc. Although riding in London is scary to some, I consider it normal and not as serious as say, track days, testing of new bikes and equipment, trying out new advanced rider courses, etc. Hell, I don't even ride in the rain! So if I am honest, I would say I'm a relaxed, casual, fair weather rider.

As I arrived at Heathrow to meet up with dedicated bike journalists (2 males and a female), my initial apprehension seemed justified - within five minutes, they revealed

more with regards their knowledge of biking than I have picked up in nine years of owning a bike. Thank goodness for these enlightened times, where we no longer have to feel threatened by the fact that a woman knows more than us men, in a supposedly "male environment", or a male dominated pastime. The three of them had met several times previously on bike assignments, and chatted away merrily, involving me where possible. It was all very strange for me, yet an eye opener, as it clearly demonstrated how little I knew about the real biking world, when these three turned the conversation to their work.

Undeterred by this lack of knowledge, I made it my mission to treat this as I would any other press trip, and basically inform the reader of my movements in general, give an idea of the things one can do in the region, report any culinary delights I came across, and basically, espouse on the state of Ischgl and the surrounding areas.

One of the main "exports" of Ischgl, is tourism, as it is a premier location for skiing. It has a huge area for this activity - 240 kilometres of pisted runs in fact, which is substantially more than many well-known resorts in Austria and other territories. This in turn, attracts thousands of skiers every year, and in order to keep current with equipment and facilities, vast sums are spent on the infrastructure for this pastime/sport. For instance, it is serviced by 44 lifts, ensuring skiers spend less time queuing at the base of the mountains and more time doing what they paid their money to do. (It's a shame Disney cannot do the same for their visitors!). A new cable car lift was constructed last year, at a cost of 18.5 million Euros, and another is being replaced this year, which will cost 40 million Euros. Such investment is seen as necessary, if the satisfaction of visitors is to



continue.

The skiing season opens during the last week of November, and ends the first weekend of May, when warmer weather melts the snow. The season opens (and closes) with a live concert, now a regular in the calendar, and always features a big name, drawing in thousands of people, both locally and of course visitors. Entry to the show is free, with a fee charged only for the use of the lifts which take you to the concert site. This year it was the turn of our very own Robbie Williams to close Ischgl's ski season on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, and previous years have seen Sting, Deep Purple, and Kylie, as the act to close the season.

Ischgl is set in the Paznaun Valley within Tirol, the largest province in Austria. The area is in the Silvretta mountains, part of that "small" range known as the Alps, which stretch across eight countries, including France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. Tourism in Ischgl is financed in two ways: Firstly, a tax on private citizens and businesses, and secondly by a nominal levy on tourists of 1.7 Euros, per person, per night. This enables the area to keep up the high standards enjoyed by visitors and residents alike, ensuring the constant influx of travellers, spending their money locally, and creating an Austrian "circle of life", financially. This revenue also provides the lump sum required for the aforementioned concerts.

Access to the area by air is fairly straightforward. Swiss or BA will take you to Zurich, a three hour drive away. Alternatively, Easyjet fly to Innsbruck twice a week (one hour away). Monarch and Ryanair also fly to the region. Flights on average, are around £175 return, but of course these prices do show an increase at school holiday times.

So, on to the other pastime, the one which I was in Ischgl to write about - motorbiking.



Many lovers of the long, open, winding road take their own bikes to the region, but for those who do not relish the idea of, for example, an 800 mile journey from the UK before they get to ride through Ischgl, there is an alternative. A marvellous system has been set up at the High-Bike Test Centre in Paznaun (see pic, previous page), whereby you can hire and test a multitude of bikes, across many brands and ranges. It is the only cross-brand motorcycle centre in the area, and ensures that due to the selection of bikes available, the experience is truly one which allows a rider to test out different machines every day, on these challenging roads. All gear, including helmets, gloves, boots and clothing, is available for hire, too (pic, left). This scheme was borne initially as a result of ideas from the tourist board, and is now in its 4<sup>th</sup> year. This biking promotion seems to be really pulling in bike lovers, as we passed several returning from their day out, whilst approaching our base for the next few days, the Hotel Piz Tasna.

The first evening together was dedicated primarily to dinner at the hotel, giving everyone time to get acquainted, whilst also enabling the group to subject Sue Freeman, responsible for setting this whole thing up, to a barrage of questions about the region. Sue handled everything thrown at her with consummate ease. Hardly surprising – she has been officially promoting the area for the last 13 years!

Dinner was wonderful, beginning with a salad bar, then in the following order: A small venison sausage, tomato soup served in what resembled a glass cappuccino cup, ravioli with parmesan and krauter, a mini lemon sorbet (in a mini ice cream cone), a main course of fried beef in onions accompanied by what I assumed was the Austrian equivalent of a hash brown potato as a base, with salad, and



finished off with apple strudel with strawberry ice cream and apricot puree. Satiated would be an understatement. A lovely meal, with some new bikers who would more than likely teach me a thing or two.

The next day, following a hearty hotel breakfast, the bike centre was first on the agenda. Licences were flashed, deposits for security were paid, and helmets and all manner of garb were modelled then nabbed. Let me say at this point - DO NOT forget your licence if indeed, you do go on this venture. Telling the guys at the High Bike Centre that you have owned bikes for years simply will not do and you will be disappointed when you are not given a bike. On this trip, your licence is as important as your passport.

Once we were all ready, we rolled out like Mounties on our conquering steeds – steeds we had chosen. As the owner of a Yamaha Dragstar cruiser, used primarily in London and on motorways, I chose the only cruiser I could see, a Triumph Thunderbird. A mistake on my part, which would be evident later, but which could have been avoided had my “fellow” journalists been a little less concerned with their mutual back slapping, and a little more concerned with my well-being.

Our ride took us high into the Alps. The views were truly breathtaking, the greenery of the Alpines reminiscent of Norway, and the excellent road surfaces making this the ideal biker thrill - sometimes there was a drop on the other side of the barrier on the bends, at times the bends were long and sweeping, or tight and short. It was all there for the average to dedicated biker. There are even opportunities for the “knee almost on the ground”, should you desire and be good enough. I found myself fascinated by the Trisanna River which accompanied much of our ride. At times it was



*The Alpinarium*



*Andy's rented Triumph*

very shallow, breaking onto rocks and almost resembling a brook, but further on it would turn into a bright, beautiful, emerald green swirling torrent. It was not dissimilar to a flame, drawing you to stare at it, but with bends, dips, and gradient changes galore, this was hardly the time! I had to negotiate more ridiculously angled bends (hairpins and dog legs, etc.), than I have ever encountered in nine years of owning my bike. However, this is where I came unstuck with regards my bike choice. The sheer effort of steering this thing around these bends proved too much, and my forearms started to feel as though a truck had gone over them. After what seemed like 6 hours, but in reality was just under 2, we eventually reached St. Moritz, in Switzerland, where we stopped at Café Badillard for a drink. I was ecstatic to get off the bike, taking the opportunity to remove the excellent Rukka jacket and trousers I had hired, cool down, and allow my forearms some respite as we sat 1,464 metres above sea level. We would soon be heading down, stopping off somewhere for lunch, after which it was back to the hotel. My poor aching arms were pleased at this prospect. At least, that's what I thought! How wrong I was. Someone casually pointed out that our guide Andreas had told her we were about 40% of the way, in terms of altitude! Being sensible, and realising trying to brave it was not an option if safety was to be considered, I opted to have one of the guides escort me back to the hotel, taking a different, flatter route. (For which I was most grateful!) By the time we reached the hotel, I was thankful to still be able to just about operate the brake and clutch levers. My hands and arms were shot to pieces. I was unsure if I was up to going out again the following day. This was real biker stuff, and admittedly, I am by comparison to these riders, a relative beginner.





However, be not deterred you bikers out there, by my lack of endurance and my poor choice of bike, for this IS the holy grail of motorbiking. I can plainly see that. Ischgl/The Tirol/The Alps - this lovely picturesque region is to bikers what Graceland is to Elvis fans – home of what they love. I was probably perceived by my fellow bikers in Ischgl as a cautious or reserved biker, maybe even a part - time biker. I'll accept that, but it doesn't stop me realising that if it's motorbikes you're into, then this is the place to come, without a doubt. I for one, will be back, and will make a more informed choice when it comes to which bike I will ride. Also, on this visit photo opportunities were very scarce, due the weather and also, the reluctance of the other bikers to stop – it seemed that “throttle open” was the main focus of the day!

I have to also mention the absolute impeccable way this town, and the region in general, is presented. Ischgl in particular looks like a newly built toy town, which is due to the

fact that all buildings are constantly renovated BEFORE they are in need of it. So, we have a lovely, well-maintained and picturesque town, inspiring backdrop, some of the best and largest terrain for skiing in the world, and also some amazing roads for biking, in this small corner of the planet. Mountain biking is huge out here, too and brings in much revenue to the area.

To summarise, the hotels are excellent and reasonable, the food is wonderful, the people extremely friendly and always willing to help, and you can take part in some of the best motorbiking, skiing and mountain biking in the world, dependent on the time of year. My fellow bikers pointed out that we had breakfast in Austria, tea in Switzerland, and they went on to have lunch in Italy! What an amazing experience. Although I didn't complete that final leg, I will definitely be returning to Ischgl, ensuring that the weather forecast is more to my liking, and also that the bike I choose is not

one which requires three months of gym work before it can be handled!

So, what are you waiting for? Get your plastic out and pick up the phone. You won't be sorry. For specialist info, please contact: [info@highbike-paznaun.com](mailto:info@highbike-paznaun.com). If you do go, prompted by this review, please do drop me a line at [AndrosJournalist@aol.com](mailto:AndrosJournalist@aol.com) and let me know if it lived up to your expectations.

Enjoy!

## Andy Kyriacou

### Footnote.

The only negative for me on this trip, was the attitude of the British journalists. The guys from Germany, and Switzerland were fine, but unfortunately, apart from one of the three Brits, who turned out to be a fellow “Gooner” and quite friendly, the other two adopted this air of

“WE are true bike journalists, you are merely a general journalist who is a lowly casual rider”. They definitely considered me not of their sort when I didn't go on to Italy and I noticed a reluctance to include me in their conversation, generally. Indeed, one of them, a 23-year old who thought she was to the biking world what Christina Aguilera is to music, sat next to me on the flight home (how scintillating for me!) and never spoke. I thought all this was a shame, and did wonder what would happen if I adopted the attitude of: “I am a part-time journalist whose real job is in a band which has had 8 hits worldwide, and I make ten times more money than you guys – you are just lowly journalists”. Where would it all end? I thought that, irrespective of the type and power of a machine we ride, so long as it has two wheels we are all bikers, and we support each other. Apparently not.





# Wizzard's Guide to Riding On French Roads

Words & pics: Wizzard (no, really...)



**If you believe what you read in a lot of the UK biking press, virtually everyone who owns a bike travels abroad as often, and with as little thought, as nipping down the local supermarket for a six pack. The UK magazines are full of tales of exciting travels to anywhere in the world you could think of, and lots of places that you've never heard of.**

To make us all feel guilty about not making similar trips, they choose the most unsuitable bikes possible for their adventures (e.g. Nick Sanders on a Yamaha R1, or the delectable Lois Pryce on a Yamaha XT225). They can make for interesting reading, as long as you don't read too many, but I'd be willing to bet that many of the people reading this have never ridden outside the UK. There are plenty of good reasons for this, including a lack of confidence in the reliability of your bike, financial (or family) restrictions, or a total lack of interest. I fell into all these categories, until I eventually ventured abroad, enjoyed the experience, and repeated it many times.

A few years ago I quit my job, family and Britain, and moved to France. Before I left, I sold virtually everything I had, including my bike collection, to help fund the renovation of an old French farm house I'd bought years before. The plan was to renovate the house, and then reward myself for all my efforts by buying a bike. That idea lasted a whole six weeks. My house is within earshot of a great biking road, and every day of that six weeks was pure torture, listening to riders screaming (or thundering) past, while I was slaving away under a hot sun.

So, needless to say, I bought a bike, and had some fun learning how to enjoy and survive the wonderful roads in rural France, and I thought it would be worth passing on my experiences for any riders who may be tempted over here

for a two wheeled holiday.

In general the roads are maintained in much better condition than the UK, and there are innumerable routes where you can ride for many miles, following perfect curves on a beautifully smooth surface, and rarely see another vehicle. Speed humps are a rare sight, but like all bad ideas trialled in the UK, are increasing at an alarming rate in some areas. For the guys that are into green laning, there are hundreds of routes to play on, without all the hassles that have appeared in the UK over the last few decades.

There is usually a lot less traffic as well, but a word of warning – often when a rural road is being resurfaced it's done by quickly spreading a layer of tar and then a thick layer of gravel over the top. No attempt is made to compress it with a roller – that is the job of the next few thousand cars driving over it, and that can take a long time given the lack of usage! It can be a bit scary hitting the deep loose gravel on the bike, especially if it's a three inch deep berm on a rarely used junction or corner. I have a few friends who can confirm just how lethal these gravel traps can be.

There is a much greater level of respect for two wheeled travellers here. Most people will move over to give you extra space to overtake, bikes tend to park anywhere they like without being ticketed, restaurants will not turn you away because you're wearing leathers, and the general public will go out of their way to help if you've broken down. However, if you get lost and ask for directions, your command of the French language had better be bloody good, as it can get very complicated.

It all sounds idyllic, but of course an experienced rider will be aware that "surprises" could happen at any time. I could probably write a whole book on the subject of "surprises"



alone, but I'll just give a few examples which confirm that you should ride with the attitude that anything could happen, however unlikely, especially as you are going round a blind corner.

A lot of French roads come into the category of rural, which goes some way to explain the high proportion of agricultural incidents below.

Cattle are often moved from field to field by crossing roads. The attendant farmer should display a red flag, and usually does, but the problem is the location of that flag. Common sense would say it should be positioned at least 100 metres before the crossing, in both directions, but the reality is he will likely be carrying it and swiping the rumps of any recalcitrant cattle to keep them moving. And even if your timing is good, and they've already crossed the road before you get there, they are

sure to have left some slippery little reminders to catch the unwary. Horses too are regular road users, and tend to get a bit upset when a noisy bike comes thundering towards them. Not half as upset as their owners though!

Cattle don't even need to be alive to be a risk. I once came across the corpse of a Charolais bull, the size of a people carrier, lying upside down in the middle of the road with its legs in the air, very dead. Not quite like a pheasant that you can slip in the pannier and take home for tea, and much more messy if you are unfortunate enough to hit it.

Single track country roads (with no handy passing places like the UK) can be very picturesque but that opinion can quickly change when faced with an enormous piece of farm machinery trundling towards you. Do not assume that the driver has seen you – spectacles are very expensive here, and a fair





amount of the local vin rouge may have already been consumed by that stage of the day (*any* stage of the day) – so its probably up to you to find a safe way round, bearing in mind that roadside ditches can be deep enough to lose a Goldwing. Which, when I think about, is as good a place for a Goldwing as anywhere.

As I write this the Tour de France cycle race is on, so I better mention our engineless colleagues. There is a general rule here that if someone hits a cyclist it's usually assumed that it wasn't the cyclist's fault, even if it really was. Cycling is a very popular leisure interest, and the roads can be full of multicoloured lycra-clad fitness freaks, of all ages, and sometimes in large groups, taking up more than their fair share of the road. Resist the temptation to scare them with your horn, or cut them up, because they travel surprisingly quickly. The next time you stop for a beer or fuel, you are likely to be soon surrounded by a horde of very angry, wasp-like characters.

Speaking of beer, the authorities have made a big effort over the last few years to clamp down on drink driving, but it's a big country, with a maze of tiny lanes linking hamlets to towns. There is still a generation who like a bottle of red at (our) breakfast time (they've already done 3 hours work in the fields), another at lunchtime, and yet more at night. Random roadside breath tests are becoming more common, and of course that's an ideal time to check tyre treads, paperwork, etc. Any excuse to slap you with an on the spot ninety euro fine. Another favourite is to hide near a stop sign for people to watch for people who don't fully stop – yeah, another ninety euros straight in the Christmas fund. The way I look at it, I like to stay sober on the bike to be able to avoid those that aren't.

With all these lovely roads it's tempting to

let the right wrist twist a bit more than normal. In the past I've travelled throughout France at high speeds without any worries about speed traps or cameras, however over the last few years this has all changed, with fixed cameras popping up more and more. These are *usually* (but not always) advertised by a sign some distance before, giving time to slow down, but there is a possibility that at some stage these signs will be taken down, making life a bit more difficult. As in the UK, there are mobile camera units, and if you see a gendarme watching you with binoculars, yep, these are speed cameras too. The fixed cameras don't seem to pick up on Brit registrations, but I've heard that the technology may soon be in place to send the fine to the UK, with the points added to your licence. Mobile units can issue on the spot fines, and crazy speeds will result in the loss of your vehicle and licence. If vehicles approaching you are flashing their headlights at you, it's not because they think they know you, but to warn you of a gendarme presence ahead. Motorway speed limits are slightly higher than in the UK (around 80mph), but remember these reduce when it's raining.

Now for something really bizarre. There is a class of car here called a "sans permis", which when translated means that you don't need a licence to drive them (see pic, left/bottom). They are usually driven by people who cannot get a driving licence (bad eyesight, mentally retarded, or just inept), or by people who have lost their licence for repeated drink driving offences. These vehicles come in various guises (car, van, pick up or sporty coupe (!)) and all are restricted to 50kph (30 mph) as a maximum, are very fragile, cost a fortune, and insurance is sky-high for obvious reasons. Because of their slow speed, following vehicles tend to overtake them as soon as they encounter



them, including blind bends. Because of driver related deficiencies they do tend to have a lot of accidents, but I'd bet they cause a lot more due to the frustrations of normal vehicles following them.

OK, enough of the warnings, which a good rider will factor into his pace anyway. When you get to France, there is a wealth of things to do and places to visit, no matter what your personal interests. Chateaux, prehistoric caves, amazing towns, lively cities, war museums, race circuits and virtually anything else you could desire. Why not have a themed holiday, visiting vintage vehicle museums, or investigate the history of the Resistance. In the summer there are innumerable events throughout France, with free live music or street theatre mixing with more traditional folk dancing and gourmet fetes. These events are not always well advertised, but any local tourist office should be able to point you in the right direction (just make sure you get a map). Most paying events, such as race circuits, have much lower entry fees than the UK, so that's a bonus.

If you are into the custom bike scene, you could visit one of the many shows held throughout the season, but it should be noted that their frequency varies dramatically from region to region. Entry is again usually very cheap or free, and if you do have to pay, you get a lot for your cash. I have seen none of the political hassles so common in the UK, even at the HA or Outcast shows where 12000+ attendees is the norm.

One thing you should be aware of in France is that all social activity revolves totally around food, even bike club runs. You can find restaurants to suit all budgets, but if you want good value for money and don't need a big choice, watch where the truckers go. These "Relais" usually do a meal for ten to twelve

euros, with big portions and wine thrown in. Which reminds me, watch out for large trucks being driven a bit erratically in the afternoon!

The reality is that this is a great place to ride a bike, the weather is usually a lot better than the UK, and the populace make you feel very welcome, so why not start planning your first trip across the channel. And, if you like it, you might even end up doing what I did, and moving here permanently!

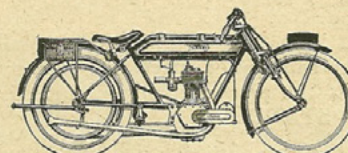
## Wizzard

# Norton

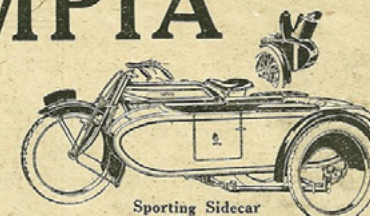
STANDARD MODELS

AT

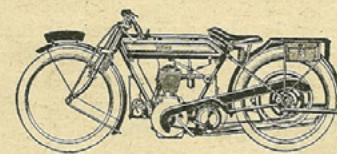
## OLYMPIA



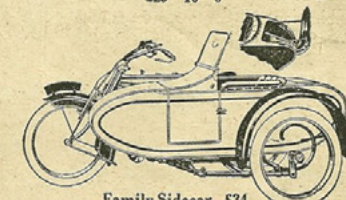
Model No. 9. Direct Belt drive. £80.



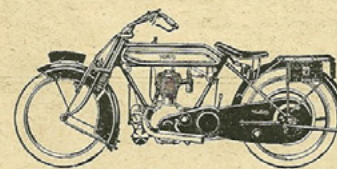
Sporting Sidecar  
£29 10 0



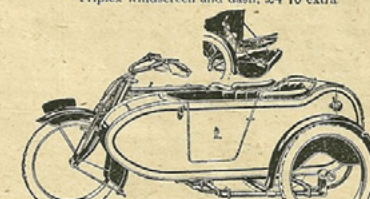
Model 16H. 3½ h.p. 3-speed. £115.



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*In answering this advertisement it is desirable to mention "The Motor Cycle."*



# It's Electrifying!

Harley-Davidson's Project LiveWire arrives in Blighty  
Could it ever be *The One That You Want..?*

Words: Paul Blezard  
Pix: Blez/H-D





I've been following electric two wheeler development for a good few years now and I've ridden a great variety on road, dirt and track; everything from electric bicycles to the fully-enclosed, 200bhp, 300kph Peraves Monotracer plus Quantyas, Brammos, BMWs, Energicas, KTM's, Kubergs, Mavizens, OSETs, a TT-winning Agni and a lot of Zeros. Yet I was as surprised as anyone when Harley-Davidson sprung their Project LiveWire onto an unsuspecting world in 2014.

Of all the major manufacturers, they were the last that I, or indeed most people, would have expected to embrace the sorcery of the battery-powered bike. With their long history of emphasizing tradition over common sense, it seemed about as likely as the Pope promoting birth control and quickie divorces! And they didn't do it in a small way, with just a show bike and a couple of prototypes, no Sirree! Harley really pushed the boat out by building thirty prototypes and taking them on a test-ride tour all over the USA last year in a pair of massive trucks. They gathered rider responses from no fewer than 7,000 test rides and 12,000 more 'jump starts' (as they called them) on a rolling road. Feedback was 84% positive and 74% of those who tried one said they'd actually consider buying a LiveWire – and most of them were existing Harley owners. Just think about that for a moment.....

In fact it could be argued that since last summer The Motor Company has done more to advance the cause of electric motorcycles than any other major manufacturer. BMW already have their highly impressive C evolution electric maxiscooter on sale throughout Europe but it's barely pierced the consciousness of most motorcyclists and very few would even consider taking it for a test ride because it's



a scooter (their loss, believe me!). KTM now have their super-lightweight Freeride electric trailbike and supermoto in selected dealers too but they are not exactly designed to appeal to mainstream motorcyclists either, even in the petrol version of the Freeride, let alone as electrics. (Also highly recommended though!).

### Stormy Millbrook Weather

Last December Harley made the LiveWire the centrepiece of their stand at the NEC and in May the LiveWire test-ride 'road show' came to Europe. The UK got 'first dibs' at Millbrook Proving Ground from May 14-17, starting on a rain-soaked Thursday with sixty members of the press and meedja. The test rides continued the following day with Harley dealers and industry representatives while the weekend was devoted to interested punters who had entered a competition via the H-D website, deliberately split 2-1 between Harley owners and other motorcyclists.

The pre-ride presentation revealed that the LiveWire is very light by Harley standards, at only 210kgs, helped by the first alloy frame the company has ever produced, – it weighs just 6kgs. Power output wasn't mentioned, but a sub-four-second 0-60mph time was. (It is strongly rumoured that San Francisco-based Mission, who have been developing race-winning electric bike technology for many years, helped with the development of the LiveWire by allowing H-D to use much of the racer's technology - see pic, left) After a quick introduction to the dashboard and controls the first twist of the wrist left no doubt that the prototype electric machine can match any air-cooled Harley on acceleration, but with turbine smoothness and a sound which Harley describe as 'like a jet engine'. (And like most electric machines, the LiveWire is 'twist and go'





*H-D publicity shot of four LiveWires at the Brooklyn Bridge arch*



with no clutch or 'gear shifter' but conventional hand front and foot rear brakes – the same as all the latest Zeros.)

With neither ABS nor traction control, caution was required on Millbrook's challenging, armco-lined 'Alpine Route' in the wet conditions. I'd ridden this track once before, in the dry, way back in 2001, when Piaggio re-launched their 100mph X9 500 at Millbrook following a disastrous first launch in Spain when a French journalist was thrown off his wobbling scooter while travelling at considerable speed along the Autopista..... Thanks to Millbrook's famous speed bowl Piaggio were able to demonstrate that the host of modifications they'd made to their machine had made it safe and stable even when flat out. It was an interesting experience, but not nearly as much fun as riding the Alpine Route, which is a bit like a 2-lane competition hill climb, but with a blind brow and 'down' sections as well as 'up' ones.....

I found myself riding behind Marc Potter, long time but now ex-editor of MCN, and after he took the first corner rather conservatively I moved alongside him with a view to making a pass into the second. I'm glad I thought better of it because the downhill corner was tighter than I'd anticipated and my buttocks were firmly clenched for a couple of seconds as I shut the throttle, made good use of the electric motor's braking but also gave the conventional brakes a gentle squeeze and ran right to the edge of the tarmac. As I breathed a sigh of relief I said to myself "You would've looked a right twat if you'd dropped it on the second corner of the test!" We then had a pause and a re-grouping before being set off one at a time into the second section of the Alpine Route where several photographers awaited our once-only passing.



**Blez on the LiveWire at the Millbrook test**



**The LiveWire and a 'conventional' H-D**

### **Fast Acceleration but Slow Steering**

The LiveWire's handling was predictable but definitely Harley-esque, with a big heave on the bars required to change direction, the geometry making the bike feel longer and heavier than it is – the wheelbase is only 1468mm (57.8 in) but the front wheel is an 18 inch rather than 17. The riding position was actually more 'roadster' than 'cruiser' with a gentle lean forward to the bars on the distinctive 'naked' machine, which I found very comfortable. The seat is good'n'low too, at only 742mm (29 inches). The conventional disc brakes worked well but the regenerative braking through the electric motor was so good that it was hardly necessary to use them at all. By contrast, the funky low-slung mirror-indicators were fine as indicators but completely useless as mirrors.

We then had another re-grouping during which I turned the ignition off and then struggled to re-start the beast as the electronics had to go through a whole 'reboot' sequence, after pressing various buttons in the right order. I'd been looking forward to getting out onto Millbrook's banked 'speed bowl' but, in contrast to the Alpine Route, it was a major anti-climax since our one and only lap was entirely devoted to getting action photos, one at a time, from a slow-moving van. A second 'fast lap' would have been good, even in the rain, to experience the LiveWire's 92mph (restricted) top speed. I was extremely jealous when I heard that mere punters had had the chance to get their LiveWires flat out on the speed bowl over the following weekend. For the extra minute or two that would have been required, Harley really let us journos down there, and no mistake.

Nevertheless, I was still mighty impressed by the prototype H-D. It felt pokier than both the Brammo Empulse and Zero's new





*Top-secret spy/phone cam shot of the Millbrook LiveWires on charge*

SR, and Harley's specifications support that impression. The company claim 55Kw/74hp and 70Nm/52ft-lb of torque from the AC Induction 3-Phase 4-Pole motor, compared to only 40Kw/54hp for the Brammo and 50Kw/67hp for the Zero SR. However, Zero claims an astonishing 144Nm/106ft-lb of torque – double the Harley's! The Zero SR also has double the range of the LiveWire when fitted with the maximum 'power tank' battery pack – 115 miles 'combined', 77 'highway' compared to only 53/39 miles for the Harley (calculated by the same EPA formula). The Zero is 5kgs lighter too, complete with ABS, which the Harley lacks in this prototype form. (Having nearly been caught out by the awesome torque of the Zero, and seen a fellow journo put on his ear by it, I'm convinced that traction control is as important as the compulsory-for-2016 ABS on electric motorcycles.) The Harley certainly had no trouble spinning up its rear wheel in the wet conditions at Millbrook.

#### **'A Game-Changer'**

For those who were experiencing proper electric power for the first time the LiveWire was a revelation. Andy Hornsby, editor of American-V magazine, was amazed and described it as 'a game-changer'. Steve Green of Guildford Harley-Davidson said, "It was awesome, the acceleration was amazing, as was the regen braking. I wish we could've ridden it for longer." Shaz Ahmad, MD of Leeds Harley-Davidson said, "It was great and if they can get the range for a production model up to 85 miles and keep the price below £20,000 we could definitely sell it."

Dave Luscombe, who co-ordinates the Motorcycle Industry Association's electric division said: "It's a perfect two wheeled executive commuter and I reckon would sell

now, even in prototype form. I was totally sold on it as a proper bike and a proper e-bike solution. It's a vision of the future of urban motorcycling and how new clean technology can be moulded into a product that will have a strong appeal to existing mainstream riders." Luscombe rode the LiveWire alongside industry spokesman Craig Carey-Clinch and a couple of senior officials from the Department for Transport. Clinch said, "The power delivery is exceptional and the bike itself was a pleasure to ride during the 15 minute road test. The Government is really getting behind alternative powered motorcycles and it was great to ride out with folks who I mostly meet in the context of Westminster meeting rooms."

From an industry point of view, the LiveWire's timing couldn't have been better since, as you may have heard, motorcycles are finally going to get a grant similar to the one that has been available for electric car buyers for the past five years. The details are yet to be finalised, but the initial government announcement back in April implied that there would be a maximum of £1500 or 20% off the recommended retail price – whichever is the lesser – available from some time soon until at least 2020.

Mike Johnstone, H-D's European marketing director told me, "The purpose of this exercise is to get some feedback. We want emotional feedback because emotion is a very large part of the Harley brand. So far, most existing owners have embraced the concept and say they think it's cool. There's a lot of technology in our V-twins and we spend an awful lot of time trying to hide it to keep the style and the lines of our bikes looking right; with the LiveWire it's the opposite – we want to show the technology!"

Every rider was asked for feedback, both in



an iPad questionnaire and on video, and one of the first questions asked whether we liked the sound it made. I realised that I'd not thought about the noise – or lack of it – for a single moment that I was on the bike. I guess that's partly because I've ridden so many electric bikes before. In any case, loud exhausts lost their appeal for me several decades ago and I find the eedjits who ride Harleys on open pipes, usually very slowly, amongst the most annoying drivers on the road. Afterwards I had a go on the LiveWire that was fixed to a rolling road and thought it sounded horrible but much of that was from the bearings on the rolling road rather than the bike itself. The experience was nothing like riding the bike properly in any case, because there was no jerk to your arms from the awesome acceleration!

### Learner-legal Loophole

The people from H-D were reticent about revealing any plans for the future of the LiveWire and would not even confirm that the machine would be put into production. However, with all the positive responses they've already had from press, dealers and punters on both sides of the Atlantic, I'll be amazed if the LiveWire – or something very like it – doesn't go into production sooner rather than later. Furthermore, Harley could make the LiveWire learner-legal for customers with no more than a CBT, yet retain two thirds of its power, since EU regs allow the 11Kw/15hp maximum continuous power to stretch to 35Kw/48bhp peak, as the BMW C evolution already does). It could then be upgraded to full power when owners passed their test with no more than a couple of minutes of lap-top manipulation. None of the H-D dealers I spoke to were aware of this massive loophole in the EU learner regs, but all were planning to write

a favourable report on the LiveWire for their websites and Facebook pages.

The Project LiveWire road show has since moved on to France, the Netherlands and Germany and by the end of the European tour will have delivered some 1,000 road tests in all. The fifteen prototypes in Europe all fit into one large truck, complete with fully independent generators which can charge the 300-volt lithium-ion batteries of four bikes at a time in about three and a half hours. An impressive bit of packaging for a very impressive prototype electric motorcycle.

There's just one crucial point about electric motorcycles which to date, only a handful of people seem to have understood and acted upon. It's this: if Harley-Davidson and the other electric motorcycle manufacturers paid as much attention to aerodynamics as they do to making their battery-powered bikes look like funky petrol-powered ones, they could go twice as far as they currently do with exactly the same combination of batteries and controllers! It seems ironic that back in January I rode a Craig Vetter-faired and otherwise modified 2012 Zero that has already done a thousand mile 'Iron Butt' run in under 24 hours (see pic at right), and back in 2009 I rode a Peraves Monotracer that was capable of the same feat. But that's another story, or rather, two.

Similarly, British electric motorcycle guru Cedric Lynch, who designed the Agni that won the first electric TT in 2009 maintains that with proper aerodynamics the electric TT racers could do two laps instead of only one, at the same speed, with the same battery pack. Harley, Zero (and Brammo-now-Victory) should think about that!

### Paul Blezard

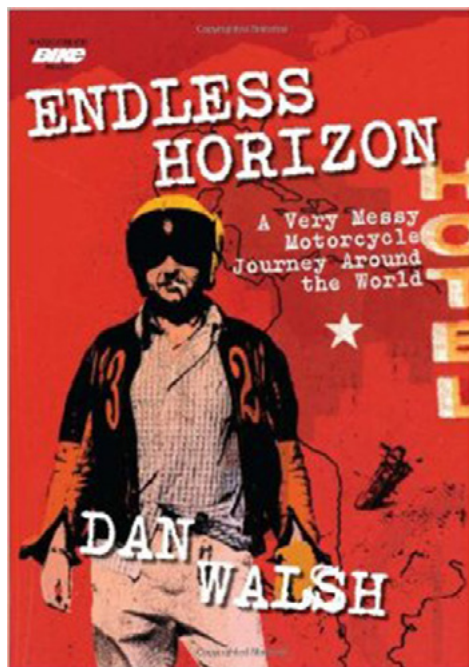




# MOTOLIT & CULTURE

by Jonathan Boorstein

## Summer Reads



**S**ummertime and the riding is easy. So is the reading. Though perhaps it's best not to read and ride at the same time. Unless it's a road map. At least three out of the five riders discussed here found Sat Navs or GPS devices less than useful for the purposes they were designed, assuming the rider deigned to use one at all.

This time we have a roundup of four books that kept falling to be bottom of the to-be-

reviewed list, including two that impressed Managing Editor Dave Gurman and Editor Stuart Jewkes. It's really a shame that the books didn't get covered earlier, since they're all worthwhile reads.

Let's start with Dave's choice, an "oldie" called **Endless Horizon: A Very Messy Motorcycle Journey Around the World** by Dan Walsh (2008). *Endless Horizon* is the American edition of *These Are The Days*, a rare case where the new title is slightly better than the old one.

Walsh, a motojournalist whose dispatches from his road trips were first published in *Bike*, is a big fan of and quite influenced by Hunter S. Thompson. Dave is as well, which partly explains his enthusiasm for one of the few practitioners of Gonzo journalism in the field.

Gonzo journalism is a subgenre of New Journalism, which applies the techniques of fiction to reportage. Gay Talese, whom Tom Wolfe, New Journalism's prime exemplar, claims was the first New Journalist, said that while New Journalism reads like fiction, it should be as reliable as reportage.

New journalists tell the story through scenes, through dialogue rather than quotes, through points of view – the reporter's, if not the subject's – and through such everyday details as friends, relations, possessions, and behavioral quirks. Journalists immerse themselves into the story, emphasizing "truth"

over "facts", explaining as well as informing.

The New Journalism evolved at a time when television news took over the responsibility of basic reportage. Magazines had to provide a perspective that consumers couldn't get from TV to compete. In theory, the New Journalism breathed its last in the mid-80s. In reality, it lowered its volume and went mainstream. It is rare not to find New Journalist articles in such major newspapers as *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*. Most of the articles and writers here at *The Digest* loosely fall into the category of New Journalism and New Journalists as well.

Of course, even back in the day, there were questions about whether there was anything new about the New Journalism. Subjective and advocacy reporting were part of the norm in the Nineteenth Century; objective reportage didn't dominate the news until after World War I. And travel writing, since it values personal experience and opinion over neutrality or objectivity, has been an example of New Journalism for at least the past three hundred years that I know of.

Gonzo journalism takes all that and pushes the reporter front and center, from observer to protagonist. It's more about emotions and personal experience than objective verifiable facts or quotations. It uses humor, irony, profanity, exaggeration in a vigorous, supercharged stream-of-consciousness style that seems to be fueled by alcohol or drugs.

The word was coined for Thompson by Bill Cardoso, then editor of *The Boston Globe's* Sunday magazine. Cardoso hasn't been too consistent about where he got the word "Gonzo", but there are two commonly accepted explanations. The first is that it's Boston Irish slang for the last man standing after an all-nighter in which he's drunk everyone else under the table. My mother, who was born and



brought up in Boston, never heard of it.

More likely the name came from 1960 James Booker hit tune, *Gonzo*. Booker, a drug addict, named the instrumental after a character in the *film noir*, *The Pusher* (1960), which was based on the 1956 Ed McBain (Evan Hunter) novel. The screenplay was by Harold Robbins, no less (we research geeks live for silly facts like that). Don't be too surprised if *Gonzo* is played on BikerFM late one Sunday night.

Unlike New Journalism, there were virtually no female practitioners of Gonzo Journalism back in the day. The female equivalent of the testosterone-driven archetype then might be what Katie Roiphe has called Smart Women Adrift in the fiction of Renata Adler, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Joan Didion (my favorite), among others: a passive, stylish "intelligent but emotionally fragile or keenly sensitive woman without a man, or moving from man



to man, a woman, in short, without a stable or conventional family situation, in a state of heightened, nervous awareness". If you lived in New York at that time, you knew that woman. If you were male, she probably walked out on you.

Nowadays, there are women Gonzo journalists as well. And most New Journalists have gone Gonzo at one point or another. (Right. There will be a brief pause while we wait for everyone to stop laughing at the thought of my going Gonzo. Thank you. We shall now resume our regularly scheduled program.) Gonzo has yet to go mainstream, but has found a new home in blogs, webzines, and social media.

Walsh however was a print practitioner of Gonzo journalism. His style draws as much upon film noir and hard-boiled detective novels as it does upon Wolfe and Thompson. Between 2000 and 2006, he filed an irregular series of articles about his overland motorcycle adventures, first across Africa and then North and South America, with a brief interlude in England in between.

*Endless Horizon* turns into a story of a lad and his lad; of riding and writing; of typhoid and taverns; of women and wankers; of nicotine and narcotics. It's a lowdown on a low-rent sideshow of sex, spliffs, and saloons. It's more about dive bars than handlebars, but it has the most exciting and literate writing in a motorcycle adventure travel book around in a long time: no wonder Dave was impressed.

Walsh crosses four continents seemingly without maps, GPS, spares, or repair kits. While the lack of a Sat Nav seems to be a case of neo-Luddite pretentiousness, the lack of even the basic knowledge to execute a roadside repair seems bizarre, given how often he cites Chris Scott as the ultimate source authority in all

things motorcycle adventure travel.

There are 49 dispatches here, with some places getting just one dispatch and others getting more. The gap between dispatches varies as well, from a month to several months, sometimes with reason, sometimes without. He hits town with attitude and imagery, getting his "mind blown in a Tangier bar as a Berber child acrobat flick-flacked between the tables of dead-eyed hookers and mullet-haired truckers" (P.11). Ensenada is just "a low-rise Pacific port town that makes its living catching fish and tourists" (P.191), while San Cristobal de las Casas (Jovel), stronghold of the Zapatista resistance, is "now clogged with phoney-radical day-trippers goofing off balaclava chic" (P.204).

Walsh feels that "three months seem to be ideal time for any country – long enough to get beyond the obvious, short enough to keep things fresh" (P.369). He's not always in a city or a country that long, but does have a sense of when he knows a place. "You really know a town when you can score sex and drugs," said Bill Burroughs' (P.242). Needless to say, Walsh also likes Charles Bukowski.

Scoping a "new city means playing the new-city routine, riding in clumsy circles for a couple of confused hours, forcing the map to fit the territory, hunting for a hotel that takes bikes, a cashpoint that takes Co-op cards, a café that brews proper coffee and serves breakfast till mid-afternoon. And, obviously, a decent bar" (P.309). Elsewhere, he notes: "A transit night in a transit town. Find a cheap hotel, park the bike in another lobby and familiarise. Check out the price of Marlboro (\$2), the quality of the chicken chimichangas (juicy), whether my card works in the ATM (it does – ace) and if I have any money (I don't – arse). And finally, taste the local beer" (P.210). For him, the "bare essentials"

are "petrol and food, booze and fags, motels and Lacoste shirts" (P.326).

He's not unaware of the limits of that approach. It "[t]akes just two weeks to turn dusty Dar's wide-open circle delights into just another drunk's triangle – flophouse for a cry and a wank, internet café for long-range abuse, bar to get bed-wetting drunk on a school night with the usual crowd of lost expats and ambitious hookers. And Mocambique's deep wilderness magic drowns in the smell of fighting and onions" (P.99).

The bars tend not to be where the locals hang out, but rather the homes-away-from-home catering to ex-pats and adventure travelers. "Ryan's is the perfect fake Irish pub, draught stout, beef and Guinness pie, 'Cead Mille Failte' over the door, Beckett and Joyce on the walls, Sky Sports on the TV" (P.55); adding that "it's in the bars that overlanders meet. The overlanders need each other. Runaways of the world unite" (P.105).

In addition to barkeeps and barflies, Walsh meets thieves and smugglers who steal motor vehicles in Europe which they then drive to East Africa to sell; a police sergeant who moonlights as a hooker (one wonders what she does with clients who like handcuffs); and even local biker clubs. "It's the usual café racer mix of crash-tatty Blades, Yoshi-piped ZX9s and blue-bolted R6s with matching Mad Max jackets, Versace jeans and Nike trainers. The joker in the pack's on a Desperado low-rider with fringed lace-up leathers, Bob Marley wig and skull motif Zippo in a pouch on his snakeskin belt" (85).

He meets decent people as well, such as the nice Canadian couple he condescendingly dubs "Dick and Jane". More important, he crosses paths with Jeff Powers, a legend in both overland and vintage Norton circles for having ridden a restored 1974 Norton Commando 850

(stock Roadster; Interstate tank; and typical, minimal mods) from Cusco, Peru, to Ushuaia, Argentina, and back again about ten years ago. (see next page).

Powers, who was killed in a motorcycle accident near Tarapoto in Northern Peru in 2013, also had a knack for making cameo appearances in the books about other overland travels. Stephen Holmes mentions Powers and his pub, Norton Rats Tavern, Cusco, in *To Infinity and Beyond* (<http://www.theridersdigest.co.uk/book-review-che-sera-sera/>). Dr. Gregory W. Frazier also notes Powers and his trip in the more recent *Down and Out in Patagonia, Kamchatka, and Timbuktu*. Walsh however encounters Powers twice: once before he takes the trip and once during his ride to Ushuaia.

Walsh is impressed that Powers made it as far as Argentina, but declined to go to Ushuaia with him. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight and the distance of a decade later, this may be Walsh's biggest blunder of his career. While Powers did write up his trial run to see if his restored Norton could make the trip ([http://www.ontarionortonowners.ca/documents/jeffs\\_norton\\_diaries.htm](http://www.ontarionortonowners.ca/documents/jeffs_norton_diaries.htm)), I have been unable to find out whether he wrote or published anything about the actual trip itself so far. It's a full story that needs to be tracked down and published.

Of more immediate interest is that Powers does back up at least one part of Walsh's tales. Powers, talking about some BMW riders he met, says, "I didn't mention to them about my English friend Dan, fully sponsored to ride and write for a British bike mag, who at that moment was stuck in La Paz Bolivia waiting for trans parts for his BMW F650".

Independent verification is important when dealing with unreliable narrators in general and alcoholics in particular. Some





*These pages: Jeff Powers (left, top) and the '74 Norton 850 Commando in South America (pics: ontarionortonowners.ca)*





things verify themselves. For him, New Orleans in nothing more than a place to get drunk. He's not the first. He's not the last. He's just one in a long tradition of frat boys hitting the city during Mardi Gras to get drunk and behave badly. And he did.

His comments about Los Angeles are clever and well-written, but nothing new. He could have penned them in London. "Los Angeles, La La Land. This is where they make the stupid movies, the lying TV shows, the fraudulent adverts for a world that doesn't exist. This is where the "soft bigotry of low expectations" is created by swine whose blow- and blow-job-addled imaginations can see no further than porn-star chicks and wanksta rides. This is where the mundane American lifestyle is cosmetically enhanced into a dishonest dream" (P.187).

New York becomes problematic because the reviewer not only was born, brought up, and has lived here all his life, but also worked as a tour guide when younger. Walsh is correct when he observes, "filtering's not allowed, but that doesn't stop the few bikes I spot, so it doesn't stop me" (P.169). Filtering (or lane splitting) was then as it is now only legal in California. (There is a petition before the State Assembly at the moment to change this.)

He lists four bars he visited in a manner no New Yorker would. The bars would be grouped by borough. But then again, he isn't a New Yorker. While calling the White Horse Tavern the White Horse is acceptable – there's enough information there so people who know New York or want to know where in the city it is can find it – referring to the Corner Bistro as the Corner Bar isn't. The Corner Bistro is too famous on the one hand and there are too many places that might be "the Corner Bar" on the other. Calling Sixth Street Specials 6<sup>th</sup> Street Specials

still gives everyone enough information to find the place (it's among New York's better and better-known motorcycle garages), but born, bred, and island-bound city boy that I am, I do not know nor can I find on any map any part of New York called the "lower west side" (P.168-170).

Problematic in a different way is how he treats women and motorcycles. "Ride the same bike for long enough, and it becomes part of your body, an organic link" (P.332), he writes, yet treats the bikes he rides across Africa (a Yamaha XT) and across North and South America (the BMW) so carelessly that by the end of the trips they're worth little more than scrap.

He goes through more women than continents. To be fair, two were serious relationships which ended badly. And a couple of the others seem to have been intense affairs. One begins, "[a]n hour later she threw her drink in my face. A day later she met me for lunch. Two days later she was lunch. Caligula would have blushed" (P.218). It's clever and shows great economy of language, even it does leave the reader wondering what Walsh could be doing with the lady in question that would make an emperor often accused of incest and bestiality blush. Perhaps it's Walsh's attitude. "The girls come and go, the bike remains the same" (249). He credits part of his success to "over-the-counter Cialis" (P.370). Let me give you a senior observation here, Dan: if it's not getting up on its own, your body is telling you something.

Most of the dispatches end with such phrases as "keep drifting", "next stop", "bring it on", or "these are the days that should happen to you", the first part of which was used in the original title of *Endless Horizons*. The art direction features faux spills, splashes, and glass ring stains, presumably referring to what

Walsh likes to do in bars. Though given all his references to wanking, I don't want to think about possible alternatives for the splashes.

I often point out that motorcycle adventure travel books are made up of a few basic elements: a gimmick; two or three set pieces; and a handful of memorable characters or encounters. The gimmick here is that Walsh is on assignment about which the best and worst that can be said is that it's functional. It gets the job done. The dispatch format works against developing set pieces, but that's more than made up by almost unbelievable encounters in which he gets into one form of trouble or another and his incredible eye and ear for characters, which are rendered more memorable by fantastic turns of phrase.

A fourth element I seldom discuss is the personality of the narrator. Is he or she likeable? Interesting? Someone you want to spend three or four hundred pages with? A book I shall never review was written by a snot-nosed 20-year-old whose narrative style resembles a marathon bullshit session in a college dorm. He was full of it and himself. I can deal with mucus or manure, but not both at the same time.

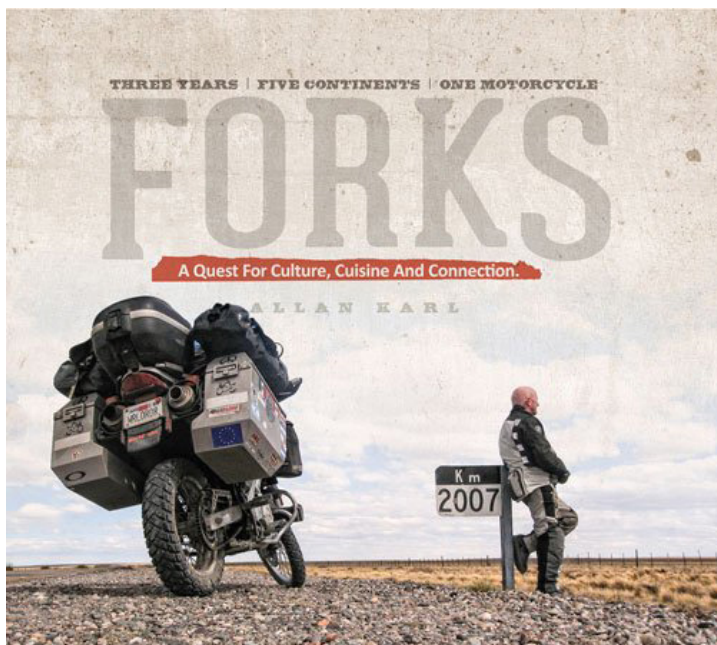
Walsh is not likeable. He can be fascinating, entertaining, and even riveting, at least in the sense of watching a train wreck. But the bar stories get repetitive and the long passages of self-pity and self-loathing about his drinking and other destructive behaviors get maudlin and go nowhere. He seems to have thought his travels would solve all his problems and make him a better person. Instead the stress of long-term long-distance overland travel seems to have accelerated his downward spiral, which he does nothing to stop. It's very well-written, evocative, with surgical precision, but instead of empathy, it leaves feelings of what a waste, if not disgust.

The driving tension seems to be whether Walsh wants to be a lad or a littérateur. The narrative is filled with examples of his "laddy" behaviors. The narrative is also filled with brilliant writing and accurate references to Yeats, Borges, Marquez, Chandler, Houellebecq, Neruda, Calvino, and Coleridge, among others. Walsh all but identifies himself with Raskolnikov, which is out-and-out creepy. Walsh makes a passing reference to having been brought up on a council estate but going to a posh school (P.263). It shows.

Although the book is a collection of previously published pieces, it's best read in order. And ignore Walsh's suggestion to skip the first eight dispatches because they're "clunky, naïve, and laddy" (P.8). There's good writing before that and he never does lose the "laddy" elements. There is heavy use of Irish and British slang, but his attempts at American slang often go awry. His suggestion to begin with the ninth dispatch is in part because that's where he first "fuck[s] the pooch". He's garbled a phrase he picked up second-hand from Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, which is credited with introducing that bit of US Air Force slang into the mainstream. The actual phrase is "screw the pooch", which is the polite version of the saltier military "fuck the dog" (except in the Navy where it's "dick the dog"). I'm afraid Walsh fucked up saying he fucked up.

But at his best he can be witty and evocative. "Travel is sensual. That maps been sensualised. By the smell of South Carolina's sulphurous plough mud, of New Orleans' vomit and bleach cocktails, of Mexico City's black, sooty smog and of El Salvador's fresh pine cloud forest. By the sight of frozen Niagara Falls, of elephants on Broadway, of the jungle pyramids at Palenque, and of a hundred Pacific sunset and maybe three Caribbean dawns. By





the taste of salsa'd fish taco in Baja, of dark rum in Managua, of fresh ground coffee beans in Atenas, and of Cubano cigars in San Salvador. By the sound of sirens on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, of the world's worst band in Atomic City, of Mexico's best mariachis in crooning Guadalajara, and of Stone Roses wah-wahs and Sean Paul bombings in every Caribbean beach bar. And by the feel of sand and tarmac and gravel beneath thrumming tyres, by the feel of sun and rain and wind in my daft grinning face, by the feel of old cold stone and hot baked beach beneath my toes. And by the feel of spiteful road tearing into this fatbody's too-thin skin" (P.251-252).

Summertime and the reading is sleazy. Recommended for those who like good writing and unsavory characters. Not recommended for those upset by debauchery and braggadocio.

Allan Karl's **Forks: A Quest for Culture, Cuisine and Connection** (2014) is a photography book.

No. Karl's *Forks* is a cookbook.

No. *Forks* is a motorcycle travel book.

No. *Forks* is a photography book, a cookbook, and a motorcycle travel book.

Generically a coffee table book, *Forks* is a hybrid of all three. And a successful hybrid at that, if being stocked in the travel section of a major bookstore chain here in the States rather than being exiled to the transportation section (as is usual for motorcycle adventure travel books) is any barometer.

Around 2003, Karl, a tech entrepreneur, found himself bored, divorced, and unemployed. At that fork in the road of his life (to use his forced metaphor), he turned to his passions for travel, photography, and motorcycles. He was not as much inspired by the usual *Jupiter's Travels* or *Long Way Round* to go around the world as he was by Neil Peart's *Ghost Rider*, a finalist for the prestigious Drainie-Taylor Prize for biography of the year in Canada. Peart, the drummer and lyricist for Rush, a well-known rock band, has published

six travel memoirs, three of which involve motorcycles to a greater or lesser extent. His recent books have also been cited for their excellent photography.

Karl spent two years planning his trip in which he wanted to visit as many UNESCO World Heritage Sites as he could. Parenthetically, this is actually a great gimmick. There are more than a thousand such sites around the globe, enough and then some to fill several volumes of motorcycle travel.

His round the world three-year jaunt on a 2005 BMW F650GS Dakar began on 4 July 2005. He racked up 62,329 miles; 52,077 photos; 4,225 liters of fuel; 2,500 meals with other people; 62 border crossings; 40 World Heritage Sites; 35 countries; 13 front tires; nine rear tires; six chains; five continents; three sets of brakes; and one broken leg, which put the trip on hold for half a year.

The actual trip began from his home in Newport Beach, CA. He went north to Alaska, looped through Canada, then south through the US into Mexico and just kept going until he toured South America as well. He flew to Africa,

heading north until he reached the Middle East, ultimately winding up in Turkey. After his third attempt to get into Iran failed, he decided it was time to go home. He shipped his BMW, forks and all (to use his forced metaphor), to the east coast of the US, where his bike was trashed, forcing him to turn to Paypal to solicit donations to re-outfit his BMW to get home. He crossed the country to the west coast riding backroads when he wasn't on Route 66.

Despite being a serious foodie, the food aspect along with the usual utensils needed to eat it (to use his forced metaphor) was not part of the original plan. It didn't occur to him until he was well into the South American leg of his trip. In Brazil he was served moqueca, a local fish stew, with a new-found friend when Karl realized "how much we learn when we take the time to share a meal...and how local flavors and aromas tell as much about a place and its culture as do the customs by which it is prepared, served, and shared...it's in cooking and dining that we all come together, connect, and share", he explains in the Introduction (xv). "So I collected recipes from every place I

"EVERY PHOTOGRAPH, STORY AND RECIPE IN THIS BOOK PRESENTS READERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRY SOMETHING NEW, TO TASTE FLAVORS OF A NEW FOOD OR TO JOURNEY INTO DANGEROUS OR UNKNOWN TERRITORIES. EVERY EXPERIENCE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS."

Allan Karl  
WorldRider





visited”.

This is a great souvenir: it’s specific; it’s portable; and you don’t have to declare it to customs. That it could be the gimmick for a travel book however came to a slow boil. Once he was back home, he prepared moqueca for some friends who enjoyed the dish so much he decided to include some of the recipes he collected to his then nascent book. Parenthetically, this is also a great gimmick.

Karl shopped his book around, but several publishers felt he needed to write a more traditional travelogue without recipes. Parenthetically, this shocked me. There is a precedent for mixing travel, memoirs, and recipes from the iconic legendary food writer M.F.K. Fisher to the cult figure Vladimir Estragon (Geoffrey Stokes) and his biweekly column *Waiting for Dessert* in the old *Village Voice*.

Karl decided to publish the book himself and launched a Kickstarter campaign, with the initial goal of raising \$22,000 in nine days. He raised \$40,994 from 546 supporters, which allowed him to print 2,000 books, hire a publicist, and launch a national book tour. Did

I mention that upon his return to California he started a sideline as a motivational speaker?

The book is handsomely produced, equal to top professional levels. There are almost no copy editing or proof reading errors here. As a result the few that did slip by glare. If he visits Canada before he visits Mexico, then Mexico is not the first international border he crossed (21).

Like most coffee table books, *Forks* is oversized and jams more than 700 photographs in its 280 pages. It’s divided into seven parts, plus the four sections for modifications, acknowledgements, the introduction, and the packing list. Each of the seven parts is dedicated to a different geographic area – North America, Africa, the Middle East – and begins with a quote, as does the book itself. The quotes usually relate to travel. Central America, for example, begins with a quote from Henry Miller: “One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things” (P.27). I doubt a comment by Lawrence Durrell, Miller’s great on-again/off-again friend, would have blipped on Karl’s radar screen: “How travel narrows

the mind”, which is credited to Pursewarden somewhere in *Justine*, if memory serves.

Each chapter is one stop on the journey. The chapter has four or so pages mixing text and pictures, followed by two pages for the souvenir recipe (a photo of the dish in question facing a page with the actual recipe). The first page of text has two maps: one of the country itself; the other of where the country is in its geographic area. There is also a side bar listing the country’s size, population, capital, largest city, independence day, number of world heritage sites, literacy rate, currency, population below the poverty line, key exports, and number of mobile phones (along with the world ranking: my favorite; we research geeks live for silly facts like that).

The narrative focuses on one basic anecdote or encounter per country. It’s broken up by photos, most without captions, and call-out quotes. Each ends with a kicker, usually about food, sometimes about connections. At the end of each narrative is a picture of the relevant national flag. Many sections include faux spills and glass ring stains, but here they’re likely to be from wine glasses, as befits someone who auctioned off the contents of a 500-bottle wine cellar to help finance his round the world trip. Yes, he visited a number of vineyards around the world as well.

Both the photography and the selection of pictures are excellent. There is a welcome mix of people, architecture, and food. The styling of each country’s national dish is particularly mouth-watering. The lack of captions might annoy some, although what few there are, do more than just identify the subject matter.

The recipes are all interesting. *The Digest* no more tests recipes than it tests motorcycles, but Peru’s lomo saltado and Ethiopia’s zizil alecha among others will likely be tested on

my own dime and time. One grumble though: it would have been nice if the recipes included how many people they will feed. Experienced cooks and professional chefs will be able to guess, of course, but not everyone is at that level.

The structure prevents the development of set-pieces, but there are more than enough characters and food-related anecdotes to fill a book. The World Heritage Sites ultimately ride pillion to the recipes and Karl’s political message about connections. “After an hour, he gives me directions. We exchange hugs and a few photographs and, as I ride on, passing signs pointing to the borders of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria, I realize that Attayak and I shared more than a cup of tea,” he writes about Jordan. “Though I was filled with anger for the violent act committed by those children, I was quickly calmed by the simple gesture and local ritual of tea and conversation while seated on the floor of a Bedouin home. And that is should be so simple, here in the tension-filled Middle East! I wonder, if people could take a moment and curb their anger over a cup of tea, would they learn about each other and discover what makes us all the same, that we all share the primordial human need for connection?” (219).

The chapters exist independently of one another, not only preventing any momentum from developing, but also making it easy to read the book out of order, though some of the charm would be lost that way. I suspect most will look at the pictures first; then read the captions and recipes of those photographs that look particularly interesting; and finally if the recipe is interesting enough, read the chapter supporting it.

Although ultimately defeated by Iranian bureaucracy, he managed to enter countries that have been traditionally difficult usually



by waiting patiently at the border until he was let in. Whether the tactics are diplomatic or passive/aggressive I'll leave to the social sciences. In motorcycle adventure travel, whatever works, works. Incidentally, he doesn't mention any problems with the GPS he brought along.

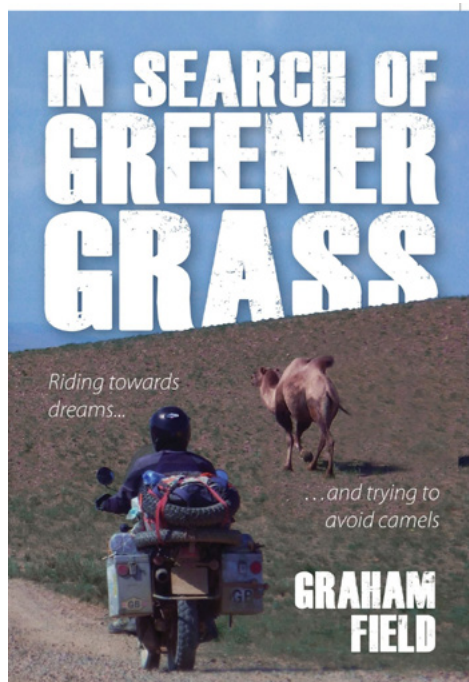
Despite moments of pretentiousness, Karl is a pleasant, low-key companion for the length of the book. The pretentiousness is the usual pablum: "Tourists follow itineraries. Travelers follow their hearts and dreams. I'm a traveler" (P.35). Let me give you a senior observation here, Allan: there are travelers who follow itineraries and tourists who follow their hearts and dreams. Visiting World Heritage Sites gives you an itinerary whether you care to admit it or not.

"I slither my motorcycle into a narrow gap between a truck and the ramp, then wait in the rain while the unlikely captain pilots the feeble vessel through the painfully slow and white-knuckled quarter-mile ride across the river" (P.149) is a good catch-all for his light and easy literary style.

Summertime and the reading is breezy. Recommended for those who like food as well as travel writing and, since it's a coffee table book, those looking for a house gift if their summer trips includes a week or a weekend somewhere. Not recommended for those for whom such books are just about the motorcycle and the miles traveled.

Graham Field is back and single-handedly disproves Karl's theory about the differences between tourists and travelers. Field is an adventure rider who both follows an itinerary and follows his heart and dreams.

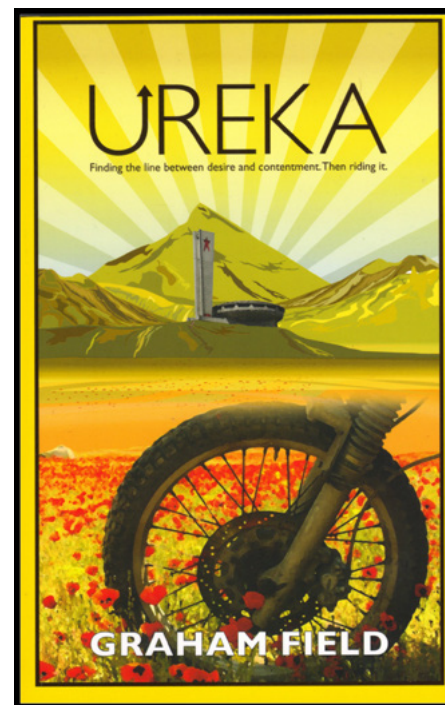
Field is one of the better organized people in a group known for exceptional organizational abilities. Simply put, if you don't



know where you're going and when you want to get there, you probably won't get there. I suspect Walsh had help from the home office.

When we last encountered Field, he had gone off *In Search of Greener Grass* in Mongolia (above). It was an interesting, but flawed, maiden effort. It wasn't clear how he would develop as a writer, but it was clear he planned to continue writing and self-publishing. I "predicted" we'd hear from him again.

Predictions like that look good in the moment, but are meaningless over time. Ultimately such predictions are irrelevant in the face of reality. No one cares whether they're right or wrong. We read Baudelaire's art criticism for insights into his poetry and not whether his was right about Delacroix and wrong about Ingres or whether his concept of the flâneur anticipates somewhat ours of the New Journalist.



But back to Field, who's back with **Ureka: Finding the Line between Desire and Contentment. Then Riding It** (2014), along with his trusty KLR650, a daily budget of £50, and his you-are-there diary-entry format. Even Monklet, the small toy monkey, and Mother Field are back. Unfortunately, so are horrifically bad copyediting and proofreading, but more on that later.

Whether he is riding across Central Asia to Mongolia or racing about the Balkans and the Caucasus, Field is in search of the sublime, but in the early Nineteenth Century English Romantic Movement sense of the word. He "wants the unusual and spectacular" (P.69) on his "lifelong quest for gratification through natural beauty" (P.80). In addition to the unspoiled and the unexpected, he likes "abandoned monuments" (P.81), much in line with Soane and Turner, not to mention Byron,

Keats, and Shelley. "I ride alongside a disused railway line; there is something romantically mysterious about it. A destination no longer serviced, it's unmaintained, reclaimed by nature, the hard labour of laying track wasted" (P.332). That Shelley-like whimsy turns to an odd awe in Erbil: "I'm just an insignificant traveller through a city that was established over 3,000 years before the pyramids were built" (P.158).

Field's dream itinerary was to ride through Iran. When that fell apart due to much the same bureaucracy that defeated Karl, Field created a back-up plan to tour the 'Stans. When that didn't come together, he wound up riding the Caucasus. As we say in journalism circles, this is the story about not getting the story. But more in line with New Journalism (if not Gonzo Journalism), Field looks inward and delves into how he feels and what he thinks about it.

The trip starts to unravel almost from the start. It seems to have left without him. Worse, he left some of his documents home. "I cannot see how, with all my preparation, my pedantic packing, all those check lists, the photo-copies, visa applications, all this paperwork, I managed to forget the second most important travel document of them all" (P.74-75).

After the Iran plan collapses and he hammers a new one in place, he asks himself: "Are the Stans a compromise or an equally exciting alternative?" (P.171). After visa problems scotch that plan as well, he's had it. "I don't want to deal with this, any of this. I've had enough. I can't face anymore bureaucratic hurdles, not to mention the costs involved in this delayed, altered and rescheduled itinerary....I should be freaking out but I'm not, I'm just numb, I can't make any more alternate plans, I'm all planned out. I walk back to the hotel. I email my man at Stan Tours who



has arranged all this for me so far. It's been hard, really hard, the mojo has been tenuous and now it's just dead. I'm very aware that I sound like a whinging little motherfucker. The problem is I don't really expect anyone to have the slightest sympathy for my predicament, when I'm out here living their dream" (P.210).

Also preventing his developing his "mojo on the road" (P.53) as he calls it, is an eBay Sat Nav that's useless for anything but an auxiliary speedo. "Bloody sat nav, bloody monument, bloody plan. See that's the problem with having a plan, when I expect to see something, even though I know what it's going to look like, I do expect to see it" (P.65).

His frustration leads him to think about the nature of travel, who does one travel for, what will happen if he backs out, and even more basic, is he enjoying his own trip? He also takes stock of his limitations as both a rider and a writer. Africa has no appeal for him. A spectacular view leads him to note, "I have already used up my best descriptions" (P.362). Let me give you a senior observation here, Graham: part of being a writer is never using up your best descriptions.

He is also aware of the limits of his education, seeing things without understanding what he sees (P.69). Observing a woman using a book to guide her to what she needs to take note of, Field says, "I'm a little envious but that's education for you; the more informed you are, the more you appreciate" (P.284). Someone needs to tell Field about that bit of business in Forster about an English tourist who didn't see what she was told to look at until she put down her Baedeker.

It's never too late for an education. Often all it takes is a willingness to look things up and check facts. That approach would have saved him from this howler. "The fact that the Turks

massacred 1.5 million Armenians around the time of the First World War coined the phrase 'genocide'" (P.175). No. The word – not phrase – was coined in 1944 after the full extent of the death camps and the purpose of the legislation passed to enable them were exposed. The word was then applied to earlier examples of genocide, of which Armenia is one of the best known. That no one had a word for it didn't mean that they didn't understand the concept. Jewish settlers in Palestine who were being treated almost as badly as the Armenians at the time decided they were next on the Ottoman list for what we now call genocide. A handful of them threw their lot in with the British, providing one of the more interesting footnotes in the history of the Great War. Mata Hari was an amateur compared to Sarah Aaronsohn. Of course, Aaronsohn was not a courtesan, was not a German spy, and was not played by Greta Garbo in film.

With the long-distance prodding of a friend, Field accepts that "I have travel burnout and should turn around" (P.215). The decision is liberating. With an itinerary of not much more than meeting a couple of friends and possibly attending a rock concert, he finds his "mojo" and his way back home. He gently concludes, "I like to think that when I go away next time I will be better equipped to decide what is right and wrong for me" (P.407).

From the point of view of serious criticism, this is actually exciting stuff. It's not only the growth of a writer, but also growth in an unexpected direction. Good travel books have both an internal as well as an external voyage. The internal voyage reflects the external voyage. In most motorcycle travel books it's just the external voyage. The internal voyage, when it exists at all, seldom goes beyond plumb and platitudes. *Ureka* goes into the relatively

unexplored areas of the depressing difficulties of motorcycle travel, which is against the usual arrant upbeat live-your-dreams-all-you-have-to-do-is-just-do-it twaddle of the New Age self-help self-actualization crowd. It's an admirable risk to take to say how awful everything is as well as how upset Field feels about it.

However, this casually divides the book into two parts, coincidentally just past the midpoint. Whether the book loses something once Field's issues are resolved and continues as a more traditional travel narrative or the book gains something once he's over himself and continues as a more traditional travel narrative depends upon the individual reader.

Field's writing style has loosened up, indulging in a great deal of whimsy, wordplay, and really bad puns. "Real woolly sheep, herded by a father on his phone and his six year old son. (The phone, I assume has a sheepdog app). (sic)" (P.133); "I'm no longer anchored in Ankara" (P.120); and, referring to some Greek Orthodox priests, "Their grey beards make these guys look older than their years but perhaps it's because they never say dye" (P.229). The results are uneven, but if you don't take the big risks, you don't get the big laughs.

Unfortunately, that also means risking the big pratfall. In one case the pratfall lands him squarely into homophobia. At Motocamp, Bulgaria, Field's home-away-from-home on this jaunt, he introduces the resident pet canine as the "camp dog" (P.62). He goes to explain, "[n]ot camp as in effeminate". In context that's not something that would occur to anyone except a punster, but it's a usage that's obsolete, if not unknown, in the US. To be fair, the first citation of using camp to mean gay or effeminate is British (c. 1910; we research geeks live for silly facts like that), but I'm not certain how common it is in Britain today.

He compounds this by adding, "he appears perfectly secure in his masculinity", which not only kills the joke by going on too long (not the only example of this in the book), but also kills the joke by drawing attention to the homophobic subtext. (I'm not sure of the incidence of homosexuality among the canine population; even we research geeks have our standards: I'll just render unto Caesar what is Caesar's even if in this case the Caesar in question is Caligula.) Supporting the homophobic interpretation is an anecdote Field tells twenty or so pages later in which he has a toxic interaction with a couple of gay men, more or less a duel exchanging attitude at forty paces. At least this is organic to his story and in isolation would have passed without comment. A later remark about a man being "effeminate" confirms the interpretation.

Worse however are the copyediting and proofreading errors. A map places Austria somewhere in the South of France. Lady Gaga is misspelt as Lady Ga Ga, especially glaring considering how knowledgeable Field is about music, and not just rock music, if I understand a few passing comments correctly. Apostrophes turn up where they shouldn't and don't turn up where they should. In some cases the mistakes are surreal. He writes on page 157: "I'm utterly discussed". No, you're not. You're not utterly discussed until I'm finished discussing you.

The larger issue here is that he's a punster. With so many errors how can we know whether we're supposed to laugh at him or with him? "By the bus are three emergency workers and six bodies, five of which are covered with sheets and tarpaulins. The sixth is surrounded by three paramedics. It's an horrific site" (P.130). Is site a typo or an ill-placed pun? Not only could the sight be horrific, but so could the location.



As a companion on the road, Field comes across as an aging metal head, somewhat peevish, with a taste for puns and silly jokes and whimsy. He does go on a bit, sometimes long after he's made his point, if he's made a point.

Here's a good catch-all for Field's literary style at its best, even if it does literally go on one sentence too long: "In a while a man who is probably the captain of this twenty foot vessel seemed to indicate. There is no ferry terminal bustle here, just a road reaching a river and no urgency. I instantly feel the chilled-out atmosphere that is in the air. A little girl from over at the café waves at me. She says hello, so I order chai from her, leaving my bike in pole loading position by the ferry ramp. She and her little sister have a few words of English and together they bring over chai and sugar. Some local on-lookers come over to say hello too, and ask where I'm from. This brief exchange seems to exhaust their English skills, it doesn't matter though, the following silence isn't awkward; I could sit here all day. And soon sitting around will be the only occupation left. Up river, giant concrete 'A' shape structures have been erected, the supports for the imminent bridge which will take away several little livelihoods overnight. The brief glance down the canyon the crossing motorists will have, won't reveal this social service, specifically here for the time-rich traveller who wishes to reach the other side. That's how it happens, that's how the world speeds up, and communities disappear, that's how interaction is replaced by automation. The destination will be reached 45 minutes faster and the time saved could never be spent as rewardingly as it could be spent here. Time efficient devices come at such a cost, from supermarkets instead of individual shops, from internet instead of interaction. It

creates a generation of isolation, a person's day can run so efficiently, they can get back to their boxes and stare at screens to relax before it all happens again tomorrow. If only the western world knew the pleasure gained in waiting for a ferry to cross a river, I'm sure it would be a happier and healthier place" (P.133).

Summertime and the reading was good for me. Recommended for those interested in seeing the growth of a writer. Not recommended for those distracted, if not angered, by puns and typos.

"China is the largest country in the world that it's possible to circumnavigate without backtracking, and it was for that – the longest continuous journey by motorcycle within a single country – that we were awarded a Guinness World Record in 2012 and included in the book *Guinness World Records 2012*" (P.265), writes Ryan Pyle toward the end of **The Middle Kingdom Ride** (2013), which is co-authored by his brother, Colin.

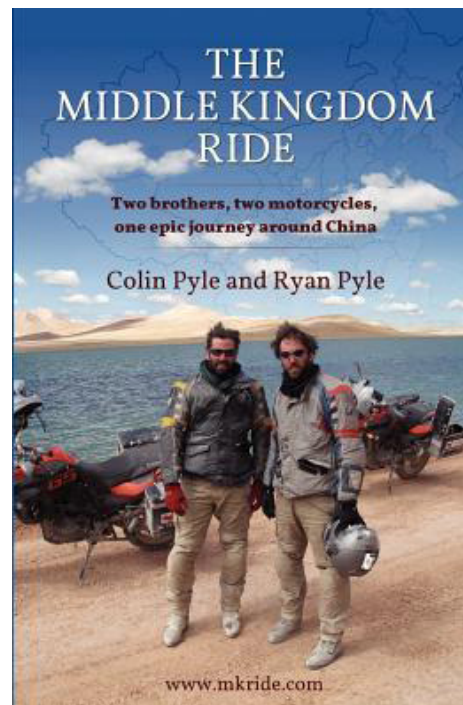
That's a first-rate gimmick. This is the book that explains how they achieved their world record. That gets attention even from those who are skeptical about Guinness World Records in general and those pertaining to motorcycling in particular. That alone might explain why it's Stuart's pick of the lot.

In March 2010, the two Canadian brothers found themselves in New York and at loose ends. Half or more of Ryan's work as a freelance photographer based in China had dried up due to the crash of 2008. Colin had just sold his business and was thinking about taking a year off to travel.

"Maybe you could start your travels in China," suggested Ryan (7).

"How easy is it to ride a motorcycle in China?" asked Colin (8).

And that despite the fact that "Neither of us



had ever done any multi-day motorcycle trips" (P.18).

They adjourned to the Apple Store on Fifth Avenue, near Central Park, and used one of the computers on display to develop a route that would circle China counterclockwise, as North Americans call it (the word is used in Canada as well). The plan would take them north from Shanghai to the Mongolian border, then west across Xinjiang before heading south through Tibet, before heading back east to Shanghai through southern China.

Within five months, they figured out that it would take about two months to travel the approximately 20,000 km. They decided to fully document the trip, which Ryan credits to his background in professional photography. It is not as clear as it should be at what point the boys decided to go for the Guinness.

Unable to secure sponsorship from BMW,

they purchased two new F800GSs, which including the import tax into China, came to US\$70,000. While they were at it, they also imported spare parts, despite the bureaucratic nightmare, and GPS, which is technically illegal. Incidentally, the GPS also turned out to be useless for anything except as "expensively overengineered thermometers" (P.28). The systems are set yearly and China's giant road and infrastructures projects change routes almost daily. "A sat nav can tell you the name of the town you're passing through and you can zoom in and out of the map to see what's 3 km or 10 km ahead of you. What you can't do with any confidence, however, is set a course to follow, because there's a good chance the roads have changed" (P.74-75). The road work would prove to be an ongoing nightmare during the trip.

Further rendering the GPS a dubious indulgence was that half the proposed route was off-road. To prepare themselves for that, the brothers Pyle took the off-road riding course at BMW's Hechlingen Enduro Park.

They hired Chad Ingraham, a fellow Canadian living in China, as a cameraman to help document the trip. In addition, they arranged for an SUV as well as fixers, drivers, and translators. The vulgar will have already figured out that the bill for their whim probably came in at the low to mid six figures. "I knew how lucky Colin and I were to have enough money to be able to finance the trip ourselves, and that there are many people who'd love to become involved in adventure motorcycling for whom costs are a major and insurmountable barrier" (P.16). Let me give you a senior observation here, boys: listing that you bought the bikes and what the tariffs are is transparency; listing how much you paid is bragging.





*Top left: Ryan Pyle. Top right: Colin Pyle  
Main pic: the 5,000 km marker on the G318 in Tibet (pix: mkride.com/Facebook)*



Just so that their jaunt wouldn't be just about them, the Pyles decided it should also raise awareness for the SEVA Foundation ([www.seva.org](http://www.seva.org)), which is dedicated to preventing blindness. According to its website, Apple's Steve Jobs "before he was famous" provided the seed money to start the charity.

Their trip began at 6 a.m., 14 August 2010 with the first of many traffic jams. To be fair, it was not as bad as the one they were caught in later on which was 1000 km and one week long. The support vehicle compounded the agony. As motorcyclists, Ryan and Colin could slip through the worst of it, but they needed to keep the support vehicle handy for their documentation.

The bigger problem was military and police checkpoints. "We'd encountered checkpoints almost every 200 km throughout our journey, and with each passing day I'd become increasingly aware of how militarized China really is" (P.234), Ryan notes, moaning elsewhere, "Why had I chosen to circumnavigate one of the most militarized countries in the world" (P.150)?

They wound up playing "cat and mouse" with military checkpoints, ignoring toll booths, and bluffing when need be. One of the smaller set pieces involves trying to keep the military away from the support vehicle and possibly confiscating their film documenting their trip. Torrential rains, record-breaking floods, mechanical breakdowns, falls, and heat exhaustion added to the difficulty of the circumnavigation.

The book is about the riding, logistics, and difficulties in achieving the world record, and not really about the people or places. There are brief interludes in Kashgar and Lhasa. Ryan had been visiting Chinese Turkestan four or more times a year photographing the

area and documenting the changes (last year he published the results in *Chinese Turkestan: A Photographic Journey Through an Ancient Civilization*). He worries about the destruction of the traditional social fabric and sense of community. Colin is more blunt: "Are the changes that are being made intended to be a slap in the face for the people of Kashgar to show them that the Chinese Government is in charge? Or are they a genuine attempt to the lifestyle and well-being of the people, by improving their homes" (P.170)? As for Lhasa and the rest of the province, Ryan notes dourly, "We were back in the civilized world – which, in Tibet, as in the rest of China, meant road construction" (204); while Colin observes that Lhasa's "like an occupied city" (P.217). Some maintain it is an occupied city.

The people they encounter are less defined. Ingraham who accompanied throughout the entire 65-day trip is distinguished only by being the cameraman and by sucking lollipops to help him stop smoking. Ted, their first driver, gets a bit of business about the legal issues involving a passport. Kalsang, the Tibetan guide, gets to present khatas – the long white scarves that Tibetans present as a farewell gesture meaning (in this case) good luck and safe journey – to Ryan and Colin, but oddly not to Ingraham. If I understand the tradition correctly, and I may not, that would be an unthinkable omission.

Ryan, who is the dominant literary voice here, manages to make his and Colin's voices and characters distinct. Each brother has his own section in each chapter, the larger part going to Ryan. (Did I mention he's the older brother?) It's a straight forward narrative. Colin's section follows, but is presented in an epistolary style similar to Field's. Ryan's sections tend to be more neutral; Colin's, more intimate.

Sometimes they cover the same incidents; sometimes one will mention something the other doesn't. Teapots used to fill motorcycle gas tanks seem normal to large sized in Ryan's narrative, but small in Colin's. The two views of Colin's accident reads like *Rashomon*.

Even when they voice similar opinions, differences shine through: Ryan writes he "felt that I had a link to the past and to all the other travelers and traders who'd journeyed along the Karakoram Highway over the last few hundreds of years" (P.177). Colin's same, but different, observation reads, "I'm a foreigner passing through China, just like all the traders who travelled along the Silk Road for hundreds of years. I stay somewhere overnight and I'm on my way again the next day or the day after that" (P.161). Colin is also amazed by China's diversity. "Perhaps my overriding sense was that I hadn't been traveling through a single country, but rather, through China, Mongolia, Tibet, India, Central Asia, and then China again" (P.271).

Ryan affects international or culturally neutral English in his parts. Units of measurement are metric: kilometers per hour rather than miles per hour; Celsius rather than Fahrenheit. Spelling and monetary units are American: color rather than colour; US dollars rather than Euros or British pounds – or even renminbi. All numbers are Arabic; even one and zero aren't spelt out. This is striking in a sub-genre dominated by British writers and therefore grammar. Colin sticks to standard North American English, sprinkled with a fair amount of standard Anglo-Saxon. He says fuck. A lot.

Like its literary model, Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman's *Long Way Round*, the book is written for non-riders, explaining things that motorcyclists wouldn't bother to explain

to other motorcyclists. "When you're riding off-road on uneven terrain, the back wheel of the bike slews and bounces all the time, and if you sit down, your spine takes every hit. So, to avoid the risk of breaking your back, you stand up and let your knees, hips, arms, and elbows act as suspension" (P.196).

Ryan can produce nice moments, especially in his beloved Chinese Turkestan. "We had to drive through most of the villages at low speeds, partly because of the cattle that were wandering on the roads, and partly because of the young Uyghur motorcycle-taxi drivers who often rode beside us, checking out our bikes before giving us the thumbs up and speeding off in clouds of wheelie-dust" (P.174).

As traveling companions, the brothers Pyle are pleasant and likeable. Ryan is more controlled and controlling; Colin, more laid back and let-it-happen.

Summertime and the reading is haute bourgeoisie. Recommended more for those interested in how to set world's records and those interested in intensive overland travel than those interested in traditional travel narratives or anyone interested in China itself.

## Jonathan Boorstein



# BITZ

## Vertex Raptor-i Wireless Intercom System

Review: Ricardo Rodrigues

I haven't owned a car in 10 years and probably around 70% of the distance I cover every year on my bikes is done two-up, either traveling or just going to the shops, and I have never owned an intercom system.

The truth is I like the quietness inside my helmet and being able to focus on the road when things get twisty, or just let my mind wander during the boredom of the motorway.

I always tell people who don't ride bikes that the best thing about travelling with your girlfriend on a bike is that she has no option but to keep quiet! [A joke that doesn't always go well with the significant other...] The fact is though, on many occasions I've considered getting a set of intercoms, but then I look at the prices for a twin set and think I could just save the money and go on another trip!

When I got the opportunity of testing the Vertex Raptor-i, a well priced set of Bluetooth/Radio intercoms, I immediately said yes! I wanted to know if this was the piece of kit that would change my mind and finally make me a convert - after all just about everyone else travelling by bike seems to have an intercom fitted to the side of their helmets.

Priced at £169.99 for the single unit or £299.99 for the twin set, and there is a deal in

which you get the £70 remote control for free with every twin set so it's good value. But is it any good?

First impressions are that it looks like quality kit. The basic intercom unit comes in its own package with only the charger. A second box includes the selected headphone/microphone combo - in my case flat speakers and mic for full face helmet - together with the 3M Velcro tape that is used to fix the intercom to the outside of the helmet. Finally a third box includes the infrared remote control and a selection of brackets and screws to fit your bike.

Installing the intercom to the helmet is easy and straightforward as long your helmet has removable interiors (if you still own a helmet without removable interiors, you should probably save the money from the intercoms and invest in a better quality lid anyway).

To help making installation easier the guys at Vertex made it possible to disconnect the right side speaker from the rest of the loom, and some helmets like my girlfriend/co-tester's Shark Vision R Carbon even have a recess in the styrofoam lining to fit the speakers so that they sit completely flush and don't cause any discomfort. The speakers have a pretty thin profile and even in my NEXX XR1R which has no such recesses they are completely imperceptible under the lining.

The mic is a fairly small half boom style that also attaches with Velcro to the inner side of the chin guard. The structure of the base of the mic is made of flexible rubber allowing it to adjust to the curved contours of the helmet.

What is it like to use?

The intercoms pair between themselves quite easily with the press of a few buttons. The same goes for pairing with phone and GPS and you are ready to go. The communication is full duplex but you can only have one audio source at a time: if you are listening to music, so there is no GPS or intercom at the same time and vice versa. You can however cycle quite easily between sources on the move with a click of a button. The remote makes it a bit more convenient by allowing you to do it without taking your hands from the controls.

As a single unit for solo use I found it to be pretty good, giving a comfortable alternative to headphones when you want to listen to music on the go and allowing you to take phone calls on the move if you really must.

Music quality isn't near that of a high quality





set of headphones, but I would say it is more than satisfactory for the purpose of having some tunes playing in the background while you ride. The ability to play, pause, skip and adjust volume on the go makes them a much better option to regular in-ear headphones connected to the phone - Not to mention the extra convenience when you have to take your helmet on and off.

Riding round town the unit works perfectly and at motorway speeds with the volume turned up to the max it is still pretty much ok. Keep in mind my Multistrada's weird screen/front fairing configuration causes a lot of buffeting, if you ride a more touring-style bike with better wind protection you will certainly get much better results.

Taking incoming calls is done with a press of a button and as long as you are not on the motorway, sound quality is sufficient to maintain a conversation.

With a tested battery life in line with the claimed value (8-10h) you could use your Raptor for a whole day of riding or close to a week of commuting before needing a charge. However if you do find yourself with a drained battery you can easily charge it using a regular USB port (5V 500mA) and the supplied USB cable. Charging takes close to 4h, but again if you really must use it you can charge it on the go, using an external battery pack (the kind you use to charge mobile phones) or your bike's accessory socket as the system can be in use and charging at the same time.

One fact that distinguishes the Raptor from some of the competition and that I quite liked is that it is attached to the helmet with heavy duty Velcro instead of those weird brackets that clip to the rim of the helmet. This makes it extremely convenient to remove (to be able to fit the helmet inside a top case, or for charging



for example) and at the same time should provide added safety in the event of a crash, as it will be promptly ripped off on impact. It does however feel secure enough that I never felt like it could fall during riding or carrying the helmet around.

All in all it's a decent piece of kit that I feel with a few tweaks could be made almost perfect.

If you spend a lot of time on the bike on boring commutes or work as a courier I believe this could be an interesting upgrade to your everyday ride, giving you the convenience of a sound system inside your helmet to be able to listen to some music, podcasts and take urgent calls. However if like me you use your bike mostly for pleasure rides I still prefer the good old unspoken communication that you and your pillion develop and makes the experience of riding together that little bit more special.

The advice I would give anyone thinking of buying an intercom system is: be honest with yourself and the expectations you have for it. If you have good wind protection on your bike and you can hear yourself talking inside the helmet at the kind of speeds you want the intercom to work, then you will be happy with the Vertix Raptor-i. If on the other hand you can't even hear yourself due to the wind noise around your helmet, the chances are that not even the most expensive and high-tech intercom will do you any good.

Vertix have an interesting [video on Youtube](#) where a rider talks on the intercom while riding on track. It works, and the voice is surprisingly clear because the noise filtering works pretty well. However you're getting the audio feed from the mic only. If you were riding behind him you would have all the wind noise around your own helmet to deal with.





Pros: sturdy build, easy and convenient install and setup; useful remote control that comes free with a twin intercom kit; comfortable and unobtrusive; good noise filtering from the mic; reasonably priced (especially if you buy a twin pack and get the remote control for free); good battery life.

Cons: it's a Bluetooth 2, several newer devices are now BT 3.0 or 4.0; speakers could do with an upgrade; max volume may not be enough for motorway riding especially if you are wearing earplugs; the claim that it is usable up to 210Km/h is a bit of a marketing gimmick, the noise filtering is quite good but the speaker volume and the overall wind noise around the helmet makes it impossible (at least on most bikes) to maintain any kind of conversation.

Note: one of the review sets I was given

developed a problem - a broken wire on the connection to the left speaker, causing interference until it eventually stopped working. Vertix has assured us this is failure that is covered in the 1-year warranty and they will be sending us a replacement speaker/mic set. As this won't be in time for the deadline for this review, keep an eye on The Rider's Digest website for a follow up on this article as we have more time to put the system through its paces to give our readers the most in-depth info possible. Who knows, maybe we'll even do a video review!

**Bonus! Here's the pillion's opinion - by Catia/the GF.**

After a few thousand kilometres and a handful of tours as a pillion travelling through over a dozen countries together, Ricardo and

I have developed our very own unspoken language on the bike. Let's face it, there aren't that many options that allow you to maintain a conversation while on a bike so you have to develop a way to get essential information across, be it a quick tap on the leg signalling 'let's stop at the next rest area' or a violent (but loving...) hit to the helmet meaning: "I know this is an Autobahn and the bike is fast but could you please, maybe...if you don't mind... slow down, now!!"

The truth is in a way, those moments on the bike are mine and I'm not used to (nor willing) to share them. Sometimes I just love to watch the scenery go by and lose myself in my thoughts without distractions. All the chatting and talking can be left for when we pull over for a coffee, a photo or fuel, so it's only when we needed to make some kind of practical/strategic decision that I missed the intercom's presence and usefulness. With an intercom, a decision as simple as where do you want to go next, or where do you want to stop for lunch no longer implies stopping to ask the question, and going through the whole process of: removing gloves, pausing the iPod, removing sunglasses, helmet... ok now talk! Instead all it takes is a press of a button from music to intercom and you can talk, on the move. At least at country road speeds; on the motorway the wind noise (even with the fairly effective filtering) became annoying and trying to maintain a conversation was just a source of stress and annoyance as the "What?", "Could you say that again?", "Can't hear you..." are repeated more often than anything else.

On the other hand, and coming from a girlfriend who loves to talk on the phone, having him wear the intercom while he's out riding solo meant I could call him anytime, and we could talk clearly most of the time instead

of having to wait until he finally decides to stop and check the unanswered calls and text messages....

**Ricardo Rodrigues (and Catia)**

**THE DETAILS:**

Manufacturer: Vertix ([www.vertixglobal.com/](http://www.vertixglobal.com/))

UK Distributor: Motohaus Powersports Limited ([www.motohaus.com/](http://www.motohaus.com/))

Prices at the time of publishing (from Motohaus.com) and inclusive of VAT:

Vertix Raptor-i Single Unit: £169.99 including either open face or full face helmet speaker/mic set.

Vertix Raptor-i Twin Set: £299.99 including either speakers/mic set and remote control as a limited offer.

Replacement speaker/mic set: £29.99

Optional alternative in-ear speakers/mic set: £49.99

Remote control unit: £70

Our thanks to Joxlyn Tay at Vertix for supplying the review sample.



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